

2008

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### Recommended Citation

Cross, Tiffany (2008) "Exploring Permanent Property: An Exploration of the Tattoo Acquisition in the Midwest," *McNair Scholars Journal*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mcnair/vol12/iss1/3>

# Exploring Permanent Property: An Exploration of the Tattoo Acquisition in the Midwest



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## Abstract

*America has become a society in which almost anything can be bought or sold. This study, through both the ethnological comparison of contemporary tattoo acquisition research and ethnographic fieldwork in Graylin, Michigan, analyzes the increase in the acquisition of tattoos within the past two decades. Specifically, this study focuses on tattoo acquisition in the Midwest and tests whether the expectations gained from the literature are significantly relevant to this region of the United States. Through interview, survey, and participant observation, the goal of research ultimately is to analyze cultural transmission and trends. In past studies, the focus has been on class, identity, consumerism, and subculture distinction, but this study examines these four “themes” together to gain some understanding of tattoo acquisition as a whole.*

*\*Note: Many of the names in this study are aliases.*

## Introduction

*Miami Ink, L.A. Ink, and now London Ink.* These reality television shows exemplify the prevalence of tattoo acquisition in the twenty-first century. These shows feature tattoo artists who through their craft have become household names in the manner of other pop culture celebrities like Britney Spears and Madonna, both of whom are also tattooed. It is not just television that illustrates the growth of tattoos in the United States. If one were to visit local libraries and bookstores, one might notice shelves filled with books like Steve Gilbert’s *The Tattoo History Source Book*, discussing the tattoo’s past, or Dale Rio’s *Tattoo*, filled with pages upon pages of photographs establishing the tattoo as many things from an emblem of independence to an art form. There are magazines like *Tattoo Artist Magazine*, a self-proclaimed “quarterly trade journal for the Professional tattooer.” A plethora of scholarly articles in economics, sociology, psychology, history, and anthropology and reference books provide evidence of the tattoo’s surge in popular interest. A 2003 survey done by Scripps Howard News and The Ohio State University reported that 15 percent of the U.S. adult population have tattoos and the figure rises to 28 percent of in adults younger than twenty-five (Kang and Jones 2007, 42). Accepting this figure’s accuracy, it means that nearly 450,000 Americans have at least one tattoo.

The popular perception holds that before influential cultural icons like the Rolling Stones started revealing their tattoos to the public in the 1970s and 1980s, only sailors, “loose” women, the blue-collared, and criminals had tattoos. In the eyes of the mainstream or average American, these individuals were just as immoral or impure as the tattoos they acquired (DeMello 2000, 44-52). The tattoo was something considered exotic or weird that had originated amongst savages in what were believed to be backwards or less civilized cultures

(Kosut 2006; DeMello 2000). Sailors and military men who came back from tours in the Pacific are often credited with bringing traditional Polynesian body art to the shores of North America. As it arrived in the States, it spread increasingly amongst the sailors, factory workers, even carnies—essentially among the working class (Thomas, Cole and Douglas 2005; DeMello 2000).

Today, the tattoo has made considerable inroads into American culture. The so-called everyman and everywoman are acquiring tattoos in the twenty-first century. It appears that it is losing its bad reputation and can be seen more and more on the necks, hips, backs, and arms of America's population. The rapid acceptance has given researchers across the social sciences reason to take notice. Their studies have acknowledged the tattoo's once exotic cross-cultural roots, its tumultuous American history, and growing acceptance in late-twentieth/early-twenty-first century American culture.

Some of the most recent in-depth pieces such as Margo DeMello's *Bodies of Inscription* (2000) and Clinton Sanders' *Customizing the Body* (1989) have sparked several other tattoo acquisition investigations. Contemporary literature establishes four main themes: class, identity, commodification/consumerism, and culture-subculture. Stemming from these themes are embedded expectations: contemporary tattooees are of the middle class; Americans acquire tattoos to create new identities for themselves; the increase in acquisition is linked to American consumerist habits; and tattoo subcultures within the United States, so-called "tattooed people," are trying to separate themselves from the general practices of most contemporary tattooees. Current research attempts to qualify or disqualify these expectations within contemporary tattoo circles by analyzing tattooees, tattooers, and anyone else connected to them.

In my research, I apply these expectations to my own testing ground, Graylin, Michigan. Graylin is a middle-size Midwestern city, population 193,000, located in southwestern Michigan. It is the chosen site of my pilot study because other research ignores regions outside of large urban centers like Los Angeles, New York City, Miami, and Chicago.

## Auto-Ethnography

My interest in tattoos began in my childhood. My father, through his civil service career, was continually invited to the different cultural events around Chicago. I remember seeing tattoos for the first time at the yearly Puerto Rican Day parade. In 1996, at ten years of age, none of the people I knew personally had tattoos (or at least visible ones), and although I may have seen them on television the sight of one up close sparked my interest significantly. I did not know at the time what people widely thought of tattoos, but I know I had not seen many of them. I was unsure of why this was the case. In my opinion as a child, I thought the decoration was worth my interest and attention. Surely, the individuals who had acquired these tattoos must have also believed similarly. However, after pointing a tattoo out to my father that day, I learned that he disapproved of them considerably. According to him, and later reinforced by my mother, if I even thought about getting a tattoo, I would be in a tremendous amount of trouble.

