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Consumption Markets & Culture

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gcmc20

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To cite this article: Chloe Steadman, Dominic Medway & Emma Banister (2023): Consuming memorial tattoos: the body as marketplace object?, Consumption Markets & Culture, DOI: 10.1080/10253866.2023.2188206

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2023.2188206

Published online: 16 Mar 2023.

CONSUMPTION MARKETS & CULTURE
https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2023.2188206

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Consuming memorial tattoos: the body as marketplace object?

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ABSTRACT

The body is central to contemporary consumer culture. However, whilst material objects such as family heirlooms can be used by the living to create a sense of immortality for the deceased, little is known about why persons might turn to their own impermanent bodies to create a symbolic legacy for lost loved ones. Drawing on multiple in-depth interviews with eight memorial tattoo consumers, photographs, and a tattoo consumption diary, this paper teases out three unique qualities of the tattooed body in the lives of those left behind: *body as intimate*, *body as entwined*, and *body as controllable*. In foregrounding what makes the body so special, our study holds implications for better understanding the intersecting role of both bodies and marketplace objects in consumers' memorialisation practices, whilst also addressing the underexplored practice of memorial tattoo consumption.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 30 April 2022
Accepted 3 March 2023

KEYWORDS
Death; marketplace object; memorialisation; memorial tattoos; symbolic legacy; the body

> The prospect of life is death; the ultimate cause of death is birth. – Bauman (1992a, 1)

Introduction

The body commands a central presence within consumer culture; as Featherstone (2010, 197) observes, "consumer culture is obsessed with the body". Reflecting the "somatic turn" across the social sciences since the 1980s (Shilling 2012; Turner 2008), there has been growing attention given to the body within consumer research (e.g. Patterson and Schroeder 2010; Roux and Belk 2019). However, since the body is the source of our physical mortality, as Turley (2005, 68) puts it " … all consumers are on death row". Although death is considered differently across cultures (Bonsu and Belk 2003), in Western societies dying bodies are typically hidden in hospitals and hospices (Bauman 1992b; Shilling 2012) and conversations about death often avoided. Hence, individuals have long sought to attain a sense of immortality (Becker 1973), for instance through putting faith in religion, creating offspring, or maintaining a healthy body (Cave 2012). Yet, as Cave (2012, 74) notes, "to try to keep us indefinitely healthy is like trying to hold together a statue that is turning to dust".

Subsequently, persons have historically looked outside of their impermanent bodies to the enduring cultural realm to attain a "symbolic legacy" (Cave 2012); extending "post-mortem

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biographies" (Turley and O'Donohoe 2012) or "post-mortem identities" (Bonsu and Belk 2003) through time. There is, therefore, extensive research recognising how marketplace objects can extend individual and group identities (Belk 1988) – potentially beyond the grave – such as scrapbooks (Phillips 2016); music cassettes (Kuruoğlu and Ger 2015); household objects (Epp and Price 2010; Richardson 2014); souvenirs (Marcoux 2017); and family heirlooms (Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000; Türe and Ger 2016).

In some ways, the body has also been considered a marketplace object – or icon (Patterson 2018). As Baudrillard (1998, 129, his emphasis) proclaims, "in the consumer package, there is one object finer, more precious and more dazzling than any other … That object is the BODY". Indeed, we are often encouraged by marketers to view our bodies as commodities to be shaped into bodily ideals (Patterson and Schroeder 2010). As Falk (1995, 99) notes, "the body is man's [*sic*] first worked on object", whereby it comes to be seen as " … a malleable object which not only can but should be worked on" (Bjerrisgaard, Kjeldgaard, and Bengtsson 2013, 227). This may especially be the case for those placing their bodies under the gaze of others for monetary exchange, whether social influencers, models, or those working in the sex industry. The tattooed body – the focus of this paper – can also be commodified as a "walking billboard" (Orend and Gagné 2009) by consumers acquiring brand logo tattoos (Bengtsson, Ostberg, and Kjeldgaard 2005), or by advertisers using imagery of tattooed bodies to sell products and services (Bjerrisgaard, Kjeldgaard, and Bengtsson 2013). Furthermore, demonstrating potential intersections between marketplace objects and bodies, this journal's *Marketplace Icons* series showcases several objects shaping and/or adorning the body, such as shapewear (Zanette and Scaraboto 2019), lipstick (Gurrieri and Drenten 2021), and high heels (Parmentier 2016).

It remains unclear, however, why persons might turn to their bodies to create a symbolic legacy for the dead, how bodies and other material objects intersect within consumers' memorialisation practices, and whether the body can be considered analogous to a marketplace object when remembering the dead. We thus explore the following research question – *What unique qualities does the tattooed body provide for consumers seeking to remember the dead that marketplace objects do not?* – through the case of memorial tattoo consumption. Drawing on multiple in-depth interviews with eight tattoo consumers, photographs, and the first author's tattooing diary, we explore three unique qualities of the tattooed body: *body as intimate*, *body as entwined*, and *body as controllable*.

