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Consumers' interplays between solidity and liquidity in life: Insights from tattoo consumption

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ABSTRACT

This paper builds on growing research in marketing around liquid consumption. Drawing on 31 biographical-style interviews with 18 tattoo consumers, we reveal how individuals' interplays between 'solidity' and 'liquidity' experienced in life—from homelessness to heartbreak—can be navigated and represented through tattoo consumption practices. Given much liquid consumption research is conceptual, a key contribution lies in providing detailed empirical insights into how consumers negotiate perceived solidity and liquidity at the scale of their wider lived experiences through consumption practices. In doing so, the paper moves beyond understandings of a linear shift from solidity to more liquid experiences—or vice versa—by revealing consumers' dynamic negotiations between the two. Our findings also unsettle the typical conceptualisation of tattoos as a solid marketplace offering by demonstrating how tattoos can also encompass more liquid features. Finally, implications for businesses and marketers operating within liquid consumer society are provided.

1. Introduction

This paper builds on research into consumers' 'liquid lives' (Bauman, 2005) and 'liquid consumption' which characterises how consumers increasingly seek ephemerality (short-term relations with possessions), access (renting goods rather than owning them), and dematerialisation (increasing immateriality) in their consumption, in contrast with 'solid consumption', which comprises durability, stability, and possession (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). These liquid features are reflected in contemporary market trends. For example, pop-up retailing is adopted by businesses to enable ephemeral and experiential interaction between brands and customers (Warnaby & Shi, 2019), with the UK's pop-up industry worth an estimated £2.3 billion per year (Retail Gazette, 2020). Furthermore, there is growth in access-based consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012), with car ownership forecasted to drop to 20% of US consumers by 2030 (Business Insider, 2017); whereas, the global car sharing market is projected to experience a 16% annual growth rate from 2021 to 2026 (Business Wire, 2021). Finally, reflecting dematerialisation, physical CD album sales have dropped by 97% in the US since 2000 (Statista, 2021a), whilst the digital global music streaming industry is forecasted to experience an 8.1% annual revenue growth rate from 2022 to 2026 (Statista, 2021b).

Alongside this liquid revolution, tattoo consumption—our paper's focus—has been rising since the 1970/80s 'tattoo renaissance' (Atkinson, 2003). For example, the US tattooing market rose by 8.4% annually from 2017 to 2022 (IBISWorld, 2021a), with 31,196 tattoo artist businesses in the US as of 2022, rising by 7.9% from 2021 (IBISWorld, 2021b). With tattoos typically considered a more permanent marketplace offering (Sweetman, 1999; Veliquette et al., 2006), and durability a feature of solid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), it might therefore be tempting to suggest we are witnessing consumers engaging in 'resolidification' (Lee, 2011) to cope with the instability of liquid times (Bauman, 2000).

This paper, however, moves beyond polarised discussions of a linear shift from solid to liquid consumption (Bauman, 2007), or a potential return to solidity (Lee, 2011). Clearly, consumers regularly traverse desires for both durability (i.e. solidity) and transience (i.e. liquidity): e.g. committing to a romantic relationship vs. seeking a new one on a dating app, buying vs. renting a home, or signing a long-term phone contract vs. pay-as-you-go. Yet much liquid consumption work is conceptual (e.g. Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Caldwell & Henry, 2020; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020a, 2020b; Hewer, 2022). What is lacking, therefore, are empirical insights into how consumers actually negotiate perceived solidity and liquidity throughout their everyday lives. Rosenberg et al.

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(2023) notably reveal how clothing library consumers experience fluctuating desires for solid and liquid fashion items, which can co-exist in their fashion consumption experiences. We extend this work by foregrounding how individuals, through their consumption practices, dynamically negotiate solidity and liquidity within their daily lives more widely— which is not always the result of individual consumer choice. We investigate the following research questions: *How do consumers negotiate solid and liquid aspects of their lives over time through tattoo consumption practices? And what implications does this hold for marketing practice?* In this paper, tattooing is considered a practice embodying aspects of both solidity (e.g. enduring, owned, material) and liquidity (e.g. fluid and changeable), thereby rendering it a useful study context. We conclude by discussing the implications of our work for marketers operating in a liquid consumer society.

2. Literature review

2.1. Consuming in liquid times

Sociologist Bauman (2000)—whose work inspired marketing insights around liquid consumption—observes a shift from ‘solid modernity’, characterised by stability and durability to ‘liquid modernity’. The latter involves ‘...fragility, temporariness, vulnerability, and inclination to constant change’ (Bauman, 2000: viii), extending into our relationships, work, and self-identities. Bauman’s thesis can be read as suggesting an enduring move away from solid towards liquid societal structures (Binkley, 2008; Lee, 2011); indeed, he contends there is ‘...no prospect of re-embeddedness at the end of the road taken by (now chronically) disembedded individuals’ (Bauman, 2000: 33–34). However, Bauman (2000: ix) is also keen to stress this is not a simple dichotomy, stating: ‘I view those two conditions [solid and liquid] as a couple locked, inseparably, by a dialectical bond’.

Consumption is a key theme within Bauman’s work; in fact, he ‘...depicts a liquid world drowning in consumerism’ (Lee, 2011: 661). Whilst Bauman (2007: 25) sees consumption as a ‘permanent and irremovable’ feature of life, he contends the activity of consuming itself is driven by transience, with a consumer society emerging that ‘devalues durability, equating the “old” with being “out-dated”, unfit for further use and destined for the rubbish tip’ (Bauman, 2007: 21). Liquidity is thus considered by some a useful metaphor for understanding contemporary consumer behaviour (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020a) and has been explored in relation to dating apps (Hobbs et al., 2017); home ownership (Colic-Peisker & Johnson, 2012); luxury consumption (Bardhi et al., 2020; Christodoulides et al., 2021; von Wallpach et al., 2020); consumer tribes (Biraghi et al., 2018); globally-mobile professionals (Bardhi et al., 2012; Hazaz-Berger & Yair, 2011); and access-based consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Rosenberg et al., 2023).

