

From Cellblocks to Suburbia: Tattoos as Subcultural Style, Commodity and Self- expression

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Student's Name: Erin Teffs
Faculty Sponsor: Elizabeth Walden
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ABSTRACT

This research study uses scholarship on tattooing, popular cultural representation and the practice and experience of tattooing to look at how subcultures (social groups excluded from mainstream society) express themselves through style and how style creates meaning and identification. These subcultures differ from other subcultures, such as racially marginalized groups, in that they create style in order to separate themselves from the mainstream. These marginal ideas of style are often picked up and adapted by America's mainstream, materialistic culture and marketed as "cool" by corporations and other members of mainstream society for mass consumption. When discussing related subcultural theory in light of tattoos, one must not overlook the unique features of tattoos, including their permanent quality and the way society continues to perceive tattoos. Moreover, in today's consumption-obsessed society, it is difficult to escape capitalism's effect on "cool" and the ways in which cool is commodified. The mainstream is constantly commodifying subcultural trends, forcing subcultures to continually create new trends to remain marginal. Because commodification is perpetual and corporations are constantly seeking new ways to profit off of the mainstream's next perceived idea of "cool," it is somewhat remarkable that a centuries-old form of self-expression has largely managed to escape this process of commodification as tattoos have done.

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INTRODUCTION

Subcultures consist of individuals resisting certain values and expectations placed upon them by mainstream society. This resistance may be evident through their dress, mannerisms, music choice, recreational activities, etc. Because of their opposition to the mainstream, society fears these minority groups. In turn, these groups are looked down upon by the majority and held to the outskirts. At the same time, however, subcultural groups take some enjoyment in their roles as outsiders or they would not choose to isolate themselves through their fashion choices, music tastes, etc. Despite this fear and shunning of subcultural groups, society is inspired by their creative styles. In this way, subcultures inspire trends in the mainstream. Even though subcultures act as inspiration for the mainstream, they continue to be looked down upon and are never given any credit for the trends they inspire. These subcultures are forgotten and rendered invisible to the majority. Society pays little attention to where the latest trends originated from and is concerned only with how soon they too can consume and partake in these trends.

Tattoos have a long history as the mark of the outsider and their modern history seems a good illustration of the mainstreaming of subcultural style. When applying subcultural theory to tattoos specifically, it is important to also discuss the lengthy and unique history of tattoos. While they originated more than five thousand years ago, their ability to maintain their mystery and to instill feelings of fascination and admiration, as well as disgust and rejection, is worth discussing. Furthermore, their permanent nature must also be taken into consideration. For instance, although planned obsolescence does not initially appear to be relevant to tattoos because they cannot be discarded, different tattoo styles come in and out of fashion. Tribal tattoos may be particularly popular in one era while traditional tattoos may be more prevalent in another. Despite attempts of the tattooed to remain free of societal norms, they have been unsuccessful in preventing consumer capitalism from influencing the culture's trends and vice versa. Just as mass society feeds off of subcultures, subcultures act in relation to mass society.

The specific case of the tattoo draws into question some elements of the literature on subcultures and the commodification of cool and offers some insights into how values of

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genuine self expression may offer an alternative to a society made miserable by attempts to “look cool” through conformity and endless chasing of “cool.” In his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige explores the origination of subcultures and their subversive nature. Thomas Frank takes this discussion further in his book *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* by recognizing the role subcultures have in the commodification of cool. Corporations fool consumers into believing that more consumption will lead to happier lives. Consumption is what drives our capitalist system. If people did not consume excessively, America would not be the world power that she is. Frank examines the process through which “cool” became profitable. By understanding this process, consumers have the ability to stop the disastrous trend towards excessive consumption. At the very least, they can better understand their motives for consuming and realize that perhaps overconsumption is not only *not* the answer to their problems, but one of the roots of their problems. Ultimately, true happiness cannot be bought despite what ads may lead us to believe.

LITERARY REVIEW

Subcultural Theories

A subculture consists of a group of individuals who distinguish themselves from the overriding culture in some way, whether it be ethnically, morally, visually, attitudinally, etc. While many people are quick to dismiss any value that these often scorned upon groups may add to society, subcultural groups are in fact integral to the workings of any society, particularly our capitalistic system. To Hebdige writing in 1979, subcultures were subversive and acted as a scapegoat for greater society. People disliked subcultures because they feared such groups would destroy the workings of society. Society fears rule breakers. It fears what would happen if societal order were to be upturned and the chaos that would result. Ironically, it is often the mainstream’s reaction to subcultural groups that creates hysteria and moral panic¹ rather than the actual group. As Hebdige argues, the punk movement gave a tangible

¹ Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul PLC, 1978).

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meaning to crisis.² At the same time, however, he argues that the punk subculture was a signifier of chaos because the style itself was so ordered and every article of clothing/accessory was carefully chosen so that each individual item added to the overall look. In other words, the punk style was homologous in that each part worked together to create a meaningful whole.³

In order to create this homologous style, subcultures take everyday objects and materials and redefine them, giving them new meaning. Bricolage is a term used to describe the use of something for something other than its original intended use.⁴ Many subcultural trends begin with the repositioning of a commonplace, everyday object into something significant. Frank argues that subcultural resistance “arises when the young consume in ways different from the intentions of the manufacturers.”⁵ For instance, the punks began wearing safety pins in the 1970s in ways other than originally intended by society. They used safety pins as accessories, including earrings, to make fashion statements rather than as the household item they were intended for. Although society at first feels uncomfortable with this unconventional usage and is shocked to see routine items such as safety pins transformed into vulgar accessories, the shock factor eventually dies down as the masses become accustomed to this new convention. It was only a matter of time before safety pins as fashion accessories became commonplace. Now, one can walk into the tween department at Macy’s and pick up a shirt with the safety pins already on it. The safety pin is no longer a shocking symbol of the punk subculture, but a commonplace sighting in mass society. At this point in the subculture’s life, it must search for new trends to create, new ways to transform everyday objects and to shock the public in order to maintain its role as a group of outsiders resisting the masses. Frank argues subcultural groups must practice “perpetual innovation” in order to maintain their “edge” as a group.⁶ Once the group fails to inspire trends and/or maintain the barrier between themselves and the mainstream, they lose their subcultural identity.

² Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1979) 87.

³ Hebdige 113.

⁴ Hebdige 104.

⁵ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997) 17.

⁶ Frank 94.

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The example of the safety pin is also applicable to the process of commodification. This process “begins with the establishment of new symbolic challenges”⁷ and as these challenges to society are adopted by the mainstream (and in turn are no longer challenges), they become commodified as trends. Hebdige refers to this as the process of recuperation.⁸ According to Hebdige, the process of recuperation comes in two forms. One form refers to commodification – the conversion of subcultural signs into mass-produced objects.

Continuing with the previous example, the safety pin (although previously mass-produced as a common household item) would be a symbol of the punk subculture that became mass-produced as a fashion accessory by the mainstream. The second form is the “labeling” and redefinition of deviant behavior by dominant groups. Once a style is adopted as a trend by mainstream society, it fails to be an authentic indicator of subcultural belonging. In turn, the commodification of subcultural style opens the door to posers and allows consumers to artificially adopt the “cool” style of the subculture without having any real (authentic) ties to the group.

Frank and Planned Obsolescence

Along with the process of commodification comes the idea of planned obsolescence where “the acceptance of new looks automatically made older styles undesirable overnight.”⁹

Beginning with cars in the 1960s, corporations and advertisers purposely “tweak” a product in order to spur the consumption and re-consumption of their product. For example, car companies would change minor details on their car models each year so that consumers would want to buy the latest model annually. The body of the car would be the same and the car would run the same, but it would look “old” and dated. People would know it was last year’s model. In order to “keep up with the Jones’s,” everyone wanted the latest. The Volkswagen Beetle, however, became a popular symbol of the counterculture because it did *not* partake in planned obsolescence. Rather, it looked exactly the same year after year. The model’s popularity was increased by its un-advertising campaign. The advertisement acknowledged the lack of innovation in its appearance and embraced it. The ad features a simple picture of

⁷ Hebdige 96.

