

AUTHENTIC BODIES:
SUBCULTURAL REACTIONS TO THE
MAINSTREAMING OF BODY MODIFICATION

By

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ABSTRACT

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Once a hallmark of Western deviance, body modification has undergone drastic redefinition in recent decades. If body modification is increasingly seen as being an aspect of mainstream culture, it begs the question of what will happen to the subculture which once claimed the practice as its own. This dissertation investigates how members of a body modification subculture are responding to the mainstreaming of body modification through a qualitative analysis of a virtual community designed for those with an interest in these practices. By researching how and why the body techniques of the subculture's members have changed following the mainstreaming of body modification, I hope to further the understanding of how group boundaries are actively (re)defined— particularly within an internet context. I also discuss the role of style and non-body modification related phenomena in the subculture's efforts to remain a distinct group. In addition to contributing to the sociological understanding of subcultures and the role of rituals in community maintenance, this dissertation contributes to the growing area of the sociology of the body.

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For all those who look beyond appearances to see what lies in one's heart

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| CHAPTER 1 | |
| INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| Virtuality and the Modified Body..... | 3 |
| Research Objectives..... | 5 |
| Plan of the Dissertation..... | 5 |
| CHAPTER 2 | |
| LITERATURE REVIEW..... | 11 |
| The Subculturalist Approach..... | 12 |
| Analyzing Discourse..... | 19 |
| Psychosocial Shortcomings of Western Body Modifiers..... | 27 |
| The Exaggerated Health Risks of Body Modification..... | 30 |
| The Postmodern Body..... | 33 |
| The Media's Role in Body Modification..... | 37 |
| How Mainstream is Mainstream?..... | 39 |
| The Forgotten Practitioners of Body Modification..... | 43 |
| CHAPTER 3 | |
| MODIFIED METHODS..... | 48 |
| The Virtual Field..... | 48 |
| Strengths of Chosen Data..... | 50 |
| Limitations of Chosen Data..... | 52 |
| Data Collection and Analysis..... | 53 |
| Reflections..... | 61 |
| CHAPTER 4 | |
| CHARACTERISTICS OF A MODIFIED PEOPLE..... | 64 |
| Demographic Patterns..... | 64 |
| A Subculture's Repertoire on the Body..... | 70 |
| Discussion..... | 76 |
| CHAPTER 5 | |
| VIRTUAL COMMUNITY AS A TOOL FOR SUBCULTURAL BOUNDARY MAINTENANCE..... | 82 |
| Reasons for Modifying One's Body..... | 82 |
| The Subculture Goes Online..... | 84 |
| A Virtual Death..... | 87 |
| Inauthentic Motivations..... | 92 |
| Responding to Popular Forms of Body Modification..... | 97 |
| Criticizing People with Modifications..... | 102 |
| Conflict with Other Users..... | 108 |
| Offline Lives..... | 112 |

| | |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| CHAPTER 6 | |
| CONCLUSION..... | 116 |
| Limitations and Contributions..... | 123 |
| REFERENCES..... | 128 |

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Voluntary body modification in Western culture, such as tattoos, piercings and elective plastic surgery, has a long history marked by varied social (re)definitions. Throughout much of the last century, the definition was often tied to deviant behavior and social undesirables. During recent years, however, there has been a shift in the acceptability of body modification, as scholars and reporters are quick to point to members of the middle class modifying their bodies for numerous reasons, including identity salience, rebellion and aesthetics. The tattoo, for example, has “undergone dramatic redefinition” (Irwin 2001:50), shifting from a form of deviance to what younger generations of today consider an acceptable form of expression.

There are a number of factors contributing to the growing acceptability of body modification, including reasons related to a demographic shift of body modifiers in the second half of the twentieth century. Steward (1990) revealed that tattooees were predominately illiterate males in the 1950s, but that had changed by the mid 1980s when nearly two-thirds of tattooees had completed at least some college and tattooing was spreading across gendered lines (Sanders 1988). Steward (1990) noted that females were rarely tattooed in the 1950s, but by the end of the century one in three tattooees was a female (Sanders 1988). This trend has continued as women and men are now equally likely to be tattooed (Fisher 2002). According to a 2003 Harris poll of the US public, 16% of men and 15% of women have been tattooed (Kang and Jones 2007).

The inclusion of women and more educated individuals among body modifiers has led some scholars to presume body modification now belongs to the mainstream (Irwin 2001). A trend in body modification among mainstream individuals, however, does not equate to

tattoos and other forms of body modification being socially acceptable across Western culture (Kang and Jones 2007). Individuals with visible tattoos, for example, are more likely to face job discrimination than those with concealable tattoos. Notably, US courts have upheld the right of private and government employers to terminate employees who refuse to cover their visible tattoos or body piercings, as these are considered to fall under dress code violations and are not protected by freedom of expression laws (Baldas 2005; Roberts vs Ward 2006).

Individuals who conceal their modifications at work are protected against discrimination as long as the tattoo remains hidden (Baldetta vs Harborview Medical Center 1997). It is imperative, therefore, that scholars differentiate between visible and non-visible modifications. For example, scholars should not place facial tattoos on equal footing with lower back tattoos. Nor should they assume lobe and bridge (i.e., the bridge of the nose) piercings are equally acceptable within mainstream culture. In short, there is a need to differentiate between individuals according to their level of involvement with body modification, just as one should differentiate between types of modification. Bell (1999) provided a typology of tattooees that distinguishes between individuals with a few hidden tattoos (people who have tattoos) and individuals who have numerous and visible tattoos (tattooed people). I extend this typology to include other forms of body modification, differentiating between people with modifications (those who have a minimal number of discreet modifications) and modified people (those who have numerous visible modifications— including visible tattoos, non-normative piercings but not including standard gauge¹ lobe piercings on females, and/or more extreme forms of body modification, such as facial scarifications and subdermal implants).

¹ Gauge is a unit of measurement for the diameter of needles and jewelry, where smaller gauges indicate larger diameters (e.g., 18ga = 1.024mm; 12ga = 2.053mm; 6ga = 4.115mm).

Though the primary concern within body modification research has been the expansion of body modification across the socioeconomic spectrum, the traditional groups affiliated with the practice continue to be modified in ways that are seemingly meant to maintain a distinction between themselves and those who are getting one or a few minor modifications. If body modification is increasingly seen as being mainstream, then it begs the question of what will happen to the subculture which once claimed the practice as its own.

Virtuality and the Modified Body

Interest in body modification among mainstream Westerners has steadily and constantly grown in recent decades (Laumann and Derick 2006). Currently, there are an estimated forty million people with body modifications in the US (Stirn, Brähler and Hinz 2006; Kang and Jones 2007). While this number seems large enough to justify studying the topic, it is important to note that the vast majority of people who practice body modification do not fall into the category of modified people. On the contrary, most tattooees are tattooed in easily hidden locations and the majority of piercees do not have stretched lobes or enough facial piercings to be considered visibly modified (Sanders 1988; Irwin 2001; Laumann and Derick 2006).

The percentage of individuals who could be defined as modified people is relatively small. This creates a challenge in terms of the finances and time required to track down this group in order to collect accounts of the modified subculture. Given these difficulties, I turn to the internet as a space where a critical mass of modified people virtually mingle in order to share stories of their body modifications, understandings of the modified subculture, and concerns about the encroachment of mainstream culture into their cultural ways. It is in this space that some of the rituals practiced by members of this subculture meant to maintain a sense of community can be studied.

The internet has quickly changed from a rarity to an essential tool in the daily lives of most Westerners (DiMaggio et al. 2001), and numerous internet sites devoted to body modification have emerged since the 1990s. Some sites only offer picture galleries for people considering tattoos or piercings, while others offer a full virtual community consisting of newsletters, personal blogs, chat forums and so forth.

My research is focused on one of the most popular body modification websites—ModMagazine.com—a site I was exposed to while working in a tattoo shop. I first heard about ME, the virtual community hosted by ModMagazine, from one of the shop's customers. I later heard more about the site from visiting tattoo artists who shared their ME information so that we could stay in contact after they returned to their own shops. After joining ME, I discovered that the site had several advantages for studying modified people. ME is a closed site that requires users to provide evidence of at least one body modification prior to acceptance, has thousands of registered users and was created by heavily modified people. The latter aspect helped it gain legitimacy among the body modification subculture.

ME presents a community of people who are both modified and interested in the culture surrounding modification, a useful combination for looking at boundary work within the subculture of modified people. The mix of modified people and people with modifications is also useful, as it provides opportunities to observe justifications for the subculture's development and change within a larger context of body modifications. Not only do members of the subculture express their concerns about the mainstreaming of body modification in their blog entries, they are occasionally involved in conflicts with people with modifications. It is these conflicts and efforts to maintain a unique subculture that form the foundation of my research.

Research Objectives

The questions at the core of this dissertation are meant to help understand the responses of subcultural members to mainstream use of body modification and possible trajectories of this subculture within a contextual framework of boundary work and sociology of the body. Rather than focusing on mainstream people with modifications, as most scholars in this area have done, I focus on the interactions and (virtual) rituals of modified people. Approaching body modification from this perspective enables me to achieve the following research objectives: First, to determine if group boundaries (whether related to body modification or not) exist between the body modification subculture and people with modifications. Second, this approach will provide insights into how members of the body modification subculture are responding to the increasing use of body modification within mainstream Western society. Finally, my approach will help to understand the role of the internet in the formation and/or maintenance of subculture boundaries.

These research objectives allow me to expand on the small amount of research on body modifiers, which has typically been focused upon the mainstreaming of body modification and/or the psychosocial shortcomings of body modifiers. With few exceptions, the literature has ignored the body modification subculture. I also hope to contribute to the sociological understanding of group boundary maintenance— particularly within an internet context. Finally, I want to add to knowledge connected to the sociology of the body. The correlation between the virtual and embodied lives of the subculture's members will be an interesting, important, and timely contribution to this area.

Plan of the Dissertation

In order to understand this subculture's response to the mainstreamification of certain body modifications, it is important to first create an understanding of subculture as a social

phenomenon. I begin Chapter 2 by discussing the development of subcultural theory within the tradition of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. The writings of these scholars will assist me in first determining whether or not the group I studied constitutes a subculture. The literature reviewed also provides an understanding of the methods of resistance subcultures may use, as well as the social spaces in which these techniques are invoked. The emergence of postmodernity has led some scholars to question the validity of the concept of subculture in contemporary society. After considering postsubculturalist arguments, I will argue for the applicability of subcultural theory for my research.

One of the premises of this dissertation is that there has been a shift in the way the mainstream views and talks about body modification. While some of the negative attitudes remain, others have been replaced by a limited acceptability of some forms of body modification in recent decades. A review of discourse can be helpful in understanding how ways of discussing body modification have influenced both mainstream and subcultural body modifiers. Though discourse is a tool of power, subordinate groups may attempt to create competing or alternative discourses, and considering discourse will allow me to go beyond the individual texts of my participants and better understand the subculture's attempt to sustain group boundaries.

I then turn my attention to literature that has contributed to the dominant discourse on body modification by portraying it as indicative of psychosocial shortcomings. Some scholars have argued for a link between tattoos and piercings and a propensity for (sexually) risky behavior, calling for intervention of the part of mental health professionals. In a similar vein of research, some scholars have been concerned about the health risks associated with the body modification application process. The gravity of the mental and physical issues discussed by such scholars deserves attention, but it is important to consider the internal validity of those studies before accepting or rejecting them.

The mainstreamification of body modification has also drawn attention from scholars investigating the social construction of the body. Rather than discussing body modification as deviance, some scholars consider the role played by the cultural shift towards postmodernity in thinking about how the body is to be used or altered. I link the emerging commercialization of the body to the media's contribution to the body modification discourse. Remembering the distinction between modified people and people with modifications, I attempt to clarify whose interests may or may not be represented within the contemporary discourse.

The second chapter will also include the problematizing of the idea that Western cultures have experienced a mainstreaming of body modification. While the number of modified bodies has dramatically increased in recent decades, it is important to consider the significance of these numbers. Are all body modifications created equal? The answer is clearly no, given the legal right to discriminate against certain body modifiers. As the larger culture attempts to clarify the social place for body modification, the oft neglected collection of traditional body modifiers, including those with no desire to belong to the mainstream, continues to engage in the practice, creating the need for scholarly endeavors that attempt to understand the social significance of body modification from the viewpoint of groups outside the mainstream.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach of my study, in which I diverge from the quantitative methods used by many researchers investigating body modification. Given the hard to reach nature of the target group and my familiarity with one virtual space in which members of the body modification subculture congregate, I opted for a form of internet research called Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), and I discuss the strengths of the specific site and internet based research in general in this chapter. I also discuss the

limitations of studying this particular subculture, which does not always accept the presence of researchers.

I continue the methodological discussion by providing a detailed account of the data collection process, beginning with the justification for my decision to modify CMDA to include the analysis of visual data so that I might best research this collective of body modifiers. I have also chosen a two-pronged approach supplementing CMDA with informal interviews, allowing me to address some of the questions that remained unanswered by CMDA. The majority of data collected for this dissertation stemmed from content analysis of the thirty-seven participants' personal pages, and I provide examples of some codes used to analyze the role of individual texts in creating an alternative discourse in order to clarify the coding process. Initial codes were created on the basis of my previous experiences with the group in this study, and I added to the coding scheme as new themes emerged.

Lastly, I elaborate on unexpected findings and hurdles experienced during data collection phase, such as ME going offline for two weeks. Though initially unwanted, these experiences turned out to be beneficial for my analysis. I end Chapter 3 by reflecting on my chosen methodologies and the data collection process, considering possible explanations for the participation rate of my study. I also comment on reaching the point of saturation.

Chapter 4 begins with a presentation of the demographic patterns of participants (e.g., gender, age, employment status), and I link these to those of the subcultures discussed in Chapter 2 in order to substantiate this group's subcultural status. Education and employment are two areas that distinguish participants from the broader collection of body modifiers and indicate a role played by social class in this group's formation. If the subculture is determined to remain a distinct collective, then it is important to consider which demographic factors may contribute to the subculture's sustainability. I then analyze employability and financial

stress, two recurring themes that must be viewed in relation to the visible modifications characteristic among this group.

Following the discussion on group demographics, I discuss the subculture's repertoire (i.e., symbols and style) and how it is used to separate it from the larger culture. I show which body modifications are practiced by participants and how the subculture seeks to find new or more extreme ways to modify the body, as looking at which modifications are or are not common among my participants helps understand the goal of body modification. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the demographics and body modification practices of participants, considering what these interplaying factors can reveal about subcultural maintenance. The rejection of popular forms of body modification and the high participation rates in extreme forms of body modification (e.g., tongue splitting) indicate the subculture's desire to distance itself from mainstream people with modifications.

In addition to knowing how participants modify the body, it is important to know why they modify their bodies. I begin Chapter 5 by presenting the acceptable motivations for modifying the body, contrasting those of modified people with people with modifications. While the motivations of mainstream modifiers and participants are similarly multidimensional, participants did reject certain mainstream motivations, and I link this to a desire to be or remain outside the mainstream. One way participants attempted to maintain their non-mainstream status and further their subcultural status was joining ME, an important networking and identity building tool.

After the discussion of participants' understanding of ME's purpose, I turn to recent administrative changes to ME. Changes in website design and content were interpreted by many modified people as an attempt to become more mainstream, causing many to criticize and/or abandon the site. The responses of my participants to the site's changing composition will be helpful in determining the potential role of the internet in group boundary formation

and/or maintenance. They will also shed light on the subcultural importance of particular virtual spaces.

Since many of the body modification forms practiced within the mainstream were borrowed from the subculture, it is important to consider the subculture's way of talking about popular modifications and their wearers. In addition to avoiding popular forms of modification, some participants also altered existing modifications that had become popular. Negative attitudes towards people with modifications sometimes turned into negative interaction with other ME users, and I interpret these conflicts (similar to intra-group conflict) as an attempt to enforce group boundaries. I also discuss the rituals emerging within this group that reveal a desire to maintain a clear sense of group identity.

Despite the virtual nature of my research, it is necessary to discuss the offline lives of my participants. Participants used ME to solidify and further their position within the subculture, but the data collected will show the importance of the physical world to this body-centered subculture. Accordingly, I discuss some of the offline activities and relationships important to one's subcultural authenticity, such as relationships with other modified people and attendance at events dedicated to body modification.

This dissertation concludes with a summary of my findings, as well as limitations and contributions. I reflect on my research and some of the unexpected challenges that emerged during the data collection phase. Despite (or perhaps because of) these experiences, I am able to make a scholarly contribution to multiple areas of sociological interest, including the sociology of the body, subcultures, and the role of rituals in community building and maintenance.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Body modification, as experienced in the West, was of little interest to scholars throughout much of the twentieth century. Its movement into mainstream society, however, has motivated some to begin looking at and thinking about these practices. The academic approach with the longest history views body modification as a signifier of psychosocial shortcomings, pointing to the deviant nature of body modification. This approach often calls for intervention on behalf of the individual seeking some type of body modification. A related branch of research comes from health professionals warning against the harmful physical effects of body modification.

Whereas some scholars have and continue to portray body modification— particularly tattoos and piercings— in terms of deviance, others have attempted to understand why body modification is important for the socialized body. Still others have devoted research to documenting and explaining the mainstreaming of modification. Concern with the modification practices of the middle and upper classes, however, has led scholars to overlook a large segment of the population of body modifiers. As a result, little work has been done to adequately differentiate types of body modifiers, both in terms of quality and quantity of modifications and motivations for becoming modified.

I will begin this chapter with a review of subcultural theory in the tradition of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. In addition, I will briefly describe Social Identity Theory, which helps frame the intergroup relations between the body modification subculture and mainstream modifiers. I will then review scholarship on body modification to date. Finally, a discussion on discourse, an important component of internet research, is included in this chapter.

The Subculturalist Approach

Subcultural research is rooted in the writings of the Chicago School (Williams 2007), with deviant collectives often being analyzed by early subcultural theorists seeking to understand the manner in which the working class attempts to meet society's standards in the face of negative social conditions (Cohen 1955; Bennett 1999). Subcultural theory was later influenced by the emergence of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the UK in the 1960s (Shildrick and MacDonald 2006), which was primarily concerned with working class and youth subcultures in post-War Britain (Clarke et al. 2005). According to the CCCS' conceptualization, subcultures offer individuals "a different cultural response or 'solution' to the problems posed for them by their material and social class position and experience" (ibid.:95).

If a subculture is a response to conditions created within the larger culture, the question becomes how does the subculture issue its response? The subculture's solution, and the subcultural theorist's primary unit of analysis, is style:

Subcultures are... expressive forms but what they express is, in the last instance, a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second-class lives. This tension is figuratively expressed in the form of subcultural style. (Hebdige 1979:132)

Style may bring to mind meaningless superficialities. It is therefore helpful to note that style, as applied by subcultural theorists, is simply another term for the manner in which a subculture utilizes symbols in an attempt to display dissatisfaction with the mainstream culture. The style that a subculture invokes includes borrowed objects already widely used within the mainstream. In borrowing from the superordinate culture, subculture members make illegitimate use of otherwise legitimate objects (ibid.). Since a subculture's style is meant to deliver a message to the broader public and help clarify group boundaries, it is critical that the symbols used stem "from within the matrix of the existent" so that mainstream individuals can recognize the subculture's desire to alter society through altered

objects (Clarke 2006:150). Developing and using symbols that have no relation to mainstream culture would risk the possibility that others would not know one is challenging larger cultural structures.

According to some scholars who use the subculturalist approach, the best location for observing style is leisure space. A subculture's style, however, is not strictly limited to leisure space and activities. Rather, it is in a leisure setting that style can be most readily observed (Clarke 2006). For John Clarke and other CCCS scholars, the emphasis on leisure was justified by the fact that the subcultures of interest emerged from the working class, which emphasized leisure as a cherished opportunity to enjoy otherwise nonexistent personal freedom:

The rigours of work are not forgotten when the indulgences of leisure begin. But the 'relative freedom' of leisure has allowed a *displacement* of central class concerns and values developed in work to the symbolic activities of the leisure sphere... One of the most complex things in working class leisure and sport is to understand fully this combination of both release from, and reproduction of, the rhythms of work in the apparently free activities of leisure... The focus of working class youth on leisure becomes fully comprehensible when placed in this framework. As we argued earlier, this is intensified by working class attitudes to youth, especially boys, where adolescence itself is seen as a time of relative indulgence and freedom before adult responsibilities set in — and, thus, a time, pre-eminently, of leisure. (ibid.:148)

Not only was leisure important to the working class as a whole, its importance to the youthful subculture members of interest was heightened by the social factors specific to them. Leisure spaces are those where subcultural youth have the opportunity to create and express their own style, thereby making these spaces most vital in the study of subculture (Thornton 2005).

Subcultural theorists have been primarily interested in the moment a new style emerges. For, "[t]his is the moment when activities, practices, outlooks *crystallise around* certain very limited and coherent expressive forms" (Clarke 2006:148; emphasis in the original). More recently, scholars have called for a change to this initial approach, suggesting that:

the subcultures are treated as static and rigid anthropological entities when in fact such reified and pure subcultures exist only at the Centre's level of abstraction which seeks to explain subcultures in terms of their genesis. Hence, there is an uncomfortable absence in the literature of any discussion as to how and with what consequences the pure subcultures are sustained, transformed, appropriated, disfigured, or destroyed. (McRobbie 1994:69)

McRobbie's call for a more thorough analysis of how subcultures are lived and redefined after the period of initiation is an important one. It should be noted however, that CCCS scholarship was not wholly restricted to the genesis of subcultures. Willis (1978), for example, contrasted the sustainability of bikeboy and hippy subcultures. The bikeboys' reluctance to expand the subculture into non-leisure spaces ultimately led to the subculture's downfall. Hippies, on the other hand, were able to maintain the subculture for a greater period by expanding cultural practices into work and family lives.

Style has been both a preferred point of analysis for researchers and a method of differentiation for subculture members. There are, however, other aspects to subcultures that should be and have been analyzed. Clarke (2006:152) showed that actions of skinheads enhanced the distinction between them and hippies already expressed through style:

a further point about the subculture's relation to different outgroups — their reaction against certain groups does not necessarily manifest itself primarily in the symbolic aspects of the style (clothing, music, etc.), but must be looked for in the whole range of activities, contexts, and objects which together constitute their stylistic ensemble. Thus, the Skinhead reaction against Hippies is not solely manifested in their opposed dress and hair styles, but in the physical assaults on Hippies.

Similar to their attacks on hippies, skinheads have also attacked other groups they opposed, e.g. 'paki-bashing' of immigrants (Pearson 1976). The mass-dancers, who attended rigidly planned dances in large British halls throughout much of the twentieth century, provide another example of a youth culture not being limited by style. Not only did they promote a fancier style, the mass-dancers purposefully selected more expensive venues for their dances once popularity increased. Subsequently, it was understood that the lumpen youth were undesirable within this group (Mungham 1976).

While style may be the most visible manner in which a subculture can distinguish itself from the mainstream culture and other subcultures, it is seldom the only form of distinction. In fact, subcultures solely based on style are likely to crumble. Willis (1978:176) argued that a subculture ultimately contributes to its own dissolution when style serves as its lone challenge to mainstream culture:

If their cultures were basically a matter of style, then no matter what they expressed or implied they could be taken as just that: style which could be generalized, torn from its precise contextual meaning, and used to generate further demand for the culture and consciousness consumer industries... If it is to even maintain its own existence, never mind its subversion into complex forms of its opposite, the detailed dialectics of cultural transformation and personal liberation must also stretch to a dialectic with political and material structures.

Ironically, the objects subcultures take from the superordinate culture often gain popularity among the mainstream in their altered form. Thornton has suggested that one of the greatest problems facing a subculture is the popularization of its style via a “gushing up to the mainstream” (2005:191). If a subculture’s only method of distinction is style and that style is (re)claimed by the mainstream, then the subculture must seek new objects and techniques to incorporate into their existence or face extinction. Peterson and Anand (2004) have argued that mundane changes in technology, markets and occupational careers permit the production of new cultural forms, and these changes may prevent a subculture’s collapse. The ability of a subculture to develop a career system, for example, lends structure and gatekeepers so that the production of the specific culture is sustained.