The paper first contributes to bourgeoning literature concerning death and consumption by unpacking why consumers might turn to their transient bodies to memorialise the dead, thus challenging typical assumptions that consumers transfer a person's identity from the body into material objects after their death (Nations, Baker, and Krszjzaniek 2017). In doing so, it also provides insights into the intersections between the body and material objects in memorialisation practices. Second, the study builds on research surrounding the body by contributing insights into consumers' lived experiences of memorial tattoo consumption. Tattooing has been used to investigate a range of phenomena in consumer research, such as identity (Patterson and Schroeder 2010; Velliquette, Murray, and Evers 2006), advertising (Bjerrisgaard, Kjeldgaard, and Bengtsson 2013), time (Steadman, Banister, and Medway 2019) and place (Roux and Belk 2019). Yet memorial tattoos have been neglected, especially from a consumption perspective. As Cadell et al. (2022, 132) argue, memorial tattoos are "one expression of grief that is becoming increasingly common, but which has received little scholarly attention … "

We first turn our attention to the consumption of symbolic legacies in the marketplace, before discussing the body's mnemonic quality and our context of memorial tattoos.

Symbolic legacies and marketplace objects

Individuals have long attempted to extend themselves through time, from creating children and biological legacies, to freezing their bodies via cryonics (Cave 2012). This reflects Becker's (1973, xvii) observation that the fear of death is a "mainspring of human activity". People's identities

can also be prolonged through the creation of a symbolic legacy (Cave 2012). This relates to the idea that, in contrast to the body, the cultural realm is an enduring space through which memories of individuals or groups can be sustained (Cave 2012). Historically, those with most power in society could assemble a lasting cultural legacy (Bauman 1992b), such as the pyramids built to commemorate dead pharaohs and queens. However, today symbolic legacies have become further democratised, as reflected in the growth of social media which enables consumers to distribute memories more widely than ever (Belk 2013).

Symbolic legacies can also be crafted through the acquisition and dispossession of marketplace objects. Reflecting the "material turn", the capacity for possessions to capture a sense of past is well-recognised (Belk 1990). As Marcoux (2017, 955) explains, " … personal and collective memories take shape and come to matter in and through the world of material objects". Alongside extensive work regarding material culture, memory, and identity narratives (e.g. Epp and Price 2010; Kuruoğlu and Ger 2015; Marcoux 2017), there is nascent death-focused literature uncovering how, when death appears imminent due to old age or illness, consumers regularly dispose of their possessions to family and friends to create a personal or family legacy (Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000). Similarly, assets (e.g. property and money) gifted to younger generations can function as an ongoing repository of family history and identity (Bradford 2009). Whilst Phillips (2016) also finds concerns for preserving a personal legacy can motivate scrapbook consumption.

Material possessions also hold the ability to capture memories and narratives of a person once they have passed away, sometimes unintentionally. For example, touching the deceased's clothing or folding once-shared bed linen can deliver an unexpected affective charge (Richardson 2014). As Turley and O'Donohoe (2012, 1344) observe, " … material possessions are never more alive than when those to whom they belong are no longer with us". It is, therefore, not only special objects which can extend a dead person through time; memories can also reside in more mundane household objects, which can function as "pitfalls" bringing painful memories of the deceased unexpectedly to the surface (Turley and O'Donohoe 2012). Yet the construction of a post-mortem biography can be more intentional. For instance, Nations, Baker, and Krszjzaniek (2017) find that, in early stages of bereavement, individuals often divorce a dead person's identity from their body and transfer it into a tangible substitute (e.g. special possessions, photographs, and gravestones). Likewise, Bonsu and Belk (2003) reveal how the Asante tribe in Ghana construct positive post-mortem identities for deceased tribal members, by clothing them in expensive items and using beautiful caskets to express material and symbolic wealth.

Moreover, ongoing relationships with the dead can be facilitated through material objects. This links to the "continuing bonds" theory which recognises how extended relationships with the dead are commonplace (Cadell et al. 2022; Swann-Thomas, Fleming, and Buckley 2022; Turley and O'Donohoe 2012, 2017), with blurred boundaries between living and dead bodies (Shilling 2012). Marketplace objects can be used as "props" to create continuing bonds (Turley and O'Donohoe 2012) and can be selected during the process of sorting through a departed's possessions (Guillard 2017). Kates (2001), for example, finds possessions of people who have died from AIDS are often passed to members of that person's LGBTQ+ family, serving as links between living and deceased communities. Similarly, people often speak to the dead through urns containing their ashes (Baker, Baker, and Gentry 2016) or gravestones (Woodthorpe 2011) – the latter also serving as sites of "restorative giving" through the leaving of presents, flowers and meaningful objects for the dead on special occasions (Drenten, McManus, and Labrecque 2017). In such cases, consumer objects not only help to "remember or memorialise a bond that has been irreparably severed" but can also "support and sustain a continuing bond" (Turley and O'Donohoe 2012, 1343) with the dead.

In summary, material objects can be used to construct symbolic legacies for the self or others, either through extending memories or facilitating continuing bonds. This paper builds on such research by unpacking why individuals might also turn to the transient body to create lasting post-mortem identities for the dead, and thereby reveals the unique qualities of the body within memorialisation practices.

The body as walking memory

As Turner (2008, 33) observes, " … human beings have, and to some extent are, bodies". For Turner (1995, 250), therefore, the body can be described as "a walking memory", whereby the body's surface can communicate life narratives (Steadman, Banister, and Medway 2019). Such memories can be unintentionally captured on the body. For instance, spinal cord injuries can serve as a reminder of when the life-changing event occurred (Sparkes and Smith 2003); whilst scars and bruises acquired through Tough Mudder endurance events can hold memories of associated painful experiences (Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017).