⁸ Hebdige 94.

⁹ Frank 197.

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the car with the text “The ’51 ’52 ’53 ’54 ’55 ’56 ’57 ’58 ’59 ’60 ’61 Volkswagen.”¹⁰ Frank writes of the ad, “The Volkswagen is never obsoleted, unlike those new American models that appear in the spotlights at the auto show. The light, humorous copy puts the ad’s explosive message across easily: Detroit is a fraud.” By making light of itself, Volkswagen acknowledges the absurdity of planned obsolescence in the car industry. Frank argues that “One of the most objectionable features of mass society...had been planned obsolescence, the stylistic features of cars and other products that would make them seem antiquated and undesirable just a few years after having been manufactured.”¹¹

At the same time that planned obsolescence was taking over the auto industry, it was also seeping into the fashion industry, particularly men’s fashion. The 1950s was a decade of dull grey flannel suits, white dress shirts, and narrow ties. There was little room for expression. As the counterculture made its way into the late 1960s, men’s fashion gained popularity. Men, particularly admen, were bored with their dreary suits and traditional values. They were excited by the counterculture and open to creating new images. Not surprisingly, the menswear industry saw this as an excellent opportunity to make money. Robert C. Forney of the textile fibers department of E.I. du Pont de Nemours & Co. observed:

In 1959-64, when fashion meant very little to the average guy and we still had drawers full of white shirts and racks of narrow ties, men’s wear had a growth rate of 2.7 percent a year compared with 4.2 percent a year for women’s clothing. In 1964-68, when men were learning about fashion and color, the men’s wear growth rate increased to 3.7 percent year, compared with 4.1 percent for women’s wear.”¹²

Clearly the entrance of men’s wear into high fashion was a welcomed one. A suit manufacturer agrees: “There is no such thing in men’s wear as a one-year change obsoleting what went before...It’s a six- or seven-year change that makes a suit old-fashioned. If we could speed that change to two or three years, it would benefit the whole business.”¹³ The men’s wear fashion cycle was sped up dramatically to the point where one of the most

¹⁰ See Appendix A.

¹¹ Frank 196.

¹² Frank 194.

¹³ Frank 196.

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successful men's wear stores, Rubin Brothers, created a "delivery cycle, from order to receipt of goods" that typically ranged from six to eight weeks rather than the usual twelve to fifteen weeks.¹⁴ It truly was "disposable fashion."¹⁵ While many did welcome creativity and abundant choices to the marketplace, not everyone was excited about the changes. One consumer in 1970 expressed his dissatisfaction by saying the industry had become too focused on:

'overstyling,' which he obviously believed had been artificially constructed by the business to encourage consumption. 'Maybe the manufacturers are in error if they think that they can involve men in something like the mini-midi-maxi controversy...Who will want to wear this stuff in three years?'¹⁶

This man acknowledges the fact that corporations take advantage of the consumer and his strong desire to be "cool." He was not alone in his contempt as many other consumers were reluctant to purchase new clothing styles "when obsolescence seemed to be right around the corner."¹⁷ Nonetheless, companies continue to capitalize on consumers' insecurities and the need to feel valuable through the process of consumption.

Furthermore, Frank recognizes the irony in the situation – planned obsolescence became prevalent due to the onset of the counterculture, a revolution in resisting capitalism and mainstream society. "It is deeply ironic...that a movement purporting to be a revolt against the conformist sartorial codes of mass society wound up providing such a powerful fuel for nothing other than obsolescence."¹⁸ While the countercultural revolution began as a revolt against the traditional and "stuffy" values of capitalism and the 1950s, participants of the revolution unwittingly opened a new and immensely more profitable door for corporations – the commercialization of "cool."

¹⁴ Frank 201.

¹⁵ Frank 201.

¹⁶ Frank 199.

¹⁷ Frank 199.

¹⁸ Frank 196-197.

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The Commercialization of Cool

Although Hebdige touches on the theory of commodifying subcultural style through his process of recuperation, he does not explore this idea as thoroughly as Frank. For Hebdige, subcultural style was subversive and diffused by “the process of production, publicity and packaging” so that subcultural “innovations fed back directly into high fashion and mainstream fashion.”¹⁹ In response to this, Frank examines the process through which subcultural style was and is used by the mainstream as fashion. Since the 1960s when Corporate America first realized “that cool could be incredibly profitable,”²⁰ it has been increasingly difficult for authentic (original, individualized) cool to exist. Rather, cool is always commodified. It is advertised and mass-produced in ways which encourage the never-ending cycle of work to make money to consume to work more to make more money to consume more and on and on.²¹ While the media and advertisements may lead us to believe that we can buy happiness, the truth is that consumption does not translate into high self-esteem and positive attitudes. Rather, consumers must brush off the ideas of cool pushed upon them by the mainstream and instead seek happiness on their own terms, even if that means working less and consuming less in order to have more free time to truly enjoy life.

Although businesses did not originally view the counterculture “as an enemy to be undermined or a threat to consumer culture but as a hopeful sign, a symbolic ally in their own struggles against the mountains of dead-weight procedure and hierarchy that had accumulated over the years,” there is no denying the commercialization of countercultural symbols that resulted as the “hip” thing to do.²² Many businessmen at the time (and certainly today) were not emotionally tied to the products they sold and/or advertised. They did not have a relationship with the subculture (counterculture) from which these trends had originated, nor did they truly *like* the things that they argued for: “Admen in the 1960s loved rock ‘n’ roll, or at least they claimed they did.”²³ Instead, ad companies were “merely utilizing opportune,

¹⁹ Hebdige 95.

²⁰ Kalle Lasn, “The Reconquest of Cool,” *Adbusters* 24 Mar 2008, 09 Sep. 2010 <http://www.adbusters.org/magazine/76/The_Reconquest_of_Cool.html>.

²¹ The Story of Stuff Project, ed. Annie Leonard, 09 Sep. 2010 <<http://storyofstuff.com/>>.

²² Frank 9.

²³ Frank 113.

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ready-made slogans; no deeper relationship between the company and the counterculture was envisioned.”²⁴ Ad companies were simply creating advertisements with the intention to sell and profit, regardless of whether or not the ads were ethical or deceiving.

Capitalism moved from a strong force in society to a controlling force in its attempt to have power over the images of its population. The well-being of consumers fell to the wayside as advertising companies manipulated and exploited them for a hefty profit. Ad companies deceived consumers into consumption in their search for happiness. They led people to falsely believe that owning the latest car would make them look and feel “cool,” which in turn would translate into happy and confident.

Moreover, “commercialized hip” became so common place by the early 1970s that Frank brings to light the advertisement that expresses the idea that in order to resist mass society, one must dress and smoke ordinary.²⁵ In other words, the counterculture and its inspiration to be “original,” resulted in so many people opting for quirky that to detach oneself from the masses, one had to choose ordinary products.²⁶

Co-optation Theory

Initially, corporations and businessmen did not set out to exploit the counterculture and the consumer-oriented values that followed. Rather, they were excited by this revolution that seemingly freed them from the traditional values that they also felt stifled by in the ‘50s. “...They perceived in it a comrade in their own struggles to revitalize American business and the consumer order generally.”²⁷ It was for this reason that they embraced the counterculture revolution at its outset, not for its ability to market to and exploit customers. However, not only did business capitalize on exploiting the revolution, they also curbed the threat of the revolution. Once rebellious acts and appearances become integrated into and accepted by the mainstream, the threat from the minority group is diminished. Frank refers to this idea as the “co-optation theory: faith in the revolutionary potential of ‘authentic’ counterculture

²⁴ Frank 89.

²⁵ Frank 150.

²⁶ See Appendix B.

²⁷ Frank 9.

