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# SOCIAL MEDIA, PERMANENCE, AND TATTOOED STUDENTS: THE CASE FOR PERSONAL, PERSONAL BRANDING

**Luna Bergh**

UFS Business School, University of the Free State, South Africa  
BerghL@ufs.ac.za

**Jacques Jordaan**

Department of Psychology, University of the Free State, South Africa  
[https:// orcid.org/0000-0003-3931-7091](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3931-7091)

**Elbie Lombard**

Department of Communication Science, University of the Free State, South Africa

**Luzelle Naude**

Department of Psychology, University of the Free State, South Africa  
[https:// orcid.org/0000-0001-6660-8885](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6660-8885)

**Johan van Zyl**

Centre for Development Support, University of the Free State, South Africa

## ABSTRACT

This article explores the perspectives of students regarding tattoos as a form of branding themselves. Various cohort groups of students at a South African university participated by completing a questionnaire (with both quantitative and qualitative components) on their behaviour and perspectives related to tattoos and personal branding. Most participants revealed reasons of a highly personal nature for getting tattoos, and the majority of the participants chose not to share their tattoos via social media platforms. The results are evaluated in terms of current notions of branding, permanence, and social media. It is argued that the social media branding perspectives of this study population strengthen the case for the proposed category “personal, personal branding”—especially in relation to tattooing. This study contributes to understanding the role tattoos play in expressing the identities of individuals in communities.

**Keywords:** social media branding; stability; personal branding; personal, personal branding; tattooed students



## INTRODUCTION

Think of everything you publish on social media as a tattoo. As soon as it's there, it's there. It is really difficult to remove. In most cases you think you've removed it, but it may still be floating somewhere in cyberspace. (Sadleir, as quoted in De Lange 2014, 9)

These are the words of Emma Sadleir, a lawyer who specialises in social media, as quoted in a local newspaper. Sadleir contends that privacy and Facebook do not belong in the same sentence. Following this, the question we ask is: Do tattooed students, social media, and branding belong in the same sentence? More specifically: What is the stance of a subculture (South African students) concerning the sharing of tattoos on social media platforms?

With digitalisation and the rise of social media, businesses started focusing on web presence, emails, review sites, and Facebook membership (Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, and Bloching 2013, 237). For consumers, this is associated with increased active participation and a strong level of networked connectedness (Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, and Bloching 2013, 238). Consumers are empowered not only to receive messages, but also to participate actively via social media by sharing brand and product experiences with friends through status updates (Marwick, 2013). Such actions are immediate and often visible by many other consumers, which can change the intensity and even the meaning of the original message (by diverting, accelerating, or slowing and ending message activity). Consequently, companies are losing control over marketing activities, especially in the area of social and commercial branding focused on brand-related and goal-consistent messages (Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, and Bloching 2013, 238).

In this article, the dyadic interconnectedness of social media is considered, with the focus on the perspectives of tattooed students from a branding point of view. Cognisance is taken of other studies in South Africa regarding branding, tattooing, and identity; however, given their focus on adolescents and gangs, such studies do not form comparative options for our study, which focuses on social media branding among young adults. Thus, the aim of this study is to examine the perspectives of students regarding tattoos as a form of personal branding. To reach this aim, the following research question was considered: What are students' opinions about (a) the public/private nature of tattoos (the sharing of tattoos on social media platforms), (b) the permanence of tattoos, and (c) the function of tattoos as a form of personal branding?

This article is structured around the following theoretical objectives that inform the research question: (a) the social media environment in terms of branding and the revealing of tattoos; (b) perspectives concerning the permanence inherent in tattooing; (c) student views on the potential role of tattoos as a form of social media branding; and, finally, (d) personal, personal branding in light of the preceding objectives. Our argument is that, especially when we focus on the interrelatedness of the notions of

social media, branding, and the permanence of tattoos, the proposed category “personal, personal branding” (cf. Bergh, Lombard, and Van Zyl 2013) is confirmed.