Memories can also be inscribed onto the body's surface more reflexively as part of an individual's body project (Shilling 2012); for example, through hairstyle changes, piercings, and cosmetic surgeries (Askegaard, Gertsen, and Langer 2002). Tattoos work particularly well in this regard, as they present " … memory maps written in flesh that enable life stories to be told" (Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005, 127). Although the body can only ever provide a partial diary of the self (Steadman, Banister, and Medway 2019), existing literature documents how consumers acquire tattoos to commemorate important life events (Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005; Patterson and Schroeder 2010; Steadman, Banister, and Medway 2019; Sweetman 1999; Velliquette, Murray, and Evers 2006). Equally, the erasure of tattoos through laser removals and/or "cover-ups" occurs as consumer identity changes (Shelton and Peters 2006) and may be driven by a desire to forget about particular times in life (Steadman, Banister, and Medway 2019).

Recalling the mnemonic potential of marketplace objects discussed above, skin can also function as a "repository of memory" (McNiven 2016, 215) and so the body can be used to memorialise the dead. In research concerning pregnancy loss, McNiven (2016) found that bodily changes such as stretch marks held meaningful reminders for study participants of their lost children. Moreover, jewellery adorning the body has long played a role in mourning for – and remembering – the dead (Middlemass 2018); whether through older consumers passing down jewellery to younger family members (Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000), or bereaved parents wearing custom-made jewellery such as memorial bracelets to remember – and share stories of – lost children (McNiven 2016). Likewise, as Simpson (2014, 5) explains, "the dead shaped their clothes and their clothes shape the living". Thus, the sensory properties of a deceased person's clothing can help those living to remember and re-establish relationships with the dead (Simpson 2014; Richardson 2014), whether through touching and smelling such items or by the living choosing to wear that clothing themselves.

Memorial tattoos, which are " … the inking of the skin with a tribute to the person who has died" (Cadell et al. 2022, 132), also work well in this regard. Several studies have investigated memorial tattoos outside of consumer research, typically with a focus on understanding grief. This literature finds memorial tattoos can help to bring " … into visual existence the often invisible experience of grief" (Buckle and Dwyer 2023, 2). In turn, such tattoos provide opportunities for conversations with others about a loss and bereavement when they are inscribed on a visible bodily location (Davidson 2017; McNiven 2016; Swann-Thomas, Fleming, and Buckley 2022). Furthermore, the permanence of memorial tattoos can create a lasting reminder of the deceased person (Buckle and Dwyer 2023; Davidson 2017; McNiven 2016; Swann-Thomas, Fleming, and Buckley 2022). Memorial tattoos can also facilitate continuing relationships with the dead by keeping them physically close (Cadell et al. 2022; Swann-Thomas, Fleming, and Buckley 2022) and providing a permanent connection to them (Buckle and Dwyer 2023). Within consumer research, Roux and Belk (2019, 496) similarly explain how tattoos can help people cope with the loss of a loved one through "conjuring rituals", whereby etching a memorial to the dead onto the body helps to foster "the illusion of keeping death at a distance", with the tattooed body functioning here as a "carnal amulet" by keeping lost loved ones symbolically alive.

However, memorial tattoos remain underexplored (Cadell et al. 2022) particularly from a consumption perspective. Thus, it is unclear whether the (tattooed) body can be considered analogous

to a marketplace object in consumers' memorialisation and legacy-making practices; or whether the body instead provides unique qualities ripe for remembering lost loved ones. We explore this through our study of memorial tattoos.

Methods

This paper is underpinned by a broader three-year project conducted by the first author into the body, time and tattoo consumption. Using purposive and snowball sampling, participants who had tattoos signifying important times in their lives were initially identified through the first author's personal contacts, which included two tattoo artists, who then recommended others for the study. Turley and O'Donohoe (2017) emphasise the temporal balance needed between recalling the death and respecting associated vulnerabilities when recruiting bereaved consumers. However, in this case, information about memorial tattoos emerged organically and sometimes unexpectedly through interview discussions, rather than being the sole focus or the reason for participant recruitment.

This paper draws on eight interviewees from our broader sample who had consumed a memorial tattoo (Table 1), tattoo photographs, and the first author's tattooing diary. Inspired by Wengraf (2001), biographical-narrative interpretive method (BNIM) interviews were adopted. They comprise an unstructured life-history interview, followed by a semi-structured second interview about the phenomenon of interest (Wengraf 2001). The initial interview involved participants telling the story of their life, with the first author functioning as a "non-directive story facilitator" (Wengraf 2001). Participants' life narratives were elicited through special possessions they were asked to bring along holding memories about important times in their lives, given objects can convey narratives (Woodward 2019), which also helped to unpick any differences between memorialising persons through material objects and the body. Narratives were further invoked through the following opening question: *Please could you tell me the story of your life, including the events you feel have been most important to shaping who you are as a person today*?

The second interview, conducted on the same day or over two separate occasions depending on participant preference, involved individuals telling the story of their tattoos, as stimulated by the following opening question: *Please could you tell me the story of your tattoos? Do they relate to any events or times in your life*? Additional questions covered memorial tattoos, tattoo permanence, future tattoo plans, and whether the tattooed body worked in a different way than material objects when memorialising the dead. Following Puwar's (2021) notion of "carrying as method" which recognises the body as an archive of embodied memories, participants' tattooed bodies functioned as useful elicitation devices.