Similar to my parents' beliefs were those of my friends' parents and my teachers. I received my elementary and secondary educations in private Catholic schools and I knew from the way other parents reacted to the sight of tattoos or discussion of tattoo acquisition that tattoos (in addition to piercings other than one and just one in the bottom of the ear lobe) were unacceptable, tasteless, shameful, and unladylike. Students who came to school (in both elementary and high school) with piercings in any place other than the ear would receive a detention and were asked to remove their piercings permanently. In high school, students would be sent home if their tattoos were exposed and made to cover it or not come back to school.

I remember after pleading with my mother, she took me to get a piercing in my upper ear cartilage for my fourteenth birthday. This piercing, although not any larger or shaped any differently, is not a traditional lower earlobe piercing and therefore appeared to be provocative. When my father saw the piercing, he was very displeased. He asked me what else I intended on piercing, making me feel ashamed. My friends at school

were amazed at the piercing, I was a rebel in their eyes. The piercing gave me some type of "cool" status. I was suddenly aware that in American culture, an unacceptable behavior or practice is "cooler" within younger circles and my experience was a clear example of this divide between generations.

As I continued to see tattoos throughout the city, my cerebral interest grew intensely. I saw people with several small tattoos and others with their arms, backs, and legs covered in murals of ink, or the "tattooed people." None of these varieties seemed weird or immoral to me. They appeared to wear the figures, shapes, and letters on their skin without fear that someone might constantly think negatively about what they had chosen to do to their bodies. I wondered how their tattoos seemed so prominent and pronounced to me, but as I watched these individuals, their tattoos were not simply tattoos; they had become one with that "self," that person.

In my mid-to-late teens, tattoos exposed me to a larger world outside my family and friends. My interests in tattoos led me to examine my family's values in comparison to mainstream media values and the values of friends outside of my original social network. As tattoos started cropping up on the celebrities I liked or idolized, I found that despite my parents' objections, I personally approved and admired the practice. At the age of eighteen, once I could legally get a tattoo, I decided that I would not get just anything or simply get a tattoo for a tattoo's sake. I had been a fan of tattoos for too long and I had older friends with tattoos. I knew what went into acquiring a tattoo. I'd seen the work being done and had witnessed the pain one endures during and after acquisition. In the summer of 2006, I went with a friend when he decided to acquire an Aztec symbol on his upper back in a tattoo studio in Logan Square, an area on the north side of Chicago. He held my hand through every wince during the acquisition. Afterward, I had to help him put his shirt on over his open wound and then heard his audible discomfort on the drive home. Personally, I could not go through that amount of pain for reasons I deemed childish or artificial. The permanence and pain that come along with a tattoo

heavily influenced the length of time I took to acquire a tattoo and to make the final decision. Therefore for the next two years, I put considerable thought into my acquisition. This thought process included not only ideas about placement and design, but also the date and studio I was going to get my tattoo. I wanted a tattoo that symbolized a hidden aspect of my identity, and I specifically wanted words.

In discussing tattoo acquisition throughout that March and April with tattooed friends and a few of their artists, I heard that sometimes one does not want a tattoo first and then decides on the design. Instead, he or she wants a design to be tattooed on them. It is not the desire for a tattoo but a desire for something significant to be tattooed on the self which drives people to acquire one. I understood this more clearly when I came upon the expression *Bearfaidh Me Bua*—"I shall overcome" in Gaelic.

I am one-part Irish, but one would never know it just by looking at my caramel complexion. I also grew up in an area on the south side of Chicago with enormous Irish pride. I am proud of all the parts of me and I acknowledge them equally. It is also important to note that I've experienced more than my share of tribulations growing up with parents who struggled to provide their children with all the opportunities that they had never had. "I shall overcome" means more that I have and will not allow adversity to stop me. For me, this message combines my heritage and my struggles. Additionally, I chose to put the Celtic symbol for the Trinity (father, son and Holy Spirit) below the phrase to signify my agnosticism ironically.

I found the Graylin studio where I acquired my tattoo by asking friends where they had acquired their tattoos. By investigating the quality of work and exterior appearance of the various shops, I decided on a studio located on the south side of Graylin. Through my experience with tattooed friends, I knew that tattoos were ultimately collaborations between the artist and the tattooee. From what I have seen and heard, people go into a studio with a design and usually get a tattoo in which the size, color, placement, or design has been negotiated according to what the artist thinks is right for the

tattoo. Through the conversation with my artist, I learned that I had to enlarge my original words and symbol so that the ink would not "fall in on itself." My artist was considering the elasticity of my skin and the components of the ink and how the ink would settle as he applied it to the specific area of my body and the particular tattoo I wanted. I was extraordinarily satisfied with the work.

For me, the acquisition of my tattoo was something special, almost spiritual, and I found a studio and artist who could understand this. In actually acquiring the tattoo, I felt that I had moved past the infamous impulsive tattoo phase of adolescence and that I was making a rational and careful decision based on who I was and who I wanted to be. I showed my parents the tattoo a few weeks after my acquisition, and despite their earlier opinions they accepted my decision. I explained what it meant to me, and in a way I think I convinced them that it was acceptable for me. The two of them appreciate the discrete location of my tattoo, recognizing that if I did not want anyone to see it, it could be conveniently hidden. I selected this location for two reasons. First, I did not think the design would look as good anywhere else. Secondly, I know that there are some employers who still look down on individuals with visible tattoos. I believe that it was my acquisition that also led many of my close friends' parents to have a more positive attitude about the practice. They had known me for years and seeing as I was not a rebellious, wild, or troubled individual, their assumptions about tattooees had been somewhat disproved.