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) further introduce a solid-to-liquid spectrum of consumption, which conceptually demonstrates how consumption can be situated and move fluidly between the poles of solid and liquid. They suggest four conditions that could move individuals along this spectrum: relevance [of the consumer good] to the self, nature of social relationships, access to mobility systems, and precarity in life (ibid). Enriching this solid-to-liquid spectrum with empirical insights, Rosenberg et al.’s (2023) study of subscription-based clothing libraries reveals these consumers ‘tinker’ with a balancing act between solid and liquid fashion items, fuelled by their fluctuating consumer desires. Their participants owned more solid personal clothing items, such as staple minimalistic pieces, which they combined with quirkier items borrowed from the clothing library for a temporary period, to play around with their identities. In this sense, their ‘...personal possessions created a solid core around which a liquid rotation could emerge’ (ibid: 34).

The most resourceful consumers, such as the individuals rich in cultural capital from Rosenberg et al.’s (2023) research, are able to keep up with the ever-changing demands of liquid consumer society, with the flexibility to decouple from people, places and possessions often

signalling status (Bardhi et al., 2012; Bauman, 2000; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020b); yet, those unable to do so can be considered ‘flawed consumers’ (Bauman, 2005, 2007). Others experience liquidity involuntarily, such as the poverty-stricken, unemployed, and homeless (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020a), and such liquid conditions can engender uncertainty, insecurity and instability (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Hewer, 2022). Thus, for Hewer (2022: 294), ‘...Bauman’s work takes us to the heart of...“liquid modern darkness”’. Consumers with the required resources can turn to the marketplace to ‘slow down the flow’ of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000: 82) or achieve resolidification (Lee, 2011), with slowness increasingly marketed as a ‘first aid kit’ (Vostal, 2019: 1045) by facilitating ‘consumer deceleration’ (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019), such as digital detox, meditation and yoga retreats.

Instead of conceptualising a linear shift from solid to liquid times, or a turn back to resolidification (Lee, 2011), this paper explores tattoo consumers’ dynamic movements between the two. This reinvigorates the concept of a solid-to-liquid spectrum (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), building on the work of Rosenberg et al. (2023), but also extends such insights a scale further into the solidity and liquidity experienced within the twists and turns of consumers’ everyday lives; life events and periods which can be negotiated through—and represented in—not just material objects such as a tattoo, but also the narratives consumers weave around such marketplace objects. We unravel these solid–liquid interplays through the increasingly popular practice of tattoo consumption.

2.2. Tattooing the ‘plastic’ body

There is burgeoning interest in the body within marketing reflecting the body’s commanding presence within consumer culture, where it is often portrayed as ‘plastic’, and hence something which consumers should take personal responsibility for continuously (re)moulding into celebrated bodily ideals (Featherstone, 1991). There are echoes here of Shilling’s (2012: 6) concept of a ‘body project’, with the body seen as ‘...an entity in the process of becoming’ and an integral aspect of an individual’s ongoing identity project. In short, the body is regarded as increasingly malleable, dynamic and liquid, particularly as bodily technologies have advanced over time (Shilling, 2012).

Unlike other more transient bodily modifications such as make-up, hair dye, and piercings, tattooing is often viewed as opposing the ‘paradigm of plasticity’ driving consumer culture (Patterson & Schroeder, 2010: 262). Historically, tattoos have been associated with people subject to high levels of instability, mobility, and/or limited agency within life, including prisoners, sailors, tribes, motorcycle gangs, and the military (Atkinson, 2003). Tattoos are understood to help such individuals anchor their self-identities in times and spaces of flux (Phillips, 2001). Yet tattoos might also be becoming more ephemeral—a key feature of liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Developments in tattooing processes and technologies offer tattoo ‘cover-ups’ and laser removals, enabling individuals to erase past life stages and relationships from the skin as their identity changes (Shelton & Peters, 2006). Oksanen and Turtiainen (2005: 122) contend these industry transformations mean ‘...the permanence of tattoos is thus a shifting notion’. Additionally, Turner (2000: 42) observes how in traditional societies, involving ‘thick solidarities’ and ‘hot loyalties’, tattoos are compulsory marks of collective identities, whereas, in societies with ‘thin solidarities’ and ‘cool loyalties’, tattoos are ‘...optional, decorative, impermanent and narcissistic’.

Over recent decades, tattooing has moved from transgressive subcultures to becoming a more mainstream consumer practice (Atkinson, 2003; Bengtsson et al., 2005). Scholarly attention given to tattooing has likewise risen and this paper contributes to research into tattoos, identity and life narratives in particular (e.g. Bengtsson et al., 2005; Oksanen & Turtiainen, 2005; Patterson & Schroeder, 2010; Shelton & Peters, 2006; Steadman et al., 2018; Steadman et al., 2023; Sweetman, 1999; Veliquette et al., 2006). As Patterson (2018) suggests, tattoos lend themselves particularly well to identity expression since they are highly

customisable- an obvious contrast with mass-market goods (Veliquette et al., 2006). Shelton and Peters (2006) therefore identify several key ways tattoos convey identity, including through commemorating life events, spirituality, group affiliation, rebellion, conformity, and inking a relationship vow.

Tattoos are most typically considered as permanent—and hence solid—marketplace objects. For instance, Sweetman (1999) found permanence is often part of a tattoo's appeal, with study participants consuming tattoos to anchor self-identity through a coherent personal narrative and to represent enduring values and beliefs. For Sweetman (1999: 53, *our emphasis*) therefore, tattoos lend a '...corporeal solidity to expressions of individuality'. Similarly, Veliquette et al. (2006: 61) suggest, 'the popularity of tattoos reflects a need for stability, predictability [and] permanence'. They find tattoos enable consumers to thread together important life events and tensions between past and present identities into a coherent 'personal myth' of the self. Shelton and Peters (2006) instead focus on how identity changes can inspire the dispossession of tattoos through laser removals to separate from a negative self-concept (e.g. a partying past), to distance the self from an old identification (e.g. past 'redneck' social circle), or to demonstrate a new important part of the self-concept (e.g. love for a partner). Yet despite

focusing on tattoo removal, which indicates a certain level of liquidity, Shelton and Peters (2006) also appear to view tattoos as largely permanent. Indeed, their participants sometimes feel 'trapped' by tattoos that are considered incompatible with a new identity. They further note how '...in some cases laser tattoo removal leaves a permanent scar; and unlike the disposition of many other possessions, removal is not easily achieved' (ibid: 208).