Each interview lasted for around an hour and took place in participants' homes or public places such as cafes and tattoo studios. Due to limited participant availability or serendipitous

Table 1. The memorial tattoo interview sample.

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Occupation	People memorialised through tattoo(s)	Memorial tattoo(s) design	Memorial tattoo (s) placement
Alyssa	Female	35	Student	Son and granddad	Diamonds and a dagger	Arm
Hamlet	Male	75	Retired	Partner	Mickey Mouse	Not disclosed
Harry	Male	40	Electrician	Grandparents	Nan and Granddad written in star shapes and a rose	Arm
Natedog	Male	33	Tutor	Granddad	Portrait of granddad	Arm
Rusty	Male	48	Tutor	Father	Line drawing of The Prodigal Son	Arm
Sarah	Female	29	Civil servant	Granddad	Two lilies	Shoulders
Ufobaby	Male	43	Project manager	Mother and pet cat	Angel, stairs leading up to heaven's gates, mother's date of birth and death, and cat portrait	Arm
Victoria	Female	21	Student	Granddad	Black script: "Pray, hope, and don't worry"	Foot

opportunities arising during fieldwork, two participants were interviewed just once using a semi-structured approach, covering the same topics identified above. Although interviews were not centred on death and bereavement as they also involved discussing participants' other tattoos, an "ethics as process" stance was taken (Turley and O'Donohoe 2017), with the first author paying close attention to embodied cues and steering away from emotional topics if the participant seemed uncomfortable. Photographs of participants' tattoos were taken with their consent. They were not analysed as discrete data but functioned as useful aide memoires of participants' experiences and the original research encounters (Pink 2015) during interview and diary analysis. Photographs are therefore included in the paper as visual illustrations, taking Myers's (1992, 272) claim that "the richest written description of a tattoo … when compared to a photograph can only pale".

Autoethnography was also employed through the first author keeping an unstructured diary about her tattoo consumption experiences, including the acquisition of a memorial tattoo shortly before beginning the project (see Steadman 2023 for further details). Scepticism remains over this approach (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011); as Hackley (2007, 99) observes, autoethnography " … remains in the corner of the consumer research classroom". Yet, autoethnography is beneficial for building knowledge about a topic *through* emotions, and can provide greater transparency about researcher positionality (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). As Puwar (2021, 5) argues, "we are embodied beings as knowledge makers"; hence, the first author was able to build trust and rapport with participants through shared experiences of death and memorial tattoo consumption. The other authors, having not acquired memorial tattoos, ensured a balance between insider/outsider perspectives during data analysis and writing. Since the topic of death can stimulate strong emotions in researchers (Woodthorpe 2009), the diary also proved useful for navigating researcher vulnerabilities by providing an opportunity for regular reflection on any emotional challenges faced during the study.

Using a hermeneutic approach (Arnold and Fischer 1994), thematic analysis of verbatim interview transcriptions and diary entries was conducted. Initial themes and patterns were noted on paper copies of the data, before using NVivo analysis software to manage the high volume of data and visualise relationships between themes. During this hermeneutic process, an individual participant's tattooing experiences were considered in light of their life histories and the whole set of cases; with thematic movements also made between the full set of cases and the wider societal context of Western perceptions of death, thereby addressing the "context of context" (Askegaard and Linnet 2011). Finally, following Stern's (1998) concerns over power imbalances involved in assigning names to informants, pseudonyms chosen by participants are used throughout.

Key findings

Body as intimate

Whilst participants mentioned objects that remind them of deceased persons, such as photographs, clothing, and pill boxes, their tattooed body was typically considered a more intimate site through which to create symbolic legacies for lost loved ones. Indeed, the tattooed body has been described as a personal diary (Sweetman 1999). To illustrate, Alyssa has objects that remind her of the son she lost shortly after birth such as the clothing he wore in hospital, whilst she remembers her deceased granddad through his old pill box. Reflecting the capacity for sensory objects to capture a potent affective force of the dead (Richardson 2014), the medicalised smell of her son's clothing and the clicking noise of opening and closing her granddad's pill box evoke strong reminders of these family members. Yet, reflecting how possessions are becoming increasingly precarious and "liquid" (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017), over time Alyssa has developed a more intimate connection to the memorial tattoos she acquired on her arm to remember her son (a diamond tattoo) and granddad (a dagger tattoo) (Figure 1). She is therefore less inclined to

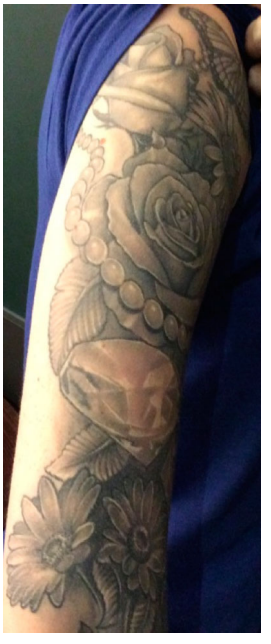

Figure 1. Alyssa's memorial to her son.

hold onto material objects to remember family members today, as she has become "less attached to stuff":

> Once I started getting my sleeve I stopped keeping hold of stuff because I felt I didn't need it in the same way … As time's gone on, I've become less attached to stuff I think because I feel like I've got that attachment through my artwork on my sleeve … With an object I can look at it … and think, "Aww yeah that's them". But it doesn't have the same impact that it [the tattoo] does (Alyssa).