As was the case for body scholars, postmodernism has forced many subculture scholars to reconceptualize their work. One critique of (sub)culture is that it is too often used, yet seldom defined, resulting in a term that means many things to many scholars (Bennett 1999; Small, Harding and Lamont 2010). For others, the notion of subculture has simply lost its relevance in the postmodern world, as all groups and narratives are of equal importance (Williams 2007). This has been the case for sociologists interested in punk and other music

based groupings (Hesmondhalgh 2005; Force 2009). Bennet (1999) argued that subculture is no longer a viable concept, because contemporary 'subcultures' do not uniformly employ the same styles and are not bounded by social class. Still others have suggested that race, gender, and age are now more appropriate points of subculture analysis than class (McRobbie 1994; Thornton 2005).

Two concepts often used by scholars rejecting the subculture approach are (neo)tribe and scene. These 'postsubculture' approaches conceptualize the groups of interest in terms of a loose collection of moments or events and not a structured subculture. They also emphasize individual choices while minimizing social structures (Bennett 1999; Blackman 2005). According to Shildrick and MacDonald (2006), these approaches overemphasize music, dance and style, as if those were the only motivators for subcultural groups. Moreover, they "tend to be reserved for the more privileged sections of dominant cultural groups" (ibid.:133) which possess the socioeconomic means to bounce from chosen tribe to chosen tribe and from scene to scene.

Contrary to critiques from postsubcultural scholars, subcultural theorists have not always presented subcultures as rigid, permanent collections or lifestyles. From its inception, CCCS scholarship recognized that subcultures can and do have flexible boundaries and potentially limited lifespans (Clarke et al. 2005). Furthermore, subculturalists deemphasized the role of class in the formation of subcultures as class began playing a less significant role throughout society and in the recruitment of subculture members. As Clarke (1990) noted, critics of the CCCS approach must recognize that the reason class was so prevalent in early CCCS writings was a direct result of the particular importance of class in post-War Britain.

Much of the criticism of the CCCS and subcultural theory, therefore, stems from a misinterpretation of early CCCS writings (Blackman 2005). Hesmondhalgh (2005) argued that a lot of the criticism regarding subcultures has been misdirected and that the actual

problem is the misapplication of subculture to numerous youth and music based groupings. The fact that subculture does not apply in all situations does not mean that subculture should be dismissed as a sociological concept. Sociologists not affiliated with CCCS have also conceptualized subcultural identity as a fluid phenomenon (Fine and Kleinman 1979). Yet, in contrast to the notions of scenes or tribes, which present a potentially “exaggerated” view of personal autonomy, subcultural theorists recognize the importance of social structures in the emergence of these groups, whether those structures are provided by class, race, gender or some other social characteristic(s) (Blackman 2005).

Scenes and tribes may be appropriate framing devices for some studies, but subculture remains a valuable concept (Wilson and Atkinson 2005; Shildrick and MacDonald 2006; Williams 2007), one I find most appropriate for this study. While all subcultural phenomena can be reinterpreted regardless of their permanence, the permanent nature of (at least many of) the body modifications within the subculture of interest indicates that tribe and scene, with their “temporary nature” (Hesmondhalgh 2005), are not as applicable. Given the inverse relationship between body modification and income, as well as education (Laumann and Derick 2006), I argue that social structures play an important role in the formation of the group of interest among modified people. Using a subcultural framework enables me to confront the potential conflicts and paradoxes currently facing this particular subculture.

As pieces of subcultures move into the mainstream, they can lose their distinctive character and dissolve, something that has taken place with both punks and contemporary pagans (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990; Coco and Woodward 2007; Force 2009). Within these subcultures, the increasing interest from mainstream outsiders was met with skepticism. The pagans in Coco and Woodward’s (2007) study welcomed the potential of increasing numbers, but only so long as new members were interested in the ‘true’ version of paganism, not the watered down version portrayed in films such as *Harry Potter*. Widdicombe and

Wooffitt (1990) found that those seeking to gain entry into the punk subculture were often viewed with suspicion and labeled according to their date of entry into the subculture (e.g., 80's punk) in order to distinguish them from committed members with a longer history. For pagans, punks and other subcultures facing assimilation (and possible extinction of the original form), one of the foremost concerns about new recruits is the sincerity and depth of their commitment, or authenticity (McLeod 1999). New members judged to be inauthentic are often rejected and said to be "latching on" to the subculture because of its current fashionable status within the mainstream (ibid.:269).

Authenticity is also a concern for subcultures not considered fashionable within the mainstream. Since measures of authenticity change over time, maintaining one's status requires consistent involvement in the subculture (Force 2009). A strong concern with authenticity within a subculture indicates that the subculture is determined to maintain its separate identity from the parent culture (McLeod 1999; Williams and Copes 2005). The extent to which body modification subculture members are concerned with authenticity can help determine the likelihood of this subculture going mainstream.

One approach to understanding the desire for authenticity and boundaries within a subculture is through ingroup/outgroup relations. Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a perspective that helps to explain intergroup relations (Yuki 2003). In addition to explaining ingroup bias (Brewer 1979; Tajfel and Turner 1979), SIT scholars have shown that discrimination against outgroups can be a method of solidifying group unity (Abrams and Hogg 1988). According to Hogg, Terry and White (1995), the categorization of ingroup and outgroups furthers group unity by providing a distinct exemplar of prototypical in- and outgroup members and activities. Even heterogeneous collections that define themselves as a group (e.g., 'Americans') have an idyllic prototype.

As the requirements for subcultural authenticity change with time, so too do the prototypical ingroup characteristics depending upon what outgroup is currently most prevalent (Hogg et al. 1995). Brown (2000) found that increasing similarity between in- and outgroup can result in an even greater motivation for ingroup members to maintain a distinct group. Intragroup conflict may arise when some members fail to meet or aspire towards the newer, more extreme prototype, as there is increasing importance placed upon remaining distinct from outgroups. Less prototypical members may be discriminated against in an attempt to enforce the new prototype (Hogg 2006). This may lead one to wonder how groups signal boundaries and intrusions both within and between groups. Within most groups, this is done through signals embedded in, among other things, discourse.

Analyzing Discourse

The study of (sub)culture can be enhanced through the inclusion of discourse analysis (Barker and Galasinski 2001). Discourse is an area of interest to scholars from various disciplines, including sociolinguistics and sociology (Iedema 2003; Wodak and Meyer 2009). Ethnomethodologists, for example, have investigated the role of discourse in the construction of social reality (Heller 2003). For scholars interested in discourse, it is not syntax or grammar that is important (Billig 2008). Rather, discourse analysts attempt to understand and interpret language as a social practice. As noted by Fairclough (1993:134; emphasis in the original), discourse “is always a socially and historically situated mode of action... it is socially shaped, but it is also socially shaping, or *constitutive*.”

The term discourse involves more than the spoken word. It includes other language forms, including the symbolic:

Like many linguists, I shall use discourse to refer primarily to spoken or written language use, though I would also wish to extend it to include semiotic practice in other semiotic modalities such as photography and non-verbal (e.g. gestural) communication. (Fairclough 1993:134)

The inclusion of photos among written and spoken texts reveals that discourses provide several methods for addressing an issue. Some discourse analysts focus on the spoken word through the use of interviews and oral histories (Clary-Lemon 2010). DeFrancisco (1991), for example, used interviews to supplement tape recorded conversations among couples in her study of marital power relations. Iedema (2003), on the other hand, used pictures from instruction manuals to show how pictures, not just language, can also play a role in a discourse's construction of reality. Whether spoken, written, or otherwise symbolically represented, discourses are "regulated ways of speaking about a topic which delimit the sayable and unsayable" (Barker and Galasinski 2001:2).

Discourse scholars differentiate between discourse and text. A discourse is not an individual conversation, but the social manner in which society talks about an issue. Text includes a single conversation, letter, blog posting, news report, or other form of communication referencing the issue. In other words, discourse is macro while text is micro. Text and discourse affect the social and individual differently. As Jäger and Maier (2009:38) argued:

A single text has minimal effects, which are hardly noticeable and almost impossible to prove. In contrast, a discourse, with its recurring contents, symbols and strategies, leads to the emergence and solidification of 'knowledge' and therefore has sustained effects. What is important is not the single text, the single film, the single photograph and so on, but the constant repetition of statements.

This quote does not mean that single texts are socially irrelevant. A single text may be important to society, such as Rev. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

Nevertheless, the power of that text lies in its relationship to the broader discourse of civil rights.

Discourse is not a single language segment and it is neither created nor distributed by a lone individual. Rather, discourses are "supra-individual" (Jäger and Maier 2009:38). Characterized by repetition and sameness, the communication of a discourse requires a

collective. There is no author of a discourse in the traditional sense, as the author is “the unifying principle in a particular group of writings or statements, lying at the origins of their significance, as the seat of their coherence” (Foucault 1971:14). Accordingly, the individual is not the unit of interest to the discourse analyst. Individuals or groups seeking to control a discourse may fail since discourses take on a life of their own over time. According to Jäger and Maier (2009:39), “[t]here may be a difference between a speaker’s reasons for using a particular discourse, and the social consequences of doing so.” Whereas most people can control their own texts, they are unable to influence the discourse (van Dijk 2004).

Contemporary scholarship on discourse has been influenced by Foucault more than most scholars. According to Fairclough (2003:123), Foucault had a “decisive influence” on discourse scholarship. Scholars utilizing this approach have acknowledged the role discourse plays in the molding of society and the individual. For Foucault, the individual as subject is the result of discourse, not its creator (Jäger and Maier 2009). The influential role of discourse, then, indicates a relationship between discourse and power whereby the social elite gain and maintain power through status markers embedded in discourse.

One aspect of discourse’s link to power maintenance is the fact that discourses serve not only to describe what is, but to represent the way the world should be. Drawing upon Foucault, Fairclough (2003:124) argued:

Different discourses are different perspectives on the world, and they are associated with the different relations people have to the world, and they are associated with the different relations people have to the world, which in turn depends on their positions in the world, their social and personal identities, and the social relationships in which they stand to other people. Discourses not only represent the world as it is (or rather is seen to be), they are also projective, imaginaries, representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied in to projects to change the world in particular directions. The relationships between different discourses are one element of the relationships between different people— they may complement one another, compete with one another, one can dominate others, and so forth.

It is important to note that, while discourses may try to project a desired reality, there is not always a unitary discourse on a given issue. There are sometimes competing discourses,

whose varying discursive ensembles prevent a regular discourse on a given issue (Wodak and Meyer 2009). The discourse on sex, for example, is comprised from competing ensembles from the fields of theology, biology and medicine (Foucault 1971). Discourses need not necessarily oppose each other, but they may not be fully integrated. As noted by Fairclough (2003:124), it is possible to have “many specific representations” of a discourse without having multiple discourses.

The link between discourse and power is sometimes viewed as a given within the literature. However, discourse was not always (mis/ab)used by the elite. According to Foucault, the role of discourse shifted in ancient Greece when the elite recognized the potential of discourse as a source of control over the masses. In constraining the limits of an accepted ‘truth,’ the elite began concocting a discourse that enabled them to increase their power:

It is, undoubtedly, a historically constituted division, For, even with the 6th century Greek poets, true discourse - in the meaningful sense - inspiring respect and terror, to which all were obliged to submit, because it held sway over all and was pronounced by men who spoke as of right, according to ritual, meted out justice and attributed to each his rightful share; it prophesied the future, not merely announcing what was going to occur, but contributing to its actual event, carrying men along with it and thus weaving itself into the fabric of fate. And yet, a century later, the highest truth no longer resided in what discourse was, nor in what it did: it lay in what was said. The day dawned when truth moved over from the ritualised act - potent and just - of enunciation to settle on what was enunciated itself: its meaning, its form, its object and its relation to what it referred to. A division emerged between Hesiod and Plato, separating true discourse from false; it was a new division for, henceforth, true discourse was no longer considered precious and desirable, since it had ceased to be discourse linked to the exercise of power. (Foucault 1971:10)

Once a way of discussing the way things are, discourse morphed into a method of excluding challenges to that elite’s version of truth and bringing about what might be. As such, discourses now play a role in “fact construction” (Potter 1996:104). Discourses typically build a version of the world that serves those in power, a fact that makes access to and control of discourse resources of control. This makes discourse one of the “crucial constituents of social power” (van Dijk 2004:356). In addition to limiting access to discourses, the elite often

exploit the complexity of institutional discourses in order to maintain their hold on power (Wodak 1996).

One method of restricting access to discourse is to prohibit or ridicule ideas lying outside the accepted discourse. While this may secure the elite's hold on power, it can harm society by effacing intellectual advancement. Foucault (1971:16) provided an example of the discourse of a discipline erring because it did not recognize the work coming from outside the accepted discourse:

People have often wondered how on earth 19th-century botanists and biologists managed not to see the truth of Mendel's statements. But it was precisely because Mendel spoke of objects, employed methods and placed himself within a theoretical perspective totally alien to the biology of his time... Mendel spoke the truth, but he was not *dans le vrai* (within the true) of contemporary biological discourse: it simply was not along such lines that objects and biological concepts were formed. A whole change in scale, the deployment of a totally new range of objects in biology was required before Mendel could enter into the true and his propositions appear for the most part, exact. Mendel was a true monster, so much so that science could not even properly speak of him.

The elites of nineteenth century biology rejected Mendel's work, because it did not conform to the version of truth they sought to uphold with the biological discourse. While this may have enabled them to maintain a hold on power, it stalled progress in the field for decades.

The labeling of individuals who do not conform to the accepted discourse as monsters or social undesirables is another method of maintaining control employed by the elite. This phenomenon did not first emerge with Gregor Mendel, but extends back to ancient Greece, through the Middle Ages, and into contemporary society. Throughout the Middle Ages, "a man was mad if his speech could not be said to form part of the common discourse" (Foucault 1971:9). Once labeled with madness, the men and women who did not concur with the accepted discourse were stripped of dignity, considered worthless, and at times deemed a danger to society that needed to be silenced through lethal means.

As was the case for Mendel, the madness of the Middle Ages was occasionally rooted in truth. Herein lies an example of discourse being manipulated to maintain power at the

exclusion of truth. According to van Dijk (2006), those in power may seek to manipulate the discourse in order to maintain (illegitimate) influence over society. Discourse manipulation is characterized by an enhanced credibility and moral superiority of the manipulating parties, as well as a discrediting and vilifying of those who disagree with the discourse. Whereas Middle Age dissidents were deemed mad, contemporary discourses may be manipulated by labeling the others as deviant and refusing them a platform for expressing ideas.

The control and manipulation of discourse often goes unnoticed and can occur within inconspicuous social institutions. Foucault (1971) argued that the education system is one such institution. Despite the ideal of education granting access to various discourses, the system has been rigged to permit or prevent access to various social actors. The underhandedness of such systems is one point where scholars have seen an overlapping theme between the work of Foucault and Bourdieu. In an investigation of changing discourses in British universities, Fairclough invoked Bourdieu while arguing that “linkages between discourse, ideology and power may well be unclear to those involved, and more generally that our social practice is bound up with causes and effects which may not be at all apparent” (1993:135). Similar to Foucault, Bourdieu argued that the school system has been used, i.e. manipulated, by the dominant classes to “ensure their social reproduction” (1984:132). The notion that schooling can lead to improved status and access to discourse is typically unfulfilled by those lacking the cultural capital of the dominant group.

Although many scholars have viewed discourse as a top-down phenomenon used to further empower the elite, others have shown that discourse can emerge from the lower echelons of society. An example of bottom-up discourse was provided by Gränzer (2002) in an analysis of human rights in Tunisia and Morocco. Created in the 1970s in response to an oppressive regime, the Tunisian League led a grass roots campaign seeking to secure human rights. With the help of the Tunisian League and Moroccan human rights organizations, the

discourse on human rights became normalized throughout both societies, so that even the governments were forced to rephrase their policies in terms of human rights: “The discourse of human rights and the political activities to which it has given rise has altered the structure of the relationship between the state and society in the respective countries. The regimes of power in both countries had to redefine their basis of legitimacy by referring to human rights” (Gränzer 2002:131). Each government’s use of human rights language is an example of a government conforming to the dominant discourse of the people. Iedema and Scheeres (2003) also found instances of bottom-up discourse in a study of changing practices among a globalizing workforce. According to the author, workers from various walks of life have altered the discourse on work in order to cope with the changes and challenges of a globalizing economy. As a result, he called on researchers to diverge from the idea that discourse is strictly a way for the elite to maintain power.

Bottom-up discourse can emerge from the mainstream as well as from other groups. Merino and Tileaga (2011) analyzed the discourse on ethnic identity as pertaining to the Mapuche tribe of Chile. According to the authors, the discourse emerged from the minority group: “minority group members are continually collected under various ethnic categories and attributes, and positioned widely in society not by majority group members but by members of their own group” (ibid.:89). Mainstream and elite Chileans had no interest in a discourse on ethnic minorities and the discourse had to be created from within the minority group. In addition to revealing the ability of discourse to emerge from outside the mainstream, Merino and Tileaga argued that discourse can be actively constructed.

Scholars applying discourse analysis in their research use a variety of methodological approaches (Wodak and Meyer 2009). Perhaps the most widespread form of analysis is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), though CDA is more of an ideological description than a description of methodology. CDA scholars draw upon other forms of critical scholarship

which “were intended to expose class structure and other unequal power relations in society” (Mayes 2010:189). Some argue that the abuse of power uncovered in discourse research requires action:

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality... Crucial for critical discourse analysts is the explicit awareness of their role in society. Continuing a tradition that rejects the possibility of a ‘value-free’ science, they argue that science, and especially scholarly discourse, are inherently part of and influenced by social structure, and produced in social interaction. (van Dijk 2004:352)

For some, CDA is not only a methodological approach meant to understand the link between discourse and power, it is meant to counteract (perceived) inappropriate uses of discourse.

Other scholars have critiqued CDA colleagues for limiting their concern to elitist discourse. De Cillia, Reisigl and Wodak (1999) argued it is also important to look at the discourse of average members of society. In an analysis of the construction of national identity through discourse, they argued that CDA is often too narrow and short sighted:

By collecting data from different social contexts (political commemorative speeches, political advertising campaigns, press articles, group-discussions and interviews) against the background of a broader notion of the ‘political’, we have been trying to take into account that the discursive construction of national identities is a multidimensional phenomenon. In fact, our study shows the importance for Critical Discourse Analysis, and especially for research on political discourse, of including data from everyday life and experience; to complement the study of elite discourse with ethnographic research, in order to grasp the tensions and interdiscursive relationships within and between official, semi-official and quasi-private discourse as well as between discursive and other forms of social practice. (ibid.:170)

Researchers using other forms of discourse analysis may draw upon CDA scholarship, while seeking to broaden the grasp of their analysis (Herring 2004b). I seek to do the same by combining CDA with Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis, a methodology which seeks to understand the similarities and differences of computer assisted discourses. This will be discussed further in the following chapter.

One place where a study of subculture and discourse intersects is the practice of rituals. Hall and Jefferson (2006) observed style through rituals of resistance, and I will argue that web-based discourse is a form of ritual, as both what is talked about (e.g., body modifications) and how it is talked about (e.g., the language used) are regulated by the subculture. These practices enable the creation and maintenance of a community, whose destruction could arise if individuals who do not share the same core ideals gain entry (Durkheim 2001). I will continue to draw on discourse and the role of rituals in subcultures in my discussion of body modification, to which I now turn in order to provide an overview of other factors my analysis will take in account in later chapters.

Psychosocial Shortcomings of Western Body Modifiers

Early scholarship on Western body modification supported the dominant discourse on body modifiers by approaching the practice as evidence of psychosocial shortcomings. This remained the standard approach prior to the final decades of the twentieth century (Steward 1990). One of the earliest scholarly endeavors on body modification in the West was Lander and Kohn's (1943) investigation into the tattooing practices of military recruits. Tattooed men were reportedly 50% more likely to be disqualified from the service than men without tattoos. In comparison to rejected nontattooees, tattooees were more likely to suffer from psychological problems or have a felony conviction or dishonorable discharge as part of their record. This set the tone for other work with an emphasis on the deviant and abnormal nature of those with tattoos.

Ferguson-Rayport, Griffith and Straus (1955:130) compared tattoos among schizophrenics and clinical patients with personality disorders and found that tattoos "signify another deviation from the mores of our culture." The authors distinguished between two possible purposes of a tattoo: the schizophrenic's tattoo is a magical source of protection,

whereas the tattoo is a physical manifestation of the internal struggles for the patient with a psychological disorder. McKerracher and Watson (1969) similarly portrayed tattooing as a prevalent problem within the institutionalized population. Among anti-social offenders in an English institution for the mentally disordered, those with tattoos were seen to be the “most emotionally unstable” (ibid.:171). The fact that the institutionalized men were nearly twice as likely to be tattooed as the general population led the researchers to conclude tattoos are of “clinical importance” (ibid.). Post (1968) also argued that tattoos are evidence of the presence of a personality disorder. Though personality disorders may be successfully treated, the tattoo is a constant reminder of the personality disorder that preceded— and led to— its application. Similar to the treatment of Mendel, these authors labeled individuals mad for not complying with the accepted discourse on tattoos. It is worth noting that each of these studies, as well as the Lander and Kohn (1943) study, suggested tattooing may be an attempt to keep one’s homosexuality hidden from the public as homosexuality was listed amongst other psychosocial disorders at the time of these studies. Though the association between homosexuality and psychological shortcomings has since been rejected among academics, some scholars still view the presence of tattoos as a sign that one needs psychiatric care (Murphy 1984; Abelow 1993; Freud 1998; Herek 2010).

More than a half century after the influential Lander and Kohn (1943) study, Stephens (2003) also addressed tattooing among military recruits. As of 1999, one in four members of the military had a tattoo. According to Stephens, the presence of tattoos should lead to psychological intervention in order to dissuade the risky and unwanted behaviors correlating with tattoos. Other contemporary scholars have also argued that the presence of tattoos and/or piercings should lead to professional intervention, so that risky behaviors may be deterred. According to Roberts and Ryan (2002:1062), a tattoo serves as a “permanent, easily

detectable, visual marker” that should “prompt a more intensive assessment for high-risk behaviors and subsequent counseling during clinical office visits.”

Scholars who seemingly desire a shift in the perception of tattooing as evidence of psychosocial problems may still (unwittingly) fall back on this approach. Kazandjieva and Tsankov (2007:361), for example, argued that tattoos “are not a symptom of a mental disturbance,” but still suggested that tattooees “are often unbalanced and impulsive, with a twisted sense of independence and a rebellion toward the society.” Despite their attempt to portray people with tattoos in a positive light, Kazandjieva and Tsankov further contribute to the notion that tattoos are deviant. Panconesi (2007) has also argued that body modifications, namely piercings, remain an indicator of psychosocial disorders in the twenty first century. After noting the higher piercing rates among young inmates and mental patients compared to university students, Panconesi argued that piercings often serve as a form of self-injury and a call for help. Other scholars have made the claim that piercings are primarily a method of self-mutilation (Carroll and Anderson 2002), reaffirming the scholar who portrays body modification as problematic.

The presence of body modifications, however, may no longer indicate a need for intervention. Stirn, Brähler and Hinz (2006) argued that body modifications among Germans indicate a greater willingness to experiment and engage in risky behaviors. Still, the authors dualistically presented body modification as either an unproblematic fashion accessory or an indicator of risky behavior, aggression, and addiction. Accordingly, they call on health professionals to delve into psychological histories of individuals participating in body modification.

It is difficult to make sense of many of these studies, given that some were agenda driven, as evidenced by the use of terms such as “[w]e presume” (Panconesi 2007:416). Nonetheless, such literature exists and serves to influence calls for psychological intervention

for the depressed, insecure tattooees who are often incapable of independent thought and easily led down the wrong path (Verberne 1969).