Subsequently, although research identifies how tattoos enable consumers to negotiate identity over time, it has not focused on consumers' ongoing interplays between those aspects of their lives they consider solid or liquid. Our paper takes a processual view of tattoos (Patterson, 2018; Steadman et al., 2018) involving their planning, acquisition, maintenance, restyling, and potential removal/cover-ups. This moves beyond existing discussions of tattoos as either durable identity anchors (Sweetman, 1999) or transient fashion adornments (Turner, 2000). We instead recognise tattoos as encompassing aspects of both solidity and liquidity, thereby reflecting the co-existence of solid and liquid consumption in consumers' lives (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Rosenberg et al., 2023).

Table 1
Table of participants.

Pseudonym*	Sex	Age	Occupation	Number of tattoos	Recruitment	Interview type/duration
Alyssa	Female	35	Student Environmental communications officer Electrical engineer	12 (including full sleeve**)	Lenny's client	BNIM interview 1: 50 mins BNIM interview 2: 60 mins
Bilbo	Female	21		3	Referred to via Victoria	BNIM interview 1: 40 mins BNIM interview 2: 40 mins
Bob	Male	47		4 large pieces (including two half sleeves and full back)	Lenny's client	Semi-structured interview: 45 mins
Chris	Male	35	Homeless support worker	7	Lenny's client	Semi-structured interview: 60 mins
Hamlet	Male	75	Retired	2	Lenny's client	Semi-structured interview: 45 mins
Harry	Male	40	Electrician	15+ (including 2 full sleeves)	Alfie's client	BNIM interview 1: 60 mins BNIM interview 2: 45 mins
Jaws	Male	37	Unemployed	5 (including full sleeve)	Lenny's client	BNIM interview 1: 45 mins BNIM interview 2: 45 mins
Kate	Female	31	Supply teacher	2 (including half sleeve)	Lenny's client	BNIM interview 1: 90 mins BNIM interview 2: 35 mins
Keith	Male	55	Project manager	1 full sleeve	Lenny's client	BNIM interview 1: 60 mins BNIM interview 2: 60 mins
Natedog	Male	33	Tutor	9	Alfie's client	BNIM interview 1: 75 mins BNIM interview 2: 60 mins
Patricia	Female	44	DJ	28+ (including 2 half sleeves)	Referred to via personal contact	BNIM interview 1: 70 mins BNIM interview 2: 105 mins
Polly	Female	22	Postgraduate student	5	Referred to via Victoria	BNIM interview 1: 40 mins BNIM interview 2: 60 mins
Red Devil	Male	44	PhD student	4 (including full sleeve)	Personal contact	BNIM interview 1: 90 mins BNIM interview 2: 90 mins
Rusty	Male	48	Tutor	8 (including 2 half sleeves)	Alfie's client	BNIM interview 1: 90 mins BNIM interview 2: 60 mins
Sarah	Female	29	Civil servant	13	Referred to via Kate	BNIM interview 1: 60 mins BNIM interview 2: 70 mins
Tom	Male	30	Electrician	2 full sleeves	Lenny's client	Semi-structured interview: 20 mins
Ufobaby	Male	43	Project manager	Full sleeve	Lenny's client	Semi-structured interview: 20 mins
Victoria	Female	21	Postgraduate student	3	Referred to via personal contact	BNIM interview 1: 35 mins BNIM interview 2: 60 mins

*Pseudonyms chosen by participants are used throughout.

** Sleeve refers to a full arm of tattoos; 'half sleeve' to half an arm of tattoos.

3. Methodology

This paper draws on 31 biographical and elicitation-style interviews the first author conducted with 18 consumers who have tattoos capturing memories of events and people in their lives. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling, initially drawing on personal contacts, including a peer of the first author who introduced her to his tattoo artist (Lenny), as well as a second tattoo artist contact known to the first author's family (Alfie). Participants were drawn from Lenny and Alfie's client bases and by interviewees recommending others for the study (Table 1).

The research was underpinned by hermeneutics, which proposes that our understandings and experiences of the social world are shaped by our personal histories (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). Biographical-narrative interpretive method (BNIM) interviews were adopted (Wengraf, 2001), with 13 participants taking part in two interrelated interviews, with each on average lasting for an hour and taking place on the same day or over two occasions, depending on participant preference. This method comprises an initial unstructured life-history interview, followed by a semi-structured interview about the phenomenon of interest (Wengraf, 2001).

In the first interview, participants' narratives around important times in their lives were encouraged through a request to bring special possessions with them, given objects have storytelling potential (Woodward, 2019). These interviews began with the following 'grand tour' (McCracken, 1988) 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?* In the second interview, participants told the story of their tattoos and answered semi-structured questions relating to tattooing life events and memories, tattoo permanence, and future tattoo plans, with their narratives elicited through the following opening questions: *Please could you tell me the story of your tattoos? Do they relate to any events or times in your life?* Due to participant availability or unexpected interview opportunities arising, five participants were interviewed only once, covering the same themes as above but typically in less depth. Participants' tattooed bodies were integral to eliciting their tattoo narratives, relating to Puwar's (2021) notion of 'carrying as method', whereby the body becomes a useful archive of embodied memories. Photographs were taken of participants' tattoos with their consent, which are included in the paper as visual illustrations.

The verbatim interviews generated 695 pages of double-spaced text and 244,711 words for analysis. A hermeneutic analysis approach was taken, which centres on the idea that the whole can be understood only in light of the parts, and the parts in reference to the whole (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). A series of part-to-whole iterations were made through conducting 'intratext' (single case) interpretations to identify the unique themes within each individual's account (Thompson, 1997). The first author read through each interview multiple times, noting initial ideas and codes on paper transcriptions, at first using participants' more 'emic' language. Next, data were uploaded onto NVivo analysis software and themes within each individual's account were further refined, becoming more 'etic' over time. Further iterations were made by conducting 'intertext' (across cases) interpretations, whereby common themes were identified across the sample (Thompson, 1997). A significant common theme identified was permanent-impermanent—or solid-liquid—interplays, which forms the focus of this paper. Finally, data relating to this theme were considered in light of the wider societal context of—and literature surrounding—liquid consumer society, thus attending to the 'context of context' (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011).