The body is considered an especially intimate means of memorialising the dead, especially when the memorial tattoo is inscribed on an area of skin usually concealed by clothing. Hamlet, for example, described the Mickey Mouse tattoo he acquired to remember his deceased partner Lynne (Figure 2) – which was not visible during the interview – as being "personal", a "close thing", and "just between" himself and Lynne. During the interview he did not disclose the location of his tattoo, nor was this made clear in the tattoo photograph sent to the first author. Hence, unlike heirlooms which can be passed down to younger generations to build bridges between living and dead family members (Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000), the tattooed body is often seen as so "mine" that it cannot belong to anybody else in the same way as marketplace objects can. As Hamlet explains:

> … It's not for anyone else [the memorial tattoo], it's not really on show … It was something just between me and Lynne … Nobody else knows do they? No one knows I've got a Mickey Mouse. It's a part of you … For me it's a personal close thing that shouldn't be on view. For me it's something that I want no one else to know about but it means something to me (Hamlet).

Moreover, as Patterson (2018) suggests, we should consider tattoos as an "event" involving their painful acquisition rather than a "thing". Tattoos are intrusive body modifications involving pain, blood and the penetration of skin (Sweetman 1999). This renders them an especially close and involved form of consumption, during which production and consumption blur together (Velliquette, Murray, and Evers 2006). As Oksanen and Turtiainen (2005, 126) observe, such painful processes can lead to more intimate connections between the tattoo bearer and tattoo because "ink makes bonding possible". Since memorial tattoos are not as easily acquired as material objects

Figure 2. Hamlet's memorial to his partner.

due to the discomfort and time involved in their attainment (Velliquette, Murray, and Evers 2006), they arguably contrast with other more easily consumed products in the "supermarket of style" (Sweetman 1999, 60).

Spending time planning, acquiring, and caring for memorial tattoos helps the bereaved through the pain of grief (Swann-Thomas, Fleming, and Buckley 2022), and allows such individuals to translate any emotional distress into something more positive through a creative design (Velliquette, Murray, and Evers 2006). As Guillard (2017) explains, feeling numb is common after losing somebody, whereby the bereaved can busy themselves as protection from the emotional pain accompanying their loss. Therefore, getting tattooed can also help consumers to temporarily replace their emotional pain with physical pain – as Hamlet noted in his interview. This echoes work on how consumers may seek painful endurance events to escape their daily lives (Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017). Pain can bring the body back into sharp focus (Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017) and make people feel alive again (Roux and Belk 2019); as Oksanen and Turtiainen (2005, 117) remark, " … when life is too distancing, the skin and flesh start to speak". This is captured in the first author's experiences and the anxiety she felt about the anticipated pain involved in acquiring a small black infinity symbol memorial tattoo on her ribs – a notoriously sensitive part of the body (Roux and Belk 2019) – to commemorate her mum, grandparents, and pet cat. As well as reflecting on whether she was seeking out this physical pain "to feel once again" at a time when she felt burnt out from her university studies:

> I cannot stop imagining what it is going to feel like being tattooed. In my head it will represent the most excruciating pain imaginable … Did I make this decision because I have been living much of the past two years in a constant state of semi-consciousness and so want to feel the pain of being tattooed to bring myself back to consciousness, to life, and to feel once again? (Research diary).

In summary, participants typically considered their bodies a more intimate site through which to create symbolic legacies for the dead than marketplace objects. Because of being so intimately "me", participants often had a closer connection to their tattooed bodies than objects containing memories of loved ones. This was especially the case when the tattoo was located on a hidden

part of the body, making it even more personal. Moreover, the pain involved in tattoo acquisition means it is a particularly close and involved form of consumption, rendering the process of adding things to our bodies to remember the dead quite considerably different from buying more detached things to add to our homes.

Body as entwined

Second, given we live everyday *as* bodies (Turner 2008), the body offers participants a tattooed canvas with which they are physically and indivisibly entwined. Indeed, in characterising the body as a "topia", Roux and Belk (2019, 486) describe the body as "a finite place that we move with but cannot leave behind". While living tattooed bodies will themselves eventually crumble, Davidson (2017) observes that the proximity of memorial tattoos with the living person until their own death is part of a memorial tattoo's appeal. For example, Sarah acquired two lily tattoos on her shoulders (Figure 3) to remember her late granddad and, although she cannot always see her tattoos, she feels she has now "always got him on my back kinda thing" (Sarah), thus enabling her granddad to "linger a little longer" (Turley and O'Donohoe 2012, 1342) in her life today.

Objects were often considered more insecure sites for memorialisation. Indeed, losing possessions can add an additional layer of grief due to feeling like losing a part of the self (Belk 1988), whereas "tattoos function as shields of subjectivity when everything else seems uncertain" (Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005, 127). Natedog even has a photograph of his deceased granddad (which he brought along to his interview) tattooed onto his arm to also remember him through his body (Figure 4). As he explained, " … my mum for Christmas one year she was like oh I've got this picture for you. And I looked at it and I was like right, I've got to get that tattooed" (Natedog). To further illustrate, as previously noted, Alyssa keeps clothing her late son wore in hospital in a memory box. However, she worries that "something may happen to those things"; whereas, she views her memorial tattoo as something that "can never be taken away" and is "with me always" due to being a permanent and entwined part of her own embodied self:

> I've got the clothes that Walter wore in the hospital … But something may happen to those things, you never know. You could get burgled and someone steals them … Whereas this [the tattoo] can never be taken away from me. So having something for someone who isn't here anymore is a way of not just memorialising them, but I think reintegrating them into your life … It's like this is my connection to them. That's with me always (Alyssa).