The Exaggerated Health Risks of Body Modification

In addition to mental and social instabilities and pathologies, literature on body modification often contains warnings about the dangers to one's health. Diseases such as HIV and Hepatitis are mentioned and must be taken seriously. If the body modification process can be linked to these fatal diseases, then researchers are correct to warn potential clients about these risks. To not do so would be irresponsible. In this section, I examine the literature concerned with body modification's health risks to understand what is being said about health issues and how the information is being presented, interpreting it as another example of the use of discourse to frame a practice considered outside the social norm by many within medical professions.

In a phone survey of 500 Americans, Laumann and Derick (2006) investigated the relationship between body modifications and health problems. The authors concluded that a direct relationship exists:

The real question is whether in modern America any association found is related to direct transmission of disease through the needle pricks or whether tattoos and body piercings are markers for other risky behaviors, which lead to infection with a transmissible agent. We have documented that these associations continue to exist. (ibid.:420)

Upon further review, however, the authors have merely alleged health problems associated with body modification. Laumann and Derick also discussed nineteen participants who had been told by a doctor that they had Hepatitis. Despite the authors' claims that they have documented direct transmission of diseases, they offered no evidence that those respondents with a history of Hepatitis contracted the disease from a tattoo or piercing needle. Greif, Hewitt and Armstrong (1999) also addressed this issue, arguing that potential body modifiers

be discouraged because some of their modified participants had Hepatitis. The authors, however, did not show causality between body modification and Hepatitis and the rate of Hepatitis in their subject population was lower than would be expected based upon the national average.

In addition to minor skin irritations and Hepatitis, scholars have also warned of a link between HIV and body modification practices. As Braithwaite et al. (1999) noted, adolescents and young adults are at a greater risk of contracting HIV. This same group participates in body modification at a higher rate than the general population. For these authors, this equates to an increased risk of HIV and other diseases among body modifiers. Accordingly, the authors argued that tattoos and piercings must be taught alongside drugs and unsafe sex as potential sources of disease in HIV education classes. To strengthen this claim, the authors cited research that found a link between tattooing and HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa. A similar study seeking a relationship between tattooing and Hepatitis in Taiwan was conducted by Ko et al. (1992). In contrast to Braithwaite et al., Ko et al. did not problematize tattooing, but the lack of sanitary conditions in the tattoo shops in nations like Taiwan.

Similar health warnings can be found within media portrayals of body modification. Just as the media problematizes mental health concerns about those modifying the body (Pitts 1999), Adams (2009) found that the media over- or underemphasizes the risks of body modifications according to the social desirability of a given body modification form. As plastic surgery and tattooing were deemed acceptable “consumer lifestyle options” (ibid.:103), any legitimate health risks were downplayed. Body piercing, however, was typically problematized.

A closer look at warnings concerning body modification from scholars and media shows that many are based on hypothetical situations. Both types of warnings have sensationalized the health risks of tattoos and piercings. For example, Braithwaite et al.’s

(1999) call for the inclusion of tattoos and piercings in American health classes as a potential source of HIV is unfounded: “The U.S. Centers for Disease Control has been tracking tattoo-related disease data in the private sector since 1985 and has not documented a single case of HIV transmission” (D’Amico 2008:117). CDC records reveal, however, that there have been seven instances of HIV being spread to patients during visits to the dentist (ibid.). Portraying expectations instead of facts, the scholarly discourse on body modification exemplifies Potter’s fact construction in addition to mirroring the discourse manipulation techniques of Foucault’s Greeks.

It should be noted that some scholars have attempted to contextualize these risks. Some have recognized the problems stem in unsanitary, amateur body modification practitioners: “It is frequently noted, but not elaborated upon, that the health consequences associated with tattooing usually come from amateur, makeshift, and prohibited tattooing rather than from legitimate and commercial tattooing” (D’Amico 2008:117). Silverman et al. (2000:1314) challenged colleagues concerning the health risks associated with body modifications, finding no statistically significant relationship between Hepatitis and tattooing within a professional setting:

Tattoo application in an inherently nonsterile setting, such as a prison, has been documented to transmit viral hepatitis. However, we conclude that when tattoos are applied in a parlor that conforms to regulations to prevent the transmission of blood borne disease, there is a low risk for transmission of viral hepatitis.

The awareness of substandard practices in the tattoo-rich prison system has led some scholars to call for prisons to end bans on tattooing and encourage safer practices. According to D’Amico (2008:128):

The harmful effects of inmate tattooing in American jails are predominantly caused by prohibition rather than by practice. By repealing this prohibition, improvements in health conditions and decreased rates of violence should occur. More general benefits to allowing inmate tattooing include decreased crime rates and lower recidivism. In closing, the benefits of repealing tattoo prohibition clearly outweigh the alleged benefits of persisting with tattoo prohibition in American prisons.

D'Amico also argued that improved health conditions would likely save tremendous amounts of taxpayer money that goes to treating prisoners infected with diseases through unsafe tattooing practices. Based on this savings potential, Canadian authorities implemented a one year pilot program designed to better educate inmate tattooists and provide a hygienic atmosphere for tattooing in prisons (Kondro 2007). With nearly half of all Canadian inmates receiving a tattoo while behind bars, the program was a step towards improving the health of inmates and decreasing the costs of inmate health care for taxpayers. Though the program only lasted one year, there remains potential in such projects to help eradicate the notion of causal relationships between tattooing and infectious diseases.

Any efforts in this area must move beyond personal biases against body modification, as the majority of work on risk and body modifications points to numerous health problems without adequately substantiating these claims. Some scholars have challenged this stance with statistical evidence to show few, if any, links between diseases such as Hepatitis and HIV and body modification. With evidence pointing to low to non-existent rates of disease transformation through body modification, I can now turn my attention to a line of scholarship that seeks to present the personal and social significance of body modification.

The Postmodern Body

The history of body modification in Western cultures includes numerous social redefinitions which have often been influenced by the reigning *Zeitgeist*. Whereas ancient Romans used tattoos as a way of disgracing the bodies of prisoners (van Dinter 2005), the position of tattoos changed in the Middle Ages, as exemplified by the Catholic Church's blessing of tattoos "that were worn to honor God" (Scheinfeld 2007:363). Negative stereotypes associated with tattooees most recently reemerged after the invention of the electric tattoo machine made tattoos affordable for the working class, causing social elites to

distance themselves from the practice they celebrated in the late nineteenth century (Govenar 1982:30). Even normalized body modifications, such as standard ear lobe piercings on women, have been redefined. Deemed unfashionable and “racy” in the 1940s and 1950s, standard ear lobe piercings have become so mundane that scholars researching body modifications typically ignore them (Sawyer 2008:6).

As society has transitioned into an era in which the body can be self-determined, body modification has begun to draw interest from scholars working in the area of the social construction of the body. For some, body modification is an example of how contemporary society has become obsessed with skin. LaFrance (2009), on the other hand, sees the modification of skin as an attempt to embody the self. Indeed, many body modifiers now receive modifications in order to express and gain control over the self (Featherstone 1982; Klesse 1999; Irwin 2001; Budgeon 2003).

According to Langman (2003), the increasing desire to alter the body is linked to the phenomenon of postmodernity which is characterized by a lack of predetermined fixed identities. As the certainties of modernity have been replaced with the uncertainties of postmodernity, many individuals turn to modifications in order to provide a stabilizing force in their lives. Over the past few decades, the body has transformed into something “to be moulded and selected at need or whim” (Synnott 1993:34). Technological advances have created interchangeable parts for the body, which can now be engineered, chosen and plugged in. According to Synnott (*ibid.*), the body is no longer a perfect, unchangeable object created and given by God. Rather, it is a plastic project that is to be bettered throughout the life course. Laumann and Derick (2006) have also suggested that the changing relationship between individuals and organized religion— namely the resulting lack of a sense of community— has led many to seek solace in body modifications. Technological advances also provide members of the body modification subculture with new tools with which they

can “augment their abilities to communicate... and create new opportunities in art and culture” (Peterson and Anand 2004:314).

Some postmodern body modifiers view their modifications as a way of battling, or correcting, the flaws of a receding modernity. Fisher argued that body modifications can be “construed as a way in which the individual reclaims some power over his/her own body” (Fisher 2002:103). The heavily tattooed Modern Primitives view their tattoos as “articulations of identities of resistance that reject the repression and conformity intrinsic to modernity” (Langman 2003:240). Many extreme modifiers seek to regain personal authenticity through their modifications. Even those with few tattoos or piercings may turn to body modification in order to find an authentic, lasting self in the constantly changing, anything-goes hyperreality of postmodernity (Bell 1999).

The postmodern turn has given Westerners the scripts needed to change their bodies and view the body as an unfinished entity that is to be molded in accordance with one's lifestyle choices (Shilling 1993). As society has changed its views regarding the permissibility of modifying the body, a variety of body modification practices have become increasingly popular. In addition to the expansion of tattooing and piercing, plastic surgeries increased 775% in the US between 1992 and 2005 (Adams 2009). Since it is now more acceptable to alter or mold one's body as one sees fit, many Americans view body modifications as another way to better the body. The increasing use of body modification exemplifies a pattern common to subcultures. Namely, the piercings and tattoos that were borrowed from the mainstream culture and altered to create a distinct style are then (re)borrowed from the subculture by mainstream individuals. The popularization of pieces of its style within the larger culture can create problems for the subculture in this study (Thornton 2005).

Commercialization within Western society has led body theorists and body modification scholars to become concerned with the influence of consumerism as it relates to the body. Featherstone (1982) noted that Americans are now more concerned with the public presentation of the body as the commercially driven restructuring of public spaces forces individuals to spend more time in the public eye. Studies have shown that many see their tattoos not only as a way to look more beautiful, but as a way to stand out as an individual in the massive crowds perpetuated by consumerism (Wohlrab, Stahl and Kappeler 2007).

Not only has mass consumerism changed how the body relates to social spaces, it has claimed the body as a commodity. For Kosut (2006:1039), the use of tattooed bodies in commercials indicates that tattoos have truly gone mainstream:

Tattoo's mainstream status is also illustrated by their usage as an advertising tool for a diverse range of consumer goods. Whether designated as a sign of rebellion, youth, trendiness, or some amalgam of coolness, tattoos assist in selling products-from vodka to cars. Thus, [the] tattoo is used to sell a product and is simultaneously a product to be consumed.

As Kosut noted, tattooed bodies are not only used to sell products, but are also products to be purchased and placed on the body. Furthermore, the commercialization of tattooed bodies suggests to Americans that tattoos are an acceptable product for consumption and labeling. However, scholars should not presume that the use of tattoos or other forms of body modification in ad campaigns results in greater acceptance. Despite Kosut's claim of mainstream acceptance, individuals with tattoos and other modification continue to face discrimination. For example, visibly modified individuals are also more likely to be taken for criminals or drug addicts (Laumann and Derick 2006), and, as previously mentioned, employers can and have fired employees with visible tattoos and certain types of piercings.

The Media's Role in Body Modification

The body as a commercialized space leads to questions about media portrayals. By the 1990s, the media often presented tattoos as a desirable trend (Irwin 2001). Since media portrayals became more favorable as tattooing spread across social classes, scholars have attributed the change in tattoo's fortunes to the media (Wohlrab et al. 2007). Kosut (2006:1045) has also argued that the mainstreaming of tattoos is coupled with media discourse on tattooing:

If tattoo is portrayed in the media to be a legitimate aesthetic-cultural form, rather than a distasteful badge that permanently blights the body, then more high-status individuals will invariably be attracted to tattoo. Notwithstanding, as the demographic of tattoo shifts from blue-collar to white-collar, it is not coincidental that both the media and institutional experts would begin to recognize tattoo as having a greater degree of aesthetic-cultural value.

As Kosut has pointed out, the media presentation of tattoos is somewhat murky, though she seems convinced that positive media portrayals will alter tattooing's destiny. To date, such assessments have been inferred rather than empirically validated via interviews with tattooees, etc. Based solely on the evidence provided in the literature, it is unclear whether media portrayals have caused more Americans to be tattooed or whether the higher number of tattooees has influenced the media to portray tattoos more positively. Given the supra-individualistic nature of discourse, it seems unlikely that any lone media representative or outlet will be able to fully alter the discourse, especially if the subculture in this study attempts to offer a competing discourse.

A closer look at the coverage shows that the media have typically favored only certain types of tattoos and tattooees. Tattooees who fall into the category of traditional modifiers are denied the opportunity to present their stories and are often blatantly ignored or portrayed in traditional ways— as criminals or psychopaths. The emphasis of media reports about tattoos is on the efforts and qualities of the middle class tattooees:

All of the factors which are highlighted in such articles-the educational and professional status of the individual, the aesthetic appeal of the tattoo, the tattoo's ability to create a sense of a self separate from others, and the spiritual potential of the tattoo-can be appreciated and understood even by the non-tattoo wearing, middle-class public. Thus, by first focusing their articles around a select group of middle-class individuals, most of whom have relatively small, inoffensive tattoos; by second, denying all of those who do not fit this category the right to be represented, except as the absent unit of comparison; and third, by centering the discussion around ideas which are very popular outside of the tattoo community, the journalists are able to make the world of tattooing a safe and understandable place for the reader. (DeMello 1995: 42)

By limiting the discussion on tattoos to middle class people who have tattoos, the media present contemporary tattooing as new and distinct from the ugly tattoo world of the past.

The aim of such selective positivity is to redefine (middle class) tattoos as an acceptable practice. Media attempts to redefine tattoos indicate a struggle over control of the discourse on tattooing, as well as the fact that the body may be a contested space in a postmodern society that is still motivated by capitalistic gains.

The media have also created a hierarchy of body modification practices. Adams (2009) found that American newspapers deemed plastic surgery most acceptable. Tattooing was often mentioned as a meaningful representation of self, but it was dualistically presented as problematic. Other findings lend support to Adam's research, suggesting that the presentation of tattoos is essentially negative (Pitts 1999). Piercings were almost exclusively framed as deviant and dangerous. Since subcultures may actively redefine their boundaries when facing cooptation or extinction, members desiring to maintain the subculture's status may use this information to shift the boundaries in the direction of the less accepted body modification practices.

Based upon media and scholarly reports, it is clear that members of the mainstream, not the body modification subculture, have determined the meaning of body modifications: "The defined tattoo includes the reasons given by the definers or, if given by the tattooed as something outside the possibility of being defined within dominant discourse, comprehended

(another way of saying defined) by the definers” (MacCormack 2006:73). Given that the media only permit certain definitions for body modification, they join other institutions in creating challenges for this subculture. In the following section I show how people who are modifying their bodies still face discrimination in the workplace and other social institutions. This provides a framework for discussing the limited nature of mainstream acceptance of body modification, thereby critiquing assessments of body modification’s achieved mainstream status.

How Mainstream is Mainstream?

Though modified Westerners are still a minority, the rapid increase in people engaging in body modification has led some to suggest the only thing that remains deviant about body modifications is not having any (Irwin 2001). In the early 1990s, an estimated 3-5% of Americans had a tattoo (Varma and Lanigan 1999). A decade later, a Harris Poll estimated that 16% of Americans had a tattoo (Sever 2003). Other studies have found that 13% of the US population is tattooed or pierced (Stirn et al. 2006). Scholars have yet to come to a universally accepted percentage of body modifiers, but all agree that rates of participation in and the public presence of body modification have drastically increased over recent decades (Sweetman 1999). Other Western nations have experienced similar growth over this same period. Researchers have placed the proportion of Canadians with tattoos between 10-20% (Atkinson 2004). Roughly 9% of Germans are now tattooed, while nearly 7% have piercings beyond typical ear lobe piercings (Stirn et al. 2006). It is important to note that rates of participation are significantly higher among younger generations throughout the West. Germans aged 14-44 are tattooed or pierced at twice the rate of the entire population (ibid.). Similarly, Americans aged 25-39 are approximately twice as likely to be tattooed as the general population (Sever 2003).

It is important to take a moment to consider whether these numbers alone represent broad acceptance. One of the major impediments to claims of mainstream acceptance is the fact that tattoos and other forms of body modification continue to be stigmatized:

Despite their increasing popularity, tattoos still carry stigma and can provoke discrimination. The University of California at Los Angeles conducted a 'Business Attire Survey' in 1999 which revealed that 90 percent of campus recruiters looked negatively on tattoos. Despite evidence to the contrary, teenagers with tattoos are more likely to be perceived as gang members, drug users, dropouts, and troublemakers... Furthermore, hardcore forms of tattooing—such as fullbody and facial tattoos—result in stronger stigmatization that can affect employability and social acceptability in ways that a small, easily hidden tattoo would not. (Kang and Jones 2007:46)

Kang and Jones made a distinction worth noting— large and visible tattoos have stronger stigmas attached to them and can result in greater discrimination in one's social and personal life, though acceptance of small and concealable tattoos may be pointing to changes in public opinion.

Given that recruiters still see tattoos as problematic, one must question the impact of the media's attempts to redefine the practice. Irwin (2001:50) has argued that "[a]lthough media images in the 1990s often defined tattoos as hip and trendy, many individuals suggested that older definitions associating tattoos with dangerous outcasts continued to shroud this form of body modification." Some individuals who accept the media's positive redefinition and decide to get tattooed may find that there is still an entrenched social stigma attached to their new body art:

While the tattooed person enjoys the positive attention from his/her peers generated by the tattoo, most of these same people feel embarrassed about the negative reactions they get from others, especially when this reaction is coming from friends and family... Even as tattooing becomes more prevalent in the USA, there is still a persistent taboo on tattoos. People with tattoos often feel that they should cover their body markings in public or risk social rejection. (Fisher 2002:101)

The sanctioning of tattooees by non-tattooed individuals shows that American culture has yet to fully embrace tattoos— even among those who espouse other middle class traits and aspirations.

While some body modifiers are surprised at the negative reactions to their modifications, others are aware that a social stigma remains attached to body modification when they decide to become modified. Irwin's (2001) investigation of middle class tattooees revealed that they tend to be afraid that a tattoo may damage social relationships, leading them to carefully select what design is appropriate and where to have it placed in order to avoid stigmatization. Irwin found that middle class tattooees chose small and discrete tattoos that were highly artistic and visually appealing, thereby distinguishing themselves from non-mainstream individuals and their perceived ugly, thuggish tattoos. Burgess and Clark (2010:762) found that those with older style tattoos are more likely to be discriminated against than individuals with more contemporary designs: "The savage origins of tattoos continue to cast a prejudicial shadow over individuals with traditional designs. However, those with contemporary tattoo designs are categorized in a manner that does not disadvantage them, relative to non-tattooed individuals." Not only do individuals need to carefully place tattoos in order to avoid discrimination (Kang and Jones 2007), they also must select an acceptable style of tattoo. Just as the need to properly locate a tattoo indicates tattoos are less than fully accepted, so too does the need to select an appropriate style.

For those who do become tattooed and want to avoid discrimination, the discourse on the tattoo can become a marker of distinction. Irwin (2001) found that middle class people with tattoos actively attempt to make their tattoos appear to be a legitimate social act. This is done by emphasizing the middle-class virtues associated with their tattoos. Many middle class tattooees, for example, get tattoos to commemorate college graduation. Getting a tattoo with a theme that is honored among the middle class helps these tattooees distinguish their tattoos from those of the lower and working classes. Though middle class tattooees are still likely to engage in stigma management with strangers and in their professional lives, they also use legitimation techniques, whereby they acknowledge the existence of their tattoos

among peers and loved ones. According to Irwin, the increasing use of legitimization techniques over stigma management may indicate a societal shift in the acceptability of tattoos: “If individuals tend to rely on legitimization more often than stigma management techniques, then society might be experiencing a time of moral indecision regarding certain deviant acts” (69). Similar to the employees finding themselves in a globalizing workplace in Iedema and Scheeres’ study, Irwin’s participants seek to alter discourse from the bottom up.

Middle class concerns over the acceptability of their modifications are not unjustified. Courts have upheld workplace discrimination, arguing that companies have the right to place restrictions on employee appearance when it relates to the company’s business objectives (Baldas 2005). In 2004, an appellate court ruled in favor of the firing of a woman who refused to remove her eyebrow ring— despite the woman’s claims that the piercing was part of her religious faith. In addition to private corporations, state and local governments have also terminated employees on the basis of body modifications, such as a Kentucky Parks employee who was fired for not covering his US Navy tattoo (Roberts vs Ward 2006). As with private corporations, the courts ruled that states have the right to enforce a dress code prohibiting body modifications. In another case, the courts ruled that employees cannot be terminated simply because they have body modifications. If the body modifications are not hidden, however, then the employee may be fired (Baldetta vs Harborview Medical Center 1997). These cases exemplify the limited extent to which body modifications have been embraced by the mainstream. The message is that tattoos and other modifications are fine, so long as customers and coworkers do not have to look at them. Similar to Hippies, who were unwilling to alter their style when in public, the inability of modified individuals to cover their subculture’s symbols puts them at risk to be fired. The subculture members must, therefore, imitate the Hippy subculture and develop alternative forms of employment if the subculture is to be sustained.

I have now provided a context in which to return to the intersection of postmodern personhood and body modifications. An individual may not view body modification as a deviant activity, but they typically recognize that their views are not shared by all. Though some individuals get tattooed or pierced without being aware of negative repercussions, Burgess and Clark (2010:759) argued it is appropriate for individuals to be aware of potential social complications before deciding to be tattooed or pierced:

Our results suggest that some of them may be correct to be worried. Having a visible tattoo was indeed an important cue in forming an impression of a potential employee. Specifically, those applicants with a traditional, tribal tattoo were rated more negatively and were considered significantly less suitable for the jobs than were those who had no tattoo. This prejudicial effect was not simply evident for tattooed women, but also extended to tattooed men.

As indicated by these authors, recent studies and court cases have shown that mainstream individuals with body modifications should be concerned about how their modifications will influence their employability.

The Forgotten Practitioners of Body Modification

The emphasis on recent body modification practices has tended to neglect body modifiers outside the middle class mainstream. Although the literature from (mental) health professionals has paid minimal attention to nonmainstream individuals, it is focused on finding ways to dissuade participation in body modification. In contrast to health professionals, social scientists have tried to understand body modification as something other than deviance. However, in doing so, the majority of scholars have neglected the West's so-called "traditional" body modifiers (Kosut 2006:1036). Accordingly, few have made the effort to incorporate this forgotten group of modifiers into their contemporary frameworks.

The scholarship's passive neglect of traditional modifiers is exemplified by the use of the term "Tattoo Renaissance" to describe tattoo's mainstreamification over recent decades (Sanders 1988; Velliquette, Murray and Creyer 1998; Fleming 2000; Irwin 2001; Atkinson

2004; Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005). The term 'renaissance' indicates a time of revival. Revival, in turn, indicates that a phenomenon was deceased, but then experienced renewed interest. The essential problem with the Tattoo Renaissance, then, is that tattooing existed and was widely practiced in Western societies before the 1980s. The oldest known tattooee resided in the Alps approximately six thousand years ago (Scheinfeld 2007) and tattoos have been a constant presence in the West ever since, including the ancient Picts of the British Isles (van Dinter 2005), medieval pilgrims returning from Jerusalem (Fleming 2000), and seventeenth century French nuns (Dauge-Roth forthcoming). The essence of the Tattoo Renaissance lies not in the new styles, techniques and technologies available to tattooees, but in the practice's gentrification (Fleming 2000).

Perhaps the greatest reason for tattooing's lingering stigma is its widespread use among prisoners. Like mainstream tattooees, the tattoo artists of the Tattoo Renaissance have tried to distance themselves from any association with prison tattoos. According to DeMello (1993:10), the class system within the tattoo world includes:

the professional sphere (within which is found the fine art style of tattooing most popular among the middle classes), the semi-professional sphere, street tattooing, and prison tattooing. Prison tattooing falls at the lowest end of this hierarchy, and tattoos that are created in prison, because of the technology used to create them, the style in which they are worn, and the imagery portrayed, can be easily distinguished from professionally executed tattoos.

Inmates who participate in tattooing are often aware of the low status of prison-made tattoos. DeMello found that many prison tattoo artists refuse to tattoo young and untattooed inmates because they felt doing so could hurt one's life chances if they were to be released from prison. The internal policing of what and who gets tattooed is an important aspect of a prisoners' socialization.