Extended narratives were also written using what Phoenix et al. (2010) refer to as a 'story teller' approach to narrative analysis. The decision to present our findings through narrative accounts, rather than thematically, is inspired by existing presentations of tattoo consumption experiences which avoid fracturing participants' accounts (e.g. Shelton & Peters, 2006; Veliquette et al., 2006). Given space constraints, two

narratives are presented below to demonstrate consumers' dynamic interplays between solidity and liquidity. Whilst each participant negotiated things in their lives they considered as either solid or liquid (Table 2), these cases were selected since they provide particularly interesting and rich accounts of solid-liquid negotiations.

4. Findings

4.1. Solid-liquid dynamics in tattooing

In this first section, insights are drawn from across the interview sample to elucidate how tattoos sit between the solid and liquid consumption poles of Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017) spectrum. Next, we outline a prevalent sub-theme identified across participants' accounts

Table 2
Participants' negotiations of solidity and liquidity in life.

Participant	Examples of things considered solid	Examples of things considered liquid
Alyssa	Love for deceased grandfather and son Relationship with siblings	Life itself (mortality) Material possessions Sense of self
Bilbo	Relationship with children Spiritual beliefs Being a twin	Relationship with parents Life itself (mortality) Sense of self Romantic relationships
Bob Chris	Interest in science Love for new partner	Romantic relationships Life itself (mortality) Period of homelessness Sense of self Material possessions Relationship with parents Life itself (mortality)
Hamlet	Love for deceased partner Being a Lord of the Rings fan	Life itself (mortality) Romantic relationships Sense of self Memories Romantic relationships Romantic relationships
Harry	Relationship with children	Life itself (mortality) Romantic relationships Sense of self Memories Romantic relationships Romantic relationships
Jaws	Relationship with daughter	Life itself (mortality) Sense of self Personal style Life itself (mortality) Romantic relationships Personal style
Kate	Being an outsider Being a tomboy Love for Alice in Wonderland	Life itself (mortality) Sense of self Personal style Life itself (mortality) Romantic relationships Personal style
Keith	Love for wife and granddaughter Love for music and the sea	Life itself (mortality) Sense of self Personal style Life itself (mortality) Romantic relationships Personal style
Natedog	Relationship with (future) children Love for deceased grandfather Being a Spurs FC supporter	Nomadic lifestyle Sense of self Life and death Memories
Patricia	Worries about children Fear of the telephone	Personal style Friendships Romantic relationships
Polly	Interests in archeology British heritage Memories of grandfather	Jobs Romantic relationships Religious views Romantic relationships Life itself (mortality) Romantic relationships Semi-permanent body modifications Relationship with birth parents Romantic relationships
Red Devil	Importance of education University friendships	Jobs Romantic relationships Religious views Romantic relationships Life itself (mortality) Romantic relationships Semi-permanent body modifications Relationship with birth parents Romantic relationships
Rusty	Relationship with children Being religious	Life itself (mortality) Romantic relationships Semi-permanent body modifications Relationship with birth parents Romantic relationships
Sarah	Love for deceased grandfather Being empathetic	Life itself (mortality) Life itself (mortality) Sense of self Piercings
Tom	Being adopted Love for gangster films Relationship with (future) children	Life itself (mortality) Life itself (mortality) Sense of self Piercings
Ufobaby Victoria	Love for deceased mum and pet cat Being religious Being a twin Love for deceased grandfather	Life itself (mortality) Life itself (mortality) Sense of self Piercings

around ‘liquid love’ (Bauman, 2003). This reveals how relationships are an arena of life regularly encompassing solid–liquid tensions, which can be negotiated through tattoo consumption practices. Finally, we broaden our analysis beyond relationships by providing two extended narratives to illustrate consumers’ solid–liquid negotiations in life.

Following Patterson’s (2018) recognition of tattoos as a ‘boundary object’, tattoos occupied a hybrid position between solidity and liquidity, enabling dynamic negotiations of commitment throughout participants’ lives—whether to identities, things, or people (Table 2). For many participants, the tattoo mark was considered relatively permanent, echoing the enduring feature of solid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), and contrasting with the ‘fling-like engagement’ people can have with access-based fashion items (Rosenberg et al., 2023). Participants therefore often engaged in prolonged tattoo planning processes to avoid any future feelings of regret (also see Steadman et al., 2018). For example, Alyssa explained how tattooing’s permanence ‘...made me choose more carefully... it’s got to be something that’s meaningful to me in 10–20 years’ time’. Victoria echoed, ‘I think that’s why I wait so long before I get them, because I know I’m going to have them forever’.

Supporting Sweetman’s (1999) finding that tattoo durability can be appealing, participants frequently expressed a fondness for tattoo mark permanence. Polly remarked ‘...it’s quite nice the fact that you’re actually stuck with it’, whilst Bob commented, ‘that’s the good thing about tattoos: once you’ve got them, they’re there forever’. Many participants, therefore, engaged in moisturising regimes to maintain tattoo durability (also see Steadman et al., 2023). Keith noted how ‘I just get worried that it’ll fade. It’s quite amusing actually; I now moisturise my arm twice a day’. Equally, Natedog noted ‘...it’s going to be with you forever. I mean it’s only going to look good for 10–12 years if you take care of it and moisturise your skin’. Given the fragility of memory (Steadman et al., 2018), such moisturising regimes exemplify a ‘memory protection strategy’ to preserve biographical memories (Phillips, 2016), akin to when family heirlooms are refreshed (Türe & Ger, 2016).