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combined with the notion that business mimics and mass-produces fake counterculture in order to cash in on a particular demographic and to subvert the great threat that ‘real’ counterculture represents.”²⁸ By replicating subcultural styles, corporations not only make an often huge profit, but they also manage to weaken the threat to mass society these radical styles pose. Still, to what extent do subcultures rely on the media and mass society for their identities? As Frank points out,

...it was and remains difficult to distinguish precisely between authentic counterculture and fake: by almost every account, the counterculture, as a mass movement distinct from the bohemia that preceded it, was triggered at least as much by developments in mass culture (particularly the arrival of The Beatles in 1964) as changes at the grass roots. Its heroes were rock stars and rebel celebrities, millionaire performers and employees of the culture industry; its greatest moments occurred on television, on the radio, at rock concerts, and in movies.”²⁹

In other words, despite the counterculture’s attempt to be devoted to authenticity and true to its rebellious beginnings, it could not help but be overtaken by mass society and media portrayals. It is at this point that the counterculture moved from the “native language of the alienated” to that of the majority.³⁰

“Hangers-on”

The commercialization of cool began with the commodification of images and appearances used to signify one’s identity with a particular subcultural group. While dedicated members of these subcultural groups embraced the values and lifestyle, as well as the images, associated with their group, the commodification of these appearances opened the door for “posers” – people who adopted the styles of the subculture but did not embrace the values and lifestyle of the subculture, thus rendering appearance a false indicator of authentic subcultural belonging. It is rather easy to create an appearance through fashion choices – one can simply walk into a store and buy a certain style of shirt or pants, etc. Yet, it is difficult to fabricate the dedication that is necessary to alter one’s lifestyle. Hebdige acknowledges the presence of posers through

²⁸ Frank 7.

²⁹ Frank 8.

³⁰ Frank 8.

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his idea of “hangers-on.”³¹ He recognizes that “originals” are authentic members of the subcultural group dedicated to the lifestyle. Hangers-on, on the other hand, offer varying degrees of commitment to the subculture. For instance, they may adhere to the image of the subculture but do not dedicate their whole style of living to the group.

Although the counterculture began as a revolution in lifestyle (rejecting corporate and family values and embracing free love, drug experimentation, and self-expression), it shifted towards style as an indicator of belonging through the process of commercialization. It is this commercialization of subcultural identifiers that opened the door for posers. Because of commercialization, people did not have to be creative or spend time accessorizing with safety pins. Instead, they could walk into the department store and buy a mass-produced shirt with pre-applied safety pins. This act, however, would be contrary to the punk lifestyle not only because the shirt was produced for mass society, but also because the person paid money for this shirt to support a large department store carrying clothes for individuals to fit in with the masses. This person buying the shirt is a hanger-on – he brings little dedication to the subculture as he fits in through image only. Furthermore, it is likely that all “authentic” members of the subculture would be aware of the fake, imitation clothes he wears.

Values vs. Appearance

While Frank argues there is no longer any relevance to “cool” and its attempt to be creative, productive and “real,” this is not to say that one should give in to conformist, consumption-oriented, bogus renditions of cool. Instead of *trying* to be “edgy” and nonconformist or trendy and conformist, one should follow his own interpretation of the meaning of cool. Rather than buying a shirt to “fit-in,” whether it be to fit in to a subcultural group or to fit in with the masses, one should buy the shirt simply because it appeals to him and his inherent values.

Despite the huge popularity among advertisers and companies to endorse the counterculture by using countercultural imagery and symbols, Frank argues that “the best soda ads stressed the values of the counterculture rather than simple countercultural appearances.”³² In other

³¹ Hebdige 122.

³² Frank 163.

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words, the best ads were not those that exploited images associated with the counterculture (as hangers-on might do) but rather those that embraced the values and ideals of the revolution. For instance, although Dr. Pepper ads have stressed their product's "uniqueness and vaguely subversive 'differentness' since the late 1960s," the company did not explicitly reference the counterculture in any of their advertisements.³³ Dr. Pepper ads stressed the values of the revolution without cliché references to it:

One television commercial of the early 1970s is particularly illustrative of the brand's ongoing confusion of hip and corporate values. A group of businessmen are shown ordering lunch to eat during a board meeting. The boss asks for a "cola," and in a scene reminiscent of *The Hucksters*, each of the men seated at the long table call out, "Me too, sir." A lone young person, though, refuses to be a corporate yes-man. In defiance of business protocol and decorum, he leaps up onto the table and sings, "Oh no, not for me, sir. I need originality, sir. Give me innovation, variation, Dr. Pepper"; soon, of course, the entire august group has been won over.³⁴

Although the ad did not make any direct or visual references to the counterculture, it expressed the values of originality, variation and innovation that are associated with the counterculture. These commercials were much more effective in labeling the brand as "original" than those that used "footage of long-haired youngsters or rock soundtracks."³⁵

The Rise of Consumption (and Consumer Debt)

As television and the counterculture overtook the nation, people began to over-consume the superficial values of mass society as dictated by advertisements and the media, rather than based on the more realistic lifestyles and consumption habits of their friends, family members, and neighbors. Prior to the popularity of television in the 1950s and 1960s, people compared themselves – their wealth, their appearances, and their need for excess – based on their neighbors. Typically, people with similar economic and social statuses would live in the same neighborhood. Hence, people felt the need to compete with their neighbors or to "keep up with the Jones'." As television became more popular and prevalent among homes in the

³³ Frank 163.

³⁴ Frank 164.

³⁵ Frank 163.

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1950s, television advertisements and the media became very useful means of conveying messages to the public. This shift from only being exposed to friends and neighbors to seeing an abundance of glamorous celebrities on TV caused a shift in the way people viewed themselves. People began comparing themselves with celebrities rather than their neighbors. They began consuming more to keep up with super wealthy celebrities rather than with people of their same income level and lifestyle. People aspired to be something that was out of their reach and out of their price range. Credit cards are so attractive to people because they allow them to spend money they do not actually have and to live outside of their means. The idolization of celebrities and the advent of credit cards has, in many cases, allowed people to live in fantasy worlds rather than face the sometimes harsh or less than idealistic realities of life.

TATTOOS

History of Tattooing

The modern word “tattoo” is derived from the Tahitian terms “tatatau” or “tattau,” meaning “to hit or strike.”³⁶ British Captain James Cook led an expedition to Tahiti in 1769 which first exposed him and his fellow Europeans to the ancient art. Nonetheless, the earliest evidence of tattoos dates all the way back to 5200 BC with the discovery of an iceman on the Austria-Italy border. The body was discovered in 1991 with several tattoos: “a cross on the inside of the left knee, six straight lines 15 centimeters long above the kidneys and numerous parallel lines on the ankles.”³⁷ The placement of these tattoos leads experts to believe they served therapeutic purposes. Prior to this discovery, several female Egyptian mummies had been found with tattoos dating back to 2000 BC. While most of the tattooed Egyptian mummies are female, ancient images depict both male and female Egyptians with the body art.

Although many believe that tattoos on ancient Egyptian women indicated prostitution or protection from sexually transmitted diseases, scholars are beginning to believe that these tattoos actually served therapeutic purposes (similar to those of the 5200 year old iceman) and

³⁶ Cate Lineberry, “Tattoos: The Ancient and Mysterious History,” [Smithsonian.com](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/tattoo.html) 01 Jan. 2007, 09 Sep. 2010 <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/tattoo.html>>.

³⁷ Steve Gilbert, [Tattoo History: A Source Book](#) (New York: Juno Books, 2000) 11.