My personal interests and experience expanded into a preliminary research project on tattoos and their acquisition. Growing up in Chicago and moving to Graylin, Michigan, for college presented me with an alternate sense of the Midwest. In the north side neighborhoods of Chicago, Boystown and Belmont, I saw the tattoo culture of a big city. Chicago has a large tattoo/piercing subculture found in other major urban centers like Los Angeles and New York City. There are numerous heavily tattooed and pierced individuals, as well as renowned tattoo establishments such as The Dragon Tattoo & Body Piercing

and M. Davis. From what I had seen there was little evidence of a significant tattoo circle or subculture within Graylin. Chicago, even with its size and influence, was not at the cutting edge of tattooing. As with fashion trends, Chicago and the Midwest are "trend followers" of New York City and Los Angeles. My research explores the tattoo culture of my home, the Midwest, the land between the two culturally influential coasts. I chose to focus on Graylin as a microcosm of tattoo culture and acquisition in the Midwest. The critical question I ask here is, "Does Midwestern tattoo culture compare to the expectations of literature set by research elsewhere?" Past research, limited to big cities essentially, examines the cutting-edge trends and their origins but not really the cultural transmission to other places. In understanding tattoo acquisition in the Midwest I hope to learn something more about my own acquisition.

## Methodology

To collect my data, I surveyed various Graylin residents, conducted interviews with Graylin residents, and interviewed two tattoo artists in each of the more popular and well-known Graylin studios. Participant observation was a necessary part of this study as well. I observed both of the areas in which the two studios are located for two days, each for three hours at a time for two weeks, to evaluate appropriately the demographics of the clientele compared to the neighbors. In order to survey individuals I used three methods: email correspondence, phone conversations, and an anonymous survey posted on a Web site. To find individuals to participate in either the anonymous survey or the personal interview, I used a snowball method. I asked acquaintances and random individuals, who then asked their family, coworkers, or friends to contact me if they were interested, and friends of friends did the same. The end result of the data collection was fifty-two surveyed individuals and fifteen interviewees.

In survey and interview, out of the individuals who expressed interest, I selected a mix of individuals, those with and without tattoos, in order to get a spectrum of thoughts and opinions on the

subject. I asked each informant several questions pertaining to her or his specific knowledge and perception of tattooing (see Figure 1). We also specifically discussed placement, design, and size, as these might indicate whether an individual belongs to a subcultural group or adheres to certain cultural or consumer norms. Each interview may have also touched upon other topics like class, gender, and sexuality, but not necessarily. With the tattoo artists, I explored trends in design, the demographics of their current and past patrons, meaning or symbolism of past work, and their knowledge of the tattoo community within and outside of Graylin. Additionally, I asked if they had any theories about the growth in tattoo acquisition.

For my participant observation I chose two studios, one on the west side of the city and the other on the south side. When I initially considered this study, I discussed tattoo acquisition with friends, classmates, and associates. These two locations were mentioned most often. The west side location is slightly separated from new business growth in an area by train tracks. The more recently built establishments are closer to the heart of downtown and they are just before the train tracks. Before the train tracks, one will notice the majority of the businesses have large open windows, stainless steel features, detailed lettering, and clear sidewalks. One side of the street holds two bars frequented most by local college students and young professionals and a public house most frequented by a mix of college students or college-aged individuals, young professionals, and persons in their thirties or older. Located just a few buildings down from these establishments is a newly built firehouse lending a sense of safety to that part of the neighborhood.

Just behind the tracks on the corner of Bird Street is the small tattoo studio. Directly to the front of the studio is a pawn shop with a dusty and slightly torn awning displaying its name, and to its left are two local Mexican restaurants and a few commercial banks. The residents are a mix of college students and middle- and lower-class African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic families. The sidewalks of these streets are littered

with flyers or wrappers. Every other storefront is vacant, most of the buildings are older brick buildings, and most have paint chipping from their siding or signs.

The tattoo studio itself is decorated in red, white, yellow, and orange lettering, which spells out the studio's name on the front and side windows as well as on the sign that borders the building and a small sign advertising a special on multiple piercings for \$20 each. The interior is a small space in which there are a few chairs lined up against the windows for customers to sit in, books of flash pages (ready-made tattoo designs) for customers to look through, and a few decorations—items like a flame-decorated skateboard. Upon entrance, there is a glass table where the individual who takes appointments or sets up piercings sits. Sometimes artists sit up there with this individual and are able to talk with the customers and help them make a decision or clear something up. When I went in to introduce myself, the tattoo artists and piercers were all in the back of the studio, but when I returned the second time to confirm my interviews, one of the artists was sitting at the front desk and others were sitting along another table which displayed different piercing tools and accessories to the back, near the tattoo and piercing areas. The piercing and tattoo areas are small but not cramped. There is plenty of room for the artist's tattooing station, materials, drawings, and awards. Everything from the table to the ink is organized to fit into the room while allowing enough room for more people to accompany a tattooee or person getting pierced. Everything is kept in what seems like its proper place. This establishment employs three male artists as well as two female and two male piercers, and the artists themselves are originally from Graylin. However, there are times when the studio employs visiting artists—artists who the west side studio artists met at conventions or through other tattooees.