In addition to regulating tattoos out of concern for one's future beyond prison walls, convict tattoo artists implement restrictions on tattooing based on the part played by tattoos in a prisoner's identity formation. Similar to the middle class tattooees in Irwin's (2001) study

who were tattooed to commemorate achievements in line with mainstream values, the prison gang members discussed by Phelan and Hunt (1998) used tattoos to reflect their moral careers. For prisoners, tattoos serve a critical role in one's identity work:

Focusing on the symbols of the Nuestra Familia has enabled us to show that tattoos are more than reflections of fad, fashion, and playful deviance. They are significant symbols that allow others to place or situate the tattooed person in appropriate social locations... In prison, information concerning identity can literally be a matter of life or death. (ibid.:292)

Receiving a tattoo that does not correspond with one's status within the prison setting is a serious violation for the tattooee, as well as the inmate who provided the tattoo. Whereas mainstream people who have tattoos can selectively present their tattoos, the nature of prison (e.g., closed confinement) and prison tattoos means the inmate's tattoo fulfills a different purpose.

An in-depth analysis of the contrasting roles of mainstream and nonmainstream body modifications has also been provided by Turner (1999). Some scholars and mainstream people with modifications have argued that contemporary modifications assist in identity formation, thereby mirroring the role of modifications in primitive tribes. Turner has rejected this approach to the mainstreamification of body modification. For him, the mainstream body modification is merely a "superficial mark," having nothing to do with the cultural functionality of modifications in traditional societies (ibid.:45). However, among the underclass, body modification still plays a significant social role. Mainstream individuals with discrete tattoos do not have true body marks; they possess "removable adornments" (ibid.:47). Contrariwise, the hand tattoo on a member of the underclass is a genuine body mark, because it is an immutable expression of one's social loyalties, functioning as one's "primary mark of hot/thick loyalties" (ibid.:46). The different purposes of body modification for Turner indicate the presence of competing discourses between different social classes. While Turner failed to see that primitive modifications were not always steadfast expressions

of solidarity (some were active attempts to be more attractive, not culturally mandated indicators of age and/or social status), his attention to the use of body modification by members of the new lumpenproletariat fills a gap in the literature.

Turner (1999) revealed the need to distinguish between modifications that are always visible and those which are only sporadically, if ever, on display. Not only does this distinction explain the theoretical differences between types of modifiers, it also reflects the lived experiences of modified people. Kang and Jones (2007:46) found that “hardcore” tattoos, such as those on the face, “result in stronger stigmatization that can affect employability and social acceptability in ways that a small, easily hidden tattoo would not.” Indeed, only those with tattooed “public skin” (Irwin 2003:37)— hands, neck, face— are “unable to escape disdain and disregard” (ibid.:38). Even large tattoos that are not located on public skin can be and are regularly covered in order to avoid negative repercussions. As Turner (1999) noted, there is something inherently different about a body modification that cannot be denied.

For both the body modification subculture and the rest of society, placement trumps size. Laumann and Derick (2006) claimed that 89% of tattooees are visibly tattooed, but their definition of ‘visible’ included legs, arm and feet— all of which are readily and regularly covered in Western societies. Likewise, Armstrong et al. (2008) considered ankle and arm tattoos to be visible tattoos. Throughout this dissertation, only tattoos on the hands, neck or face will be deemed visible tattoos. Similarly, only an individual with numerous (at least four) facial piercings, stretched facial piercings or extreme modifications (such as subdermal implants) on the hands, neck or face will be considered visibly modified.

The literature discussed above is particularly important for this dissertation, because it attempts to understand the social significance of body modification from the perspective of ‘traditional’ modifiers, not that of the mainstream. As I will show, most participants in this

study are located within the working or lower class and view the mainstreaming of body modification with skepticism. The type and degree of body modifications practiced by participants also distinguish them from mainstream individuals with piercings or tattoos. Since the body modifiers I studied do not fall under the umbrella of mainstream people with modifications, it is critical to understand the purpose of modifications within the subculture. This will be done in the following chapters by drawing on subcultural theorists.

CHAPTER 3

Modified Methods

Much of the scholarly interest in body modification has come from quantitative researchers. This has been helpful in tracking trends showing an increasing use of body modification in Western societies, but such work is unable to answer some of the more interesting questions about body modifiers (Deschesnes, Demers and Finés 2006). There is also a need to bolster existing qualitative scholarship, as some of the most influential qualitative research has given preference to personal experiences and agendas over rigorous methodology (Bell 1999). The research conducted for this study seeks to be both rigorous and open to understanding the purpose of body modification as interpreted by members of the body modification subculture themselves.

The Virtual Field

The main aspect of this research is a qualitative analysis of the internet site ModMagazine.com², or ModMag. ModMag is a site designed for those with an interest in body modifications— including tattoos, piercings, brands, scarifications and other more extreme modification practices. According to the website, ModMag is “an uncommon subculture and community built by and for modified people. We are the historians, practitioners and appreciators of body modification.” ModMag is comprised of several sections designed to support this mission, including photo galleries which make up the largest portion of ModMag. All photos are submitted by site members. Users may submit stories

² Names of websites and users have been changed to assure confidentiality of participants. Information from blogs and interviews, however, is presented with few, if any, edits to maintain the discourse in its “natural” setting.

about their body modification experiences, and the site also hosts a body modification-themed wiki. Finally, ModMag contains a section titled Mlog, which administrators use to highlight modifications deemed to be particularly interesting or of the highest caliber. Users are able to comment on the Mlog postings, offering both compliments and critique.

Linked to ModMag is an online community called ME, which is only accessible to registered users. In order to gain access to ME, individuals must submit pictures or stories of their own body modifications. For each submission, members receive site access for a set amount of time (e.g., one month for a picture of a nostril piercing). Alternatively, one may purchase a membership for a nominal fee (the cost for a six month membership is \$10). Many members disapprove of the fee option despite management claims that the money is needed for the site's maintenance. Regardless of how one obtains a membership, all members must have at least one body modification prior to receiving an account. This makes it possible to have both modified people and people with modifications on ME.

Similar to other social networking sites, ME allows users to customize their personal pages using HTML. Most pages include pictures of the member, a list of current and previous body modifications, links to friends and a personal blog. There are also numerous forums hosted by users and administrators. Forums cover a wide variety of topics, including modification and non-modification issues. Lastly, there is a messaging function that allows members to privately contact each other. Using other ModMag sections sparingly, I concentrated on the data available on the ME site, as this was the space where discourse focused on boundary creation and maintenance, and where challenges to this discourse were most likely to occur.

It is important to note the real benefits participants experienced from their virtual activities on ME. For many, ME was a virtual reprieve from offline struggles. As noted by Wellman and Gulia (1999:338) the "social beings... who use the Net seek not only

information but also companionship, social support, and a sense of belonging.” Several participants joined Atomic in considering ME an “internet haven.” For Mary Jane, ME was the only space where she was able to satisfy her need to vent about offline struggles: “i kinda do not feel comfortable writting stuff here anymore but still, [this] is the only place where i can do and I do need to get it out.” Bethany made a similar statement after ME returned from an unexpected multiple-week hiatus: “I’m so glad ME is back! I’ve had so much to say that I can’t say elsewhere.” Not only was ME a place for open personal expression, it also served as a safe space where participants could seek shelter from the mainstream’s negative sanctions. While expressing appreciation for his “only private space to post,” Corey wrote, “[t]he one thing I continue to appreciate about this webspace and the community is the ability to post things as I want, when I want, without any concerns or judgements. Its like a judgement free zone.”

Strengths of Chosen Data

Technological advancements over recent decades have increased global connectivity and “de-emphasize[d] the importance of locality for community,” and this has been accompanied by a trend among Westerners to withdraw from public spaces (Wellman and Gulia 1999:354). While traditional public spaces may be of declining importance, virtual public spaces are now significant social locations in need of scholarly attention. Garcia et al. (2009:53) have argued that qualitative researchers of subcultures “must incorporate the Internet and CMC into their research to adequately understand social life in contemporary society.” Accordingly, using the internet for this study of the body modification subculture permits a fuller understanding of present-day subcultural experiences.

One of the strengths of web-based data is its accessibility (Hine 2000; Beaulieu 2004). ModMag data are available at any time of day from any location with internet access. I

resided in Germany throughout the course of this study, but using web-based data meant the time zone differences did not affect my ability to conduct (real-time) research. The ME homepage has a built-in function that lists entries from all users worldwide in chronological order, allowing me to see which members were most active within the ME community. ME forum and blog entries are typically saved in perpetuity. Users may delete their own posts, yet this is rarely done. The backlog of entries helped me determine how long members have been contributing to the site. The saved entries also allowed me to see how some members have grown in their commitment to body modification and the modification subculture. According to Huffaker and Calvert (2005), the ability to access older posts provides researchers with critical information on identity and identity construction of those posting information and opinions.

Another strength of the selected data is that it provided a centralized source of individuals with an interest in the body modification subculture. With the rising popularity in body modification, the fact that an individual has a tattoo or piercing does not necessarily mean that they are interested in the body modification subculture. Using ME members in the study presented a pool of people who are both modified and interested in the culture surrounding modification. Most importantly, ME offered a more concentrated gathering of heavily modified members from the body modification subculture. This group remains small in number, despite growing mainstream use of body modifications (Laumann and Derick 2006).

The fact that this research draws upon those individuals from the small number of modified people interacting within an internet setting means this population was self-selected within an already small group, which may create concern over the representativeness of this research. According to Coomber (1997), however, sampling bias should not be a primary concern when studying difficult-to-reach groups. Rather, scholars should gather data via

convenience samples of those fitting the targeted demographic. Adler and Adler (2008) employed the convenience sampling discussed by Coomber (1997) in their study of an online community for self-injurers. Much like the self-injurers, some of whose practices also fall within the purview of body modification, those with extreme body modifications are a small and difficult-to-reach group, so convenience sampling is used and considered appropriate, as ME and the rest of the ModMag site offer such a convenience sample that is readily accessible and provides insight into boundary work and the creation and maintenance of community rituals.

Limitations of Chosen Data

Though web-based analysis is a fairly recent phenomenon, its benefits have helped it gain popularity among those interested in discourse analysis and other research agendas (Mann and Stewart 2000; James and Busher 2006). Nevertheless, web-based analysis can be problematic. Researchers must recognize that internet research can be “[d]eceptive in its apparent simplicity” (Markham 2005:799). In addition to the issues created by the internet itself, the nature of ME also presents some challenges. Originating from the body modification subculture in Toronto at the turn of the twenty-first century, ME is a predominantly English speaking site, though members come from across the globe. While a few users post in languages other than English, English skills are necessary for meaningful participation within the broader ME community. Accordingly, the majority of ME members reside in English speaking countries. Despite ME’s global reach, it may provide little information on the body modification subculture as experienced by those outside the English speaking West, as well as those without internet access. Special care was taken to ensure communications with English-as-Second-Language participants (three participants falling into this category had achieved a high level of English language proficiency).

Another issue to be addressed is that of constructed realities. Wilson and Atkinson (2005) have suggested that the online and offline realities of subculture members may not be as closely linked as one might assume. This may be true for my study as well, as it is possible that ME members may not be as committed to the body modification subculture offline as they claim to be while online. I would have ideally verified offline subcultural activity in person, but the global dispersion of members made this impossible. Nonetheless, it was possible to check for inconsistencies via the ME pages. Comparing various photos posted by a user, for example, helped me verify the authenticity of body modifications. Prior to collecting data, I encountered one user who altered a photo to give the appearance that he had an extreme facial piercing. Upon further review, I discovered he was considering the piercing and wanted to see if it was a good fit for him. This can still be considered a data point, but it highlights the need to be cautious when studying material posted on the internet.

Finally, whereas the ModMag administrators see the site as a subculture in itself, I argue that it is merely one site contributing to the body modification subculture. Not only are there other internet sites dedicated to body modification, Wilson and Atkinson (2005) have claimed that subcultures can be organized, but not fully lived, online. This is particularly relevant for body based subcultures, such as the Straight Edgers Wilson and Atkinson studied or the body modifiers I followed. Therefore, ModMag is merely a site where I have chosen to observe the online interactions of body modification subculture members; it is not *the* body modification subculture.

Data Collection and Analysis

As a member of ME since 2008, I had already gained entry to the community to be studied before beginning the research phase. My three year involvement with the site also helped with “getting to know the particular norms and understandings of the group,” which is

a critical step in the analysis of participant actions (Kendall 1999:70). While contemplating approaches to studying this community, I came across work highlighting two effective methods of web-based analysis— content analysis and participant observation. Content analysis is an effective and unobtrusive way for scholars to investigate self presentation in online communities (Huffaker and Calvert 2005). Participant observation also remains an important tool in the study of online presentations of the embodied self (Wilson and Atkinson 2005; Ploderer, Howard and Thomas 2008).

Drawing upon these experiences, methods and other web-based research on subcultures, I chose a two pronged approach for the collection and analysis of data from ME members and their contributions to other parts of the ModMag site. My approach is qualitative in nature, though demographic results from a 2003 ModMag survey and a later survey (Hicinbotham 2007; DiPopolo 2010) are referenced in the analysis. The initial research phase included a modified version of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (Herring 2004a). Data gathered during the first stage of research assisted in the formulation of questions for the informal interviews in stage two.

Content analysis and participant observation are both beneficial to scholars conducting web-based analysis, but combining the two methods can lead to an even better understanding of online interactions. Herring (2004a:352) proposed a research approach known as Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), which is a form of text based content analysis mixed with participant observation: “Ideally, in any analysis of virtual community, textual analysis would be supplemented by ongoing participant observation.” Herring was primarily concerned with textual data, contending that the majority of all data is textual. However, I suggest that a study involving the modification of the body should include a combination of photo-friendly content analysis and participant observation, especially when the photographs of modifications play such a critical role in developing a

sense of community, as is the case with ME. This idea is supported by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), who argued that many scholars fall short in their analysis by failing to incorporate artifacts such as photographs. Other scholars have also argued for the inclusion of photographs in discourse analysis, as they may also play a role in the formation of discourse (Iedema 2003).

The first stage of the study involved a photo-friendly version of CMDA. Given that I was already active on ME prior to this study, the participant observation portion of the CMDA is more appropriately termed observant participation. Hughey (2008) invoked this term to emphasize the fact that he was initially a participant in the site and that he intended to continue his participation after research concluded. For Hughey, his primary status of participant offered better insight than could be achieved by a scholar who was merely there for research purposes, and I suggest my familiarity with ME made it the best virtual location for me to conduct a study on the body modification subculture.

As an observant participant, one cannot make claims of being unbiased as the research phase begins. Notably, my previous participation in the ME community helped influence the direction of this dissertation. Based upon my interactions, I suspected that more heavily modified users do not appreciate the increasing number of modified individuals in Western society. I had encountered users who appear to get more extreme modifications (e.g., tongue splitting) in order to distance themselves from people with modifications (as opposed to modified people) and maintain a distinct subculture. In addition to the more extreme modifications, I knew that some members had chastised those they believed were not committed to the modified culture and/or stressed a certain terminology for modification related issues. Though I had already encountered these subcultural phenomena as a ME user, I made every effort not to allow my own experiences and biases to trump sound observations. Indeed, the scientific methods employed herein made me aware of many things I had

overlooked in the past, both intentionally and unwittingly. They also led me to conclude that some things I previously suspected might be important were not as meaningful as hypothesized.

The first CMDA task was to view member pictures in order to separate modified individuals (i.e., those with numerous and visible modifications) from individuals with modifications (i.e., those with few and concealable modifications). This helped me determine which members were viable participants for the study and what body techniques have been and are being used within the subculture. I began by recruiting heavily modified members with whom I had previously established a relationship. I then used the ME home page to assist in my search. I visited the pages of users whose avatars (user pictures) indicated they were likely modified people. In addition to profile pictures posted at the top of each potential participant's page, I also viewed picture albums in search of evidence of visible modifications. Many users also posted a list of their modifications at the top of their page. After verifying that a given user was, in fact, a modified person, I checked to make sure the user was currently active. Pages of those who no longer use ME are not deleted, so I quickly skimmed the entry dates of blog postings to verify active membership. My definition of active membership is consistent with the site norm requiring at least one blog posting per month. I then contacted potential participants via the site's instant messaging function and requested their consent for the study. I also found participants through the buddy lists on participants' pages. As will be discussed in the following chapter, these buddy lists were a great source of heavily modified users. This approach made locating participants time and energy efficient. Within 48 hours, fourteen users agreed to participate. Over thirty subjects consented within the first 96 hours. The final analysis is based upon 39 of 82 contacted users.

I began by looking at each participant's photo galleries in order to determine the modifications they had. In addition, the "About Me" section of each user's page often had a

list of body modifications, including present, retired and planned modifications. As with the rest of the data for this study, that information was then recorded in an Excel spreadsheet. Excel is both economical and user friendly, making it a helpful tool for qualitative researchers (Meyer and Avery 2009). Participant names were placed into rows and columns were used for codes. When a data point for a given code was found in a participant's blog entry or pictures, I then entered the date of the blog entry (or picture location) into the corresponding box, directing me to the appropriate Microsoft Word file containing a copy of the blog post. The tattoos for which I created a code include hand tattoos, neck tattoos, face tattoos, and full sleeves (arms that have been covered in tattoos from wrist to shoulder). The piercings I coded include stretched lobes (piercing hole has been stretched to at least one inch), other stretched (e.g., nostril or lip), heavy facial piercings (at least four visible piercings) and microdermals (small disc resting on the surface and attached to a metallic anchor beneath the skin). I also coded extreme modifications that are uncommon in the larger culture, such as bifurcated tongues and subdermal implants.

The coding process continued as I began reading each user's blogs from October 2010 through September 2011. Looking at postings over the course of an entire year was beneficial, because the professional body modification industry, from which many participants earn a living, is prone to seasonal variability. Upon initiating data collection, I considered making the year span begin one month earlier. I was able to begin collecting data earlier than expected and this would have permitted me to complete data collection sooner. I decided against this, in large part, because ModMag administrators updated the system at the beginning of August 2011. Site officials commented on the need to update the system for a couple years without ever setting a time table. As a result, its relaunch was unexpected and user responses to the updates presented me with a wealth of data.

Other unexpected findings continued to emerge once I began analyzing blog posts. Much of the coding scheme was predetermined, as shown below, but I adjusted the coding scheme in order to reflect the data. Codes for some non-modification related boundaries, such as religious criticism, were unanticipated, but the recurrence of these themes (e.g., in the form of anti-religious statements and tattoos) warranted their inclusion. While Neuendorf (2002) argued that scholars using content analysis should neither add to nor subtract from the coding variables once the study has commenced, I argue that a willingness to investigate unplanned phenomena strengthens the legitimacy of this dissertation, as it shows that I was not forcing my own preconceived notions onto the subjects. Rather, my goal was to gain further understanding of the subculture, even if that meant having to return to and reanalyze already analyzed blog postings.

I had several areas of interest in mind as I sorted through blog postings. Beginning with the top of the alphabetized list of participants, I analyzed all blog entries for a given participant before moving to the next participant listed in Excel. By restricting my analysis to one participant at a time, I was able to develop a better awareness of the participant's writing style, enabling me to better assess the nuances and quality of the data. Dated photo galleries and blog postings allowed me to determine if certain body techniques have become more or less popular as body modification has spread throughout the mainstream. Another concept of interest was community. I considered numerous phrases to be an indication of participants' sense of community, including 'community,' 'brothers,' 'subculture,' and 'us vs them.' Photographs were also helpful in analyzing the role of the body modification community in one's life, such as pictures indicating offline interactions with other heavily modified individuals. Critique of the broader ME community from modified individuals revealed what members of the subculture understand to be the purpose of body modification.

Another code was created for the purpose of ME as interpreted by participants, a common theme in the months surrounding the site's relaunch. Analyzing conflicts between subcultural members and non-members helped determine if members of this subculture and mainstream individuals have different views on the role and importance of body modification. Commentary on the modifications of others also provided useful information. What members of the subculture wrote about mainstream modifiers, for example, shed light on subcultural responses to the mainstreaming of body modification and how social boundaries are being created, maintained and challenged.

In addition to using a code for texts explicitly addressing the existence of a subculture, I also had codes for the mocking of incorrect argot and the mocking of popular body modifications. Some cues indicating mockery include the use of phrases such as 'hahaha' or 'like really?' in combination with negative comments after participants mentioned these phenomena, as such phrases indicate participants were belittling or laughing at the expense of the individual with popular body modifications or using incorrect vocabulary. Similarly, responses to other subcultural members' modifications were helpful in determining if the subculture is actively seeking to remain a distinct group. That is, if more extreme modifications (e.g., subdermal implants and split tongues) are well received, this may indicate a desire to resist mainstream assimilation by pushing the boundaries of modifications beyond what are considered acceptable modifications within the host culture.

After collecting data via CMDA, I used informal online interviews with members of the body modification subculture to clarify unanswered questions stemming from blogs or forum postings that did not adequately address my research questions. Nonetheless, the data from blog postings exceeded expectations and only five interviews were necessary. Unless otherwise noted, participant quotes came from blog postings. My use of interviews is to supplement CMDA in this research. Interviews were only employed when necessary in order

to restrict researcher intrusion among a group of participants that was not necessarily researcher-friendly on a personal level. Using interviews in this limited context enabled me to keep some participants in the analysis that I may have otherwise dropped from the study. One participant, for example, posted few blog entries but regularly commented on other users' posts and was active in forums. Though that participant met all criteria for inclusion in the study, I would not have been able to piece together enough data to warrant the user's inclusion without the interview. Finally, the interviews allow me to speak more authoritatively about certain texts, as they helped me avoid guessing about meanings and interpretations by providing the necessary background information not included in blog postings.

There is no consensus on the proper use or desirability of internet interviews, but they have gained credibility among some scholars as a way to extract more detailed information from internet users (Chen and Hinton 1999; Kendall 1999; Adler and Adler 2008; De Koster and Houtman 2008). Though Kendall expressed concern over discerning the truthfulness of responses in online interviews, others have argued that these generate more open and sincere responses than face to face interviews (Adler and Adler 2008; De Koster and Houtman 2008). Informal online interviews were most appropriate for this study, given the still sensitive nature of body modification (Sanders 1988; Fisher 2002; Atkinson 2004; Adler and Adler 2008). As ME users often communicate with one another via email and a built in asynchronous communication tool, using these in the interview process eliminated undue researcher influence (Hine 2000). Similarly, the use of asynchronous online interviews was best in this study, because it adheres to community norms (Garcia et al. 2009).

Much of the interview material could not be predetermined, as it stemmed from the findings in the first research phase. There were, nevertheless, some issues I needed to address during the interview if the participant had not already done so in their journal entries. For

example, when users mentioned conflicts with people with modifications without providing details, I inquired into the source of the conflict. The interviews were also helpful in determining the motivations behind more extreme modifications. When, for instance, one user posted a picture of a freshly split tongue without commenting on the procedure, I used the interview to determine if the split tongue was attractive to the wearer because it is rare among body modifiers and/or less acceptable within the larger culture. The interview phase of the research ended when I reached a collective saturation of all gathered data for both blog postings and interviews. It has been argued that qualitative researchers investigating relatively homogenous groups can reach saturation after merely twelve subjects (Guest, Bunce and Johnson 2006). I began to approach saturation after coding the first twenty users. Saturation was achieved by the time I looked at thirty participants. Nevertheless, I collected data on each of the 39 users who consented, including over two thousand posts and two thousand photos. This can only strengthen the results and I feel it was a sign of respect for those who were willing to grant me access.

Reflections

Few research endeavors run as smoothly as hoped during the planning stages. This study is no exception. The aforementioned site maintenance/update was initiated one week after I began contacting potential participants. Though administrators said the site would be back online within three days, the site was offline for two weeks. Not only did this delay data collection, it is also possible that this influenced the participation rate of this study. Some users commented that their messages received prior to the update were no longer available following the relaunch. My own inbox was not fully operational for multiple weeks after ME came back online.

