

# The body as image – an analysis of the postmodern characteristics of tattoos in c...

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Synopsis, Marketing and Culture The body as image - An analysis of the postmodern characteristics of tattoos in contemporary society Introduction In recent years few terms have been so widely discuss as “ postmodernism” in order to define its basic principals.

Despite a lack of consensus, most authorities agree that postmodernism represents some kind of reaction to, or departure from, modernism and modernity (Brown 1993).

The consumer of the modern society is distinguished by being self-reflexive and rational while the characteristics of the irrational postmodern consumer are hyperreality, fragmentation, reversals of production and consumption, decentring of the subject, paradoxical juxtapositions, and loss of commitment (Firat et al, 1995). The ability and willingness to represent different self-images in fragmented moments liberates the consumer from conformity to a single image, to seeking continuity and consistency among roles played throughout life.

This self-referential identity of the postmodern consumer, and the general hostility towards generalization together with the rejection of the idea that human social experience has fundamental “ real” bases are possibly the main defining differences between modernism and postmodernism (Firat et al, 1995). Despite the seemingly transformation in consumer behaviour modern marketing theory (e. g.

Kotler, Porter, Ansoff etc. ) of costumer segmentation and categorizing customers is still widely accepted and used by companies in the western society.

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In the following I will through an analysis of the phenomena, tattoos, try to identify some of the characteristics of the postmodern consumer in order to establish an underlying basis of whether the change in consumer behaviour should be considered important to a change or re-writing of modern marketing theory. Tattoos in contemporary society One of the most drastic and highly debated types of consumption within the field of bodily consumption, is tattoos. 20-30 years ago tattoos were something only to be experience in the underground milieu among sailors, punks, bikers and other more or less dubious types.

But in recent years tattoos has undergone a renaissance and become a more common piece of personal decoration and part of the modern popular culture.

Not only the consumers of tattoos, but the tattooists - the cultural intermediaries - has undergone this transformation to a more modern profile. Being considered a deviant behaviour in the mid-twentieth century, and associated with people on the margins of society, tattooing has undergone what is generally referred to as a renaissance (Sanders 1989; Rosenblatt 1997; Velliquette and Murray 1999).

The phenomenon has spread to great parts of the population, and today more than 600. 000 Danes have one or more tattoos. This renaissance has made tattoos a fashionable way of adorning the body and has transformed it to a mass consumer practice. (Bengtsson, Kjeldgaard, Ostberg 2005).

Based on the above-mentioned and in the article " Noget i ? rmet" the following paragraph will discuss whether or not a modern marketing tool

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simplified in a pre-constructed schematically model of mutual cultural conceptions can be useful in order to understand identity and social stratification.

Kim Yde Larsen is a manager in one of Denmark's largest companies, Lego. Kim used to be what he describes as a " nice" boy. At the age of 30 he wanted to break the " pattern" and changed his social circle and had his first tattoo done and like his friends he acquired more in the following years. " I do it whenever I fell there's a need for something new.

I considered it for many years, because I desired another form of identity, so I found one (a tattoo) which tells something about my character" Kim obviously uses his body as a medium in his identity creation to establish an image, both in relation to himself and others.

You might even say that this has a certain self-branding aspect to it. Asked about other people's reactions to the tattoos, he answers that although he only has received positive comments, he feels that a strict split between work and private life is necessary due to the fact that he doesn't want to be categorised and people might would dissociate them from him. The hostility towards generalizations is one of the characteristics of postmodern consumers (Brown 1993).

When at work Kim believes it is important to appear clean and presentable which translated into a clothing correlation means dressed in a long-sleeved shirt, but when at private he tends to " dress-down" for instance wearing leather pants and a T-shirt with his tattoos displayed. The code mixing and switching of style between formal and informal clothes is a strategic

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masquerade of signs at the intersections of self, society and world (Mick et al, 2004).

This could also be describes as a form of self-communication as the tattoos are placed on the body where it can be hidden. Several of my private friends also have tattoos, so you could say that I posses two different personalities. I like that I'm free, and someone else, whenever I'm off work". Here, the style consumption emerges as a creative process of 'bricolage' between cultures and differentiation from mainstream marketplace orders (Kjeldgaard 2009) and the tattoo grants membership of a certain community (Elliot 2004) defined by the communicative discourse of the tattoo.

Thus it is not enough to "purchase" the membership card, the consumer has to maintain their social identity, for the symbol to be perceived accordingly. As the picture above illustrates, Kim dresses in a traditional corporate suit whenever he is working, which represents certain values (codes) like; professionalism, leadership, reliable etc.

This could of course be seen otherwise and is a question of the cultural background of the interpreter, likewise would the interpretation of the iconic and indexical signs of the "Off-work Kim" be.

Instead of seeing what could be a criminal or perhaps a biker some could be signifying his appearance as something individualistic, creative, perhaps working in the fashion industry or in an advertising agency. Kim's appearance isn't just only to interpretance by different geographical cultures, but also very much, perhaps, to different cultures and lifestyles. In other words, meanings established through styles are not 'closed', but open

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to interpretation and representation by other authors/readers. Above his right arm Kim has a tattoo of Baphomet, the occult symbol of dualism.