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were thought to protect the woman during pregnancy and childbirth.³⁸ For instance, the tattoos are

largely around the abdomen, on top of the thighs and the breasts, and would also explain the specific types of designs, in particular the net-like distribution of dots applied over the abdomen. During pregnancy, this specific pattern would expand in a protective fashion in the same way bead nets were placed over wrapped mummies to protect them and ‘keep everything in.’ The placing of small figures of the household deity Bes at the tops of their thighs would again suggest the use of tattoos as a means of safeguarding the actual birth, since Bes was the protector of women in labor, and his position at the tops of the thighs a suitable location.³⁹

Additionally, it does not make sense that these tattooed women were prostitutes or “dancing girls” because their mummies were found buried in an elite and royal burial site, Deir el-Bahari.

Moreover, the Greeks and Romans used tattoos or “stigmata” as a way to identify someone with a religion, slave owner, or criminal. Tattoos were also used as a sign of worship and devotion. For instance, Ptolemy IV, a pharaoh ruling over Egypt from 221 to 205 BC, covered his body in tattoos of ivy leaves, illustrating his commitment to Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and patron deity of the royal house during his rule. As Christianity became more prominent throughout the Roman Empire, tattoos lost popularity as they were thought to “disfigure that made in God’s image.”⁴⁰ Consequently, Emperor Constantine, ruling from AD 306 to 373, restricted the ancient art.

Similarly to the Greeks and Romans, the Maori culture of New Zealand also used tattoos as a means of identification. Face tattoos acted as indicators of status, rank, ancestry and abilities. This culture viewed the head as the most significant body part. Hence, elaborate facial tattoos or “moko” were viewed as symbols of high status. Each individual received a unique tattoo design that portrayed personal information regarding status, rank, ancestry and abilities. Therefore, these facial tattoos were a form of “id card or passport, a kind of aesthetic

³⁸ Lineberry.

³⁹ Lineberry.

⁴⁰ Lineberry.

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bar code for the face.”⁴¹ Moreover, Maori warriors received tattoos throughout their careers to signify accomplishments and rites of passage. These tattoos were thought to increase their attractiveness to the opposite sex. Maori women received face tattoos concentrated around their nose, lips and chin. They believed these procedures to maintain their youthful appearances and to reduce wrinkles. Christian missionaries attempted to rid the culture of these rituals but the women refused. In fact, some Maori women continue to get chin tattoos. Facial tattoos among Maori men have also been revived within the past few decades, although in two separate ways. In the urban areas of New Zealand, men are getting face tattoos to identify themselves with gangs. In other parts of New Zealand, however, men are getting face tattoos to revive the traditional Maori culture.⁴²

Furthermore, native Canadian tribes practiced tattooing for reasons similar to those of other ancient cultures, including as a way of identification, to signify rites of passages and for therapeutic reasons. Still, outsiders could not understand why one would subject himself to such pain. In 1615, Gabriel Sagard-Théodat, a French explorer, wrote of the Hurons tattooing tradition in Canada:

But that which I find a most strange and conspicuous folly, is that in order to be considered courageous and feared by their enemies [the Hurons] take the bone of a bird or of a fish which they sharpen like a razor, and use it to engrave or decorate their bodies by making many punctures somewhat as we would engrave a copper plate with a burin. During this process they exhibit the most admirable courage and patience. They certainly feel the pain, for they are not insensible, but they remain motionless and mute while their companions wipe away the blood that runs from the incisions.⁴³

The Hurons were not alone in their tattooing practices. Most of the native Canadian tribes subjected themselves to the pain associated with the art form in order to identify themselves with certain religions, spiritual practices, or even rites of passage. The tribes would decorate themselves with tattoos of animals or other creatures on any part of their body, including their faces and necks. Similarly to the Egyptians, many Native North American tribes practiced

⁴¹ Lineberry.

⁴² Gilbert 191.

⁴³ Gilbert 89.

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tattooing as a means of relieving pain. The Ojibwa tribe tattooed members' temples, foreheads and cheeks in an effort to relieve pain from headaches and toothaches.⁴⁴

Tattoos also acted as a symbol of status in England in the late nineteenth century. In 1862, the Prince of Wales had the Jerusalem Cross tattooed on his arm on a trip to the Holy Land.⁴⁵ He then received several more tattoos as King Edward VII. He also insisted his two sons, the Duke of Clarence and the Duke of York (future King George V), receive tattoos upon their visit to Japan in 1882, as well as upon their visit to Jerusalem. Following suit, Japanese tattoos became a status symbol in England for the wealthy, as well as for naval officers. The British army encouraged tattoos by the 19th century, insisting that such markings promoted "*esprit de corps*" or morale among members, in addition to easy identification of casualties.⁴⁶ This status symbol moved to the US by 1890, where members of the exclusive New York Racquet Club got identifying tattoos.⁴⁷

Tattoos in America

The earliest American tattoos appear among sailors in the early 1800's. As a result, most early tattoo artists or "prickers" practiced onboard ships or opened shops in seaports.⁴⁸ Sailors often got tattoos out of superstition or pride for their roles in the wars. As one early tattoo artist recalled,

If there was a jackie without a piece of lucky tattooing on him, I'd know it...the old-time tar thought he had to have a crucifix on his chest to keep him from general harm, a pig on his left instep so he couldn't drown, and "hold fast" on his hands, one letter to a finger, so as he couldn't fall from aloft.⁴⁹

At the time of the Spanish-American War, more than eighty percent of all men enlisted in the US Navy had tattoos of some sort.⁵⁰ In 1908, the US Navy began rejecting men for "indecent

⁴⁴ Gilbert 90.

⁴⁵ Gilbert 103.

⁴⁶ Gilbert 103.

⁴⁷ Gilbert 103.

⁴⁸ Gilbert 125.

⁴⁹ Gilbert 129.

⁵⁰ Gilbert 129.

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or obscene tattooing.”⁵¹ However, these rejected men were given the opportunity to have these vulgar designs altered if they were otherwise qualified for the Navy. This requirement provided a huge boost to the tattooing industry at the time.

The first American tattoo studio was established in 1870 in New York City by Martin Hildebrandt, a German immigrant who solidified his career as a tattoo artist during the Civil War. The desire for and availability of tattoos dramatically increased with the invention of the electric tattooing machine by Samuel O'Reilly, a tattoo artist, mechanic and technician. Previously, all tattoos were done by hand. The artist worked with a set of needles attached to a wooden handle. He then dipped the needles in ink and manually performed each prick of the skin. The invention of the electric tattooing machine essentially enabled an artist to “tattoo as fast as he could draw.”⁵² By the twentieth century, every major American city had at least one tattoo studio. Because many who held the ability to tattoo did not also have the ability to draw well, some tattoo artists created designs to be sold through tattoo supply companies.⁵³ Lew Alberts was one such artist. He designed thousands of artistic yet easy-to-copy designs that became a staple in traditional American tattooing, including images of snakes, dragons, eagles, hearts, roses, sailing ships, etc.⁵⁴ Because of artists such as Alberts, traditional American tattoos are not difficult to identify as they

evolved from the efforts of many artists who traded, copied, swiped, and improved on each other's work. In this way they developed a set of stereotyped symbols which were inspired by the spirit of the times, and especially by the experiences of soldiers and sailors during both World Wars. Many of these designs represented courage, patriotism, defiance of death, and longing for family and loved ones left behind.⁵⁵

Among the famous early American tattoo artists was Charles Wagner, born in 1875 in New York. Wagner first became interested in tattoos as a teenager after seeing a heavily tattooed man at a circus attraction. After seeing this man covered in tattoos who was paid sixty dollars

⁵¹ Gilbert 129.

⁵² Gilbert 126-127.

⁵³ Gilbert 127.

⁵⁴ Gilbert 127.

⁵⁵ Gilbert 125.

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a week just to stand before an audience, Wagner purchased tattoo supplies and began practicing on himself and others.⁵⁶ At the time, only three or four other artists were practicing in the US.⁵⁷ Wagner apprenticed with Samuel O'Reilly and took over his shop upon his death. Throughout his lifetime, he tattooed tens of thousands of different people, from fully covered circus participants to wealthy members of society. Aside from being an exceptional artist, Wagner contributed to the tattoo culture in several other ways. For instance, he was the first tattoo artist in America to apply cosmetic tattoos to women's lips, cheeks and eyebrows. He also tattooed dogs and horses as a means of identification in the event of burglary and tested different tattoo removal methods using chemicals.