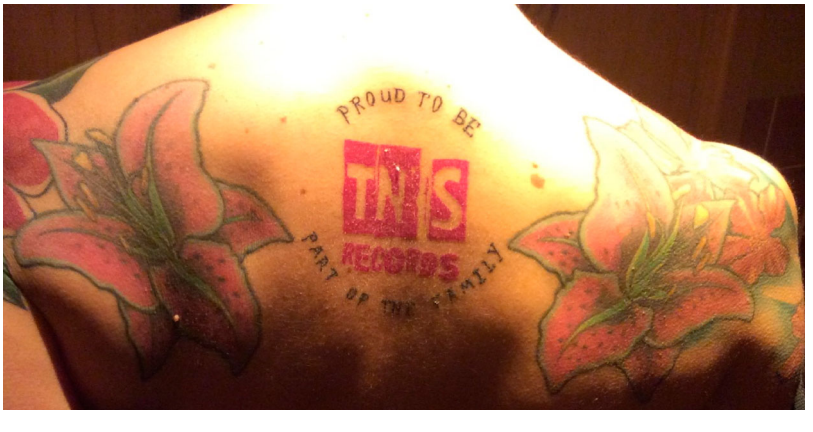

Figure 3. Sarah's memorial to her granddad.

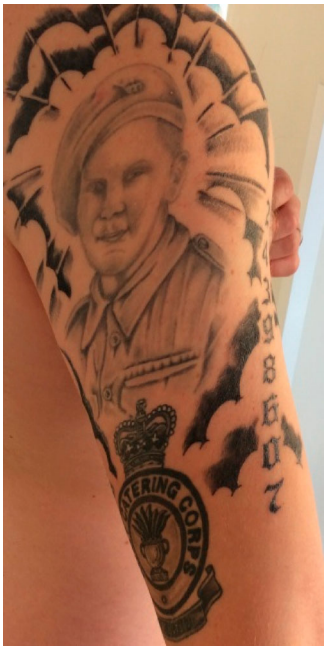

Figure 4. Natedog's memorial to his granddad.

Some participants had more mobile and portable objects memorialising the dead, which were therefore likely to be a more present part of their daily lives. For instance, Natedog inherited his granddad's hat collection and noted how "they'll go with me. Wherever I go, they'll go. I took one to New York" (Natedog). Similarly, Hamlet has several small pill boxes containing his late partner Lynne's ashes, which he decorated with jewels to reflect her love for "glitter and glamour". He takes them with him wherever he goes:

> … We went online and found some pill boxes. And Lynne loved glitter. She loved glamour … The first time we went shopping together, I don't know 30 years ago, we went to Debenhams in Manchester at Christmas time and she was going to buy a dress or something. I'd never been with her shopping before. And in we go, and she heads straight for sequins and glitter and stuff. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe all the glitter … Three pill boxes that I'd got, Swarovski little jewels on top … We put the resin in the pill boxes and we put some ashes on top and we let them set. So I've got pill boxes with ashes in and I take one with me wherever I go. She went to Kent last week, bless her. She went with us to Kent … (Hamlet).

Hence, akin to how memorial tattoos can sometimes function as "utopias of conjuration" by " … vividly prolong[ing] the illusion of … continued presence in the world" of a deceased loved one (Roux and Belk 2019, 496), Hamlet's small, portable, and personified pill boxes enable him to cope with the death of his partner by transcending her physical absence. However, memorial objects can often be bigger, bulkier and less mobile, and thus more spatially distanced from the bereaved and at times, even forgotten about (Marcoux 2017). To demonstrate, Rusty has a framed picture once belonging to his deceased father, which he keeps upstairs in his home as "it's quite big" (Rusty); whilst Victoria has a prayer card reminding her of her granddad which "used to always just stay in my purse but now it stays on my wall" (Victoria). Unlike objects which can be distanced from the body, such as when souvenirs holding difficult memories are left at home (Marcoux 2017), or household objects not fitting the family's current identity are put into storage (Epp and Price 2010), memorial tattoos always remain physically close to the embodied person.

This is heightened in the case of memorial tattoos due to their permanence, contrasting with more transient consumer objects (Sweetman 1999). As Patterson and Schroeder (2010, 262)

contend, "tattooing has often been read as a disavowal of the paradigm of plasticity" driving consumer culture. For example, Ufobaby acquired tattoos on his arm of a cat's face, stairs to heaven, and his mum's date of birth/death to ensure he always has reminders of his late pet cat and mother with him. He acknowledged that you are not " … ever likely to forget your mother, but it is a good permanent reminder of her … " (Ufobaby). Thus, against the uncertainty of the future and fragility of memory (Steadman, Banister, and Medway 2019), memorial tattoos ensured Ufobaby kept memories of family close to him. Because of their importance in preserving memories of the dead, participants were keen to ensure the permanence of their tattoos – and the bonds they represent – by engaging in moisturising routines, akin to the refreshing of family heirlooms to preserve family legacies (Türe and Ger 2016). Natedog, for instance, " … moisturise[s] twice a day … to obviously keep the tattoos in good nick" (Natedog). Whilst the first author was concerned about the imagined ephemerality of her memorial tattoo, noting "I put my Bepanthen cream on as regularly as possible" due to feeling "a bit paranoid that it's [the tattoo's] going to fade really quickly" (Research diary).