However, tattoo cover-ups and laser removals can also be consumed as a person’s identity changes (Shelton & Peters, 2006), reflecting a liquid sense of identity (Bauman, 2000). This resonates with how fashion library consumers can experience ‘burdens of ownership’ (Rosenberg et al., 2023: 24) when they own too many clothes or feel bored of older clothing, which can lead to wardrobe clear-outs. For instance, Harry is involved in an extensive and ongoing process of disposing of older bulldog and tribal tattoos through laser removal surgeries and covering them with new tattoos, as he feels these original tattoos no longer capture his fluid identity. While decluttering one’s wardrobe is arguably easier than disposing of tattoos, these dispossession practices reveal a certain level of liquidity within contemporary tattooing:

The tattoo I had was a British bulldog with England written on it. Typical tattoo back in that sort of period of time... That’s now been covered over... And after that... I went for the tribal thing which was the big thing that was in at the time... I went for a tribal tattoo up the top of my arm. And after that I ended up having tribal going all the way down... I’ve had laser, so there’s a lot of tribal that’s been removed (Harry).

Furthermore, the affects, emotions, stories, memories, and meanings associated with tattoos can be unstable, transient and ‘...change with the flow of life’ (Oksanen & Turtiainen, 2005: 122), thus expressing the ephemerality of liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). For instance, Polly observed how the Egyptian ankh tattoo (Fig. 1) originally acquired to foster embodied memories of an exciting trip to Egypt, now also reminds her of her parents’ divorce and a challenging home life at the time of the holiday. Accordingly, tattoos can facilitate the ‘restorying’ of the self (Patterson, 2018) enabling participants to keep their options open and echoing how new narratives can be layered onto family heirlooms over time (Türe & Ger, 2016). Similarly, Bilbo has



Fig. 1. Polly’s Egyptian Ankh Tattoo.

several tattoos representing her growing interest in spirituality, including the Buddhist symbol of ‘Om’ (Fig. 2). Contrasting with a more ‘solid’ written narrative, she believes a symbol provides greater fluidity and opportunities to share revised narratives. This is important to Bilbo, since spirituality can lead to a personal process of self-transformation and focus on the inner self (Hemetsberger et al., 2019), which people would not necessarily wish to share with everybody:

The day I told mum and dad about my tattoo, I told them everything because it was quite important to me... Then maybe to someone else I’ll be like, this was the day I found out about the sound that was made at the beginning of the universe... And in yoga and stuff we do ‘Om’ and it like vibrates the room... So I’d like say that to someone else. I think it is important that I have that like range of ideas... Symbols and drawings and things like that can have quite a lot of interpretations. Whereas, if it’s writing it’s quite solid (Bilbo).

Given tattoos comprise both permanent and transient features, as revealed above, they enabled participants to negotiate solidity and liquidity experienced in life, as evident in the area of relationships and ‘liquid love’ (Bauman, 2003). Considering strong social ties can inspire solid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), relationships between parents and children were seen by many participants as a suitable

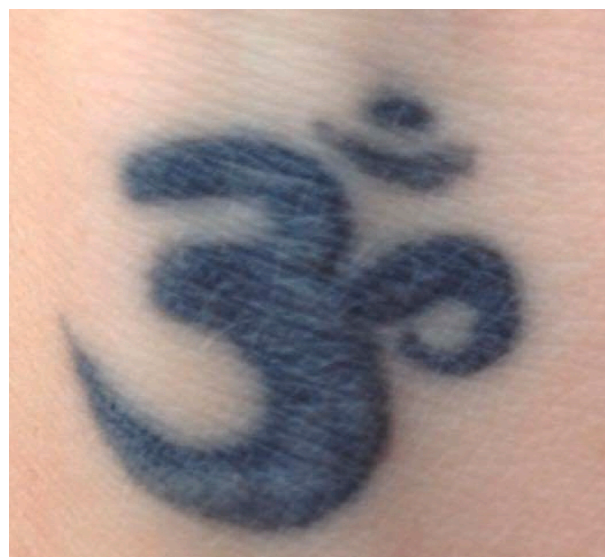


Fig. 2. Bilbo’s Buddhist Om Tattoo.

subject for tattoos:

I wouldn't have a girl's name I don't think. I'd have kids but I wouldn't have a girl's name... I want a portrait of all my kids. If I get it, I'm going to get it across my chest... I wouldn't get a partner's... because you could end up splitting up and having to have it removed (Harry).

Conversely, participants often identified even long-term romantic relationships as potentially ephemeral, with permanent tattoos symbolising commitment to romantic partners often avoided. In a somewhat perverse celebration of this solid–liquid tension, following a significant relationship break up, Sarah acquired a diamond tattoo as a reminder of how ‘tattoos last longer than men’. Within liquid consumer society, bonds between people are under continuous review (Bauman, 2003; Hobbs et al., 2017), meaning any narratives attached to tattoos commemorating persons involved a sense of ephemerality. As Smith and Sparkes (2002: 156) explain, ‘people are not narratively “frozen” as authors of the texts they compose, but rather are editors who constantly monitor, manage, modify, and revise the emergent story’. For example, Alyssa observed how the meanings attached to her candle tattoo–acquired to symbolise her dad's new partner–have changed alongside their transforming relationship:

Like with the candle, as I get to know [dad's partner] more, it means more. Initially... she seemed quite unassuming, but she brought light into my dad's relationship. But as time's gone on, there's been really tough times and she's been the only person who's been like, ‘You can do it’. So it [the meaning of the tattoo] now changes. It's still the same to a degree, but as she's changed, and our relationship has changed, [so has] my attachment to that [the tattoo] (Alyssa).

In sum, whilst tattoos are often considered a more permanent, durable and solid marketplace object (Sweetman, 1999; Veliquette et al., 2006), this first section reveals how they comprise both solid (i.e. enduring) and liquid (i.e. ephemeral) features, thus enabling consumers to navigate solidity and liquidity within their everyday lives. We now further explore consumers' solid–liquid interplays through two extended narratives.