A serious violation of site policy may have also negatively affected my participation rate. Explicit photos posted by one of the participants who is a popular member within the community were copied and posted on a different website by another ME user shortly before the site was updated. The participant completely deleted her page and later reemerged under a different user name. This breach of confidentiality not only outraged many members, it also raised concerns about personal privacy. Some potential participants gave this as a reason for not consenting to my study. Three participants noted this as a major concern and requested further information about the study and their confidentiality. They consented after I explained the safety measures I would take to protect the privacy of all participants, including the use of pseudonyms for both website and user names.

The final potential hurdle to a higher participation rate was the concurrent presence of another researcher working from Library and Information Science. Whereas I individually contacted potential participants, a ModMag staff member posted information about her research (which included a small financial reward) on the Mlog page. Accordingly, it is likely that a significant portion of the ME community was aware of her research. While some site members are open to such academic intrusion, my interactions suggest that there are members of the body modification subculture for whom this is undesirable. Many potential participants did not respond to my participation request, but at least one ME member blocked me from viewing his page after I contacted him. Given this user's hostility towards mainstream society that I uncovered during pre-screening, I was not surprised by his refusal to consent. While this user was unlikely influenced by the double researcher presence, it is possible that our combined presence turned others off who may have otherwise consented.

Despite some of these potential hindrances, I was able to collect data I believe provides strong support for the analyses and interpretations presented in the remaining chapters. It should be noted that there was also one aspect that may have influenced recruits

in my favor. Namely, in contrast to the other researcher, I am a heavily modified person. This may have deflected concerns about how the subculture would be treated since the person gathering and analyzing data had a relationship with the group. Whatever the reasons for or against consenting to the study, the participants selected provided abundant and valuable information about the body modification subculture.

CHAPTER 4

Characteristics of a Modified People

User rankings, based on the number of visits to a user's page by other members, indicate that the participants in this study were among the most popular individuals in the ME community. Only one participant was not ranked among the top ten percent of ME users after the website was upgraded. Participants were not, however, recruited based upon these rankings, as user rankings were first available following the site's relaunch. While there are multiple ways to increase visits from other members (e.g., posting sexually explicit photographs) frequent visits to some pages seem to be based on holding the status of a heavily modified individual and participation in more extreme body modification practices. Only one participant, for example, posted sexually explicit photos during the study, whereas all displayed pictures of body modifications. The content of blogs also influences ranking and will be discussed in Chapter 5.

This chapter focuses on characteristics that lead to higher popularity and interest within this online community centered on body modifications. I begin by discussing the demographics of the participants before presenting types and degrees of body modification practices. Given my intent to uncover potential differences between a body modification subculture and the collection of people with modifications, I will also compare the characteristics of study participants with the entire ME community and larger Western society by referring to studies and media portrayals of these larger groups.

Demographic Patterns

My participants consisted of twenty five men and fourteen women. The proportion of women in this study is lower than that found within the ME community where they are a

slight majority (Hicinbotham 2007). Women also make up roughly half of all individuals with modifications (Fisher 2002). Although it is possible that the smaller proportion of women in this study may have resulted from convenience sampling techniques, I suggest that women are less likely to actively participate in the body modification subculture than men. This may result from the fact that women face greater pressure to conform to beauty standards so that negative repercussions for participating in body modification are greater for them than for men (Featherstone 1982). This, in turn, may deter women with modifications from becoming visibly modified or from playing an active role in the subculture surrounding body modification.

In addition to gender, body modification and subcultural participation have been portrayed as youthful phenomena (Braithwaite et al. 1999; Panconesi 2007), and the majority of participants in this study (64%) were between the ages of 18 and 30. The percentage of participants over thirty years of age, however, was nearly double the percentage (19%) that could be expected based upon the overall composition of the ME community (Hicinbotham 2007). It seems that participation in this subculture is not as strongly influenced by age as the overall interest in body modification. Nor does age have a strong exclusionary role as has been the case for other subcultures.

The inability of modified people to hide their subcultural markers from public view may be one factor contributing to continued participation in this subculture beyond one's youth. Punks and hippies could change their hairstyles and clothes as they aged, thereby enabling them to exchange their subcultural identity for an identity conforming to the mainstream. Modified people, however, cannot remove their subculture's symbols. This 'ironic' characteristic of body modification (Kosut 2006) explains why modified people continue to be modified beyond their youth, but it does not explain why they would remain active in the subculture. Similar to Willis' (1978) hippy subculture, the ability of this

subculture to keep older members within the ranks seems to result from its expansion beyond leisure spaces. Namely, the subculture has created alternative work opportunities permitting those with familial responsibilities to remain active in the subculture while navigating various mainstream expectations contained within the subculture. Many participants, for example, were employed by tattoo and piercing studios, including 23 piercers (five of whom retired from the industry) and five tattoo artists (one of whom retired).

Given the demographics of this group, many found themselves in a phase of life where seeking employment was a top priority. Some of my participants were specifically seeking piercing or tattooing apprenticeships. RocknRollMelissa spent years searching for an apprenticeship, leading to the following post when a position became available:

The piercer I have been waiting to contact me JUST DID! I'm so nervous to call him back!! He wants to know my schedule and inquire about other things! SO EXCITED RIGHT NOW!!!!!!! :D

RocknRollMelissa's excitement over an apprenticeship resulted not only from the fact that she would be able to work in a field she is passionate about, but that she would be securing a job in a profession where visible modifications are permitted. Marvin, who has been piercing in shops across the US for more than a decade, mirrored RocknRollMelissa's sentiment when he stated that he would "refuse to do anything else except work in the piercing industry. It is truly my dream job!"

For RocknRollMelissa and other participants, the desire to work in a tattoo studio was related to the fact that those who were not employed within the body modification industry struggled to find work. Eight of the participants not working in tattoo studios were unemployed for at least some portion of the study, including Corey:

So all I need to do...get through the weekend....and get through next week....and figure out a way to have money....fuck...I hit a snafu...I need 20 bucks to make it to Thursday and its not happening....shit...35 counting phone time....I'm running out of things to sell and trade....can you say scared and frustrated???

While I cannot comment on the types of employment Corey was seeking, his heavily tattooed face may have impacted his inability to find work. To make ends meet, Corey had turned to bartering, but that is not always a viable option for one's responsibilities in a capitalistic society. Unable to barter for rent, he was considering bartering for an automobile he could sleep in.

Other unemployed members, such as Jamie, occasionally discussed the negative influence visible modifications had on their employment prospects:

[I] just updated my resume and am excited/scared shitless at the prospect of getting a job and getting off disability... I'm going to apply at everything from music stores to pharmacies to bakeries to tattoo shops to receptionist jobs to cashiers to whatthefuckever... i have my throat and knuckles tattooed, so that may be a 'dress code' challenge/turn-off for some close minded, discriminatory places... and i have 1-1/4" lobes (that i never wear jewellery in but will if that's more 'appealing') and facial piercings... oh, the challenges of being modified in a small town... fuck it, i can rock that shit... i'm a really good person and a REALLY hard worker... too bad i can't pierce anymore due to severe shaking hands... but i can't dwell on that 'loss'... i have to move on with my life... i deserve more than this

After being forced into early retirement from the piercing industry as a result of her health, Jamie spent several years without a job and was still unemployed at the conclusion of the study. Her story exemplifies the importance of being employed in the body modification industry for members of this subculture.

The relationship between unemployment and visible modifications begs the question of whether unemployment leads to visible modifications or vice versa. Given that many of the participants began collecting tattoos and piercings before reaching a working age, it is likely that their modifications induced employment struggles. It is unlikely that participants turned to visible modifications in an attempt to alleviate the socio-psychological problems stemming from unemployment. This argument is supported by Kang and Jones' (2007) findings suggesting that visible modifications negatively affect one's employability.

While unemployment may not have preceded participation in this subculture, it is possible that membership in the lower and working classes influenced this participation, as

few participants had middle class roots or aspirations. In contrast to the larger ME community, in which half of all users had a college education and one-third were currently enrolled students (DiPopolo 2010), only one of the study's participants was enrolled in college, and two had a four year degree. Given that participants were more heavily modified than the larger ME community, these findings support claims of an inverse relationship between body modification and education (Laumann and Derick 2006). As a result of this, participants who did not work in tattoo shops but were able to find work typically had working class jobs.

Financial stress was a common theme in the blogs of both the unemployed and working class participants. Fifteen of the nineteen participants who discussed financial struggles were not employed by a tattoo shop at the time, suggesting that financial security among members of this subculture correlates to one's ability to work as a piercer or tattoo artist. Mosaic is an auto mechanic who discussed the lack of financial security provided by his job:

Got my direct deposit last night while I slept. \$702 for 2 weeks of work. My rent is \$699. So after I pay rent I have \$3 left for food. And \$0 to pay the bills I am already behind on. I am pretty sure I HAVE to quit my job and seek a new one.

Mosaic posted similar entries in the months leading up to the above quote. As the study concluded, he was looking into government assistance programs and attempting to sell a car he had been rebuilding for a decade.

While seemingly in a better financial situation than their counterparts not employed in the industry, some piercers and tattoo artists also discussed financial strains stemming from the seasonal nature of the body modification industry. Jennifer4you expressed her frustration in a November entry, exclaiming "I'm so tired [o]f being financially unstable." Customers are less likely to be tattooed or pierced in late Fall and early Winter than they are in the Spring or early Summer, thereby affecting the paychecks of tattooists and piercers as they have no base

salary. For T-Bone, a piercer in a large Midwestern city, this was a repeated source of frustration: “Well, so far I’ve made almost 4x as much money in the past two days than I did all last week. I definitely have a love-hate relationship with commission based work.” The previous week, this same individual lamented, “Made \$70 last week....fuck.” Despite seasonal flux and a lack of consistent paychecks exemplified by T-Bone and Jennifer4you, tattoo shop employees were among the most financially stable participants.

In addition to supporting the claim that this collective is a subculture, the financial demographics reveal a dilemma for participants, as excess income is typically required in order to receive new body modifications. Often unable or unwilling to find better paying jobs, many participants were forced to seek alternative measures in order to maintain subcultural authenticity, a constantly moving target (Force 2009). Attempts to alleviate this conflict between financial limitations and the desire for new modifications are discussed below.

The final demographic characteristic of note is religion. Participants’ religion was not initially a concern of this study, but the number of (anti-)religious-themed texts make it worth mentioning. While most participants resided in nations where religious participation was considered normal, the majority of participants were overtly critical of religion, particularly Christianity. This may help explain their writing style, a component of this online community I will discuss in the following chapter. Twenty-four participants spoke out against Christianity, whereas none spoke favorably about or claimed to belong to the Christian, or any other, recognized faith. Christians and other religious users are present on ME, however scanning the forums for such individuals revealed them to be underrepresented among the members of the body modification subculture. The low participation rates in organized religion among more heavily modified individuals have been discussed by Stirn et al., (2006), who found an inverse relationship between body modification participation and religious affiliation. Laumann and Derick (2006) have also argued that the low sense of community in

the lives of people not tied to a religion can serve as a motivation for modifying the body, a finding that reminds one of Durkheim's (2001:257) analysis of community and ritual:

[S]ociety exists and lives only in and through individuals. Extinguish the idea of society in individual minds, let the beliefs, traditions, and aspirations of the collectivity cease to be felt and shared by the particular people involved, and society will die.

Though heavily modified people may desire to withdraw from mainstream society, they still require social interaction and turn to new collective rituals in order to be part of a different society/subculture. I will further discuss participants' outspokenness against Christianity in the following chapter as a form of boundary work.

A Subculture's Repertoire on the Body

While the demographics of my participants may help set them apart from the mainstream in numerous ways, their social sphere is more fully defined through their use of symbols. As may be expected, the primary symbols used to indicate their subcultural status were body modifications. Whereas all participants were visibly modified, it is important to include more extreme body modifications that may not be readily visible in public, as they may be used to distinguish members of the subculture from mainstream individuals with modifications. In addition to observing the extent and extremity of one's modifications, it is critical to acknowledge the manner in which participants combined various methods for modifying the body. According to Laumann and Derick (2006), only 8% of Americans who are tattooed or pierced have both tattoos and piercings. For members of this subculture, on the other hand, it was important to experience various forms of body modification and only one participant refrained from modifying the body in multiple ways.

Stretched ear lobes were an early form of modification for many participants, and thirty participants had lobes that had been stretched to at least one inch. Stretched lobes were a more prevalent form of modification for participants than for the broader ME community,

of which only 12% had one inch lobes or larger. Large lobes were a source of pride and frustration for many members, as they often required extensive maintenance. Some members discussed the possibility of having their lobes sewn back together in order to eliminate the hassle of large lobes. When asked in an interview why she considered surgically closing her stretched lobes, Mary Jane wrote:

[T]hey were (you will excuse me for the expression here) a pain in the ass during the winter... I live in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.. and winters here are very cold... i had to hid[e] them and it was sometimes very annoying ... same as for sleeping .. not the most comfortable thing.

The discomfort associated with large lobes often led members to refrain from wearing jewelry, causing the lobes to droop and wrinkle. This was a necessary, albeit unappealing, step for many participants. Some members expressed displeasure with their inability to regularly wear jewelry in their stretched lobes by invoking dysphemisms for their naked lobes, as exemplified by Dilshandra's use of the term "vaginalobes."

In addition to large lobes, the majority of participants had heavily pierced faces. Twenty-five participants had at least four visible facial piercings. The most common facial piercings included the septum, (multiple) nostrils and various piercings through or near the lips. Furthermore, twenty-one participants had large facial piercings. Whereas standard piercing sizes for nostrils and lips are twenty gauge (0.8 mm) and fourteen gauge (1.6 mm), respectively, members of the subculture often had nostrils that measured to 0 gauge (8 mm) and labrets larger than one half inch. Stretching one's facial piercings can be a time consuming and painful experience. One user, Cursed, had severe allergies which often irritated his septum. The thought that the pain associated with stretching his septum piercing would have been done in vain, however, motivated him to keep the piercing—"I think the only reason I kept it was because it fucking sucked so much stretching it up." Some members elected to have parts of their face 'punched' (essentially a hole punch for skin instead of paper) or scalpeled in order to avoid the stretching process. C-Lo, for example, initially had

his labret scalpeled at 11 mm. While this option enables one to have a larger modification done quickly, few individuals outside the subculture select this option. In contrast to stretched piercings, scalpeled and punched modifications cannot be reversed by removing the jewelry, allowing the hole to close.

Members from my sample with piercings also had tattoos. Over half of the participants (22/39) had full sleeves (arms that have been completely covered in tattoos from the wrist to the top of the shoulder). Those without sleeves often had several tattoos on their arms and some discussed plans to finish the sleeves. While some participants had one consistent concept per sleeve, most had sleeves comprising of various tattoo styles and themes, as discussed by Mosaic:

Yesterday I had randomly thought about this, and last night the discussion popped up again.

Would it be crazy of me to laser my right leg and start over? It is my 'geek' leg. I constantly get compliments on the tattoos on it. Namely the worm, 'Fallout Boy'(sigh), and Gordon Freeman. I have a lot more in mind. However it is just pieces. Not a SLEEVE.

As most of you know, my shit isn't the planned from the start sleeve idea. It is all piece by piece stuff, then fill in between. Now I've taken up all my available space and don't have a 'sleeve' in the modern sense. I'm tempted to start fresh(ish) with one kick ass artist and just do it beginning to end.

Or maybe I need to find a kick ass artist and get their opinion on working with what I have. Any suggestions for a tattoo artist that can do awesome comic book/video game type art? Anyone, anywhere. Though in Austin would be nice :)

The ability to 'start fresh,' as discussed by Mosaic, is only possible after undergoing several sessions of laser removal. The goal of laser removal on heavily tattooed areas is often to drastically fade the tattoo rather than to completely remove it, particularly if the individual wishes to be tattooed again. While Mosaic considered redoing his sleeve so that it would become a more unified tattoo, few participants had such sleeves. Participants were also unlikely to have old tattoos removed via laser in order to start fresh. Marvin, a piercer, was the only participant to select this approach after deciding that he preferred traditional style

tattoos over those he had at the time. The presence of various styles and themes on one's sleeve reveals the progressive manner in which many participants became interested in body modification and the subculture surrounding it. The tattoos may also serve as a chronology of one's tattoo journey. Jamie hinted at the ability to date one's tattoos based on appearance and style when she wrote, "my chest and sleeves are 16 years old... obviously! ha!"

Extensive tattooing on the arms may serve as a gateway into the body modification subculture. However, sleeves may still be covered and hidden from public view, which may explain why my participants did not view sleeves as a form of body modification that differentiated them from other tattooees. Instead, it was important for them to have tattoos that were clearly visible. Compared to twenty-two sleeve wearers, twenty-nine users had hand and/or knuckle tattoos, a percentage that was larger than that of the ME community, of which roughly ten percent had such tattoos (DiPopolo 2010). Multiple participants were tattooed on the hand before completing their sleeves. Loretta, a twenty year old with heavy facial piercings, was tattooed on her hands only three months after receiving her first tattoo.

Neck tattoos were also slightly more prevalent among participants than full sleeves (n=23). Study participants were six times more likely to be tattooed on the neck than other ME members (DiPopolo 2010). Similar to Loretta, Nomes is a clothing designer who had her throat tattooed prior to having significant tattoo coverage. Although unsleeved at the conclusion of this study, Nomes was tattooed on her hands, neck and face. Bloodstain, who works as a computer programmer, was also tattooed on his face and hands before deciding to complete his sleeve. While facial tattoos were less common than other visible tattoos (n = 18), they represented the greatest difference in tattooing practices between the broader ME community and study participants, as the latter were ten times more likely to be tattooed on the face.

Tattoos and piercings, which have been used to varying degrees by other ME users as well as the broader culture, were the most widely and frequently used forms of body modifications. Several participants (n=18) also had scarification pieces, which are also possessed by one third of the ME community, despite low rates of participation within the larger culture (DiPopolo 2010). It is important to note that participants also utilized forms of body modification that are uncommon outside of their subculture. Tongue splitting, for example, is a procedure where the tongue is sliced and stitched in order to resemble a snake's tongue. Twenty-one participants chose to undergo this procedure and other participants were considering it. In contrast to visible tattoos and piercings, split tongues are not always visible. Nevertheless, they have increasingly gained popularity within the subculture over the past five years and are readily displayed online and in one's personal life.

Another form of modification not practiced within the broader culture is the subdermal implant. Subdermal implants are typically teflon or silicone pieces that are inserted beneath the skin through an incision created by a scalpel. Implants were initially limited to different sized beads that could be inserted on the forehead, forearms or genitals. Dilshandra was one of the eighteen users with subdermal implants and had two beads placed on each side of her forehead to look like horns. Members of the subculture have recently developed implants with various shapes that can be inserted on the back of the hand, such as Jennifer4you's anchor-shaped implant. As of 2010, some members began receiving magnetic implants in their fingers, allowing them to pick up small metallic objects. Poked was one of the first to undergo this procedure and wrote, "im getting subdermal implants in like 9 days... so stoked.. I'm taking the day off to get them and to check out the tattoo expo, it'll be my first day off in 5 weeks arg!" Given the fact that magnetic subdermal implants are at the forefront of body modification innovation, it is not surprising that only those participants who have

worked in the industry had received them. It is possible that their use will increase if the procedure is well received by industry workers.

Although this subculture is primarily concerned with (semi) permanent forms of body modification, two temporary practices were widespread. Microdermals, or anchors, resemble piercings but have no exit point. Anchors typically have a small metallic ‘anchor’ that is inserted beneath the skin and attached to a disc resting slightly above the skin. Fifteen participants had anchors, which emerged within the subculture in the previous decade and have since spread into the mainstream. Despite technological advancements, the single point nature of anchors makes them susceptible to being rejected from the body within the first year.

Suspension was the second popular form of temporary modification within this subculture. During a suspension, individuals hang and swing from ropes that are attached to large fish hooks piercing the skin. Members typically hung from two to five hooks during a suspension. While roughly half (n=19) of the participants have suspended, there was no consensus as to suspension’s position within the subculture. Cheddar, a piercer, considered it to be a subheading falling under the piercing umbrella. Though Ghost did not consider suspension to be body modification, he paired it with forms of extreme body modification to create an “ongoing ritual” that can be understood as part of the community building and legitimization processes. Another participant, Mosaic, suspended several times and considered body modification subculture different from the suspension scene. Mosaic regularly suspended with people who were not visibly modified, which supported his exclusion of the practice from the body modification tool kit. Despite being common among participants, suspension was not viewed as a form of ‘modification.’

Some participants also practiced other forms of extreme body modification. T-Bone is a piercer who decided to retire a genital piercing. Once he realized that the piercing holes

would not entirely close, he decided to perform another modification on himself and wrote, “it never closed up completely and I’d piss on my leg if I didn’t sit down. It’s the main reason I did my meatotomy.” Four other male participants performed similar procedures on their genitals. Another extreme modification was Ghost’s self-filed teeth, which he manually filed to resemble triangles.

Whatever the preferred method of body modification, participants in the study considered body modification to be an ongoing process. Approximately half of the participants (n=20) expressed a desire for more modifications. It is likely that a larger number plan on receiving more body modifications, though only twenty discussed such plans within the research period. After going some time without any new modifications, Cheddar wrote, “I have had the ache for awhile, I should really smarten up and get pierced like a champ... Up next: Tattoo everything!” Cheddar’s aching for more modifications was echoed by other members, such as Cursed, who wrote, “[r]eally feel like I need to get tattooed or something, its been ages and have the itch bad!” In addition to the comments on future plans, it should be noted that none of the participants said that they were finished modifying their bodies.

Discussion

The demographic observations presented here reveal the relevance of the subculturalist approach for a study on this collection of modified individuals. Contrary to postsubculturalist scholarship rejecting the role of class in subcultural formation, I found a link between social class and membership in this body modification subculture. Whereas the larger ME community may include users from all social classes, the dearth of middle and upper class individuals among the site’s heavily modified population causes one to question postsubculturalist claims that subculture has been rendered an untenable concept as a result of the disappearing relationship between contemporary ‘subcultures’ and social class (Bennett

1999). According to my findings, (at least some) groups rejecting the mainstream continue to be formed along social class lines. This body modification subculture, then, more closely resembles the flash dancers and punks in post-War Britain than the various neotribes of the late twentieth century. One indicator of social class cited above is education level. Compared to the broader ME collective, participants were less likely to have attended college. Another indicator I have cited is the unemployment rate among participants. During the year for which data was collected, the unemployment rate for this group was more than twice the rates of Australia³, Canada⁴, the UK⁵ and the USA⁶, the countries in which most participants resided. Another indicator of class was type of employment. Participants were most often employed within the body modification trades. Some were also employed in other working class jobs, including auto mechanic and factory line worker. The final indicator of social class is financial status. In addition to having working class backgrounds, many members struggled to make ends meet. This is the weakest of the four indicators, as similar phenomena may also be observed among middle and upper class individuals who overspend (Frank 2001). I suggest, however, that low-wage jobs are the source of economic frustration, as the data collected do not indicate that participants were leading themselves into financial hardships by living above their means. I have shown that modifications, at least among the heavily modified, may contribute to unemployment and financial struggles. In addition to displaying the subculture's desire to remain a distinct collective, this exposes the mainstream's unwillingness to fully accept body modification.

³ <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/6202.0>

⁴ <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/subjects-sujets/labour-travail/lfs-epa/lfs-epa-eng.htm>

⁵ <http://www.hrmguide.co.uk/jobmarket/unemployment.htm>

⁶ <http://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000>

Despite these struggles and awareness that their visible modifications may be negatively viewed by potential employers within the larger culture, members did not express regret or attempt to remove modifications in order to seek better employment. Visible modifications are, then, privileged over concealable modifications. The higher presence of visible tattoos, as well as numerous and stretched piercings, compared to full sleeves indicates that the subculture places at least equal, and likely greater, value on the location of one's modifications as it does on the size of one's modifications. This argument is supported by the fact that, while all participants were visible modified, none were completely covered with modifications and only Marvin expressed a desire to become fully covered. The selection of more extreme forms of modification, such as tongue splitting, is similarly privileged.