Figure 1 - Wagner tattooing societal lady in formal wear (Gilbert 128).

Additionally, he used his tattooing machine without ink to test the idea of whether or not such a technique would reduce pain related to rheumatoid arthritis. Despite Wagner's popularity and incredible artistic talent, his work was never recognized by art galleries or museum displays, as is the case with most tattoo artists. Although it takes incredible skill to perform original designs on the body, most tattoo artists are not recognized as artists or given credit for their abilities.

Tattoos and the Circus

Tattooed people became an important part of the circus in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly in the last decade. As the popularity of the circus grew, heavily tattooed people became in high demand. Most common among the themes for tattoos were religious and patriotic scenes or symbols. Often, these tattooed people would have scrolls or banners with sayings such as, "Love One Another" or "Jesus Saves."⁵⁸ Sayings such as these helped to minimize the shock and terror of the conservative onlookers. Eventually, however, circus-goers became accustomed to and no longer shocked by tattooed people. The end of World

⁵⁶ Gilbert 129.

⁵⁷ Gilbert 130.

⁵⁸ Gilbert 138.

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War II also brought about the demise of the circus as people no longer felt it appropriate to laugh at unfortunate “freaks.” Moreover, most circuses began to go bankrupt and in 1956, Ringling Brothers’ Greatest Show on Earth had the last performance of a three-ring traveling circus in the US.⁵⁹ Still, while tattoos have become somewhat commonplace in society, it remains shocking to see people covered from head to toe in tattoos as these circus “freaks” were. Such heavily tattooed people are often admired (positively or negatively) at modern-day tattoo conventions. While society may be immune to some degree of tattooing, it has not become a norm to see full-body tattoos on a regular basis. People with full body tattoos/face tattoos remain at the outskirts of society and are often looked down upon by the masses.

Tattoos and Subcultures

Hebdige uses the term bricolage to refer to the use of something for something other than its original intended use. Many subcultural trends begin with bricolage – it is this repositioning of the object that creates shock among the mainstream and separates the subculture from mass culture. Once the shock factor dies down, however, the trend is incorporated into and often adopted by mass society. Tattoos provide an example for this process. While symbolic tattoos date back thousands of years, tattoos prior to the 1970s and 1980s were signs of someone who was seen as “no good” by the mainstream. Generally speaking, only outcasts from society such as gang members, sailors, and criminals had tattoos. Parents did not want their kids hanging around people with tattoos. However, as the countercultural revolution began to take place and mass society began searching for new outlets of expression, tattoos gained a small bit of acceptance. Gradually since then, tattoos have become more and more common and accepted by society to the point where many suburban moms or businessmen have tattoos. Still, there remains a division between those belonging to the tattoo subculture and those who identify with mass society but have tattoos. This distinction is similar to the safety pin example used earlier where authentic members of the subculture dedicate their lifestyle to the values set forth by the subculture, whereas posers identify with the subculture through appearance only. The question is then raised: how might one identify authentic subcultural members versus posers? As mentioned earlier, the idea of authentic lifestyle values versus

⁵⁹ Gilbert 140.

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simple appearance is key. Still, tattoos are different from the simple safety pin example in that tattoos are permanent. Getting a tattoo is a much bigger decision than buying a shirt. The shirt can be disposed of, the tattoo cannot. A tattoo is forever. This difference makes it difficult to determine and measure authenticity. Still, someone who has sleeves and knuckle tattoos is clearly more committed to the subculture than someone else with a dolphin tattooed on her ankle. For this reason, the placement of one's tattoo (is it a highly visible area on the body), the images used in the tattoo (traditional, tribal, etc.), and the symbolism and motivation behind the tattoo are all important factors in determining the authenticity of one's identity and appearance.

Moreover, Frank argues that subcultural groups must perpetually innovate their images in order to maintain their position on the outskirts of society. Although some degree of tattoos have become mainstream – i.e. the suburban mom with the dolphin tattooed on her ankle – the subculture continues to shock the mainstream by getting full body tattoos, face tattoos, hand tattoos, or even scarification and other body modifications as a means of separating themselves from the mainstream. Nonetheless, while the sight of a “soccer mom” with a tattoo may be commonplace, the tattoo still separates her in some ways from mainstream society. It is unlikely she got the tattoo for fashion alone. Rather, it is more likely she did so in an effort to alter her image/appearance and the way society perceives her. She got the tattoo as a way to identify herself within mass society. Still, the dedicated members of the subculture are able to maintain the separation between themselves and these mainstream appearances of tattoos by taking it to the next level – full body tattoos, face tattoos, hand tattoos, etc.

Additionally, the permanent nature of the act also makes it somewhat easier to distinguish the members dedicated to the lifestyle of the tattoo subculture versus the “hangers-on.” Dedicated members are likely identified by their heavily tattooed bodies and maintain values similar to those of the counterculture – originality, creativity, beating the system, honesty among peers. They live by the code “death before dishonor” and are incredibly loyal to their close group of friends and family but ruthless to outsiders and the masses. In contrast, the “hangers-on” of the subculture would include those who are not tattooed or badly tattooed yet admire and

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imitate the core members of the subculture. They are not acting true to themselves but say or buy what they believe the group will perceive to be “cool.” Dr. Samuel M. Steward, an English professor turned tattoo artist in the 1950s, notes that “In all the locations where I have tattooed, there has always been a certain type of individual haunting the shop. Sometimes they have already been tattooed, but most of them have not. These are the ‘hangers-on’...”⁶⁰ In other words, these people did not fully dedicate themselves to the lifestyle of the subculture but instead remained on the outskirts of it, admiring those on the inside but unwilling to make the lifestyle changes necessary to fully “belong” to the group.

Furthermore, as Dr. Steward mentions, even those with tattoos may be labeled “hangers-on.” One may receive this label for their lack of values. Perhaps he is disloyal to the group or has misinterpreted the group’s perception of “cool.” Additionally, the actual design and placement of the tattoo is key. A middle-aged soccer mom with a lower back tattoo of a butterfly would not be considered a core member of the tattoo subculture. Still, this tattoo would likely imply some attempt at nonconformity or dissatisfaction with society’s rules and expectations.

Tattoos and Commodification

Hebdige’s theory relating to the process of recuperation (and commodification) is also applicable to tattoos. According to Hebdige, the process “begins with the establishment of new symbolic challenges,” which are then adopted by mainstream society and commodified into trends.⁶¹ One form of this process is the conversion of subcultural signs into mass-produced objects. While tattoos are unique in that they are permanent body modifications, they have not escaped this process of recuperation. For instance, each tattoo is applied to each individual by a tattoo artist. This then gives each person the opportunity to have a completely unique design on his body. Nonetheless, people still choose pre-fabricated tattoos from books/pictures in the tattoo parlor. Additionally, it is difficult to be completely unique when choosing a tattoo design because all designs/ideas are inspired by something else, whether it

⁶⁰ Samuel M. Steward, Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos: A Social History of the Tattoo with Gangs, Sailors and Street-Corner Punks, 1950-1965 (New York: Harrington Press, 1990) 139.

⁶¹ Hebdige 96.