The south side studio is located in an area that is similarly racially and economically diverse. Here, one notices that the neighborhood is trying to diversify its business and change economically. It is just seconds from the heart of downtown Graylin as well. However, instead

of bustling restaurants, boutiques, and bars, Diversion, the street that the south side studio is located on, houses several vacant or abandoned storefronts and buildings. There is also a food pantry, a thrift store, and an older bar to the left side of the street, all in need of repair. The lettering, siding, and decorations are either falling off, in need of touch-up, or lack any color or refurbishing other than a bleak tan. Most recently, a restaurant and a bar opened right next to one another on the right side. The bar has a shiny silver décor and large windows and glass door that allow passersby to see activities inside. The restaurant is decorated in navy and dark red insignia and décor.

Immediately to the left of these newer establishments is a much older pub without the large polished glass windows and modern décor. It caters to a more casual clientele. The tattoo studio itself is located next to a popular lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) club that proudly hangs a rainbow flag outside and a few buildings down from a punk music venue. The residents in this community are an eclectic combination as well. The pantry and thrift store along with the bars lend the street a mixed atmosphere.

Throughout the weekend, I observed and talked to teenagers (both young males and females) dressed in very tight jeans with hair of many abnormal shades, spiked hair, or hair covering their faces—teens who would be described as punk, emo, or scenesters. These individuals “hung out” at a small music establishment called the DAAC. Toward the two newer establishments, I observed an older crowd of people dressed much more formally and mostly Caucasian. As I talked with a few groups of these people on separate nights, I learned that many had grown up in Graylin and were Dutch and Christian. Many informants were young adults who were finishing up their undergraduate or graduate education or recently entered into the workplace, while others were in their late twenties to early- and mid-thirties. Both the older pub and the LGBT club were hosts to a mix of people, but more so the club, with people of different ethnicities and class wearing everything from baseball jerseys to business attire.

The tattoo studio itself has an open

seating area with a small set of chairs against the window. The other spaces in the seating area are lined with books of flash pages. The wooden floor is polished and gleaming and the design and lettering on the front window is simple, not flashy. It reads the name of the studio as well as the studio's telephone number. The door displays the days and hours of operation. Inside the studio are what seemed to be neatly and purposefully placed designed skateboards and a designed motorcycle. There are also plaques and awards placed carefully on the walls and several trophies, including a recent one on top of a wall that separates the waiting area from the artists' areas. Everything in the studio is polished and sits in a manner that gives the entire studio a very spacious look. The desk worker is always the same woman; she helps customers set appointments, answers the phone, and sorts out inquiries with the customers. The piercing and tattoo stations are spotless and roomy. While one might enter a tattoo studio expecting something else, this studio has the feel of a trendy doctor's office. The studio also employs seven male artists (two originally from the Graylin area, one from a nearby community, and one from the east side of the state) and two piercers, the master piercer and his male protégé.

Graylin State University is the largest university in the Graylin area. It is especially important to discuss my investigation of Graylin State University's influence in the community because of how it affects tattoo acquisition in Graylin. In past years Graylin State's student population mainly lived in the small town of Alister, Michigan. With the growth of the University and development of free bus transportation between its Graylin and Alister campuses, Graylin State students have migrated into the city and have spread some influence. Several Graylin students come from communities outside of Graylin and have brought differing and contrasting values and beliefs with them. It is necessary to take into consideration how these values and beliefs have transformed or influenced tattoo acquisition in Graylin.

## Literature Review

From exhibitionism and spiritual awakening to sexuality and individualism, there are a range of reasons why contemporary Americans say they acquire tattoos and a range of works that analyze everything from the contemporary developments in the profession to the associated attributes. In literature that focuses on why, who, and where people acquire tattoos, four themes—class, identity, consumerism, and culture-subculture—are prevalent. It is necessary to discuss each theme in order to illustrate my expectations for this research.

### Class

Class at one time was an indicator for whether or not one would or could acquire a tattoo. Looking at the history of tattoos in the United States, researchers agreed that before the 1980s the working class constituted the majority of tattooed individuals (Seward 1990). It has been fascinating for anthropologists as well as a spectrum of other social scientists to watch as tattoo acquisition moved among the classes, the larger middle class in particular. In "Legitimizing the First Tattoo: Moral Passage through Informal Interaction," Katherine Irwin discussed how the middle class developed a set of legitimization techniques to supposedly maximize what they saw as the positive benefits of becoming tattooed (having independence and autonomy from authority) and minimize the negative meanings associated with tattoos (being low-class, criminal, dangerous) (2001, 54). Irwin argued that middle-class tattooees circulated in several social worlds. While at school and with friends, individuals of the middle class would often learn that tattoos symbolized independence and freedom from conventional society. However, at work, with friends, or hanging out with individuals who more or less strictly adhered to the rules and practices of conventional society, potential tattooees continued to see getting tattoos as courageous and acceptable behavior. It was through their interactions with tattoo critics (perhaps a mix of professionals, clergymen, and the like) that potential tattooees studied and discovered how a tattoo could change their interaction in conservative social worlds (2001, 58). What scholars like Ir-

win and Margo DeMello, author of *Bodies of Inscription* (2000), concluded is that the tattoo has moved into the middle class and anchored itself amongst those who initially disapproved of the practice. What is a bit unclear in the works of DeMello, Sanders, Kosut, and Irwin is how exactly the middle class is defined.