## SOCIAL MEDIA IN RELATION TO BRANDING

In this section, the first concept—social media—is defined, described, and discussed briefly in relation to brands and brand identity, in view of the ultimate aim of considering tattooing among students as a potential form of personal branding in a social media context.

Social media can be defined as communication systems that allow their social actors to communicate along dyadic ties. Consequently, and in stark contrast to traditional and other media, social media are egalitarian in nature (Peters et al. 2013, 282). This dyadic relational interactivity is “the main differentiating characteristic of social media compared to other traditional offline and online media: a social medium is, by definition, multi-way, immediate, and contingent” (Peters et al. 2013, 282). Given the rise of social media, the notion of branding also requires reconsideration in the digitally empowering world.

Branding can be defined as naming a product or service in order to gain an identity, develop a meaning, and project an image (Jooste et al. 2009, 217). One of the most profound changes in the new social media environment is the increasingly blurred line between brands and consumers’ social networks; that is, not only do brands build on consumers’ networks, but consumers also generate brand stories by conversing on their social networks (Gensler et al. 2013, 250). Thus, the social identity of the brand is enhanced, and the brand stories of various actors are knowingly or unknowingly absorbed into the identity of the brand. This implies that social media make associations between brand identity, image, and consumer lifestyle more visible and effective (Gensler et al. 2013, 250). Based on the motive, content, and network structure of messages, these actors (consumers) do not simply receive and forward messages, but also evaluate and alter messages (Peters et al. 2013, 288).

In considering social media in relation to branding, the focus of our analysis is on brand authorship, and more specifically its emphasis on telling stories. Moreover, we focus on the potential of making stories using the power of technology to share, comment on, and distribute stories—here by keeping in mind the way in which trust creates permanence and stability for those that seek these values in tattoos (cf. Bergh, Naudé, and Jordaan 2015).

To capture the many voices in brand authorship enforced by social media, open-source branding occurs when a brand is embedded in a cultural conversation in such a way that consumers gain “an equal, if not greater, say than marketers in what the brand looks like and how it behaves” (Fournier and Avery 2011, 194). Social media

technologies such as blogging, video sharing, social bookmarking, social networking, and community platforms enable open-source branding by empowering consumers.

## PERMANENCE AND THE PARADOXES SURROUNDING TATTOOS AS BRANDING

In this section, tattooing and the relationship between tattooing and branding are considered from an historical perspective that highlights the polysemous meaning potential of the word “branding”.

The history of tattoos reveals a century-old tradition that in itself is marked by complexity and diversity (DeMello 2000). The practice of permanently inking the body can be traced back to the ancient Greeks and their contemporaries (Fisher 2002, 92). The Greek word “*stigma(ta)*” actually indicates tattooing and not (animal) branding (Jones 2000, 4 and 13). As from the mid-twentieth century, tattoos have functioned primarily as rituals or rites of passage, for identification (individually or as part of a group), as talismans, or as decoration (Blanchard 1994).

Cesare (2011, 39) points out that “sporting a tattoo allows the wearer to make a permanent (and often public) declaration of self amidst ever-changing demands.” As forms of (body) art, tattoos present a paradox given the dominant insistence in art circles concerning the reception of a work of art (Law-Viljoen 2017). Although there is an element of desire to reveal tattoos (to show the individual’s stylishness, for instance), there may be an equally profound desire to conceal them (because of the deeply personal meaning of a tattoo or from a deeply embedded social stigma). While the tattooed person may enjoy the positive attention generated by the tattoo among peers, he/she may also feel embarrassed about any negative reactions and rejection, especially from friends or family. Also, even as tattooing becomes more prevalent (Cesare 2011, 3; Fisher 2002, 97), there still appears to be a persistent taboo around tattoos, particularly in job situations (Brallier et al. 2011; Dickson et al. 2014; Fisher 2002, 101; King and Vidourek 2013).