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be from something in nature, tribal tattoos, or virtually anything one can think of. As tattoo artist Don Ed Hardy wrote,

I think tattooing is the great art of piracy. In fine art it's fashionable to talk about 'appropriation' in the post-modern visual arts and architecture of the 1980's. It's certainly always been going on in tattooing because it's a totally bastardized art. Tattoo artists have always taken images from anything available that customers might want to have tattooed on them. The customer might ask for a design from a church pew or an acid rock album cover or the tattooer might choose a black panther design out of a 1934 kid's book and adapt it to make a tattoo design."⁶²

Inspiration for tattoos can come from virtually anywhere, making them unique in that there are so many different ideas and each tattoo can be custom designed. At the same time, however, it is difficult to be completely original as most things have been done before. As with clothing and fashion, popular tattoo styles come and go:

Thirty years from now there will be all these old farts kicking around with their tribal tattoos and some twenty-year-old will say 'haw haw you must have got that in the 80's.' Someday it will be dated just as any style becomes dated. It's going to continue to be part of the mix, because it's just like making more flavors available. ⁶³

Moreover, despite their permanent nature, tattoos have been commodified and produced for mass-consumption through different forms of temporary tattoos/temporary body art. Temporary tattoos are typically popular with young kids. Recently, however, Beyonce announced a collaboration between her clothing label Deréon and the temporary tattoo company Temptu. The limited edition temporary tattoo collections will consist of designs distinctive to the clothing label. Beyonce herself wears these temporary tattoos in the new advertisements for her label.⁶⁴ Another example of tattoos as a victim of commercialization is the extremely popular elastic chokers, bracelets, and rings of the '90s. The jewelry was made of elastic and designed to fit snugly around one's neck/wrist/finger to create the illusion of a tattoo. Because the jewelry was such a huge trend, however, it was obvious to most that these

⁶² Hardy 200.

⁶³ Hardy 201.

⁶⁴ See Appendix C.

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accessories were not permanent, hence defeating the purpose of appearing “cool” through having tattoos.

Another example of the commodification of tattoos is the incredible popularity of Ed Hardy products. Don Ed Hardy is considered to be one of the most skilled and perceptive American tattoo artists in history. However, he was far from well-known by the mainstream for most of his career until recently when he made a licensing deal with Ku USA, Inc. to produce a clothing line featuring his original flash art designs. By 2004, Saks expressed interest in the line and Christian Audigier purchased the rights to the clothing line. The clothing line, Ed Hardy, became a massive success. The clothing line consists of t-shirts, jeans, hoodies, etc. all featuring the tattoo artist’s designs. Despite his name on all of the products, however, most people do not know that Ed Hardy is actually a well-respected and accomplished tattoo artist. They are merely interested in the flashy graphics and high price tags. Christian Audigier turned the line into such a huge success by marketing to celebrities. Because Americans idolize celebrities and need to have what they have in order to feel worthy, Audigier knew that this tactic would be a triumph. The Ed Hardy brand is now worth millions. It is another example of how, despite the unique nature of tattoos, they cannot escape commodification.

It is questionable whether or not it is possible to be truly authentic. It may be difficult for any material object on its own to be authentic or completely original. Still, the way the object is used and interpreted by individuals offers the potential for genuine creativity. When discussing commodification and authenticity, tattoos raise several issues because of their unique permanent quality. Tattoos become an important part of one’s identity in that they are permanently embedded in the skin. They are also unique in that each tattoo must be applied to each individual by a tattoo artist. Because each tattoo is done by hand, it may seem unlikely that they would be commodified. Yet, nothing is left untouched by greed. Flash art and templates, cosmetic tattoos, temporary tattoos and body paint are all ways in which capitalism has infiltrated the tattoo subculture. Moreover, tattoos have long been used as a way to identify group members, from royalty to criminals. Still further, tattoos are unique in that they are a trend that has lasted thousands of years. As described through Hebdige’s process of

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recuperation, it is often no longer than a matter of years before society becomes accustomed to a once-shocking trend and it is transformed into a norm. Despite the ancient history of tattoos, tattoos continue to bring alarm to many mainstream participants. Tattoos have lost some of their ability to shock, but they continue to bring about feelings of disgust and distaste in many people. Additionally, it would still be shocking for many people to see someone walking around with tattoos covering their face.

Motives Behind Tattoos

The study of tattoos is especially unique in that there is an abundance of personal motives behind getting a tattoo. While people may rationalize that they got the tattoo in memory of a lost loved one or to proclaim their love for another or in an act of camaraderie or any other number of reasons, the act of permanently embedding ink into one's skin is a strange act that still invokes curiosity in others. Tattoo artist Don Ed Hardy theorizes:

A lot of people are eager to link up with "something beyond," reaffirm their connections with greater forces beyond this mundane daily life... The essential magic of the tattoo for us now, as ever, is the chance to hook up with the sympathetic powers of the chosen subject, participate in a meaningful rite of passage (even if it's getting Popeye on the forearm during one's first Navy liberty) and help keep away evil spirits – these days, often members of the Moral Majority and other repressive Thought Police types... [The tattoos] might only be epidermal placebos. But if they make us feel better about ourselves, and by extension others around us, the magic works. We are wearing our dreams. ⁶⁵

Hardy acknowledges that tattoos, despite their lengthy history, still upset the majority of more conservative people, allowing the tattoo subculture to maintain its identity on the outskirts of society. In addition, while Frank disagrees with excessive consumption and the need to "keep up with the Jones'," Hardy recognizes that there is some sort of pleasure derived from, in this particular case, the consumption of tattoos. The means by which this pleasure is obtained is not harmful to others and therefore, should not be looked at with disdain.

When attempting to decode the overall motive behind tattoos, scholar Steve Gilbert extracted one theory relating to Darwinism:

⁶⁵ Gilbert 161.

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[Tattooing is] a handicap in that it's expensive, painful and potentially dangerous. But the elaborate tattoos of the Marquesan warrior, the Japanese Yakuza and the American biker have something in common: they advertise the fact that the owners of the tattoos have money, can endure pain, are deadly serious, and will be dangerous adversaries in battle. And a warrior who can win by intimidation instead of fighting his enemy will live to come home and father children.⁶⁶

Tattoos have often acted as an intimidation mechanism and continue to do so in today's society. People often get tattoos because they enjoy the sense of power and strength they feel from this painful and permanent adornment. As Hardy mentioned, such markings scare away "members of the Moral Majority and other repressive Thought Police types." This reasoning also holds true for those who feel alienated by society's industrialized values and attempt to separate themselves from and threaten these values by tattooing themselves.

In the words of cultural anthropologist Daniel Rosenblatt, "bodily adornment can become resistance because it is able to use the idea of 'the primitive' to explore the 'self,' and...such exploration is able to be figured as a threat to society at large." The tattoo is thus culturally defined as "a therapeutic ethos based on the recovery of the self in response to the experience of consumer capitalism."⁶⁷

According to Rosenblatt, tattoos continue to be a relevant form of protest because youths get them in order to rebel against the capitalist system of consuming. There are numerous theories regarding why one might get a tattoo, but no definitive answer.

Historically, tattoos have been a popular form of marking one's accomplishment of a significant life event or rite of passage. American culture does not have traditional rites of passage the way the Maori or other tribes did. Nonetheless, people still get tattoos in honor of significant and unique life experiences. In this way, tattoos are uncommodifiable in that they are used to tell one's story through the modification of his-own flesh. This use takes tattoos beyond design and into another realm of meaning. In this same way, people who choose

⁶⁶ Gilbert 160.

⁶⁷ Gilbert 160.

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overdone or stereotypical tattoos are inscribing on their skin their own conventionality. Tattoo artist Dr. Steward noted,

Many young men have come into the shop to say: "I want a good original tattoo, sumpin no one else's got." When I showed them my collection of original designs, they would turn vague and unhappy. "Naw, that's *too* different," they might say, and then end by getting a panther or a skunk or eagle. The clientele was not noted for its originality...It had to be like something which they had seen before on someone.⁶⁸

By choosing a tattoo lacking in originality, the person is advertising his own lack of substance and ability to differentiate himself from others.

At the same time, however, tattoos cannot be reducible to just subcultural style and instances of "cool." Ultimately, to permanently mark one's flesh cannot be cool in terms of style because cool is a style that can be commodified. The flesh cannot be commodified the same way clothing and other disposable objects can be. To see tattoos as cool or as fashion will always miss the point.