Class is a relatively ambiguous and often contradictory term that can be described by shared values, practices, or socioeconomic status. Some experts might say that the middle class makes America what it is, meaning that it is the defining aspect of the American way of life. There is supposedly not simply a lower class and a ruling class, but a class in between of educated people who share the same traditions and values. This category is characterized by the so-called stability it brings to the economy and by hard-working Americans with a hope for success and sense of social responsibility, as well as an emphasis on family and education, particularly a college education (Hochschild 1995; Kalil 1999). The middle class has been stretched out to include almost every person probably under the top 10 percent of American income. Essentially, even the exceedingly wealthy have a place in the middle class if they hold these values and participate in the allotted practices (Kalil 1999). Therefore, when evaluating Graylin, I used shared practices and beliefs instead of income to distinguish an individual's class. For me, the stereotypical middle class traditionally eats dinner as a family, attends church or religious events together, sends children to college, makes children aware of social responsibility, has children start working at an early age, and readily enjoy activities and events with a larger extended family. In this way, an individual can also declare him or herself of a particular class just like the DeMelt family (an extremely wealthy and prominent Graylin family), who often assert that they have middle-class values.

### Identity

Identity is a theme characterized by what the tattoo ultimately does or provides for the individual who acquires it. Especially in the last ten years experts have argued that it is through tattoo acquisition that the modern individual intentionally attempts to mold him- or

herself into the person he or she wants to be, to ultimately construct his or her social self (Atkinson 2004; Feathersome 1999; Wohlrab, Stahl, and Kapperler 2007; Braunberger 2000). The body, according to Craig Shilling, author of *The Body and Social Theory* (1995), is always in this process of becoming. In this theory, Shilling asserts that the body's shape, size, appearance, and contents are subject to reconstruction on a continual basis. Through the choice to acquire and the specific qualities (color, style, placement, and design) a person selects for his or her tattoo, the individual is defining a persona according to his or her personal standards, opinions, and internal beliefs. Atkinson and Young (2001) write that "[tattooing is a] process of intentionally reconstructing the corporeal in order to symbolically represent and physically chronicle changes in one's identity, relationships, thoughts and emotion over time" (118). Through the literature individuality stems from a sense that a person alone is taking control over his or her own body, that ownership has been taken back from someone or someone, and that this tattoo provides the self with something that is specific to the individual (Featherstone 1999). From the nature of the reading, I am to understand that the individual seeks to take back this ownership from society or from one's respective families or class.

Another theory is that a tattoo provides not an identity in itself, but rather independence. The acquisition of the tattoo separates an individual from the ideals, values, and beliefs that they have rejected from the broader society (Atkinson and Young 2001). The tattoo historically has been that symbol of rebellion, and here we see the tattoo emerging as a symbol of values and beliefs anew. The individual establishes his or her independence because the tattoo as a symbol is still enough to visually separate oneself from society at large (Bell 1999, para 4). Here, the tattoo serves as a distinction within the accepted social construction and not a completely different or new identity for the tattooee. Often heard is that individuals acquire their tattoos to illustrate their opposing beliefs about religion, sexuality, or the "right life."

#### **Commodification/Consumerism**

While some believe that the recent increase in tattoo acquisition is linked to notions of self-identification and independence, others contend that within our consumer culture the tattoo has become just another commodity in a world where almost anything can be bought or sold. In this instance, one does not acquire a tattoo in the pursuit of a separate, authentic self, but just to purchase "something" else. According to articles like "The Possibility of Primitiveness: Towards a Sociology of Body Marks in Cool Societies" by Turner (2000), the tattoo is no longer an emblem of rebellion and buyers need not beware because the tattoo today is optional, narcissistic, impermanent, and decorative (cited in Featherstone 1999). The adjectives optional, narcissistic, impermanent, and decorative are now attributed to the tattoo because it is, in the opinion of Turner, a commodity. It went from a countercultural representation to a fashion statement that teenagers and twenty-somethings can make, later remove, and possibly regret. Within the realm of this literature, the tattoo as a commodity in our "throw-away culture" is supposedly just like any other product the consumer buys in a market where the consumer is separated from the means of production and has no real knowledge of how things are produced (Sweetman 1999; Kosut 2006).

#### **Culture-Subculture**

Culture-subculture is a theme linked together because it illustrates how outside cultures have influenced the contemporary subcultural American trends in tattooing. Today, Western movements, most notably the Neo Primitive movements, are adopting so-called "primitive styles" like that of the Maori, the Celts, and the *yakuza* of Japan (Atkinson and Young 2001). Members of the Neo Primitive movement are trying to get back to the roots of tattooing and to the traditions associated with the styles (Bell 1999; DeMello 2000; Atkinson and Young 2001). While American tattoos are more image-oriented, primarily literal interpretations of things that typically stand alone (i.e., a lone rose or cross figure), "primitive" tattoos are seen by tattoo communities around the world to be more ritualistic and identity- and

symbol-oriented (DeMello 2000).