Tattoos can also be compared with cosmetics and clothing that are used to present identities to others. Several authors compare the decision of getting a tattoo with impulse shopping (in a group), although, by definition, tattoos are permanent (Fisher 2002, 100). In respect of this, a distinction has been drawn between fashion “as characterised by continual and systematic change, and those more fixed modes of dress which are relatively static, conservative and resistant to change” (Davis 1985, 22). In turn, Polhemus and Proctor (1978, 16) distinguish between fashion and anti-fashion; they consider tattooing, along with other permanent forms of body modification, as “the ultimate” in anti-fashion and, as such, a means to “maintain the illusion, if not the reality, ‘of social and cultural stability’.”

From an historical point of view and considering the present emphasis on the identification function of tattoos (cf. Cesare 2011), it also follows that tattoos demand a rethinking of the notion of branding. By modifying the body with tattoos, the twenty-first-century individual may be perceived to have chosen to add permanent decoration to his/her body—and, from a Western marketing perspective, may be considered to be self-branded.

## TATTOOED STUDENTS

Our attention now turns to tattoos and the student subculture, which is often equated with the concepts “youth culture” (Ugor and Mavuko-Yevugah 2015) or “waithood”, defined as the “liminal zone between childhood and adulthood” (Ayelazuno 2015, 22). Discussing the daily lives of young people in the broader spectrum of Africa, Ayelazuno (2015, 22) explains that “to be in ‘waithood’ is certainly the most frustrating, stressful, disconcerting, and contradictory experience for African youth, a situation that may make many of them angry and rebellious.” In this context, identity can be regarded as the social positioning of self and other (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 586). Several of the chapters in *African Youth Cultures in a Globalised World*, edited by Ugor and Mavuko-Yevugah (2015), deal with young people’s creativity and resilience as expressed by songs (cf. Manase 2015) and via social media, but not tattoos. The majority of participants in our study were students, but they may already also have been concerned about the high rate of unemployment in the country and on the continent in general, and especially among young people. Yet, and in accordance with other young people on the African continent, the art forms (in this case tattoos) among our participants do not express or protest such concerns directly or explicitly. In contrast, the second term used in the title of this article—“permanence”—denotes something “lasting or remaining unchanged indefinitely, or intended to be so; not temporary” (Oxford South African Concise Dictionary 2013, 877) and emphasises the values and principles captured by the tattooees in our study.

At a Midwestern university, Cheng (2003, 22) found that some instances of tattooing among college students may counteract the postmodern culture of “an all-encompassing flow of fascinating simulations and images” and “overloaded commercialized information and simulations”, as it provides pleasure and variable trendy fashion, with “something real” and personal, specifically due to the pain and permanence. Cheng (2003, 23) concludes that students got tattoos as a form of non-verbal intrapersonal communication, which means that the tattoo is more than a visual signifier open to other people’s interpretation. “So to every tattooee, their tattoo becomes a *personal thing*” (Cheng 2003, 23). This description ties in with Douglas Kellner’s (1995, 242) statement that “postmodern identity is a function of leisure and is grounded in play, in

gamesmanship, in producing an image”, which in turn points forward to the current practice of digital “selfies” (that is, self-portraits in the sense of digital versions of themselves as produced by consumers through social networking platforms). The practice of selfies fits in with Kellner’s (1995, 69) description of visual culture as “fast editing, dazzling high-tech images, and narrative excitement”. To the tattooee, neither selfies nor “ego-shots” (self-portraits taken with an extended arm and hand, usually using a mobile camera) (Tiidenberg 2013, 1) will therefore necessarily represent a form of honest self-expression or empowerment.