For Hebdige, commodification of subcultural style occurs when the outrageous becomes conventional. Frank builds off of this theory by arguing that new convention is then the appearance of being edgy. In other words, cool is the new convention and what is outside of this can no longer be cool. Hence, the culture of the tattooed is no longer about cool or subcultural identity. Although the tattooed may appear to be part of a subcultural style because the act began as a response to something the dominant culture did not offer, the tattooed arguably do not make up one subculture with its own unique identity. Rather, the tattooed are simply people marking their bodies in different ways in an effort to not be commodified. Tattoos are not a style because they involve an actual change in the flesh. Style is always a form of planned obsolescence, but the act of permanently changing one's skin defies the idea of obsolescence. Once a tattoo marks the flesh, it will always mark the flesh. In today's world of planned obsolescence and fear of commitment, is the idea of permanently marking one's flesh amazing or foolhardy? It challenges the complete malleability and

⁶⁸ Steward 168-169.

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changeability that makes up capitalism. Capitalism thrives on planned obsolescence and the ability and desire of people to reincarnate themselves through their appearances. Part of being cool is the ability to remain a blank slate in order to be cool in the next reincarnation of style and what constitutes “cool.” Tattooing challenges this process of style reincarnation because it permanently alters the skin so that the body is no longer a “blank slate.”

CONCLUSION

By examining subcultural theory and the process of commercialization, we are able to understand the ways in which corporations manipulate consumers into believing that consumption is the answer to their problems. We are then able to stop the cycle of mass consumption and “to understand where this bogus cool has been leading us: not to happiness and prosperity as promised in the ads, but to cynicism, ecocide and a brutal, dog-eat-dog future.”⁶⁹ It is not necessarily less consumption that will make us happier as a whole, but the need to work less and to compete less with one another (in terms of wealth and consumption). If we consumed less, we would require less money to live and in turn less hours spent at work. The national level of happiness in the US has been declining since its peak in the 1950s, around the same time that the counterculture began to take place, companies began profiting off of cool, planned obsolescence was introduced and consumption became a major part of American life. We have more stuff – the average person now consumes twice as much as in the 1950s⁷⁰ – but less time for the things that really make us happy. In fact, we have less leisure time than any time in history since feudal society. What’s more, the little free time that we do have is spent watching television and shopping.⁷¹ If we were to cut back consumption and in turn cut back the need to work long hours, Americans would have free time again. As a nation, we would be less stressed, happier and more satisfied. Furthermore, we would be doing less harm to our environment. We live on a finite planet and we are running out of resources because we are using too much “stuff.”⁷² Over the past thirty years, one third of the earth’s natural resource space has been consumed – we are undermining our planet’s very

⁶⁹ Lasn.

⁷⁰ Leonard.

⁷¹ Leonard.

⁷² Leonard.

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ability for people to live here.⁷³ Moreover, the US makes up 5% of the global population, but uses 30% of the planet's resources. The US runs on consumption because in this country, a person's value is determined by his ability to contribute to this system. If he does not own or buy a lot of material objects, he is looked down upon and does not have value in our society. Hence, it is important to remember that consumption is not the same as well-being and it does not translate into human worth.⁷⁴ Increasing one's quantity of stuff is not the same as increasing one's quality of life or one's importance as a human being.

Subcultures often begin in an effort to rebel against the overall values of society, including consumption, materialism and capitalism. In these efforts, a unique subcultural identity and style is created. This identity is then adopted by and exploited by mass society. Moreover, the subculture's creation of a specific identity usually leads to some form of consumption and in this way, their efforts to rebel are thwarted. After all, America would not exist without capitalism and capitalism would not exist without consumption. Hence, while many people feel that tattoos are an act of rebellion, this is not entirely the case. Tattoos still cost money. At the same time, however, this money is paid to tattoo artists who are members of the subculture itself. It is the commodification of tattoos – the Ed Hardy apparel, the couture Deréon temporary tattoos, the body painting – that allows capitalism to make a profit off the art.

It is easy to say that overconsumption is killing the nation and that people should simply stop consuming so much. It is much harder for people to actually do this. In order to change a behavior, one must understand it. Thus, consumers must understand their consuming habits – why they are consuming, what they are looking to gain from it. It is likely that people are participating in mass consumption in an effort to escape the mundaneness of their lives. They are bored with getting up every day to go to work and follow the rules. They are sick of restrictions and conformity. In turn, they turn to consumption at night. They need the latest trends to feel as though they are living glamorous lifestyles comparable to those of the celebrities on TV. They need tattoos to feel they are above the demands of society, to feel as

⁷³ Leonard.

⁷⁴ Juliet B. Schor, "Towards a New Politics of Consumption," The Consumer Society Reader, 2000.

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though they are the rebellious, thrilling movie star. Additionally, Frank argues against consumption and the existence of cool without acknowledging that, in fact, we do experience some form of pleasure in crafting our own image. Creating our own identity gives us a form of control over who we are and how the world perceives us. We derive pleasure from seeing and being seen. Nonetheless, mainstream society takes this natural pleasure from us and uses it to their advantage by influencing our consumer habits so they will profit. Hence, consumption and the desire to primp or appear “cool” is not in itself bad. Overconsumption and overwork in order to buy goods to keep up or fit in can be mentally and physically damaging to our society as a whole. The key is not to consume to keep up or fit in, but to consume in moderation in order to create an identity that is pleasing to the individual without the influence of corporations trying to make a profit.

While it is important to recognize that some amounts of pleasure can be derived from the idea of asserting identity through style, creating meaning and identity in this way is superficial and does not make us completely happy – there are deeper, more meaningful ways in which to derive pleasure from life. Rather than invest so much of our time, money and sense of self into superficial appearances and consumption, tattoos allow individuals to actually invest deeply in the greater cultivation of the greater self. Changing one’s identity through fashion is shallow and requires little commitment or deep reflection of one’s true self. Instead of constantly investing in flimsy trends, one should constantly strive to better himself and cultivate his image to reflect his true, deeper self independent of short-lived trends and consumer habits. Tattoos allow people to show the world who they are and their life experiences – what makes up their sense of self – through artistic design instead of through “stuff.” In this way, body modification makes sense – it rejects the idea that one can buy stuff to make himself cool. As a nation, we can be happier, better people who do not need to destroy the planet through mass consumption to be cool.

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APPENDICES

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Appendix A – Volkswagen's Un-advertising Campaign⁷⁵



The '51 '52 '53 '54 '55 '56 '57 '58 '59 '60 '61 Volkswagen.

Ever since we started making Volkswagens, we've put all our time and effort into the one basic model.

You can see we've had lots of practice.

We've learned to make every part of the VW fit every other part so well, the finished car is practically air-tight.

The engine is so carefully machined and assembled, you can drive a brand new VW at top speed all day.

We don't make changes lightly. And never to make the VW look different, only to make it work better.

When we do make a change, we go out of our way to make the new part fit older Volkswagens, too.

With this result, an authorized Volkswagen dealer can repair any year's Volkswagen, even the earliest. (Why not? They use mostly interchangeable parts!)

If you had to decide between a car that went out of style every year or two and a car that never did, which would it be?



enter doyle dane bernbach.

Volkswagen, 1961. Simple, elegant layout; simple, devastating sales pitch. The Volkswagen is never obsoleted, unlike those new American models that appear in the spotlights at the auto show. The light, humorous copy puts the ad's explosive message across easily: Detroit is a fraud.