The Neo Primitive movement uses the solidarity and group association connected to primitive tattooing to oppose, resist, and separate themselves from what they see as fad and commercial styles of tattooing (Atkinson and Young 2001). For members of this subcultural group, tattooing provides spiritual, emotional, and practical rewards—rewards that are repressed by the overarching societal structure and institutions of the Western world (Rosenblatt 1997; Atkinson and Young 2001). Neo Primitive tattoos are characterized by their supposed tribal lines and shapes that follow the body's natural contours, tattooed in black and red ink. These tattoos are large and often full-body (Atkinson and Young 2001; Camphausen 1997). Neo Primitive tattooees as well as the individuals called tattoo collectors (individuals who aspire to collect tattoos over the entirety of their bodies) seem to draw a line between those who have tattoos and those who are tattooed—the insiders and the outsiders. Those on the inside believe that their tattoos are every bit a part of their self as their eyes or their nose. The Neo Primitive tattooees, tattoo collectors, and the heavily tattooed are the tattooed individuals.

#### **Data Analysis**

From the themes, I expected several results:

- Most individuals acquiring tattoos today would be from middle-class families
- Individuals would attach their identities to their tattoo
- The increase in tattoo acquisition would be attached to American consumerist habits
- There would be drastic differences between people with tattoos and tattooed individuals. Tattooed individuals would be those who see the tattoos as another part of their body.

I have categorized the results into two sections: "Meets Expectations" and "Does Not Meet Expectations/Inconclusive" so I can properly analyze the data without limiting aspects that might meet expectations in some ways but in not others, as well as analyze without

separating similar or shared themes.

### **Meets Expectations: Class, Commodification/Consumerism, and Identity**

From the data collected, my results regarding class and commodification/consumerism are consistent with that of the literature, and some parts of the identity theme meets expectations as well.

Through interactions with relatives, friends, and influential persons of the same class who have acquired tattoos and established the tattoo as acceptable, self-identified middle-class individuals are increasingly acquiring tattoos. My informants had families who ate dinner as a family, attended church or religious events together, sent children to college, made children aware of social responsibility, had children who started working at an early age, and readily enjoyed activities and events with a larger extended family. The vast majority of my informants, whether from Graylin, nearby communities, or out of state, declared themselves of the middle class. Of my informants, half of the sixty-seven individuals reported that it was the sight of their relatives' (immediate or extended) tattoos that influenced their own acquisition. Others said that it was the sight and knowledge of their peers' and friend's tattoos that had influence on their acquisition. On average six out of ten informants, both students and professionals, indicated that moving away from their largely conservative parents had a large role in their decision to become tattooed. Those twenty-two who did not have a tattoo expressed a variety of reasons why they did not want or have a tattoo, ranging from the disapproving views of their friends and families to their own belief that tattoos are senseless purchases and unnecessary. A female informant said that none of relatives have tattoos as far as she knew. Her family is "very" Catholic and lives on the east side of the state. Her parents, she asserted, told her that if she ever acquired a tattoo they would stop paying her college tuition and she would no longer receive any type financial assistance from them. They believe that one who acquires a tattoo is defacing and mutilating one's body. She, despite her parents' beliefs

and conditions, would like a tattoo, but will wait until she has a stable career.

Graylin is known for the "conservatism" reported by my informants. Graylin could be considered a bit of an anomaly. Western Michigan, where Graylin is located, is considered by other "Michiganders" to be "very conservative"—conservative mainly revolving around right-winged Evangelical Christian beliefs tied to the strong and continuing Christian Reform Church tradition in the area, as well as Dutch roots in the population. The terms I recorded most often were "influential Dutch reform traditions," "right-wing politics," and "the Christian Reform Church," stressing that "conservative" individuals here did not want to "deviate" from what they believed to be cultural norms. A recently married couple, both raised in the Christian Reform Church on the east side of Graylin, informed me that generations of their families have focused on living the way the Church and God wanted them to live, free of sin and pure of heart. While none of my informants could pinpoint exactly where in the Bible or their religious tradition it says not to tattoo or pierce one's self (although one mentioned Leviticus), a few discussed how it is believed that some piercing is seen as adornment to most people, while tattooing is mutilation, destroying the body God gave one to spread His news and live a righteous life.

Many inferred that the conservative attitude in the area has an influence over the tattoo culture in Graylin for its residents but that the Graylin State University's mixed population also has influence over the continual acquisition. The artists I interviewed as well as most informants stated that they believed most tattooees nowadays are college-aged individuals or college students. The University brings in students from outside areas. For several students who have grown up in the community or grew up in conservative, middle-class households, this mixed interaction has changed their views on tattooing, and they have found confidence in their thoughts of possible acquisition.

I spoke with two young males, G & C, both from nearby communities. One of the young men, G, said that he grew up around tattoos. His uncles, father, aunts,

and cousins all had tattoos and he often went with his relatives and older friends when they were getting work done. He acquired his first tattoos, a large clover on the upper back of his right shoulder and a very detailed moon figure on his front right arm, the year before he started going to Graylin State and told me that he intended on getting several more. His best friend, C, explained before he met G at Graylin State, he thought that tattoos were ridiculous. He did not understand why someone would want to go through any amount of pain just to get a senseless drawing on their skin. After the two students became friends, he started to admire G's tattoos.