The context of digital photosharing may also still represent a context where tattoos are taboo. For example, in a case of unintentional Emotipix publication, a user remarked: “It is a little scary that you cannot delete photos after the fact. I was worried the picture of my tattoo might show too much but it turned out ok” (Cowan et al. 2010, 6–7). In contrast, however, the findings of Cowan et al. (2010) reveal that a small number (7%) of the photos represented gift giving, and that a type of “gift giving that occurred mainly among the non-couples involved disclosing personal information; for example, sharing pictures of pets, tattoos, and of one’s parents’ house” (Cowan et al. 2010, 7). Social media sites encourage image sharing, and digital photography has a privacy advantage in that there is no need for darkroom development nor a professional intermediary (Tiidenberg 2013, 1). However, “cropping, framing, angles; blurring out the background and tattoos ... are all common practices among self-shooters” (Tiidenberg 2013, 4).

Those seeking permanence and stability or those who view tattoos as a form of refuge may also represent those unwilling to share personal tattoos and tattoo designs on social media. In line with our focus on brand authorship, and as Skaar (2015, 70) points out, the increase in plagiarism among online students in recent years across the Western world can be attributed to “the access in [*sic*] digital technology and the Internet”. In our study, the students were approached with these changing contexts, paradoxes, and ambiguities in mind.

## METHODOLOGY

This article is based on an overarching research project undertaken to determine both the scope and communicative value of tattoos among young people on a university campus in South Africa. The participants were members of Generation Y (with ages ranging from 19 to 26), a generation marked by an increased use of and familiarity with communications, media, and digital technologies.

The study was conducted in three stages. During the first stage, undergraduate communication science students, as well as a larger random group and young working adults of the same age, were involved. Next, third-year communication science students recruited fellow students from other departments (including medicine and economic and management sciences). Thereafter, third-year psychology students participated.

Each member of each group anonymously completed a questionnaire adapted for the local setting from one used in international research (Cheng 2003). The questionnaire was available in Afrikaans and English (the official teaching languages on campus) and was adapted slightly during each stage of the research. The questionnaire included questions of a quantitative nature (e.g. How many tattoos do you have?) and questions of a qualitative nature (e.g. Have you already placed a photo of your tattoos on Facebook or another social media platform? Why is that your decision?).

## RESULTS

In this section, the focus is on the results from the surveys and the patterns that emerged, as related to the research question and objectives stated earlier. A more comprehensive discussion of each stage of the research is presented elsewhere (see Bergh 2016; Bergh, Lombard, and Van Zyl 2013; Bergh, Naudé, and Jordaan 2015; Lombard and Bergh 2014).

### Trends regarding tattoos

Communication science students seemed to be more comfortable with having tattoos than psychology students. Moreover, and in contrast to the other groups, the majority of the participants (78.3%) in the latter group did not have tattoos. In all the cohort groups, most participants with tattoos were planning to get more in the future and participants without tattoos were open to considering getting one in future. In all the groups, a very small minority of the participants' parents had tattoos, ranging from none in one cohort group to 6.3 per cent, 8 per cent, and 8.7 per cent in the others. In most of the groups, participants reported that about two-thirds of their tattoos were visible.

### Reasons for getting tattoos

A content analysis of the reasons for getting tattoos is reflected in Table 1. The patterns concerning the reasons for having tattoos mostly corresponded among the various cohort groups.



**Table 1:** Primary reasons for getting tattoos among participants with tattoos

	First cohort group			Second cohort group	Third cohort group
	Communi- cation students: n = 46	Other students: n = 143	Young working adults: n = 23	Communication and other students: n = 537	Psychology students: n = 101
Valued the pain	2	1	0	2	0
No reason	3	0	2	9	0
Fun, cute, cool, just wanted to do it	8	18	4	99	10
To feel young again	2	2	0	0	0
Meaningful, symbolic, stories, special events	14	45	7	184	46
Uniqueness, self- expression	3	10	1	60	15
For attention	1	5	0	16	0
Peer pressure	6	23	2	52	4
Like the designs, body art, decorations	5	20	5	60	16
Personal	1	3	1	11	0
Seems interesting	1	3	0	6	0
Fashion	0	2	1	11	0
Addictive	0	1	0	4	0
Relieves stress	0	3	0	2	0
For improved self- esteem	0	2	0	3	2
Rebelled	0	5	0	3	0
Permanence	0	0	0	15	0
To prove a point	0	0	0	0	4
To overcome fear of needles	0	0	0	0	1
Can be removed in future	0	0	0	0	1
Religious reason	0	0	0	0	2