In summary, unlike material objects holding memories of the dead which can be lost, stolen, or left at home, participants considered their tattooed bodies as more pervasive and enduring. This was fuelled by the permanence of tattoos, which led to greater feelings of security in memorialising the dead through the body relative to marketplace objects. This theme therefore bolsters Velliquette et al.'s (2006) claim that tattooing unsettles conventional notions that consumer objects remain separated from the body, since tattoos become an entwined part of the consumer's embodied self.

Body as controllable

Third, the tattooed body can be seen as a controllable miniature world when life seems uncertain (Oksanen and Turtiainen 2005), as can often be the case during bereavement. As Turley and O'Donohoe (2017, 459) explain, "bereavement can tear survivors from the familiar world … in the absence of a loved one, routines, social structures and relationships become imbued with an uncanny combination of the familiar, the strange and the surreal". Yet, the inherent permanence of tattoos also means the planning processes around them can be especially important to avoid any future regrets (Steadman, Banister, and Medway 2019). As participant Ufobaby put it, with objects such as clothing you can "either take it back or just stick it in the back of your wardrobe and forget about it". However, with a tattoo "you've got to make sure you trust the person who's doing it … and you're not going to be regretting that for the rest of your life" (Ufobaby).

Whilst in the past consumers could select a generic tattoo "flash" design off a board, contemporary tattooing is characterised by choice, personalisation and customisability (Atkinson 2003). Accordingly, participants expressed a preference for creating unique tattoo designs. For example, Rusty explained how his tattoo artist "wouldn't use my tattoos on somebody else. They're mine and that's what I like. And I know they're not replicated" (Rusty). Equally, Sarah noted how " … the thought of getting anything like flash off a wall I don't think I could ever do that … I don't like having tattoos that everyone else has got" (Sarah). Such desires to control tattoo designs extended into planning memorial tattoos, echoing Cadell et al.'s (2022) research. In this sense, owing to their high levels of customisability tattoos contrast with mass-marketed commodities which are ordinarily personalised after their acquisition (Patterson 2018). As Velliquette, Murray, and Evers (2006, 61) explain, "every tattoo is unique from the beginning". To demonstrate, Victoria inscribed Catholic saint Padre Pio's phrase "Pray, hope and don't worry" onto her foot (Figure 5) to remember her granddad, as it was his favourite saying. Meanwhile, Sarah explained how she "really spent a lot of time obsessing" (Sarah) over the choice to etch two vibrant lilies onto her shoulders (Figure 3) to reflect her deceased granddad's love of gardening.

Due to carefully choosing their tattoo's design, consumers may therefore experience greater control over the creation of post-mortem identities with a memorial tattoo than with material objects. In fact, the latter can sometimes reveal some uncontrolled and unexpected aspects of a deceased's

Figure 5. Victoria's memorial to her granddad.

identity when their belongings are discovered by family (Guillard 2017). Bodily placement of memorial tattoos is also an important aspect of control, in terms of whether people share stories about their loss with others (Buckle and Dwyer 2023; McNiven 2016). As Roux and Belk (2019) suggest, the body can be considered as either an open or closed space, with tattoo consumers using the spatial boundaries of their bodies to shield certain stories from others. For instance, the first author engaged in "tactical omission" (Swann-Thomas, Fleming, and Buckley 2022) or "memory compartmentalisation" (Marcoux 2017) by inscribing her memorial tattoo onto her ribs – a place ordinarily hidden under clothing – with her body thus representing a "closed space" (Roux and Belk 2019). This was to control who she shared the meanings behind her memorial tattoo with:

> … Perhaps I have chosen the tattoo with the most emotional meanings and memories associated with it to be inked on one of the least publicly visible areas of my body to gain an even higher level of control over who can view it, and hence who I allow access into the layers of meaning attached to it …. (Research diary)

Informed by both design and location decisions, memorial tattoos enabled participants to control and construct highly positive symbolic legacies for deceased loved ones. For example, when showing the portrait of his granddad to the first author (Figure 4), Natedog shared fond stories of their trips away, of his granddad's good nature, and how he always wanted to see his grandchildren smiling:

> … He was a good egg. He was a Leeds fan … and he always used to go out in the morning and buy a paper … and he'd always write down the football scores. And if I ever have kids, or adopt kids and they have kids, I'd want to be that granddad that sits down in the chair and writes down the scores from the paper. Legacies live on. And memories live on … We used to go to Legoland and he'd always crack a joke. I remember one day, we went out and he got badly sunburned and it was the typical English thing he was wearing suit trousers and was literally red raw. And it was mint. And he wouldn't go on any rides but he wanted to see our faces on the rides looking all happy. He would have done that twice over … (Natedog).