The Baphomet contributes to feelings of uniqueness and individual qualities. As the tattoo is customized and through display it embodies individuation and self-identity. The "consumption" of the tattoo by Kim, can be seen as both an authentic act and as an authoritative performance (Arnold and Price 2000). The tattoo is the expression of the "true" self of Kim and constructs a meaningful individual existence, and projects a certain image. The tattoo represents values from within and constructs a story, which he feels reveals/produces his "true" self.

The tattoo also works as a collective sense of identity and feelings of community with his friends (and possibly others) and displays a certain cultural tradition. In addition to that you could draw parallels to the Meaning Transfer System (McCracken, 1986) where the consumer, from the given structures of society embraces the phenomena tattoo but executes it in a manner to make it personal.

The narratives Kim seems communicated could be described as: \* \*

Professionalism \* Intelligent \* Leadership \* Reliable \* Rebel \* Part of a sub culture Toughness \* Dualism Reflection Kim is a useful example on how the postmodern consumer has fragmented identities (you could of course discuss whether or not Kim is representative for the population) and consumes in order to construct and express a unique identity, just like he communicates and modifies his style and image dependent on his role in the social relation. From a sociological perspective, most socially interested

researchers, if not all, agree that consumption is pivotal to understanding contemporary society.

Some have suggested this to be because we live in consumerist societies where people are categorized according to their competences as consumers (e. g. Bourdieu, Hoiris 1993), while others as Featherstone believe it is because we construct ourselves in order to communicate consumer lifestyle and dreams (Murray, 2002). Strongly inspired of the work of Bourdieu, Henrik Dahl has developed the Minerva-model, which is widely used by companies today as a tool to identify receivers of a certain product in relation to four distinctive cultural categories based on values and lifestyles.

The theory by Bourdieu on different levels of capital and consumption objects and taste has been widely accepted among theorists, but could be criticised for not being up-to-date and therefore unfit for use in the postmodern consumer society. In the case of Kim it is difficult to categorize him both in the 'system of distinction' and in the Minerva model as he developed a taste of tattoos, which conflicts with his other values in the cultural capital.

Although one of the critics, Douglas Holt, argues that the theory can be used if it is re-written and instead be centred on consumption practices, (Holt 1998) it is nevertheless, on a individual level very hard, if not impossible, to categorize consumers like Kim. From a modern marketing theoretical perspective the change in consumer identity and behaviour has implications for how marketing processes and phenomena are researched and studied.

The general assumption in modern marketing has been that if and when informed about characteristics of the consumer, some meaningful generalizations about the consumer and prediction of their actions can be achieved.

(Brown, 1993) This consistent identity is exactly what is waning in postmodern culture, as are predictability and explanation in the traditional sense (Firat et al, 1995). Postmodernism emphasizes the uniqueness, diversity, plurality and idiosyncrasy of each and every individual. It is no longer just that consumers frequently change their self-concepts, characters, values etc. ut they often subscribe to multiple and often highly contradictory value systems, lifestyles etc. In the perspective of consuming, and the findings of the analysis of tattoos in contemporary society it is nevertheless very difficult for today's marketing theorists to reject the notion of postmodernity and the need for a change in strategic marketing theory in order to " be on the same page" as the contemporary consumer.

The contemporary marketing practice has to a degree changed and the idea that not the product but the image possesses the value as gained recognition. Successful marketing organizations like Apple and Nike, realize that they are not in the business of selling products but of crafting images. This is a quintessential postmodern approach - the image is the marketable entity and the product strives to represent the image. In other words, the consumer is the marketer of his/her self-images.



This could rise tensions because of marketing practices has become postmodern while marketing theory continues to be developed in a modernist mode.

Although some academic marketers maintain that an external reality exists, that meaningful generalizations can be derived and predictions ultimately made from a long range of marketing conceptualizations such as 'The 4P' of Kotler, the strategic matrices of Ansoff, Porter and the Boston Consulting Group, this would have consequences for companies working with these widely accepted concepts. References Brown, Stephen (1993), "Postmodern Marketing?", *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 27, no. 4, 19-34

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Appendix 1 Modern versus postmodern Adapted from Brown (1993)

Appendix 2 The development in the world of tattoos Tattoo Ole is the oldest functioning tattoo shop in the world When sailors poured into Nyhavn sporting tattoos they had gathered on their journeys and were greeted by a few enterprising locals who had set up simple stations that amounted no little more than a box to sit on, hand-held tools and some ink.

This is of course not the scenario of the today's "Tattoo Ole" but the style and the culture of old the Nyhavn has remained.

Unfortunately I haven't been able to take photos inside the place, but the small of basement room is shadowy and dark. AlleTidersMissRoxy is an example of the great development in the world of tattoos and tattooists. As shown in the pictures beneath, the studio (as it is called now) is furnished with modern fashion furniture, the walls both outside and inside have been painted white and the studio appears bright. ----- [ 1 ].

<http://www.dr.dk/DR1/kontant/2011/05/30131938.htm> [ 2 ]. <http://www.fri.dk/personlig-udvikling/noget-i-aermet>