One day I asked [G] why he picked those two tattoos out of all the things he could have gotten, and he told me about how his grandfather, father, uncles, and cousins had the same clover tattoo on their backs. He said he couldn't wait to get his first tattoo, to feel like one of the boys. They all have clovers because they're Irish, but it seemed to mean a lot more to him than just that they were Irish. I had always thought that the moon on his arm was pretty awesome too, but now I understand what the moon actually means to him. He loves the night, ya know. He has this badass telescope. Yeah, I started to think about getting one myself, something that symbolizes my music and my five-year relationship with my girlfriend.

I found that commodification data is very much in-line with the most recent research on tattoos, just like the class theme, contending that contemporary acquisition (acquisition in the last eight years) is tied to American unnecessary consumerist habits. Of all the tattoo stories I recorded, evidence points in this direction, especially for first-time tattooees under the age of twenty-five. All four artists I interviewed expressed that I would be amazed at the number of college students that come in just because they are bored. In comparing my own reasons for acquisition I was surprised. These artists state that tattoo acquisi-

tion has become another activity people do to keep themselves entertained.

About eighteen tattooed informants stated that their tattoos were works of art inscribed on their bodies, while ten especially stressed that it was a very casual decision to get their tattoo, that they did not put much thought into the decision, and they just did it with a friend or relative randomly. One artist commented that the reason women get smaller tattoos in hidden places and are more likely to get piercings is because women change their minds often and like to have the ability to change their image with ease. Piercings, for the most part, can be easily and inexpensively removed and closed up. Men are more likely to acquire blatant armbands and detailed animals or drawings because they are slower to change. This particular comment correlates to pop culture fashion and seasonal trends: They change quickly. One trend apparent in the data is the fact that many of my college-aged informants went to get their tattoos in a group. It appeared that if these individuals did not have a decision made, a design and such picked out, the group or the other individuals had a considerable influence in all aspects of the acquisition, placement, size, and design.

A recent graduate of Michigan State University and new resident of Graylin told me that he considers his lizard tattoos art, like the art work one would purchase at a gallery. However, the words “Out, Never In” on his butt were acquired for just for fun with his fraternity brothers. The study definitely illustrates through vocal opinions and subtle mention that residents and students alike often acquired tattoos for aesthetic, decorative, and maybe even fashion-related reasons.

When it comes to identity, my informants did often directly and indirectly express how their tattoo is a symbol of independence and freedom, yet very few of my sixty-seven informants mentioned anything about identity or a self-established and proclaimed identity. Although this idea of a separate, self-cultivated identity was dominant in the literature, independence was also another factor in the identity theme, and it was the idea of independence that was more consistent with the expectations. I asked my infor-

mants why they themselves acquired the tattoo(s) and/or why they believed one would acquire a tattoo. To quote one of my artist informants, “People get inked for decorative reasons. It’s like buying a dress for some. For others, people who come in with their own designs, mostly it’s more special. It separates them.” The later part of the quote is evidence that connects the decision to acquire more to independence than to a desire to form a completely new identity. I was told by nine of my tattooed informants that the actual acquisition made them feel like it was one of first times they were really making their own decision.

### **Does Not Meet Expectations/ Inconclusive**

There was not a great deal of data that matched the literature expectations for the identity theme. Very few informants directly or indirectly mentioned the word identity or discussed the idea of acquiring a tattoo to construct a unique and separate self, one that is separate from past beliefs, traditions, values, and institutions. Those who did indicate that they acquired a tattoo to express their identity linked this identity to a group and never talked about the tattoo as an expression of uniqueness. The instances I did hear a tattoo being an outright symbol of an identity were related to sexuality or group association. For example, three of my informants used their tattoos to express that they were openly part of the lesbian community. One female explained that her snowflake tattoo symbolizes the day she came out to her parents and her solidarity with her fellow lesbians and friends. Quoting another of my informants, “As a Marine, I got my tattoo with my buddies, members of my company, my brothers.”

Finally, in examining the idea of tattooed individuals, my data are currently inconclusive. My pool of informants and my time restriction limited the amount of data I collected in association with the culture-subculture theme. Only six of my informants had multiple large tattoos covering a particular area of their bodies, and four of these individuals were tattoo artists. Of these four individuals in particular, one told me that

most people only see maybe 5 percent of tattoo culture, and because of the size and atmosphere of Graylin, its residents see and know even less. He also mentioned that the heavily tattooed and tattoo artists comprise a community because they share a unique connection and appreciation for tattooing. The two artists at the west side location stated that they believed they were a part of a subcultural group consisting of individuals who hang out at tattoo and piercing studios, heavily tattooed individuals, and individuals who “collect” tattoos like the literature’s tattoo collectors and tattoo artists. These individuals value tattooing for separate reasons, but it is a genuine appreciation and shared interest that unites them.

The other two artists did not believe they were members of a subcultural group, but stated that they believed such groups existed according to the style, size of an individual’s tattoo(s), and the meaning they ascribe to it/them. Other than the four artists, the two individuals (both males) who had large tattoos noted that once they acquired larger tattoos they were lumped into a category with similarly tattooed individuals. One of the informants had two tattoo sleeves (an arm completely covered with tattoos), and the other’s back and left arm were completely covered. Together, we discussed how—often when their tattoo-covered body parts were exposed to the general public (at the gym, beach, doctor’s office, and the like)—they felt a bit of alienation or like they were a spectacle. When people were not staring, they were asking these individuals questions, such as, “Didn’t that hurt?” and “How long did take to get that done, and why did you get a that tattoo?” With the exception of their families and friends, these two informants felt the most comfortable in the presence of those who have similar tattoo work done. Individuals with tattoo sleeves, full back pieces, or a full bodysuit understood what it meant to acquire something that separated an individual from conventional society even if they had differing reasons for acquiring their tattoos. Essentially, the tattooee may not separate him- or herself or indicate that he or she is a member of a subcultural group, but as a result of his or her particular acquisition

may be categorized or placed in one.