The category *Meaningful, symbolic, stories, special events* represented the strongest reason for having a tattoo across all cohort groups. The other two categories that revealed strong patterns across all groups were *Like the designs, body art, decorations* and *Fun, cute, cool, just wanted to do it*. Some participants were notably influenced by peer pressure, and in some groups, the category *Uniqueness, self-expression* also featured strongly. Also, relatively few participants chose *For attention or Rebelled* as a reason for a getting a tattoo. The majority of participants considered themselves to be religious. Among the participants without tattoos, many provided religious reasons for not wanting to get a tattoo.

## Opinions regarding the permanence of tattoos

Among some groups, permanence represented a reason for getting a tattoo or not, or regretting having a tattoo. This category also related to decisions concerning social media branding.

For some participants, tattoos were their most permanent possessions. The following statements represent some of these opinions among the first and second cohort groups:

“It belongs to you and no one else.”

“Memorabilia—it is moments captured and painted onto the canvass of my life. My tattoos will live on in the intentions of the universe.”

“Every single one of my tattoos carry a strong story or message that I do not want myself to forget. No matter where I am or how old I am, my tattoos are lessons etched into my skin. They will be with me forever.”

A somewhat different opinion regarding permanence was raised in the psychology group. In line with their field of study, they revealed a more developmental, long-term perspective on permanence in that they aired concerns about making the right choice for something that will last a lifetime, or simply that tattoos are permanent.

## Tattoos on social media platforms

In the last stage of the research, two questions were added to the questionnaire to measure the participants' intention and practice of sharing their tattoos on a social media platform. On both the questions (Have you already placed a photo of your tattoos on Facebook or another social media platform? and Would you place a photo of your tattoos on Facebook or another social media platform?) the majority (59.7% and 58.6% respectively) answered in the negative. Reasons provided for not placing tattoos on social media platforms were mostly that tattoos were considered to be private and personal, that participants did not want to be judged or to show off or “broadcast” their lives, and that they feared potentially negative professional implications. The smaller group of participants who were comfortable with showing their tattoos on profile pictures and

to friends on social media platforms provided reasons such as “love sharing personal moments”, “because they are beautiful”, “proud and share excellent artistic design”, “to put out there that I love body art”, “I am a social being”, and the fact that it is easier to share tattoos on social media platforms than sending photos individually.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In the safe and anonymous situation of this study, participants were willing to share a great deal of information regarding tattoo perspectives, but this does not necessarily translate into the same willingness to share on social media. Remarkably, the majority of participants in our study chose not to share their tattoos via social media platforms. This was confirmed by the fact that many participants did not agree to have photos taken of their tattoos, yet they agreed to an interview; thus, they were willing to communicate, but only when they had some control. Overall, the tattoos were not determined predominantly by tradition, given the small percentage of participants whose parents had tattoos—consequently the potential hesitation to share tattoos on social media (since many of the parents and also grandparents of this age group typically may be active on social media, especially Facebook). Religion was a determining factor among all groups in the decision to acquire a tattoo or not, and may therefore also be a decisive factor in sharing a tattoo via social media.

As was pointed out earlier, the category *Meaningful, symbolic, stories, special events* represented the strongest reason for having a tattoo across all cohort groups. With regard to why consumers tell brand stories, Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011) distinguish three levels of consumer engagement in social media: consuming, contributing, and creating. Related studies show that entertainment is a key motivation for contributing and creating content, together with expressing one’s identity, connecting to others, and empowerment (Gensler et al. 2013, 247–248), and that positive content is shared more often than negative content.