Like Natedog, Sarah's depiction of her granddad was wholly positive:

> My granddad died when I was 18 or 19 … He was a massive influence on my life. I never heard anyone say a bad thing about him at all – ever … He was just such a nice guy, and I never heard him say anything nasty about anyone; never heard anyone say anything bad about him. I absolutely admired him. He was the best person in the world as far as I was concerned … Absolutely gutted when he died. Really, really sad (Sarah).

Accordingly, tattooed bodies " … cannot offer direct windows into our lived experiences; rather, the past is reinterpreted, represented, and can be forgotten" (Steadman, Banister, and Medway 2019, 215), as remembering is a dynamic process (Phillips 2016) and the skin is an unreliable curriculum vitae (Patterson and Schroeder 2010). Further, the visual nature of memorial tattoos provides an ongoing opportunity for the living to edit the post-mortem identities of the deceased and maintain for them a positive symbolic legacy. However, unlike when memorial tattoos are used as a "conjuring ritual" enabling persons to escape the pain of their current bereaved condition by "masking the past and making it disappear" (Roux and Belk 2019, 496), these participants were not attempting to mask the past; but rather, consuming tattoos to ensure (positive) stories of lost loved ones from the past continue to be shared with others today.

In summary, the body is never fully controllable; it is the source of our mortality (Bauman 1992b), can rebel against our efforts to modify it (Shilling 2012), and we cannot always control how others interpret it (Patterson 2018). However, for participants the body was considered more controllable than other marketplace objects for memorialising the deceased. Although family heirlooms (Türe and Ger 2016) and other household objects (Epp and Price 2010) can attain new and layered narratives, such stories are usually co-created by multiple family members over time. Tattoos, however, are highly customisable from the outset, and their acquisition often entails more involved and prolonged planning processes around design and placement due to tattoo permanence.

Discussion and conclusions

To conclude, human beings have long sought the "elixir of life" (Cave 2012) by extending post-mortem identities for themselves and others through time (Bonsu and Belk 2003). However, little is understood about why a person may create a symbolic legacy for the dead through the canvas of their transient body; nor how tattooed legacies intersect with other more commonplace consumption-orientated memorialisation practices and the material objects involved. We addressed this lacuna through a study into memorial tattoos, where we explored the unique qualities the tattooed body provided for consumers when seeking to remember the dead. Our paper makes two key contributions to consumer research.

First, we extend nascent literature surrounding death and consumption (Dobscha 2016) by untangling why consumers might turn to their transient bodies to memorialise the dead. Prior research considers how material objects can extend identities beyond the grave (e.g. Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000), with consumers transferring the identities of deceased persons from their absent human form into tangible objects (Nations, Baker, and Krszjzaniek 2017; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000). However, our participants also turned to another materiality – their own bodies – to create symbolic legacies for the dead. In showcasing what makes the body so special we revealed how, via the practice of tattooing, the body is considered a more intimate, entwined, and controllable site through which to remember lost loved ones than marketplace objects. This links to the endless customisability of any given tattoo and the indivisible connection between that tattoo and the embodied person that acquires it.

Hence, although as previously noted the body is presented as an object to be modified within consumer culture (Shilling 2012), within consumers' memorialisation practices the body seems to work in a unique way compared to other marketplace objects. Within unstable and "liquid" consumer cultures, relations with possessions are increasingly precarious (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017) and there are risks around memories and bonds with the dead being deleted or lost in digital clutter (Belk 2013). Our study suggests bodies offer consumers a more secure material canvas for remembering the dead. This has implications for understanding consumers' memorialisation practices and

signals that material objects may play a less prevalent role in this domain for consumers choosing to turn towards their own bodies for comfort. Future research could further explore bereaved consumers' potentially changing relationships with material possessions in a precarious consumer culture, identifying alternative consumption practices, including – but not limited to- the body. Moreover, our findings suggest those working in the death industry may wish to create opportunities for more portable, customisable, and durable memorial objects.

Second, in highlighting the unique qualities of the (tattooed) body in memorialisation practices, the study also builds on literature regarding the body and consumption. More specifically, this paper contributes insights into consumers' lived experiences of memorial tattoos from a consumption perspective. Existing research into bereaved consumers usually focuses on their use of material objects to remember the dead (e.g. Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000); whilst memorial tattoo studies ordinarily focus on the role the body plays in this, rather than considering how these same consumers may also draw on material objects (e.g. Cadell et al. 2022; Davidson 2017). Our study instead demonstrates how both material objects and the body can intertwine in the lives of memorial tattoo consumers. The body- as we have shown- offers something unique that marketplace objects cannot always deliver alone, whereby the intimacy of the body allows individuals a closer, more involved, customisable and secure site on which to develop a symbolic legacy for the dead. Future research could investigate other bodily practices used to create symbolic legacies, including ashes tattoos (when cremated human remains are combined with tattoo ink), scarification practices, and memorial jewellery consumption. This is important considering Shilling's (2012) claim that mortality can seem even more disturbing today as the body is viewed as so central to our identities, with this and the future suggested research thus helping to foster more open and honest discussions about consumers' shared- and inescapable – mortality.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the study participants for taking part and openly sharing their tattooed narratives. We also extend our thanks to the three anonymous reviewers and special issue editors for their helpful advice in improving this manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This study was funded by an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) student scholarship supporting the first author's MRes and doctoral study [grant number ES/J500094/1].

Ethical declarations

The first author's doctoral research underpinning this paper was given ethical approval by the University of Manchester's Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from participants through the provision of an information sheet and consent form.

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