4.2. Chris: ‘There's more stability in what I want’

Chris was a 35-year-old support worker for the homeless. He offered emotionally powerful accounts of the instability faced throughout his life, and his ongoing search for a sense of ‘balance’. Chris has long been involved in high-risk sports such as BMX biking, but his parents were not accepting of such activities and threw him out of the family home when he was 17. Reflecting Bauman's (1996) observation that persons increasingly find themselves on-the-road in liquid modernity, this act of parental distancing pushed Chris out onto the road quite literally. However, unlike professional global nomads who could be considered the ‘tourists’ of liquid times (Bauman, 1996), purposely seeking out new experiences and opportunities across the globe (Bardhi et al., 2012), this extended period of homelessness was not through Chris's own choosing. Instead, he characterises one of Bauman's (1996: 28) liquid modern ‘vagabonds’; a stranger passing through life with no ‘roots in the soil’. Chris's experiences of liquidity here thus contrast with the idea of solidity and liquidity as individual consumer choices (Rosenberg et al., 2023). As Chris explained, ‘I spent about seven years on the road that was just travelling here there and everywhere... I never really felt like I had a home anywhere’.

During his period of homelessness, Chris cut ties with his home, family, and education, echoing Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2017: 592) claim that ‘the homeless lead a very liquid life... they constantly have to move from shelter to shelter, and lack a secure place to keep their few possessions’. He lacked a sense of future, lived moment-by-moment for survival, and sometimes tempted death by behaving recklessly. Although bearing embodied memories of the injuries he endured

through such acts (Scott et al., 2017), Chris's body remained un-inked at this time. However, a couple of major turning points came during his homelessness, where a sense of hopelessness informed his decision to change his life. The first was when he found himself scraping mould off a piece of bread in a cave to survive, which led to emotions Chris had ‘held back for a long time’ to come ‘flooding out’. Chris's experiences reveal how transformative experiences can lead to a heightened sense of reflection, whereby the ‘fog lifts’ on things previously hidden away (Hemetsberger et al., 2019):

During the homelessness there was a point (sighs) I was living down in Devon in the caves, and there was a day where I was hungry. Like I hadn't eaten in about four or five days, and I was sat out the back of this like restaurant trying to scrape mould off a piece of bread. I just like fucking broke man. I started crying and couldn't stop. And I think that everything that I had held back for a long time, too long, all came flooding out (Chris).

The second was meeting another man at a respite centre with whom Chris forged an emotional bond that eventually led to him rebuilding his relationship with his parents:

I went up to a respite care centre... One night... they asked me whether I could do the night duty. I was walking up and down the corridors and I could hear this heart-wrenching crying... And I sat and talked to him for a long time... it was getting light by the time we finished. I came out and again I just dropped on my knees and sobbed. It was heart breaking... I moved in with him like about a week later... It was amazing. No electricity. No running water. We had to get the water off the side of the mountain. It was 50 miles from anywhere. And we broke the TV the night we moved in on purpose like because we figured that we were some awesome people living there and it would be better to talk to each other (Chris).

Chris's references to a life of basic necessity highlight a more fleeting relationship to possessions, such as the TV, chiming with the lightness of liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Indeed, transformative experiences can lead to a ‘release’ of ‘material things and possessions’ which keep people ‘entangled in emotional heritage’ (Hemetsberger et al., 2019: 554). However, precarity can inspire more solid consumption to attain stability (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), and so Chris acquired his first tattoo aged 27, during the process of slowly rebuilding his life. It was a Yin and Yang symbol to represent his often unbalanced life and desire for anchorage to a ‘home’; he noted, ‘...It was kept shabby because I believe in balance and finding balance in your life. And I will never quite find it to a certain extent... hence the messiness of it’. Chris's recognition that his first tattoo symbolises a desired ‘balance’ and his acknowledgment this is probably not achievable, reveals how ongoing tensions between solidity and liquidity in life can become embodied through tattoos.

Although Chris tattooed memories of other significant times into his skin throughout his late 20s and 30s, such as a significant breakup (skull tattoo) and a serious sporting injury (Do Not Revive tattoo), the most important turning point in Chris's life came from meeting his girlfriend, Lizzie, who Chris explains gave him ‘something to live for’. This relationship has inspired Chris's future plans to acquire an oak tree tattoo:

I want an oak tree... There's a place called the White Leafed Oak... It's my favourite place in the world... Because I'm finally with Lizzie... when I'm lying with her in my arms I actually feel like I'm home... Feeling like I belong somewhere... There's more stability in what I want... I want solidity. I'm very loathed to use the word stability because it always sounded boring to me. But certainly I want to be the best man I can be and give Lizzie the best partner she could ask for, you know. And for that I need to be grounded (Chris).

Chris's references throughout his narrative to never feeling as though he had a sense of home resonates with those groups historically acquiring tattoos to attain perceptions of spatial anchorage when on-the-

move, such as sailors and the military (Atkinson, 2003). His consumption of permanent tattoo marks thus enable him to symbolise growing perceptions of ‘stability’ within his life, such as the ‘solidity’ he now wants from his relationship with Lizzie. This contrasts with the idea that romantic bonds are becoming liquified (Bauman, 2003), and instead supports Hobbs et al.’s (2017) finding that many people still value long-term relationships. However, despite seeking greater stability, Chris’s story also reveals how tattoos have helped him retain a more fluid identity if needed, for he is still ‘very loathed to use the word stability’. His tattooed body, therefore, symbolises the fixity and fluidity of life.

4.3. Patricia: ‘Time to sail away from the safe harbour’

Patricia was an Italian DJ in her 40s. Having become ‘restless’ following leaving work to commit to being a mother, a ‘totally unexpected turn’ in her life, which led her on the path to becoming heavily tattooed, was when she became a DJ at 38-years-old:

I remember one night... in Rome. I remember this DJ set. I looked at the console, I looked at the music, and I just thought ‘Shit I want to do this’... I just decided to learn... I’m restless. I need to keep moving on and I need to make sudden changes in my life constantly... Entering the club scene at 38 it’s not so easy... But I just remember I went round a few evenings that I liked... and I started getting to know people and I started giving this mixtape around. And I was booked for a gig one night and it was a success. And basically, from when I thought I actually want to be a DJ, six months later, I was (Patricia).