Study participants may eventually become fully covered with tattoos and other modifications, however it is clear that extensive coverage does not take precedence within the subculture. The financial constraints of many members may contribute to this practice. As mentioned, covering one's body in tattoos can be a very expensive endeavor and I suggest that participants selectively used their finances to acquire the extreme and visible modifications valued within the subculture. Stretching one's nostrils, for example, is comparatively inexpensive as it requires only the cost of jewelry, and even that may be avoided if jewelry is borrowed from other individuals. Accordingly, members creatively utilized their limited resources to gain entrée into and further their status within the subculture. Within this subculture, the location and extremity of one's modifications trump the degree of coverage provided by those modifications. Nonetheless, participants sought to have multiple visible modifications.

Since members of this subculture maintained their subcultural status beyond adolescence, it is important here to differentiate between this subculture and youth

subcultures characterized by excessive free time and expendable incomes. In contrast to exclusively youthful subcultures, participants had greater economic and personal responsibilities, limiting their opportunities to frivolously spend money on new modifications without awareness of the consequences. They expressed an awareness of the financial struggles they would encounter while directing their money towards body modification. As Corey discussed his future plans, he acknowledged the existence of “financial [structures] that complicate it all that much further.” Mosaic also mentioned the need to sacrifice and save for new modifications, noting “My desire to get tattooed has been growing greatly. This is now in direct conflict with my ‘budget’ goal. Sigh.” Rather than exhibiting poor money management skills, I argue members of this subculture willingly tolerated continued financial strain in order to meet subcultural expectations. Those who were unemployed continued seeking employment in fields that would accept their visible modifications, and none of those facing economic hardships expressed regret of or desire to remove their visible modifications.

Some participants also attempted to find alternatives to traditional capitalistic practices (i.e., paying full price at a tattoo shop) while furthering their collection of body modifications. Such participants traded in on their subcultural capital in order to receive new modifications at no cost. Corey and Jamie, for example, bartered for facial tattoos. Were it not for her long history within the subculture, it is unlikely Jamie would have been permitted to ‘pay’ for a tattoo with homemade cupcakes. Several participants who worked in tattoo shops noted receiving body modifications from and/or performing modifications on coworkers at no expense. The complimentary performance of body modification between professional modification artists not only enabled members to strengthen their subcultural capital, it was also seen as an honor to be able to modify the body of another profession artist within the subculture.

The process of modifying one's body is viewed as long term within this subculture and many participants spoke of their future modification plans. In contrast to postsubculturalist scenes for which age plays a restrictive role, the data do not indicate that the subculture conforms to a rigid age range. The scene approach may, however, be more applicable for the broader ME collective, as its participation rate for individuals over thirty is roughly half that found among study participants. One of the factors enabling members to remain active in the subculture beyond their youth is the subculture's ability to mimic the hippy subculture and create alternative work structures. Many members of the body modification subculture are able to find work in tattoo and piercing studios and this allows body modification to permeate their lives. However, the financial well being of shop employees is largely dependent upon the mainstream individuals with modifications entering their shops. This potential source of conflict will be discussed further in the next chapter among other experiences of living out and maintaining the boundaries of this subculture.

Finally, it is helpful to consider the role of rituals. Since subcultures are communities, the rituals of body modifiers may be viewed through the lens of scholarship linking rituals to a sense of community. While the end product may take precedence for people with modifications who fleetingly traverse the social spaces of this subculture, it is important to note that participants were not only interested in body modification but in the process of becoming modified. Like the religious acts of Durkheim's (2001:287) totemic cult, sharing plans for and receiving new body modifications were "above all, the means by which the social group periodically reaffirms itself." With the exception of two self-modifying participants, the ritual of getting a new body modification was a social act with at least one other member of the subculture that served to connect participants with the subculture. In addition to suspensions and the modification process, many shared stories of navigating an ever-increasing population of people with modifications, maintaining one's modifications,

and anti-establishment sentiments. Since they help distinguish participants from people with modifications, these rituals may be even more important for community building and boundary formation than the body modifications, and they will be discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Virtual Community as a Tool for Subcultural Boundary Maintenance

The evidence presented in the preceding chapter indicates the existence of a body modification subculture whose boundaries are linked to participation in certain body modification practices which include not only body modifications but also maintenance of those modifications, as well as socioeconomic status to some extent. In this chapter I further discuss the methods of boundary maintenance invoked by members of this subculture, focusing on the virtual setting of ME. I begin the discussion of body-modification-related boundaries by analyzing (un)acceptable motivations for participation in body modification. In addition to boundaries related to body modification, I also discuss practices unrelated to body modification that are still intended to create, maintain, and challenge boundaries. Finally, given the indelible nature of the symbols worn on the physical bodies of members in this subculture, I also consider forms of offline boundary work.

Reasons for Modifying One's Body

Having discussed the body modification practices of participants, it is now helpful to consider the appeal of body modification for this group keeping in mind the notion of boundaries and the community aspects of a subculture. Given the possibilities of personal and professional rejection as a result of visible body modifications, one might wonder why members of this subculture choose to modify their bodies. The idea that heavily modified individuals may be seeking public attention is linked to fashion and was discussed among participants. The attention-getting nature of visible tattoos and extreme modifications was, however, viewed as a negative aspect to be overcome rather than a motivating factor for becoming visibly modified. Luger, for example, noted that the modified body on display

occasionally “draws a lot of unwanted attention.” Jamie was also unhappy with the attention she received for her tattoos, especially given the ‘private’ nature of most of her tattoos.

One reason participants in this study chose to be visibly modified was in order to feel better about their own bodies and boost their self esteem. Though they acknowledged that others may have different motivations for modifying the body, Mary Jane and other participants saw the practice as therapeutic. In contrast to fashion-motivated body modifiers who seek to look good for others, these participants used the body as a tool to feel better about the self. Body modification also served to assist participants, such as Atomic, in the “journey of self-discovery.” These body modifiers lend support to scholars claiming that the body can be altered in an attempt to control the self (Featherstone 1982; Budgeon 2003).

While some participants sought to anchor the self, others approached modifications as an opportunity to free the self from social confines. According to Corey, body modification offered an escape from being “trapped in a world of ‘pretention’ and ‘animosity.’” He felt that modifying his body allowed him to be free from life’s preconceptions.

Marvin also wrote that body modifications helped free him upon discussing the reason for his initial interest in tattoos and piercings:

As for tattoo and piercings, I love it. I think being heavily tattooed should still be an underground taboo thing. I didn’t get into this because I wanted to fi[t] into society, I got into it because I fit in outside of societies standards. When people want being tattooed to be something that is good and cool bums me out. This is my lifestyle, why are the people that shunned me before trying to take it over, don’t try and change it now because you want it to be ok.

Marvin’s text exemplifies Shilling’s (1993) argument that the postmodern body is often molded in accordance with one’s lifestyle choices. Marvin did not become an outsider because of his modifications. Rather, he turned to body modification in order to express his preexisting outsider feelings, though reflecting on it in the online community reveals his desire to connect with a social unit.

Comments like these indicate that body modification is not a one-dimensional practice of self construction. There are various reasons for participants' efforts to mold the body and self. While some were drawn to the positive aspects of body modification, others turned to it as a negative strike against the mainstream they already resented. More than an attempt to be freed from the confines of the mainstream, body modification is utilized to help understand the place of the self in society and this subculture. I now turn to the methods participants used for solidifying the position of both the self and subculture.

The Subculture Goes Online

ModMag gained popularity within the body modification subculture a decade before Myspace and Facebook were launched. Though open to everybody with an active interest in body modification, ME and ModMag established a reputation for being a virtual meeting place for those interested in non-normalized forms of body modification. In the words of AussieChips, ME "appeals to a subculture/community which is looked down upon from the masses as freaks or weirdos." Combined with a later comment on extreme modifications that are "illegal in many areas/countries," this quote from AussieChips indicates the primary group of concern within ME. Despite the large number of people with modifications on ME, participants were primarily interested in the site as a tool for interacting with other modified people. This could be observed within users' buddy lists, as over two-thirds of all participants' buddies were visibly modified and only six participants had more buddies of people with modifications than buddies who were modified people.

Participants were interested in other ME users who were members of the body modification subculture and used these relationships to further their own subcultural capital. Professional tattoo artists and piercers, for example, often used ME as an arena for talking shop, including a private forum promoting advanced piercing techniques that could only be

accessed after one's job was verified. By controlling access to the forum, members of the subculture attempted to prevent knowledge contributing to one's authentic standing from being uncovered by members of the outgroup (i.e., people with modifications).

Workers employed in the body modification industry (referred to as industry workers in this chapter) also created photo galleries with pictures of modifications they performed in order to add to stocks of subcultural capital. While some galleries were designed to display the high level of one's piercing or tattooing abilities, others were used to present one's willingness to perform unique modifications. One practitioner from Central Europe, Abstrakt, posted and discussed pictures of minimalist tattoos and scarifications he performed. Upon noting that his style of linking minimalist art with tattooing was one of a kind in his country, Abstrakt was complemented by other modified people. Stasi's photos of dot work and abstract line tattoos similarly resulted in praise from other subcultural members, especially those residing in North America, where this approach to tattooing is rare. By presenting their distinctive work, Stasi and Abstrakt were able to establish elite status for themselves within the body modification subculture at an international level.

For others, the posting of pictures served to increase one's subcultural knowledge. T-Bone used his pictures in order to further his piercing skills by requesting critiques from other professionals. Upon posting a picture of an uncommon surface piercing performed on a friend, he wrote:

It was a little awkward on the exit. I remember ME: Hunter mentioning to exit perpendicular to the tissue so that it doesn't give a tendency to lean a bit. I had to readjust and brace the exit with my first finger and thumb. Went a little slower than I wanted but I hit the marks where I wanted to. Surprisingly she didn't swell at all or at least not noticeably.

Other members responded with praise for his first attempt at that particular piercing, which served to legitimize his role in the community and his attempts to further his skills. T-Bone also received comments explaining the techniques employed and jewelry selected by others

when performing the same piercing, an exchange contributing to the transformation of cultural knowledge from older to younger, or more experienced to less experienced, subcultural members. Comments also affirmed the practices as appropriate within the group.

Pictures of modifications performed and worn served to locate individuals within the subculture, and this facet of ME was especially beneficial to industry workers. Textual data, however, also served an important function for participants. For Bloodstain, an IT professional, ME was most important for granting the opportunity to “have genuine conversations and share interests with those of this community.” The chance to discuss body modification and life issues without the fear of being ridiculed in one’s offline life was most important for those not working in the industry, as they were unable to withdraw from disapproving members of the mainstream to the same degree as those working with other modified people. Baltimore Bunny considered ME “my last safe place where I could express myself and just be me.” The employee of a government agency, Baltimore Bunny viewed ME as an outlet for escaping the “too conservative” bureaucracy in which she was located while offline.

Some participants used the blogging function to gather opinions of other heavily modified individuals regarding future modifications. Unsure whether or not he should stretch his septum piercing during the winter, Mosaic wrote, “Septum seems rather settled at 0ga at this point. Texas did it some good. Time to stretch to 00? Or ride out the winter at 0? Can’t decide.” Referencing the pain and lengthier stretching process accompanying the cold weather, Luger responded, “Ride out the winter at zero man. Winter’s a horrible time for stretching and a few extra months will only make it easier when the time comes.” RocknRollMelissa also sought guidance while considering stretching her nostrils. While she did not want nostril jewelry so large that it would deform her nostrils (e.g., “nostril droop”), she desired nostril piercings that were larger than the nostril piercings encountered in the

mainstream. In asking if “you guys think 8g is respectable,” RocknRollMelissa revealed her desire to be accepted as a legitimate member of the subculture. It is interesting to note the combination of RocknRollMelissa’s statement making it clear that she wants to have an appropriate piercing for a member of her subculture with an expressed unwillingness to stretch her nostrils as large as others. Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1990) found that subcultural members who are too willing to fulfill all tasks or wear all symbols within the subculture’s repertoire may be rejected as inauthentic. By drawing a line, RocknRollMelissa showed that she was not a zealous pretender. Her authenticity was then substantiated by other members who supported her decision not to stretch beyond an eight gauge piercing. While this dialog on authenticity indicates that this subculture does not want to be agglomerated with the larger culture, it shows that it still seeks legitimation at a community level (McLeod 1999; Williams and Copes 2005).

A Virtual Death

Long considered a valuable resource and interaction outlet for heavily modified individuals, users increasingly complained about the degradation of their virtual community throughout the time period analyzed for this study. One repeated complaint was that ME transformed into a pornographic site displaying sparsely modified, and sparsely dressed, bodies. Within a blog entry titled “ME evolved for the worse,” T-Bone criticized the website’s officials for the changing emphasis:

Just want to say that I think it’s bullshit that I’m expected to pay to see pictures of standard, non genital piercings, but there is all kinds of hardcore genital torture/mods on Mlog for free.

As someone who has supported ModMag and ME for the last 11 years and have seen it change from an educational website about body modification and contained a devoted community of like-minded people into what it is today...It’s truly disheartening.

Pillpopper also critiqued the administrators for the material posted on Mlog, which was implemented to showcase body modifications of the highest caliber:

some chick in a garter belt, bustier and panties is good enough to make it over what could have been some amazing jewelry that someone made.... and what did she have mod work wise... a “42” that was probably no bigger than a quarter... fuck you Mlog, your dead to me.

As the site began to promote sexually explicit material over modification-related material, it became increasingly common for users with few modifications to post explicit photographs, a ritual that was considered to fall outside community norms among participants. Others also critiqued this trend, but directed their frustration towards users instead of administrators. Jamie, for example, considered the “young girls on ME that put up nude and other saucy photos” to be the primary culprits. RocknRollMelissa also spoke out against these female users, writing, “I hate when girls...have pictures of them holding their tits and not for modification reasons.” RocknRollMelissa’s statement indicates that she would accept the posting of sexually explicit photographs if the photographs were meant to display body modifications. Pictures with gratuitous nudity, however, were discredited in much the same way as body modifications that were used as attention getting mechanisms.

Participants were also upset about the dwindling amount of electronic activity on ME. Activity levels were not an issue of concern for most participants at the start of this study, but this concern snowballed in the latter half. While fifteen participants used their blogs to complain about the site dying out, only three of these complaints occurred within the first six months of the study. Mosaic was one of the participants to comment on low activity levels, writing:

SO ME sucks nowadays, right? I mean that is what everyone says it would seem. Checking my buddy updates gives me a hint why.

Of the 86 friends I have in my ME [friend list], 10 have updated in the last 24 hours. 2 in the last 12 hours.

So ME sucks cause no one updates? How about updating? I know it is silly sometimes and we just talk about boring crap, but get it out. Use it as a diary, vent! Talk about that new tattoo or piercing you got. New jewelry? Post it. I know you fuckers have done/got these things, you show me when I see you in person. Or post it on Facebook cause it is easier. Big deal.

Don't be a quitter.

Another participant exemplified the decreasing activity levels discussed by Mosaic. Jamie was one of the most active members in the years prior to this study and, as the study began, she regularly posted multiple entries per day. Following the site's update, however, Jamie only posted three to four times per week. Still, Jamie's page became the third most visited page, which may be another indicator of decline in activity across the board.

In addition to fewer blog postings, some participants pointed to the lack of comments on new blog entries. After posting a story about his snot falling onto a client's face as he stood over her to perform a piercing, Luger was disappointed at the lack of comments to a seemingly unique entry. Aware that other users were labeling ME dead, he wrote, "I have seen a lot of people complaining about how ME is dead. I almost have to agree with them after only getting one comment (on the post below) about snot dropping on a client's forehead." According to Luger, the lack of comments was an indication of ME's "swan song."

The changes in structure and content implemented as part of ModMag's redevelopment contributed to its perceived demise. Jamie, for instance, listed the changed format in comment forums for user blogs as a reason for her decreasing activity. Prior to the updates, users had the option of receiving a message whenever another user posted a response in the same comment forum, and this encouraged further interaction among participants. The removal of this function, however, caused Jamie and others to forget which blogs were commented on, leading to fewer exchanges between users. Roughly half of all participants critiqued ME in response to changes in the user interface.

Many participants threatened to leave ME because of the changing structure, composition and/or activity level, and many followed through with these threats by deleting their accounts. What began as a slow trickle in the month prior to the site's update became a noticeable stream by the conclusion of this research, as 20 of 39 participants left the site in the months following the relaunch. Bloodstain was one of the members to abandon ME, despite having free lifetime access for his tattoo of the ME logo. The changes in ME were not perceived as insignificant, and he withdrew from the virtual community once so closely associated with his own identity that he was willing to permanently alter his body in its honor.

When asked in an interview why he left ME, C-Lo responded:

I feel like ME nowadays is more about popularity, flirting and posting pictures of your junk than body modification. I really got sick of it. There's a whole lot of ego on that site and I just didn't want to be a part of it.

As this quote reveals, the unforgivable change in ME was a shift in its purpose. Users like C-Lo abandoned the site once they felt it was no longer primarily a resource pertaining to body modification. Rather than being focused on the subculture, ME became focused on the individual, making it less appealing to members of the body modification subculture seeking a community form that would enable them to validate their subcultural status.

The willingness of participants to either leave ME or reduce activity levels calls into question the statements made by ModMag administrators that the site was a leader in the body modification subculture. Although users withdrew from ME en masse, there is no indication that such action meant withdrawing from body modification and the subculture surrounding it. Participants leaving ME typically posted departing messages on their page with contact information so that connections made on ME could be maintained, indicating a desire to remain active within the group of heavy modifiers. Dick Tracy noted his intent to remain in contact with individuals met via ME by stating that he felt "most of the people that

I used to stay in touch with on here are now my friends on facebook... and that really negates my need for ME anymore.” Contrary to administrative statements, this reveals that ME is a platform used by the subculture to interact, not the subculture itself. Though there exist other social networking sites designed for body modifiers, users chose to relocate to other virtual spaces where modified people may network. Complaints about ME from participants continued throughout the duration of the writing process and it is conceivable that ME will increasingly be neglected by heavily modified individuals, turning itself from the host site for the subculture to the site that helped the subculture strengthen its networking capabilities. Though experiencing an exodus of subculture members, it should be noted that the site has not experienced the ‘swan song’ predicted by Luger, as membership numbers increased during the study. ME has not collapsed or died as some participants suggested, however it was increasingly viewed as a dead zone for some of the more active members of the body modification subculture.

The shifting composition of site users resulted in participants turning to other internet spaces. Interestingly, such participants preferred to congregate on sites widely used within the mainstream rather than to remain on ME, where they would be associated with the people with modifications who infringed on their space. Accordingly, participants indicated that the new ME users were not a part of their ingroup. One possible explanation for participants’ willingness to leave ME for mainstream sites such as Facebook is that they may not be as likely to be lumped together with people with modifications in those spaces, diminishing the risk of group boundaries being misperceived by outgroup members. Turning to mainstream websites reveals the subculture’s desire to separate itself from closely related outgroups (e.g., people with modifications), similar to the contemporary pagans who did not want to be associated with *Harry Potter* fans (Coco and Woodward 2007). The pagans welcomed *Harry Potter* fans until they were found to be uninterested in the true paganism, as interpreted by

those members already part of the culture. Participants previously welcomed users with few modifications, but withdrew their approval as new users altered what it meant to be a site devoted to the appreciation of body modification. In this context, participants deemed affiliation with people with modifications to be a greater risk to the maintenance of the subculture than the use of mainstream social networks, and they responded by abandoning the virtual space once critical to the lived subcultural experience. The virtual relocation of participants then served as a form of boundary work, keeping people with modifications at bay.

Inauthentic Motivations

The scholarship on body modification presents numerous motivations for modifying one's body, including fashion (Sanders 1988), revolt (Deschesnes et al. 2006), and the commemoration of significant experiences (Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005). While some motivations may be equally accepted by members of the mainstream and the body modification subculture, neither side accepts all motivations. According to Riley and Cahill (2005), the motivation for one's tattoo is a determining factor in the authenticity of one's claims of subcultural identity. The data collected for this study supports this argument, as participants rejected both modified people and people with modifications deemed to be modified for the wrong reasons. By rejecting certain motivations, participants helped solidify the idyllic ingroup member and ingroup/outgroup boundary (Abrams and Hogg 1988).

One of the motivations to be rejected among participants in this study was fashion. Stasi is a German tattoo artist who expressed his disdain for tattoos as fashion in the About Me section of his personal page:

i give a shit on the big tattoo society, on all the girls and boys with the newest fasion tattoo, with her ed hardy shirt and the next topmodel haircut, all the television crap like miami ink, tattoo family.... why tatuuing goes more and more fasion and more akzeptanz in the normal society - thats not good and destroyed the soul of tatuuing... to

all the fasion guys. maybe you are cooler with a new tattoo and maybe you get akzeptanz in the society - but you never will have my respect and you never will be a part of it...so shut up an colour your nails or whatever....

Regularly posted at the top of his page, Stasi's statement indicates the importance of rejecting tattoos as fashion. Stasi did more than deny the legitimacy of the fashionable tattoo in an online setting. Rather, the international reputation he gained through the development of a new tattooing technique gave him the security required to turn away potential clients who desired small and fashionable tattoos. The inclusion of tattoo-themed clothing and television shows in the discussion of fashion as a motivation is important, as it reveals the essence of the subculture's problem with tattoos as fashion. The fashionable tattoo is rejected because it is a commercialized tattoo. Other participants also criticized Ed Hardy, a former tattoo artist who became rich after designing t-shirts with traditional tattoo images. AussieChips wrote that he "strongly hates" Ed Hardy, because he betrayed the tattoo subculture by selling himself and his tattoo designs to the mainstream.

The commercialization of body modification was also a topic of concern. One oft cited example of commercialization focused on the owner of ModMag, who was awarded the website as part of her divorce settlement with the site's creator. Though visibly modified like her ex-husband, the changes Bobbie made to ModMag caused some to label her a sell out: "i dont feel ModMag sold out... the only issue is that Bobbie took over and shes been a sell out from the beginning. i feel things would be better if Ricky were still around." The selling out alluded to by Pillpopper is a reference to the fact that ME was no longer free of charge to users after Bobbie took charge. The furor over Bobbie's capitalistic motives reached a peak in February, when Bobbie responded to her critics. In a blog post titled "Facebook is the Wal-Mart of the internet," she addressed:

people who have been complaining about the fact that ME costs money. Everything costs MONEY. Even Facebook which you think is free, costs money. They sell your information to the highest bidder and flood you with ads. ModMag & ME do not have ads. So you can either pay 1.67/month and retain your privacy or you can submit a

photo, video or an experience, or moderate submissions once the engine is opened to the community in order to barter for ME time if that's what you'd like to do. I give members of our community OPTIONS.

Bobbie, who regularly discussed the villa and globetrotting adventures she funded with ModMag, attempted to dispel the notion that she was using ME for capitalistic gain by referencing other social networking sites and the option of earning membership time through photo submissions. Contrary to the claim that posting photos would soon be an alternative to paying for membership, however, this was still not possible nine months later as this chapter was written. Corey found Bobbie's text to be such an affront to the community that he suggested she "suck my fucking asshole," indicating the level of frustration experienced by some members. The switch to paid membership was a greater concern for the financially strapped modified people on ME than for the largely middle class people with modifications, as it eliminated one of the subculture's alternatives to the larger culture's economic system, namely cash payment for services. Aware of the subculture's negative view on commercialization, and that this stance against commercialization formed a group boundary, Bobbie attempted to distance herself from commercialized entities like Facebook. Her attempts to remain within group boundaries, however, failed.