## Conclusion

Although this preliminary study is still in the early stages, the data show considerable consistencies with the class and commodification expectations of the literature. The current identity results are a bit inconsistent with expectations because, while informants often expressed how their tattoo is a symbol of independence and freedom, they rarely discussed how their tattoos provided them with a new identity. Again, because of time restrictions and my limited pool of informants, the culture-subculture results are currently inconclusive. Further investigation is certainly needed with regards to all four themes, especially the culture-subculture themes, but the current results do shed a bit of light on what I might find through continued examination. The most important aspect of this preliminary exploration is that I have begun tattoo acquisition research in an area and region previously unstudied. This study has allowed me to take the first steps in understanding not only the factors or influences that drive the increase in tattoo acquisition today, but also in understanding how the Midwest affects or is affected by cultural transmission. It is a land between two major cultural metropolises, and as a result trends seem to be imported into the Midwest, but rarely exported. As I continue with my research, I am left with this question, "What will it take for the Midwest to be at the cutting edge of trend?"

Because this investigation is still in its early stages, it is important to point out that a larger sample of informants might elicit contrasting results. It is also necessary to emphasize the complexity of human reasoning. Although the literature divides tattoo acquisition into simpler themes and categories, things are definitely not black and white. Often influence and logic behind the acquisition of a tattoo is linked to aspects of class, identity, consumerism, and culture-subculture. These themes are certainly not mutually exclusive. In further investigation, I would like to be able to interview more artists and attend a tattoo convention. I think my preliminary data for

culture-subculture was incredibly limited by my inability to talk with individuals who had larger tattoos and spend sufficient time in multiple tattoo studios. My questions, like my sample size, should also broaden so that I may further discuss topics like sexuality, religion, gender, and workplace acceptability.

Although it has only been a preliminary study, I have also enjoyed the ability to analyze my own acquisition as I learned more about Graylin and tattooing through my informants' perspectives and opinions. Although I still assert that my acquisition is the result of independent consideration and personal beliefs, I note that because of commodification of the tattoo in the late eight years tattooing was an option for me. If tattooing was not as popular or accepted as it is today in my age group or in my social circles, I may not have acquired a tattoo. I am proud of my tattoo and I do not try to purposefully hide it. However, I wonder if I would have been as proud of my tattoo thirty years or even ten years earlier, and if one act of tattoo acquisition for a mixed-race, middle-class female would have been completely disgraceful and unacceptable.

My parents accept what I have done but would not necessarily approve of another tattoo, and they certainly do not believe it would be appropriate for my fifteen-year-old sister to acquire one. Yet they respect my rights as an adult and ask only that I be "tasteful" in my actions and consider my future. Some of my friends' parents have accepted tattooing in general, perhaps due to my acquisition or to their own interactions with more and more individuals with tattoos, while others have simply accepted my acquisition but still disapprove of tattooing overall. With the research I have done, I feel as though the tide is changing with regards to tattooing even in conservative areas like Graylin. This acceptability is a trend that appears to be moving through the Midwest.

## Appendix 1. (Figure 1)

### General Survey

“Exploring Permanent Property” Grand Valley State University

You are being asked to take part in this survey because either you have a tattoo or multiple tattoos, or your experience, knowledge, opinion, or perspective on American culture as well as tattoos is needed to explore and learn more about the research concept. No identification (name, address, area code, age, etc.) whatever is needed for research purposes and need not be provided. Your opinions will not be judged or seen by anyone other than the researcher, Tiffany Cross. If you have any additional questions or concerns, would like to request a copy of the final manuscript or see what has been done with the information you provided, please contact the researcher at .....

Note: This symbol (\*) means these questions are for individuals with tattoos.

1. Is it appropriate to have any type of body art/modification (piercing, tattoos facial implants, henna, etc)?
  - a) What do you consider appropriate in terms of body art/modification?
  - b) What do you consider to be extreme in terms of body art or modification?
2. What do you think is appropriate (size, location, design) for tattoos specifically?
3. What are your thoughts on tattoos in American culture today? (Tattoos in everyday life or in the media).
4. Why do you think people get tattoos?
5. Who was the first person you can remember having a tattoo?
6. Do you have, currently want, or at one time want a tattoo or tattoos?
  - a) If you have a tattoo (s) so, why did you decide to get a tattoo(s)?
  - b) If you want a tattoo, are you getting one soon and/or what has prevented you from already acquiring one?
  - c) If you do not want one, why? Do any of your family members or friends have tattoos?
7. \*If you have or want a tattoo, how did you decide on the color, placement, design, and size of your tattoo(s)?
8. \*[Answer yes or no and then pick and describe location]  
Did you get your tattoo in one of the following: Western Michigan, in the state of Michigan, or in the Midwest?
  - a) If so, which one and where was this studio located? What did it look like and why did you pick it.
  - b) If not in the Midwest, where did you get your tattoo(s) done?

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