Patricia always feels she ‘need[s] to keep moving on’, supporting how ‘burdens of ownership’ can elicit desires for newness and liquidity (Rosenberg et al., 2023). However, unlike Chris, Patricia *chose* to live life as a liquid modern ‘tourist’ (Bauman, 1996), and she has a tattoo of a whale swimming away from a lighthouse, to reflect the Mark Twain quote ‘sail away from the safe harbour’. Being a nomadic DJ has led to a newfound sense of freedom, alongside continuous feelings of guilt, reflecting moral mothering discourses which conflict with liquid notions of individualisation, lightness, and mobility (Parsons & Cappellini, 2020). Patricia thus juggles travels as a DJ and her commitment to being a mother in England and experiences ongoing solid–liquid tensions:

When we moved here, initially I basically cut about 80% of my gigs because otherwise I would never be here [England]. And there were always jobs, travelling up and down..., here and there. But I was feeling frustrated basically and sad because I... was not spending enough time with my children; but at the same time I was feeling that I was losing what I just started having (Patricia).

Patricia sees the most important moment in her life as the first ‘re-birthing’ session (breathing therapy) she underwent. Patricia explains how she ‘...spent three days in a kind of limbo where I was sort of scared, tired. And one day I woke up and my life had changed completely... I was like reborn in terms of managing to get rid of things that were a burden’, such as painful past memories and feelings of guilt for putting her needs first. This re-birthing experience led to a newfound appreciation for her body and shifted her sense of temporality; whilst often feeling sad about the past, or anxious about the future, she now tries to focus on the present moment:

...You know the glass with the sand that goes down... If you think about every little piece of sand... it’s either up or down; it’s never stuck in the middle. And every second in your life, it’s either the past or the future and you’re always compromising between your memories, the pain in the past, the happiness in the past, the things that you regret that you haven’t done, or regret having done, or your hopes in the future... And there’s never a moment where it is that very moment in your life... I try to live as much as I can in the present (Patricia).

However, Patricia’s temporal shift towards the present moment does

not mirror Husemann and Eckhardt’s (2019: 1142) notion of consumer deceleration, where consumers seek out slowed-down consumption practices as ‘...a respite from their quick-paced, hectic everyday life’. Her focus on the present is actually accompanied by a sense of temporal acceleration, whereby she considers tattooing a ‘non-stop process’ of marking in-the-moment affects and emotions. Patricia sees life and death as in ‘constant transformation’ and herself as a ‘flow’, encapsulating the instability of liquid identities (Bauman, 2000), which her skull tattoo expresses. She therefore differs from other tattoo consumers who tend to spend more time planning tattoos to avoid potential regrets (Steadman et al., 2018). As Patricia explains, ‘I just follow a feeling. It’s like one day I wake up and a tattoo is in my mind’. She claims not to consume tattoos ‘...to remember something. It’s something that represents me in that moment... things that are happening there and then’. Patricia has tattooed the quote ‘shiver when you see me’ on her body to represent how she felt furious with somebody at the very moment of its acquisition, and the word ‘more’ on her arm to symbolise how at that point in time she wanted more from her life (Fig. 3).

To live within the present, Patricia ‘started to detach from things, and emotions, and persons’, reflecting the lack of ownership involved in liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), and the release of ‘old stuff’ accompanying bodily transformation (Hemetsberger et al., 2019). Yet, Patricia’s consumption of tattoos is not purely liquid, despite her attempts to ‘detach from the idea of memory’. Indeed, since the body is highly mnemonic (Steadman et al., 2018; Steadman et al., 2023), by tattooing her momentary feelings onto the skin, Patricia’s tattoos actually memorialise her past. As Oksanen and Turtiainen (2005: 127) observe, ‘tattoos articulate as memory maps written in flesh’. Patricia has a tattoo of her daughter’s handwriting, another recalling a significant conversation she had with her son, and multiple tattoos created by her tattoo artist friends, all of which remind her of the enduring importance of these relationships. This contrasts with Bauman’s (2003) notion of liquid love. However, Patricia also sees her memories as in a constant state of ‘flow’, and her tattoos therefore align with Bauman’s (2000: 83) understanding of identities as ‘the spots of crust hardening time and again on the top of volcanic lava’, as she can re-narrativise her tattoos over time.

Subsequently, both Chris—whose liquid precarity was not of his own choosing—and Patricia—who to some extent desired a further sense of lightness within life—have not been able to simply consume away the instability, uncertainty, and hopelessness ‘liquid modern darkness’ can bring (Hewer, 2022). Chris’s ‘shabby’ Yin and Yang tattoo symbolises the ongoing sense of imbalance within his life, whilst Patricia’s ‘non-stop process’ of consuming tattoos reflects—and contributes to—the disorientating temporal acceleration associated with liquid times (Bauman, 2000). The marketplace, therefore, does not offer a straightforward panacea from liquid life. Due to the co-existence of solid and liquid features in tattoos, however, they to some extent enabled participants to navigate the complex interplays between solidity and liquidity in their everyday lives.

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1. Theoretical implications

Through an in-depth qualitative study into tattoo consumption, this paper responds to calls for more empirical work on liquid consumption (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020b) and provides two key contributions. First, Bauman’s work is often read as proposing a linear move from solid to liquid societies (Lee, 2011), with literature largely suggesting there has been an enduring move away from solid consumption of the past, towards the liquid consumption of today (Bardhi et al., 2012). More recent work theorises a potential return to solidity (Lee, 2011) or decelerated consumption (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019) to cope with an unstable liquid consumer culture. Extant research, therefore, tends to present relatively polarised discussions of liquid consumption. Bauman and



Fig. 3. Patricia's tattooing of present feelings.

others hint at a 'dialectical bond' between solidity and liquidity (Bau-
man, 2000), a dynamic 'solid-to-liquid spectrum' (Bardhi & Eckhardt,
2017), and a liquid modernity 'pendulum' (Hewer, 2022), while
Rosenberg et al. (2023) foreground how fashion library consumers
oscillate between solid and liquid clothing items driven by their fluc-
tuating desires. A key contribution of our work, is providing detailed
empirical insights into how consumers dynamically navigate the solidity
and liquidity experienced in their lives—from homelessness to heart-
break-through consumption choices, not only in terms of the material
object itself (i.e. a tattoo), but also the narratives consumers weave
around such objects (i.e. shifting tattoo meanings and stories).