The rejection of the website's owner for earning a living at the cost of body modifiers presents an interesting paradox, as the income of professional piercers and tattoo artists also depends upon the 'exploitation' of the subculture surrounding body modification. It could be argued that Bobbie was overly concerned with mainstream modifiers, but the same is true of piercers and tattooists. With the exception of Stasi, participants working as tattooists or piercers earned the majority of their income from mainstream individuals with few modifications. Remembering that piercers and tattoo artists were typically the most financially stable members of this subculture, one might expect them to be at risk of being considered sell outs. This, however, was not the case. Perhaps Bobbie's flaw lies in the fact

that she was the most successful member of the subculture in terms of mimicking the hippies and integrating the subculture into her working life, which Willis (1978) argued is necessary for securing the continued existence of the subculture. Unlike Ed Hardy, only people who have modified their bodies were granted access to her product, limiting her opportunity to further contribute to the mainstreamification of body modification. It is also possible that participants saw a fundamental difference in paying for body modification and paying to interact with other modifiers, but the willingness of participants to pay for entry to tattoo and piercing conventions also renders this possibility duplicitous. Nonetheless, Bobbie's economic exploitation of body modifiers was *perceived* to be different and more severe than that of other members, resulting in her rejection by some members of the subculture.

Participants not only critiqued motivations for individual modifications, they also critiqued those who became significantly covered for what was considered to be the wrong reason. Young individuals who were rapidly and extensively covered with body modifications were rejected for participating in one-upmanship. Mary Jane worked as a cashier in a shop frequented by teenage modifiers whom she felt violated the purpose of modifying one's body:

the reasons why most of people now get into body modification are not the same then it was maybe 10 years ago. I work in a retail store .. kinda skate shop and my customers are lots of young/ teenager with full sleeve, throat and neck tattooed, 2 inches ears ... they keep telling me they want more and more .. but when i ask why ..it's sounds like a contest for them and nothing else.

It is interesting to note that Mary Jane described herself in the same words later in the interview, noting her arm, throat and neck tattoos. The distinguishing factor for her was the time spent becoming heavily modified. Whereas her teenage clients became heavily modified in a span of months to a couple years, Mary Jane had gradually added to her collection of modifications throughout the previous fifteen years. Jamie also critiqued such body modifiers on the basis of a lack of uniqueness among them, suggesting they were “interchangeable” and

“sad.” Rather than a lifelong investment and process that should be thought out prior to participation, body modification was a contest of unoriginality for these young body modifiers. Though the visible outcomes were the same, speed modifiers were rejected, because the rituals they invoked to achieve those outcomes were (perceived to be) significantly different.

Modified people considered to be boasting about connections to the body modification industry were also criticized. Pillpopper discussed “mod sluts:”

its shocking to see that that these people still exist. i mean they talk and act like theyre in the industry and befriend whoever they can just to get discounted or free work, but then they talk to you as if your the idiot for not knowing who some random piercer is that youve never come across. i mean, ive met alot of people before, but there really are THOUSANDS of piercers out there and for “i dont get why people [don’t] know him, everyone should know him” comments come out. or people running their mouth about seeing a video of me with “that stupid spike cone thing in your face”, look bitch, that video was made before you were even INTO this scene. Shocking how the internet works like that.

doesnt give you the right to say as you please. so have a coke and a smile and shut the fuck up.

Although participants often prided themselves on knowing who were the most influential and skilled practitioners of body modification, this excerpt reveals their disdain for namedropping. Worse than namedropping is the namedropping of an individual that is unknown to subculture members possessing the subcultural capital necessary to distinguish between the two. The juxtaposition of namedroppers with those who neither appreciate nor know the appropriate terminology for his extreme modification indicates that Pillpopper considers both violations to be an indication of inauthenticity. Like the new punks discussed by Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1990), participants rejected attempts to latch on to the industry via namedropping as an inauthentic attempt to prove one belongs.

The rejection of some modified people shows that entrée to the subculture cannot be gained by body modification practices alone. Outsiders may look at the owner of ModMag, as well as ‘competitive’ and namedropping body modifiers, and assume they are part of the

same subcultural group as participants, but their violations regarding motivation for participation in body modification cause them to be rejected by others on the grounds of inauthenticity. Although the superficial similarities between these groups are noteworthy, it is important to remember that increasing similarities between groups can lead to sharper ingroup boundaries (Brown 2000). As more people have become visibly modified and attempted to associate themselves with the subculture in this study, members have had to determine whether they should expand the subculture or attempt to further maintain its core. The rejection of Bobbie and the rapidly modifying youths discussed by Mary Jane exemplifies Hogg's (2006) argument that less prototypical members will be discriminated against and cast aside in order to solidify the prototype.

Responding to Popular Forms of Body Modification

Despite the fact that the body modification subculture in this study has existed for decades, the attempt to establish the prototypical member is an ongoing process. The data collected for this particular research project support Force's (2009) argument that subcultures are regularly reconstructed through inter- and intragroup interactions. In addition to enabling interactions between members of this subculture, ME also provided people with modifications access to the subculture. The ability to see and learn about the symbols used by the subculture while accessing ME pages allowed people with modifications to appropriate certain aspects of the subculture for the mainstream. A ME user, for example, could read Dilshandra's postings about implants and then know how and where to undergo a similar procedure, or how to talk about the modification in a manner that suggests they are part of the group. Some participants posted warnings for anybody considering copying their body modifications, but the nature of ME cannot guarantee the subculture's hold on certain modifications. Sweetman (1999) and Pitts (1999) have both shown how heavy body

modifications are borrowed by individuals outside the subculture, which contributed to the mainstreamification of some forms of body modification. Participants' reactions to the popularization of modifications that were once uncommon outside the subculture are particularly relevant for this study, and these reactions helped process the prototypical member by showing which modifications should not be worn by members of the subculture.

One way participants responded to the mainstreaming of a certain body modification was to avoid getting that modification. Loretta has heavy facial piercings and considered getting Dahlia piercings in the corners of her mouth. She decided against them, however, once they were popularized:

Came home this morning thanks to my best mate, I hadn't seen him in a while so it was really good to catch up, I think he's finally going to re-split his tongue :) Spoke to him about his retired status in the mods department, he had to take everything out for a job he was working but now his current job don't mind so he wants to get everything back. He had some amazing piercings. I've decided I'm going to get my lowbrets, in Perth 'Dahlias' have become ridiculously popularized, to be honest I know so many people who have the top and bottom lip piercing combo :/ over the last couple of months... so I'd like to not get the dahlias so I don't look like every 15 year old scene kid out there... I've always loved lowbrets and I want to finish my face finally so that's what I'm going to do. I'm most def going to have them at 10g aswell. I'd like to get them as low as possible too. I think Kay will be ridiculously keen to do them, still so proud of her for doing her first nasallang⁷ the other day.

Though she liked the appearance of dahlia piercings⁸, Loretta opted for lowbrets, which exit the mouth on the jaw line on either side of the chin. Not only did Loretta avoid getting the dahlia so that she would not be lumped together with the immature and undesirable 'scene kids,' she also selected a rare piercing. Loretta excitement over her friends' participation in extreme and rare modifications indicates the preference for non-normalized modifications and placing them within the subculture's boundaries.

⁷ A nasallang is a nose piercing where a barbell goes through both nostrils and the septum.

⁸ A dahlia is an oral piercing located at the corner of the mouth.

Some participants had a body modification that became popular after they received it and could not, therefore, avoid the modification. These participants employed other tactics to distance themselves from the outgroup individuals with the same modification. Participants with piercings that became popular removed the piercings, such as those removing their microdermals. The “microdermal craze” altered the practices of users like Lovedeath. Unlike piercings and implants, tattoos are not easily removed. Participants with a popularized tattoo motif elected to cover up the old tattoo with a newer and more acceptable tattoo. Tattoo laser removal techniques have improved in recent decades (Varma and Lanigan 1999), but laser removal is still a cost and time intensive process. Jennifer4you considered lasering an old tattoo, but was relieved to find an artist who could do a cover-up instead, as laser sessions more than double the cost of the tattoo. In addition to having limited financial means to pay for laser removal, cover-ups were also preferred given the fact that participants desired a different tattoo and not tattoo-free skin.

Texts on cover-ups were important tools for defending one’s authenticity. Participants electing to cover up old tattoos did more than post pictures of new tattoos. While discussing plans to cover the old piece, some participants ridiculed themselves and /or the tattoo in question. Vigilante wrote, “I’m getting my back piece started in December and was smart enough to book 6 appointments at once one month apart instead of booking at the end of each visit and waiting 3-4 months. Im really excited to get it started and cover some of that sweet 18th bday tribal shit.” In labeling the tribal tattoo as ‘shit,’ I suggest Vigilante discredited the legitimacy of the popularized tattoo motif in order to distance himself from it. Mentioning that he received the unacceptable tattoo on his eighteenth birthday also emphasized his immaturity at the time. Vigilante’s text reveals the progression members of this subculture made as they transitioned from naïve youths to accepted members. Beginning with an interest in modification, participants typically lacked the subcultural capital necessary in selecting

appropriate body modifications and practitioners. This was a recurring theme among participants like Loretta, who derided her decision to visit a disreputable piercer for one of her first piercings.

In addition to employing boundary maintenance tactics to counteract the popularization of certain body modifications within the mainstream, participants proactively sought to solidify group boundaries by receiving bigger and more extreme modifications uncommon in the mainstream. Already tattooed on his hands, neck and face, Marvin decided he needed to be fully covered with tattoos if he wanted to avoid being lumped together with mainstream body modifiers:

I am working on a full Body suit. Now that tattoos are on TV and a lot more people thing they are cool, being heavily tattooed like I am sets me apart from them. I am still different from the excepted.

Marvin turned to body modification because it was not normal in his hometown and he wanted to make sure he had modifications that kept him outside the mainstream, though the mere decision to turn to body modification because of its ‘otherness’ indicates the hold the discourse on/against body modification has on those attempting to resist. Similar to an individual challenging the West’s authority in Hall’s (2007) discussion of the West and the Rest, Marvin’s decision to participate in modification rituals meant to challenge the mainstream was ultimately directed by mainstream forces.

Whereas Marvin hoped to distance himself from the mainstream through the amount of tattoo coverage, others did this through the application of large, solid black tattoos. The legs and arms which were completely covered with black ink and lacking any design are seemingly a direct response to the mainstream’s demand for optically and thematically appealing tattoos. According to Poked, black limbs have become “a must!” for professional piercers. When another piercer commented that he was one of the few piercers he knew of without a solid black arm, Poked responded, “yea I’ve already worked with 3 other piercers

with black arms and that's in ontario alone soo... i can just imagine." Six of the eight participants to black out their limbs worked as piercers while the remaining two were not industry workers, revealing the viability of the practice as a boundary maintenance tactic for piercers. The fact that no tattoo artist had solid black limbs indicates its inviability among tattoo artists. Piercers and tattoo artists are expected to display good examples of piercings or tattoos, respectively. It is less important, then, for piercers to have tattoos that inspire others to be tattooed. Accordingly, piercers were able to use tattoos as a form of protest against the tattoos deemed acceptable by mainstream body modifiers. With the exception of Stasi, whose tattoos gradually became a cluttered mess of lines and dots, tattoo artists seemed unwilling to permanently alter their skin in a manner that could dissuade potential customers. It should be noted that piercers, such as Bethany, expressed similar concerns about having appealing piercings and jewelry that could be used to motivate their potential customers. The (un)willingness of some participants to receive a black limb displays the balancing act of participants seeking to distance themselves from the mainstream, all the while attempting to maintain the alternative work opportunities in the body modification industry that are largely funded through the mainstream individuals with modifications group boundaries are designed to confront.

Participants also turned to other body modification practices that would help distance them from the mainstream and it appears this was a strong motivational factor for the large percentage of participants practicing tongue splitting and stretched piercings. An aspect of the split tongue that appealed to Loretta was the fact that they are still an "oddity," even among people interested in tattoos and piercings. C-Lo wrote a similar comment about dermal punches when asked in an interview if he thinks visible modifications will gain mainstream acceptance, noting "I can't really see the 'mainstream' culture running down the street to get

their nostrils punched.” As was the case for Loretta and Marvin, C-Lo granted greater value to less widely practiced forms of body modification.

Although participants praised less extreme modifications that were well executed (e.g., a perfectly symmetrical double nostril piercing), the greatest and most common praises were reserved for extreme body modifications. Given the mainstream’s acculturation of less extreme modifications, the admiration of split tongues and stretched facial piercings, among others, serves as a method of subcultural preservation. In order to maintain the distance between the subculture and mainstream, participants must continually modify in new and more extreme ways. The subculture’s response to the mainstreamification of body modification, then, mirrors middle and upper class responses to Bourdieu’s “schooling boom” (1984:132). According to Bourdieu, the economic elite previously used the school system to “ensure their social reproduction” (ibid.). As the education system became more accessible throughout the twentieth century, however, the academic qualifications of the elite became devalued, forcing them to obtain higher qualifications in order to maintain social distance from the newly educated. The devaluation of (lower) academic qualifications correlates to the fact that less extreme body modifications no longer help distance one from the mainstream. Accordingly, members of this body modification subculture must turn to increasingly extreme modifications in order to ensure their group’s social reproduction, just as the elites discussed by Bourdieu could no longer be satisfied with a *baccalaureat*.

Criticizing People with Modifications

Texts critical of people with modifications were also widespread and assisted in the boundary maintenance process. Argot was one point of interest for critics of mainstream body modifiers. Given the geographical diversity of ME users, participants were not concerned with the development of a highly specified argot. In other words, users were granted

linguistic leeway based upon geographical differences. American users discussing ‘microdermals,’ for example, did not criticize Australians using the term ‘skin divers’ for the same body modification. Rather than attempting to create a unified argot, participants focused on the elimination of incorrect terminology used by people with modifications. An example of participants mocking the incorrect argot of mainstream body modifiers was provided by Cheddar when she posted the incorrect names for piercings used by some of her customers and asked other members to guess which piercing was meant. Confused by the terminology used by her clients, Cheddar asked, “Who thinks of this stuff??” Luger also mocked incorrect argot by posting a conversation he had with a young woman desiring to stretch her ears. Several participants and other modified people laughed at and praised his sarcastic comment that the person with modification would “have sick gauges in no time.” In contrast to the virtual Johns discussed by Blevins and Holt (2009:621), for whom argot was primarily a “secret language” designed to communicate sensitive information, participants in this study used argot to “highlight the boundaries of the subculture” (ibid.). Mocking incorrect argot helped participants highlight boundaries by showing the ME members who used those terms that they did not belong to the ingroup, because they lacked appropriate subcultural knowledge.

Some industry workers also used ME to express frustration with mainstream clients. For example, piercers and tattoo artists criticized clients for being more interested in receiving a cheap tattoo or piercing than a good tattoo or piercing. Poked discussed this tendency, writing:

People here are also the cheapest, i get phone calls about 10\$ piercings on a daily. I try to explain to people why cheap isn't better but there's no point. I bet they'd let me pierce them with a nail gun to save a buck.

The use of hyperbole in Poked's text emphasized her belief that clients are willing to put their physical well-being at risk in order to receive the cheapest piercing possible. For Poked and

other participants, the absurdity of being pierced with a nail gun resembles the offense of being pierced in an unsanitary shop with low quality jewelry, the perceived prerequisites for a ten dollar piercing.

Local Legend was another piercer to express frustrations about people with modifications who prioritize affordability over quality. Whereas Poked's text was primarily aimed at her own clients, Local Legend's text was concerned with the violations of the modification practices of people with modifications at large:

same old rant every time. complaining about swap meets, part time piercers, 20 dollar shops, shitty cheap jewelry, crooked piercings, kids blowing their ears out stretching with acrylic tapers. i mean how do we fix any of this shit. every time i start explaining the healing process of a piercing i feel like it's floating over the customers head. if i warn a kid about his ear thinning i see her/him the next week with larger plugs. the beauty school girls all come in with piercing problems at the same time every year because some guy goes in and 'certifies' them to use piercing guns and they run out into the parking lot and shove guns up their noses or tragus.

One of the underlying problems revealed in Local Legend's text is that he felt his subcultural knowledge was not respected by people with modifications. Similar to Poked, who felt there was "no point" trying to share her subcultural knowledge with clients, the repeated offenses of kids and beauty school girls caused Local Legend to wonder if such problems could be fixed. Part-time piercers were criticized for their lack of devotion, while kids with thinning lobes were criticized for being overly motivated and not heeding his advice. Mary Jane echoed Local Legend's sentiments, replying:

i had to deal with those kind of situation pretty much every days at work, even if im not working in a tattoo shop. i mean, kids are stupids and there is nothing we can do about.. your job is to tell and warn them but aftert all they will do whatever they wanna do.It was driving me crazy for years .. now i just try not to notice or not even answer when they are asking about cause i know they will not listen to it anyways... 15-16 years old kids with sleeve and 2 inches lobes... Body modification became all about fashion for them and they dont even think about their futures.

Winston also responded to the post, suggesting that such experiences were one reason for his decision to leave the body modification industry: "Yeah I quit piercing and I hardly think

about it what-so-ever.” Other piercers also cited frustration with clients when discussing their desire or decision to retire from the field.

One plausible explanation for piercers’ concern with cheap piercings is that they threaten the livelihood of those charging higher fees and/or specializing in higher end jewelry sales. The inclusion of statements referencing damaged ears, however, indicates a concern with the quality of modifications and not a jealousy caused by lower financial gain, or so it would seem. Furthermore, piercers could charge clients pierced elsewhere for consultations or for fixing poorly performed piercings. Since piercers would then benefit financially from unacceptable modification practices, it is unlikely that the criticisms outlined above have been motivated by one’s own financial well-being. Rather, participants were primarily concerned about body modifications being performed properly.

The argument that piercers being critical of modification practices within the mainstream were not primarily concerned with their own bank accounts is strengthened by the fact that participants who were not industry workers also voiced similar critiques. Loretta, for example, was upset with a friend for prioritizing price over quality:

I’m ridiculously mad tonight, There’s a piercing studio in Perth I hate with a passion, My body piercer used to work there but left a long time ago, and other amazing Perth piercers have left this same studio too. The head piercer has been piercing for 18 years and yet today and numerous other times I’ve seen his horrendous work. Today a very good friend of mine got 4 nape dermals done by the head piercer, the bottom two are on a visible angle and the top right hand dermal is extremely visibly higher than the other 3.

She foolishly went to him because he charges the cheapest price in Perth for dermals and she’s 15 and he’s the only one in Perth who would pierce her. He did 6 dermals on her hips that in a triangle on each side, relatively straight but not all the same depth. She thought it was a good idea even though our group of friends told her to go else where as he has a very bad reputation for being a shit piercer not to mention how dodgy and seedy he is. I was the first person she showed, I looked and instantly noticed the top right was way off, I made one of our friends take a photo with her fancy camera to show Kelly and asked our other friends to look at the photo before I told Kelly just so I was sure it wasn’t just what I was seeing. She saw it too and was not happy, this girl is one of the few young kids I know who actually knows her shit, knows how to look after her piercings and really gives what she wants thought, though today I had to tell her, ‘Good work isn’t cheap and cheap work isn’t good’ I

hope she listens to that advice. I suggested to her to go see my piercer and get her advice, she's not happy with them at all so she wants them fixed, I reminded her that they would heal and grow in so she'd have to get it removed as soon as she could, apparently she's going back in tomorrow morning before work to talk to them about it, she asked me to come in with her, I know I shouldn't go, the head piercer doesn't like me because I'm friends with his ex employee who he desperately wants back. I'm going to go in with her because I have this awful feeling their going to try and bullshit her and tell her there fine and it's her neck or how they heal, it's visible, it's shit work, she deserves better. To make matter worse, Kelly spoke to the apprentice after the piercings and she said she'd fix them and that she noticed they were off but didn't say anything at the time because she wasn't the piercer. The apprentice hasn't been there for very long, I don't think she should be fixing the work at all.

AussieChips supported Loretta's point of view by posting a comment mocking a "classy establishment" where employees pierced "lobes, lips, nostrils, cartilage, eyebrows and even septums using the gun." Although piercing guns are the most common method for mainstream individuals to receive earlobe piercings, they are rejected within this subculture, as they can damage skin tissue and are unable to be sterilized like the single use needles used in reputable piercing studios. In addition to speaking out against the use of piercing guns, some participants posted anti-piercing gun photos on their personal pages, where a circle with a diagonal line is superimposed upon a picture of a piercing gun. Piercing guns and cheap piercings were then typically associated with low quality and professional incompetence.

In addition to being passionate about body modification and the proper execution thereof, it is important to note that participants were upset by the fact that many mainstream piercees did not appear to take body modification seriously. The critiques outlined herein emphasized attempts made by participants to prevent people with modifications from participating in practices rejected by the subculture. By not listening to advice provided by heavily modified people, people with modifications did not acknowledge the subcultural capital of participants. Like their piercing counterparts, participants who were not industry workers desired, but often did not receive, respect on the basis of their subcultural standing, leading to poor piercings.

Another source of critique of people with modifications was their perceived lack of creativity. Bethany hoped to perform unique piercings that could be submitted to a piercing competition and offered discounts for clients willing to receive less common piercings. Her clients, however, did not always grasp her intentions:

For some reason, one of my customers isn't understanding this: I put out a note on Facebook saying that I want to do some fancy ear projects using IS's new jewelry, the ball joints and the 3- and 4-point industrials. I told the people who were interested that they would just have to pay for the jewelry, but not the piercing. She looked through the jewelry and Earmageddon entries, and sends me a picture she found on the internet of someone with two industrials right next to each other. I told her we could do something similar, as long as we could use the IS jewelry. She said she just wants to do two industrials, not connected. I told her it would be regular price, and she doesn't understand why I wouldn't give her a discount. BECAUSE I DO THAT FIVE FUCKING DAYS A WEEK DUMB SHIT. So today I have to talk some sense into her.

For Bethany, Earmageddon represented an opportunity to be creative and enjoy a reprieve from the piercings she typically did for customers. The fully capitalized statement at the end of this text reveals Bethany's frustration with the mundane nature of most piercings as well as this particular client's unwillingness to use the more creative IS⁹ jewelry because of price.

Jamie is a retired piercer who created the "Dumb Customers" forum for other body modification professionals. The forum's description was permanently located at the top of its welcome page and encouraged users to "to bitch, rant and ridicule some of the asinine or insulting comments and questions we get." Despite the forum's small target audience, it was one of the most frequently contributed-to forums, indicating the level of frustration industry workers had with people with modifications. Not surprisingly, then, body modification professionals in this study often expressed joy when they were able to perform creative or unusual modifications, indicating the dearth of such opportunities and their belief that body modification is best utilized among those seeking to be different from the typical mainstream body modifier.

⁹ IS stands for Industrial Strength, a manufacturer of body jewelry.

Tattoos and tattoo clients were also criticized when the tattoo was interpreted to be lacking uniqueness. AussieChips expressed his disapproval for mass-produced body modifications in a post rejecting traditional American tattoos. When another user challenged his statements against traditional tattooing, AussieChips replied:

I don't have any real beef with traditional tattooing. Just the fact that everyone continues ripping off someone else's designs. When someone says to me 'Look at this awesome trad piece' I'll look at them and say 'What's so awesome about it?? Really?? It's exactly the same as another 40 artists who have tattooed the same piece before this guy.' Give me an artist that can create new ideas into a trad style and I'll love that artist but the trad style of tattoos can suck my balls.

Despite attacking tradition style tattoos, this text shows AussieChips' problem is not with the style per se (i.e., he does not dislike the appearance of such tattoos), but with the manner in which the style is used. AussieChips' rejection of traditional tattooing results from the fact that people often receive identical (e.g., 'flash') tattoos with identical themes, such as the traditional 'Mom' tattoo consisting of a heart and a banner dedicating the tattoo to one's mother. If tattoo artists were to use tattooing practices as can be found in traditional tattoos, such as bold lines, in combination with new designs and themes, AussieChips would likely accept the tattoo as legitimate. Accordingly, his true disdain is for unoriginal tattooing, not any specific tattoo style. Similar to the complaints about dumb customers and praise for creative piercing clients, such texts helped users establish ingroup boundaries by indicating the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable body modification practices. The rejection of these practices in these texts displays one's adherence to boundaries and also shows ME users who are not part of the subculture where group boundaries lie.

Conflict with Other Users

The use of forums and blogs to criticize the generalized other and people with modifications met offline was supplemented by direct conflict with other ME users who were not members of this subculture. Though less frequent, direct conflicts were referenced by

both participants and people with modifications active on the site. Some participants acknowledged ongoing conflicts with other users in their blogs, but chose not to list names in order to avoid violating the site's terms of service (TOS) agreement. Website administrators, including BossLady, regularly scanned new entries for conflict between users and maintained a forum that listed expelled users and their TOS violations. The threat of being removed from ME led most participants involved in a conflict to carry out their negative interactions via instant message in order to prevent the conflict from being discovered by administrators.