In this study, most participants *consumed* social media platforms such as Facebook through the use of cell/mobile phones, and received information regarding their studies online. In terms of *contribution*, participants contributed a variety of purposes, mostly personal, of tattoos. The expression of identity among these participants, however, does not focus on identity domains that are highly profiled in a materialistic sense in consumer culture, namely a search for “the good life”, happiness, and a perfect body (Dittmar 2008). Often, the life events tattooed in this study related to sad or traumatic events (cf. Bergh 2016). Many participants in our study were *creative*, for instance in designing tattoos as body art and decoration or for self-expression of identity (as reflected in the response from a participant in the first cohort group, “My body is a canvas and I like to show through my outer body who I am inside as an artist”), yet they did not necessarily share creative tattoo designs on social media platforms.

Personal branding requires careful consideration in the context of this article. Rachelson (2010, 76) contends, “Essentially, personal branding focuses on your uniqueness, how you position yourself relative to colleagues and competitors, and how you ‘package’ yourself in an authentic way that makes you stand out.” Our participants’ use of tattoos in this personal way also corresponds with certain principles of effective professional personal branding (Rachelson 2010, 76) in that a tattoo makes the person memorable, has a unique touch, develops a story about the person and his/her life journey, is compelling, and evokes emotional reactions—but in a very personal way, focused on intrapersonal communication and mostly self-image (how the person sees him-/herself) and self-worth rather than image (how others see him/her). Concerning Law-Viljoen’s (2017) observations regarding “the impulse of an artist to repeat”, in this study tattoos are added as a personal story or artistic picture unfolds, and not generally for the sake of competition or as prescribed by culture. This ties in with international findings among students (Cesare 2011), which show that it is no longer so much about the act of getting a tattoo, but about how tattooing is used individually.

A schematic analytical approach proposed in Bergh, Lombard, and Van Zyl (2013) represents a perspective on the use of tattoos in professional personal branding. The related continuum in Bergh, Lombard, and Van Zyl (2013) from an integrated marketing communications perspective (Du Plessis et al. 2003; Jooste et al. 2009) is presented in Figure 1.

*Personal marketing—Personal public relations—Personal branding—Personal, personal branding*



**Figure 1:** Personal branding continuum (Bergh, Lombard, and Van Zyl 2013, 31)

The term “personal, personal branding” refers to the ways in which tattoos are used among the majority of participants in this study. Essentially, the continuum captures the indistinct boundaries evident among the personal branding categories identified from our research. Tattoos among participating students were not used primarily and deliberately for professional or commercial branding. The continuum also depicts North’s (2010) argument that, firstly, although personal branding is embedded in marketing, personal branding cannot be equated with personal marketing, and, secondly, that someone’s personal brand is a combination of that actual person and other people’s perceptions and beliefs about that person. This presents a challenge regarding the visibility or non-visibility of tattoos. Very few participants revealed insight into the marketing or public relations potential of tattoos. This was only evident in statements such as “Tattoos were a sign of being ‘the real deal’ and gave their owners free publicity. So I wanted that too”, and—with regard to sharing a tattoo on social media platforms—“Not afraid to advertise!”

On our continuum, personal branding can include social media branding via tattoos, but personal, personal branding does not include social media branding by means of tattoos. In response to the questions posed to the last cohort group (Would you place a photo of your tattoos on Facebook or another social media platform? Why is that your decision?), there were four (or 3.9%) participants who answered emphatically in the negative by indicating “Never!”, but there were also six (or 5.9%) participants who answered “Perhaps”, while nine (or 8.9%) rather surprisingly indicated that they were not active on social media platforms. Cases such as these can be accounted for in terms of our continuum. Fournier and Avery (2011, 194) argue that in our twenty-first-century paradigm of open-source branding, the focus is on protecting the brand’s reputation, making brand management more similar to public relations. This ties in well with our continuum (see Figure 1) in capturing more generalised, varied branding options in terms of tattoos. It also illustrates a predictable tendency in terms of sharing a tattoo, namely one which becomes increasingly protective and concurrently declining as the tattoo moves from a marketing function to personal, personal branding.