Second, our research challenges existing theorisations of tattoo
consumption. Hitherto tattoos have largely been considered a perma-
nent and solid marketplace offering, helping to anchor stable aspects of
consumer identities (Sweetman, 1999), or sometimes trapping con-
sumers into undesirable past selves (Shelton & Peters, 2006). Our par-
ticipants were keen to carefully plan tattoos as expressions of
commitment to more durable things and people in their lives, and
engaged in moisturising regimes to maintain tattoo durability. Yet it was
important that a given tattoo's meanings and narratives could be edited
if necessary, with participants regularly re-narrativising the stories
attached to their existing tattoos. This further reveals the liminal

positioning of tattoos (Patterson & Schroeder, 2010) between fixity and
flow, permanence and ephemerality, and solidity and liquidity;
anchoring memories in ink, but with potential for the feelings, memories
and meanings attached to such etchings to morph over time with the
passage of life.

5.2. Managerial implications

Attention has been directed towards growing markets catering for—
and fuelling—the ephemerality, access-based, and dematerialisation
features of liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), whether car
sharing brands such as 'Zipcar' (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012) or clothing
rental brands like 'Rent the Runway' (Rosenberg et al., 2023).
Conversely, other businesses such as 'Calm' tap into the slow market-
place (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019), offering products such as slow
food experiences (Binkley, 2008), yoga and mindfulness as respite from
liquid acceleration. Our findings, however, uncover more of a dynamic
solid-liquid dialectic, which hold implications for marketing and the
tattooing industry (Table 3).

Marketers face the challenge of understanding how the solid-liquid
dialectic plays out in consumers' 'lifeworlds', to ensure they (co)create
meaningful value outcomes for (and with) consumers (Gummerus,

Table 3
Managerial implications.

Summary of key finding	Marketing implications	Tattooing industry implications	Link to the '7Ps'
Consumers negotiate solid and liquid aspects of their lives through consumption practices	Conduct market research to find out about the solid-liquid interplays most commonly navigated in consumers' lifeworlds to co-create meaningful value outcomes	Offer extended tattoo consultation meetings to learn more about the solid/liquid things in consumers' lives they wish to represent through tattoos Help consumers navigate solid-liquid tensions when deciding on which things in life to symbolise through tattoos and which to omit Offer advice about the most effective tattoo designs to enable consumers to navigate solid/liquid experiences over time	Process People
Consumers can find value in products and services comprising a mix of solid and liquid features	Offer products and services comprising both solid (i.e. durable and stable) and liquid (i.e. ephemeral and digital) options	Provide consumers with the opportunity to fully customise their tattoos to represent solid and liquid things in their lives Promote the rich narratives behind tattoo designs through client case studies shared via social media, tattoo studio websites, and physical/digital tattoo artist portfolios	Product Promotion Physical evidence

2013). Gummerus (2013: 36) indicates the marketer's task '...is not only to look at what customers want from a firm, but to see what customers do in their life sphere, what their daily life is like... and thus assure long-term competitive edge'. We recommend marketers gather intelligence through market research, not only into what their customers buy, but also the solid and liquid interplays most regularly navigated within their lifeworlds, to (co)create products and services that bridge the boundaries between solidity and liquidity. For the tattooing industry specifically, it is advised that tattoo artists offer extended consultation meetings in the tattoo planning and design stages, particularly for larger artwork (e.g. a 'full sleeve'), to learn more about the solid and liquid things in consumers' lives they wish to represent through their tattoo designs. This could also help consumers navigate solid-liquid tensions when deciding on which things in life to symbolise through tattoos, which to omit, and the most effective tattoo design types to enable ongoing solid-liquid interplays and the potential restoring of tattoos over time.

Our findings also demonstrate potential value in creating products and services enabling consumers to navigate interplays between solidity and liquidity through comprising a mixture of solid and liquid features and options. For instance, a memory-based firm could offer families both liquid (e.g. digitally through filming short family documentaries) and solid (e.g. writing retreats to create hardback memoirs) service options to remember their shared lives (Wiseman, 2022). In this regard, tattooing businesses should continue to provide their clients with the opportunity to either customise 'flash' designs offered by the studio, or to design their own tattoos from scratch, thereby ensuring tattoo consumers are offered the opportunity to represent both solid and liquid things in their lives. Furthermore, promotional strategies could be enacted to raise awareness that tattoos are not exclusively solid and permanent (Sweetman, 1999), but can also be restored and symbolise more fluid aspects of life. This could be achieved by creating client case studies showcasing the rich contextual narratives surrounding a tattoo, shared via social media, tattoo studio websites, and within the physical tattoo studio (e.g. tattoo artist portfolios).

5.3. Limitations and future research

Whilst our interview sample is varied in terms of age, sex, and class background (Table 1), our participants were all from the UK (apart from one Italian participant who had lived in the UK for an extended period), and were all white. However, Caldwell and Henry (2020) recognise perceptions of liquidity are shaped by structural influences and dispositions and call for more intersectional investigations into solid-liquid consumption preferences, including the '...incorporation of gender, race, ethnicity and religion' (Caldwell & Henry, 2020: 554). Moreover, Lee (2011) raises the question of whether the idea of liquid modernity can extend directly to other places beyond British society; while, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) suggest little is known about how consumers from different social and cultural backgrounds might manage liquidity in potentially contrasting ways. Subsequently, future research could explore how individuals from a wider range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds experience liquidity and solidity within life and consumption.

Finally, like other liquid consumption studies which often focus on a single consumption domain, whether dating apps (Hobbs et al., 2017), rented clothing (Rosenberg et al., 2023) or cars (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012), this study focused on tattoo consumption. Research that clearly joins in with existing theoretical conversations beyond rich descriptions of a unique empirical context, as we have done here with liquid consumption theory, can generate transferrable theoretical contributions (Fischer & Guzel, 2023), as well as useful managerial insights (Biraghi et al., 2018). However, to further demonstrate how our findings stretch beyond tattooing, future research could explore solidity and liquidity in life through other consumption contexts, such as music, literature, or education—'products' which may comprise material and durable

features, but which are also open to flux and becoming digitised over time.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Chloe Steadman: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration. **Emma Banister:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Dominic Medway:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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