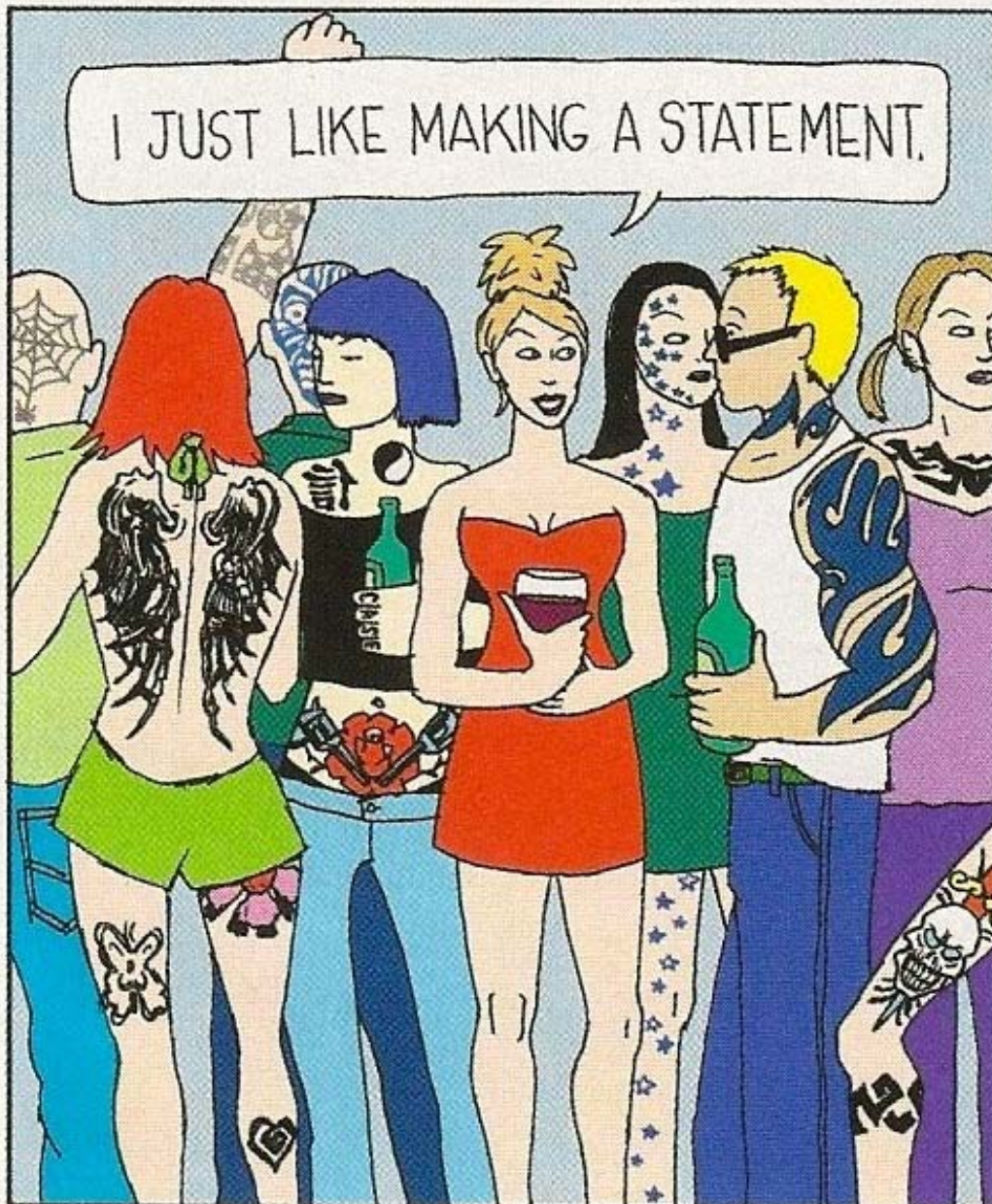
⁷⁵ Frank.

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Appendix B – To Be Quirky, One Must Choose Normal⁷⁶

Glamour Girls
by Marisa Marchetto

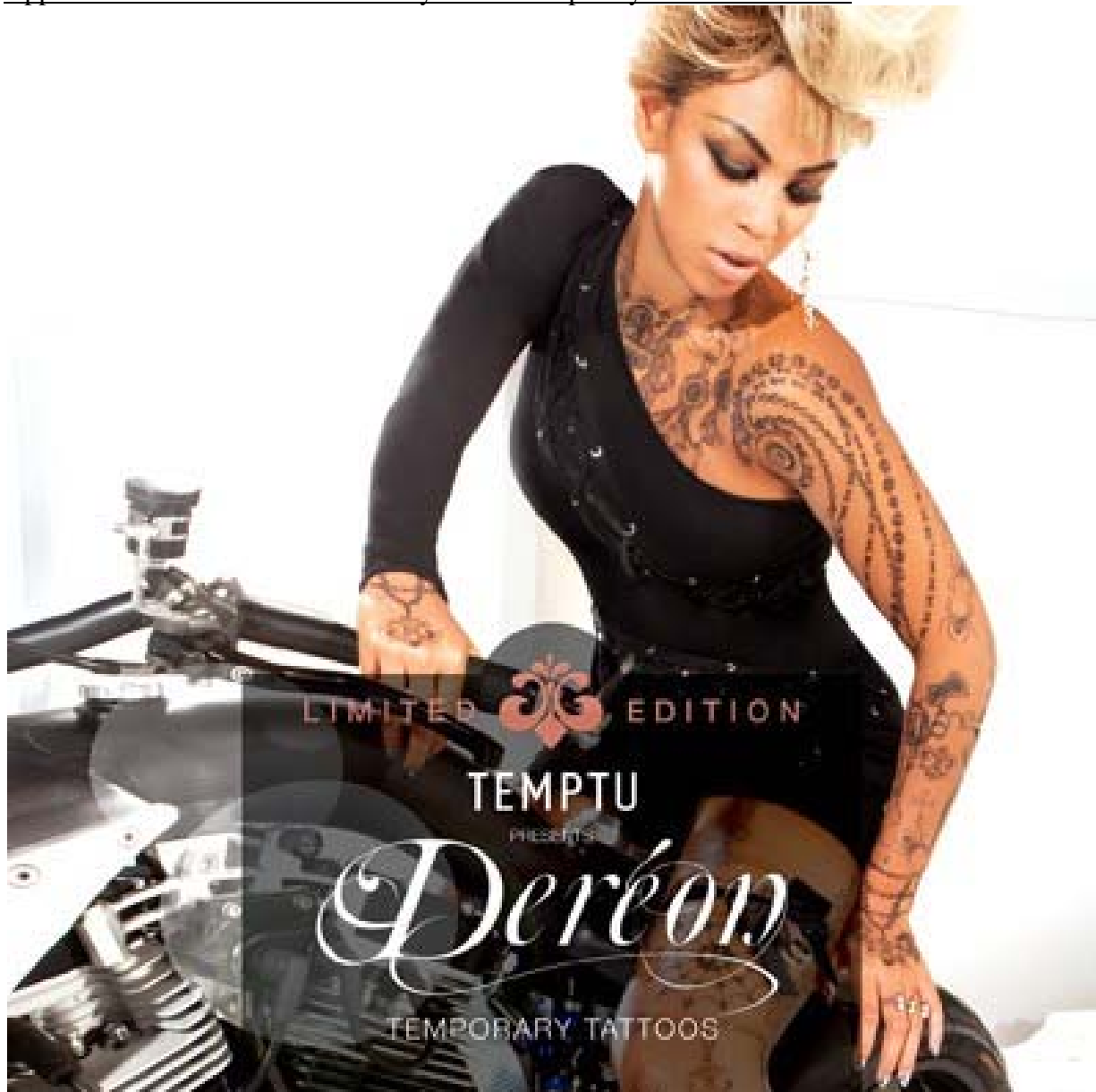


⁷⁶ Marisa Marchetto, "Glamour Girls," *Glamour* Oct. 2010: 44.

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Appendix C – Advertisement for Beyonce’s Temporary Tattoo Collection⁷⁷



⁷⁷ "Beyonce and Temptu: Temporary Tattoos," [Lovingyou.com](http://articles.lovingyou.com/tag/dereon/) 28 Oct. 2010.
<<http://articles.lovingyou.com/tag/dereon/>>.

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