One participant who was regularly involved in conflicts with people with modifications was Pillpopper. According to one of his entries, Pillpopper enjoyed "talking shit" to users with few modifications:

im offensive. thats the difference. your loss will not bother me since ive seen tons of people on this site come and go...so enjoy your bullshit and the 'lack' of drama you aim for but fail to create. im fucking over it. im a damn asshole, and i dont give a fuck anymore.

Pillpopper appeared to enjoy creating conflict with other users in order to weed out those he felt did not belong. In addition to acknowledging the potential for turnover on ME, his statement that such users will not succeed in their attempt to avoid drama (thanks, in part, to his own intervention) sends a message to people with modifications that they may be better off leaving the site before he attempts to drive them away. By labeling himself as "a damn asshole" who doesn't "give a fuck anymore," Pillpopper announced his willingness to enforce subcultural boundaries through the creation of conflicts with undesirable users.

The quotations from Pillpopper and others in this chapter exemplify participants' preference for a certain style of language. It should be noted that quotes were selected for thematic relevance instead of shock value, and such vulgarity was commonplace in the writings of my participants. Given the working and lower class backgrounds of participants, it could be argued that such language is the result of social class. According to Bernstein (1960:276) "the normal linguistic environment of the working-class is one of relative

deprivation.” In other words, working class individuals like Pillpopper turn to cussing in order to compensate for their limited linguistic abilities. It may, however, be more beneficial to consider the role of vulgarity as a choice of style in boundary maintenance. Often an indication of group membership, one’s language use may not necessarily be the result of unwilling social influences but an active attempt to fit in with a group (Guy 1995). Not only can speech be a byproduct of a social order, it can be used to create a social pecking order. In addition, language may be an important part of an individual’s or group’s style (White 1992). The style of vulgarity displayed in participants’ quotes may then be an attempt to solidify subcultural boundaries and the pecking order within the ME community, where only those willing to approach or challenge members like Pillpopper with the same style may contribute to the group’s dialog.

Users attacking specific members within their blogs often received a comment from BossLady indicating site members “may not post hostile messages in other peoples forums, or send hostile unsolicited instant messages via ME. If you have a dispute, keep it off this site.” At the expense of other sites, BossLady’s efforts to relocate conflicts were occasionally successful. Javon was involved in conflicts surrounding a person with modifications who was insulted on the basis of his facial piercings. After causing the user to leave ME, Javon’s conflict carried over to another body modification site both parties belonged to. The use of multiple virtual spaces in Javon’s conflict indicates the motivating factor behind such conflict. The desire was not to maintain the dignity of ME, but that of the subculture. People with modifications expressing interest in the subculture and attempting to interact with members of the subculture who were not deemed suitable were “driven away” in multiple settings so that such individuals would comprehend they were not welcome in the subculture.

Intrasubcultural conflict was also present on ME. Mary Jane was one of the participants to have multiple people with modifications on her buddy list and this displeased

other members of the subculture. After previously discussing conflicts resulting from her affiliation with people with modifications, she wrote that her “buddy list is back .. and PLEASE, PLEASE, i don’t want any bad feedback regarding people i am talking to this time.” Whereas some participants welcomed interactions with outgroup users considered to have a valid interest in body modification, others did not approve of the high status granted to people with modifications over modified people by Mary Jane, namely in the coveted space of her buddy list. Like those conflicts involving Pillpopper and Javon, Mary Jane’s resulted from an attempt to enforce group boundaries. Though Pillpopper and Javon were active in attempts to keep people with modifications from crossing into the subculture’s territory, Mary Jane was criticized in order to keep her from stepping outside the group’s boundaries. Those reprimanding her for (too much) interaction with people with modifications did so in order to prevent her from violating group norms that rejected mainstream body modification, as this could in turn challenge the legitimacy of the group’s boundaries. Members of the subculture who wanted Mary Jane to give preference to modified people over people with modifications exemplified the manner in which groups attempt to promote ingroup bias (Brewer 1979).

Participants also engaged in conflicts with outgroup members on the basis of non-modification boundaries. Nonbeliever used his blog to personally attack another user for his Christian faith. While mocking the user’s faith, Nonbeliever wrote that his “way of living is mind boggling and hilarious.” As a result of this post, BossLady warned Nonbeliever that he was in violation of site policies:

If your interest in body modification is because it is the byproduct (ie. ‘dress code’) of a subcultural scene you are involved with, then ME isn’t the place for you. ME is full of friends spanning all interests and age groups. If you do not think you can take part in a diverse community, and you feel that you will not be able to stop yourself from judging others for their ‘scene’ or lack of it, then ME isn’t the place for you.

Though other participants posted similar statements, most were fortunate not to draw attention from administrators. In order to maintain the “community of friends,” the administration increasingly cracked down on members creating conflict in attempts to restore the early days of ME when it was considered to be the property of modified people. Combined with the promotion of people with modifications on Mlog and the increasing prevalence of non-modification related explicit photography, the official stance rejecting the use of body modification as part of a subculture’s symbolic repertoire may have contributed to the departure of several participants from ME.

Offline Lives

Given the pivotal role played by the physical body in this subculture, it is helpful to consider participants’ offline lives. If the participants within this study are indeed part of a body modification subculture, then one would expect their activities and use of symbols to extend beyond the virtual spaces discussed to this point. While addressing discrimination against body modifiers, Dick Tracy discussed the importance of the offline body for members of the subculture:

I am heavily modified. There’s no way to hide the work I have done, and I accept that, and I want that... one must first and foremost recognize that we are modifying our BODIES. Our one visible entity. This is what represents who we are to the world. Any reasonable person can understand that what sets us apart from the rest of society is VISIBLE.

This text reveals the importance of visual modifications for this subculture. Visible modifications are favored expressions of the subcultural self, as they display one’s desire to be removed from the broader culture. How the body is lived, then, is a contributing factor to participants’ authenticity.

Photographs posted by participants were one tool enabling the verification of offline subcultural engagement. I was able to verify offline interaction with other modified people

for twenty participants, not including interactions between participants employed in tattoo shops and their colleagues. The use of photo-friendly CMDA helped me to better understand the nature of relationships participants had with other modified people. In addition to close friends, participants often had significant others belonging to the subculture.

RocknRollMelissa was one participant to discuss modified people's preference for relationships with other modified people:

I notice one thing, though. Their significant other is as heavily modded or more as them and/or in the tattoo/piercing industry which I have yet to try to enter again. It really does make me question and wish that I had a significant other who understood me more.

As her desire for more extreme modifications led to repeated arguments with her boyfriend, a person with modifications, RocknRollMelissa considered following the example of other members of the subculture and seeking a significant other who was heavily modified. Though she was aware of her fiancé's negative opinion on stretched facial piercings, RocknRollMelissa continued to stretch her nostrils throughout the study. Her willingness to instigate further relationship struggles by stretching her piercings reveals the primary importance of body modification for members of this subculture. Whereas having a boyfriend that is a person with modifications was acceptable earlier in her body modification process, her decision to delve into this subculture took precedence over her long-term relationship. It is, therefore, no surprise that many participants limited intimate relationships to other people with modifications so that the modified body would not be a source of conflict within the relationship.

Over half (23/39) of the participants supplemented their offline relationships with modified people through offline interactions with other ME users. Despite close relationships with other modified people, participants did not typically form close relationships with other ME users. Rather, the loosely formed friendships often served a temporary offline need or desire. In other words, offline interactions with other ME users typically involved the cashing

in of one's subcultural capital, such as accessing a network needed for participation in more extreme forms of body modification. Poked, for example, met an experienced scarification artist on ME and travelled one thousand kilometers in order to receive a facial scarification piece from him. Other participants used similar methods in order to find somebody to split their tongue, as few industry workers are experienced in this procedure. AussieChips used relationships formed on ME in order to have a free place to sleep during an intercontinental trip to tattoo conventions.

Attending tattoo or piercing conventions was another way for participants to experience the subculture offline. In addition to eleven participants who attended a convention over the course of the study, eight attended the Association of Professional Piercers' conference in Las Vegas. It should be noted that most regions only have one tattoo convention per year and the APP conferences is also an annual event. Accordingly, it is likely that more participants have attended conventions during their subcultural careers. For some participants, such as Cursed, tattoo conventions provided a safe environment for interaction with other modified people: "We visited the east coast tattoo expo on Sunday, nothing great but its nice to hang out with friends and enjoy some good chips and a coke." Other participants used conventions to receive body modifications from attending artists living far away and limit the expenses associated with getting a new body modification by professionals with a strong following in the subculture. Mandic, for example, made an appointment for a chin cutting with an artist from New York attending his local convention.

Although the offline and online worlds of participants did not regularly intersect, such occasions provide insight into the maintenance of the group boundaries and the use of subcultural capital in community building and maintenance. The body modification subculture cannot be fully lived in virtual spaces and must be part of one's offline identity. According to Thornton (2005), subcultural capital is embodied, and such embodiment must

be lived in physical spaces. Reports of trips to conventions or the posting of pictures with heavily modified friends were, therefore, tools used by participants that allowed others to verify their status as members of this subculture.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

The history of body modification in Western culture has been marked by turbulence, and the role of body modification remains a contentious issue for much of society. The increasing use of body modification among younger members within the mainstream has been a valid concern for scholars, but it is important not to neglect the traditional body modifiers amid the frenzy of the Tattoo Renaissance. After all, while the acceptability of (and interest in) body modification among the middle and upper classes has waned and waxed over the past century, these practices have consistently served various functions for lower and working class individuals as well as members of various groups rejecting (or rejected by) the mainstream. In order to distinguish between the different approaches these groups take when modifying the body, I extrapolated Bell's (1999) typology to include people with modifications and modified people.

Research on body modification may at first glance seem frivolous, but the concepts discussed in this dissertation go beyond superficial attempts to alter the body's appearance and address important social phenomena, and the aims were multiple. First, I attempted to uncover the creation and maintenance of group boundaries that exist between people with modifications and the body modification subculture. Second, I wanted to show how the subculture surrounding body modification is responding to its mainstreamification by community building through rituals. Finally, I hoped to provide insight into the potential role of the internet in subcultural boundary maintenance/formation.

I began by discussing the subcultural approach, drawing heavily upon scholarship in line with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Though some scholars have argued for a post-subcultural approach when considering contemporary Western groups, I outlined

the applicability of subcultural theory for my research topic by linking more significant body modification to social class and longer commitments to the group. The notion of style has been a primary point of analysis, and is comprised of symbols found within the mainstream but altered in order to proclaim a group's challenge to the larger culture, such as the illegitimate use of body modification by the subculture in this study. If a subculture is to last, however, it must distinguish itself in numerous ways. Previous subcultures have been able to endure longer through the creation of alternative work and family structures, and the high percentage of industry workers within this subculture should enable longevity. The permanent nature of many of the visible modifications practiced by this subculture necessitated a review of literature discussing the possibility of sustaining a subculture, as such modifications indicate long-term commitment to the group. Nevertheless, the mere presence of visible modifications was not enough to obtain membership in the group, as the manner in which the body became modified was paramount.

Given the research methods used, it was also important to consider discourse as a source of power. In order to understand the complex nature of discourse in the twenty-first century, I argued for the inclusion of images to accompany the written and spoken word in the analysis of discourse. Discourse's supra-individual and author-free nature make it a powerful tool for the social elite desiring to influence social understandings of what is and what should be. One way scholars and, above all, the media have influenced the mainstream discourse on body modification is by ignoring alternative texts on body modification. If influence over discourse is considered a sign of power, this subculture surely lacks power in regards to the mainstream discourse on body modification. Alternative discourses, however, may emerge from the bottom-up, giving subcultures the opportunity to challenge the mainstream and create internal power hierarchies. While this subculture did not attempt to create a competing discourse within the mainstream, I have shown that it has a different way

of talking about body modification. The discourse found within the subculture is not an attempt to gain power in typical public arenas, rather it seeks to grant members power within their own realm. Members of this subculture lacked power in some areas, as evidenced by their inability to control the virtual space that was initially created by and for them. The decision to leave ME and become virtual nomads, however, does reveal the group's power in maintaining its own boundaries. Rather than interpreting this as a forced relocation, I argue that the group exercises power over itself by being able to traverse various virtual spaces in order to best maintain the group and its boundaries. At the same time, however, it is important not to overlook the role of non-human actors (i.e., the internet) in making this possible (and/or necessary).

Chapter 2 included a discussion of body modification scholarship. I outlined the historical presence of body modification in Western culture, challenging the notion of a Tattoo Renaissance—a conceptualization of contemporary body modification practices that has combined with (typically unsubstantiated) warnings from health professionals to influence the mainstream discourse. Claims of widespread acceptance are often misleading, as the acceptability of the modified body is constrained by the location of the modification and one's social location within class and economic structures. Contrary to their middle and upper class counterparts with discreetly modified bodies, traditional modifiers are denied the opportunity to contribute to the mainstream's discourse discriminating against them. The restrictive acceptability of body modification has interesting implications for the body modification subculture, whose response was investigated in the preceding chapters.

I outlined an approach to help understand this response in Chapter 3. I discussed the characteristics of ME, locating it within a collection of social networking sites. Web-based analysis benefits researchers by enabling around-the-clock and around-the-globe access to research participants (as long as they present themselves online). It also increases the efficacy

with which researchers access hard-to-reach populations like the body modification subculture, as evidenced by the high concentration of heavily modified people on this site. While web-based analysis has numerous benefits, one must acknowledge the opportunity for deceit within online settings. In order to maximize the benefits while minimizing the threat of inaccurate portrayals of the offline self, I argued for a two-pronged approach that modified existent research methods to meet the particular needs of an online study of body modifiers.

The majority of my data was collected using a photo-friendly version of CMDA, as I utilized interviews only when necessary to clarify a situation in order to minimize my researcher status. Photos posted by participants were helpful in determining the modification repertoire of the subculture. I also performed content analysis on participant blogs for a one year span. As an observant participant, I lost no time gaining *entrée* and becoming acquainted with community rituals. My familiarity with the subculture, however, did initially cause me to overlook the significance of participants' vulgar style. Still, the insight gained as an observant participant outweighs the risk (Hughey 2008), and I modified the coding scheme when appropriate to include unexpected phenomena, such as anti-religious discourse.

Chapter 4 began with a presentation of the demographic characteristics of my participants. Age and profession were noteworthy, as they shed light on the ability of the subculture's members to remain active in the subculture and the methods and rituals with which they may increase the longevity of the subculture. The alternative work opportunities (i.e., being a professional tattooist or piercer) provided many participants with the financial stability needed to support young families, and this helped explain the larger proportion of participants over thirty years old than is found in the larger ME community. Interestingly, the oft criticized mainstream people with modifications enabled industry workers with familial and financial responsibilities to remain active within the subculture beyond the leisure-filled life phase to which many youth subcultures are confined, leading to the group's demise

(Willis 1978). Non-industry workers with little education, on the other hand, were susceptible to legalized discrimination and unemployment. The unemployment rate among participants was at least twice the rate of their respective countries. Nevertheless, they also remained dedicated to the subculture. Rather than simply staying in the subculture because their permanent and visible modifications depleted alternatives, I argue that such participants willingly accepted further financial struggles in order to participate in their community's rituals. Participants discussed a failed sense of belonging elsewhere, and I suggest they took on the hardships associated with these rituals as a marker or rite of belonging. Participants' disdain for the larger culture was palpable, but their need for group membership was a predominate factor in their decision to join and stay in this subculture. Marvin, for example, noted that he turned to body modification because he didn't fit in among the mainstream. Needing a place where he could be a welcomed part of the group, he began spending time in a local tattoo shop. I showed in Chapter 2 that body modification appeals to individuals across the socioeconomic spectrum, but few decide to commit to body modification to the same degree as my participants. Perhaps a deciding factor in one's decision to modify the body more extensively and join this subculture is a lack of another group to which one can belong (e.g., religion). This would help explain why participants felt the body modification process should be a lengthy one, as slowly adding to one's collection will enable them to see if they are a good fit for the subculture.

Lacking the traditional means by which Westerners acquire services (i.e., money), some participants were able to trade in on their subcultural capital when seeking more body modifications. Similar to alternatives in the work structure, this alternative to the capitalistic practice of the mainstream allowed those individuals whose visible commitment to the subculture resulted in a lack of life opportunities within the mainstream to maintain and further their position within the group. This reveals the need for a subculture whose repertoire

may lead to permanent exclusion from certain mainstream socioeconomic structures to create alternatives to various social structures, not only work and family life. While they may willingly exclude themselves from social institutions like religion and separate themselves from the mainstream through increasingly extreme modifications (e.g., subdermal implants and split tongues), members of this subculture still desire to belong to a community and participate in community rituals, including modifications, talking about displaying modifications, and helping maintain boundaries between modified people and people with modifications through virtual discourse.

These efforts were investigated in Chapter 5. Despite the fact that ME is a site welcoming anybody who has modified their body, participants distanced themselves from people with modifications by excluding them from buddy lists and criticizing them in blogs. Frustration with the administration's shifting focus away from heavy and extreme modifications and towards (sexually explicit) members with few and unexceptional modifications led many members to leave ME for popular social networking sites like Facebook. I applied Social Identity Theory to help explain this seemingly contradictory virtual relocation, suggesting that the closely related outgroup of people with modifications is the greatest threat to the ingroup's sustainability. In addition to exhibiting the subculture's need to distance itself from closely related groups in order to clarify boundaries, the abandonment of ME revealed the need for subcultures with significant online activity to be flexible in regards to the virtual spaces they occupy, as devotion to the space can conflict with commitment to the community.

Participants not only enforced boundaries against people with modifications, they also rejected heavily modified individuals on the basis of inappropriate motivations. Young body modifiers who rapidly covered their bodies were criticized for turning body modification into a competition, as were individuals who viewed body modification as fashion. Ed Hardy and

the owner of ME were rejected by some because of the economic success they gained after tailoring their products to the mainstream. The high percentage of industry workers, however, reveals the notion of selling out to be problematic, as industry workers also owe their relatively comfortable financial circumstances to mainstream clients with few tattoos or piercings. It seems the greatest difference between Bobbie and the industry workers in this regard was her unwillingness to openly criticize people with modifications and body modification forms popular within the mainstream.

One important aspect of boundary maintenance was the subculture's response to body modifications that gained popularity and/or acceptance within the larger culture. Some participants removed piercings that become popular, and others decided against piercings they initially considered because of their popularity. Since tattoos are not easily removed, participants with popularized tattoo styles covered old tattoos with new ones. Given that the mainstream is continually borrowing certain symbols from the body modification subculture, participants must be aware of trends in both the in- and outgroups in order to maintain authenticity (Force 2009). Expressing a desire to have modifications different from those found in the mainstream, many participants elected to participate in extreme forms of body modification like split tongues, subdermal implants and blacked out limbs. As the subculture nears the limitations of the physical body, it becomes increasingly difficult to find unique ways to challenge the larger culture, creating a need to develop community rituals beyond the modification of the body. Like the group's virtual migration, this begs the question of whether the subculture has any power over its destiny. It is important to note that the modes of authenticity have been restricted by the actions of the mainstream, but the group's determination to remain outside the mainstream reveals some degree of self determination. It is also important to remember the social structures that determine what is and is not considered popular or mainstream. Whereas some subcultures become less extreme and

accept a mainstream takeover, this group has become more extreme in order to maintain its boundaries, which could be influenced by lingering feelings and experiences of not belonging to the larger culture.

Written texts were also crucial to participants' attempts to maintain group boundaries. Attacks directed towards people with modification were supplemented by criticism of subcultural members who interacted (too much) with people with modifications. Challenging other group members was an attempt to keep boundaries between modified people and people with modifications from blurring, which could diminish the legitimacy of this subculture as a distinct community. Negative interactions with people with modifications were sometimes characterized by a style of vulgarity that may have been cultivated in order to dissuade people with modifications on ME from approaching them, and this stylistic approach may help explain the subculture's anti-religious discourse.

Though participants made and discussed a continuous attempt to distance the self and subculture from the mainstream, they did not want to be loners. Much of the boundary maintenance techniques were about creating distance, but some were about establishing and belonging to a community. Accordingly, it is important to note that this subculture was not restricted to online spaces, as participants combined online activity with offline interactions with other heavily modified people. Though the internet played a role in the development of this subculture and helped participants further their subcultural capital, the central role of the body for this community demands offline activity.

Limitations and Contributions

I have met the goals outlined in Chapter 1, but there are some notable limitations of my study. While many members of the body modification subculture interact online, it is important to remember that the subculture is rooted in the lower and working classes, which

may prevent others from participating in virtual aspects of community. Unable to participate in the online community building and boundary maintenance rituals, subcultural members without internet access could practice rituals not covered in my study.

Given the mainstream discourse on modified people, it is of little surprise that many (potential) participants viewed my research with suspicion. Several were unwilling to participate in interviews and while that phase of my research was secondary, their unwillingness could be seen as a limitation. For example, most of the direct conflicts took place via instant messenger, and users unwilling to answer questions created a challenge to understanding those conflicts. Such participants typically acknowledged being in a conflict with outgroup users on ME in their blogs and hinted at sources of the tension, but I would have ideally been able to ask more about this phenomenon.

As discussed by Stirn et al. (2006), many researchers have discussed a potential link between unemployment and the modified body without being able to determine if individuals are unemployed because of their modifications or if they turn to body modification because they are unemployed. I have argued that, at least among modified people, body modification seems to result in employment struggles, and this could be researched further. I initially hoped to incorporate more data from a ME survey conducted by administrators in 2003, as it delved deeper into the socioeconomic demographics of all users and could have helped strengthen my arguments regarding finances and social class. Unfortunately, administrators claimed to have lost this information while making changes to the site.

Another limitation is that my data provide little insight into how one transitions from a person with modifications to a member of this subculture. Critiques of visibly modified people offer some understanding of (in)appropriate paths to subcultural membership, but the research objectives necessitated focusing on individuals already part of the subculture. There

remains an opening for future research that investigates this transition process, which may include transitions both into and out of the subculture.

Despite these limitations, this dissertation has made a scholarly contribution. I have provided an alternative to the predominate discourse on voluntary body modification in Western culture, which typically ignores non-mainstream body modifiers like those in my study. Altering CMDA to include photos allowed me to analyze the seldom considered visual component of discourse. I have also shown claims of mainstream acceptance to be misguided, as visible modifications continue to justify the exclusion of some individuals from important social institutions.

Accompanied with the abandonment of popular modifications, the adoption of increasingly extreme body modifications indicates that the body modification subculture does not seek incorporation into the mainstream. Rather, the subculture seeks to maintain its subcultural status and invokes boundary maintenance techniques designed to keep people with modifications at bay. While much emphasis has been placed on separating the self from the mainstream, participants ultimately sought a community to which they could belong, revealing that even social outcasts desire to fit into a group. Members like Jamie criticized outgroup members for being interchangeable and lacking uniqueness, but it is important to remember that participants went to great lengths to be like other subcultural members in order to secure their status in the group. I have shown how solidifying one's status in the subculture and maintaining group boundaries requires participating in rituals beyond the modification of the body, which will become increasingly necessary as the subculture approaches the body's limits.

The unexpected site relaunch provided me with valuable information about the role of the internet in the maintenance of subcultural boundaries. Despite their previous affinity for the specific virtual space of ME, as evidenced by some members' willingness to permanently

mark their bodies with the ME logo, participants readily and rapidly abandoned the site once it became clear that it was no longer the optimal location for maintaining the subculture. By displaying the flexibility to relocate to different virtual spaces, participants helped the subculture avoid the same virtual death as ME. Virtual spaces, then, cannot be considered the subculture (as ME administrators claim), nor can they take precedence over the subculture. A subcultural understanding of virtual spaces as (expendable) tools for community rituals is critical for subcultures hoping to sustain their identity in contemporary Western society.

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