The ultimate goal of branding in the contemporary social environment (Fournier and Avery 2011, 205) is “to create resonant cultural conversations, not simply coat-tail on them ... for managers that create branded artefacts, social rituals, and cultural icons issue invitations to their own ‘parties’ rather than waiting patiently for consumer hosts to invite the brand in.” Fournier and Avery (2011, 193 and 195) reach three conclusions in this regard: (a) “[a] stark truth presents itself: the Web was created not to sell branded products, but to link people together in collective conversational webs”; (b) “[t]he dramatic rise and success of the Internet arguably traces to its delivery against one of the most basic human motivations: the desire to feel accepted, to fit in, and to belong”; and (c) “[a]s more branding activity moves online, marketers are confronted with the realisation that brands are not always welcome in social media. The technology that was supposed to empower marketers has empowered consumers instead.” These conclusions may strengthen the prediction that participants in this study may be more inclined to participate in social media to a certain degree as *people*, but not as *brands*, nor to share their tattoos as brands.

Given the perspectives of young tattooees discussed in this study, it may be especially the authentic story aspect combined with social rituals, a sense of belonging, and the “informal and personal nature” (Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, and Bloching 2013, 239) of social media that could appeal to them and encourage their participation as personally, personally branded actors. This could be mainly in terms of consumption, though. Given that many of their stories involve a sense of sadness and concealed tattoos, they may not be eager to contribute as actors or in terms of their tattoos as personal, personal brands.

The social role a consumer assigns to a brand can affect that consumer’s interaction strategy with the brand (Gensler et al. 2013, 250). As such, the brand may be regarded as a mere acquaintance or be elevated to the status of a friend, with more power to

shape the consumer's thought processes and actions. In the most intimate scenario, the brand may even be considered a family member who becomes an integral part of the consumer's life. The analysis of the results in this study leads us to conclude that the tattoos representing the personal, personal branding of the participants are closer to them than any brand, even their own personal brand in other respects (such as a story cloth, as explained by Van der Merwe [2014]). An example of this is one response from the second cohort group: "All of my tattoos have symbolic meaning. I got them, because they made me feel closer to people I hold close to my heart."

For some of the participants, permanence would also be seen as a determiner of the role assigned to a brand, given examples such as the following: "I love body art and because tattoos are meaningful and permanent unlike other stuff in life that fades (i.e. friendship and relationships)" and "I wanted to have my daughter's face on my body for eternity." For some of the participants, however, the permanence involved in the scenario of everything on social media being like a tattoo may be negated by the associated lack of privacy, control, and/or proximity. What should also be kept in mind for this group in terms of the context of social media networks (Peters et al. 2013, 288) is that social roles are neither given nor permanent in such networks.

In their advice concerning building a strong brand via social media, Poeppelman and Blacksmith (2014, 115) recommend that "crafting a biography can also be an important part of developing your identity. A biography can help tell a story about yourself in the way you want it to be told." The participants in this study embody this advice; yet for the majority this is done in a very personal way and often via concealed tattoos. The majority of the participants are actually devoted to their brand in an ideal way, in the sense that they are committed to it full time and, moreover, permanently (and thus consistently) via their tattoos, yet often in a private, intrapersonal way. Personal, personal branding is evidenced by the findings, given that many of our participants do not want to increase the visibility of their brand (and therefore conceal their tattoos so that they are not easily noticed), share their tattoos predominantly with friends and family via social media, acquire new tattoos only occasionally and concurrently with a life story element or new artful design, do not compete for attention, are not branded professionally or commercially, and clearly represent a refined subcategory of personal branding.

## CONCLUSIONS

In a postmodern context and an era of instant messaging, many young people in this study seek permanent, meaningful signs and resort to the ancient language and art of tattoos. In a changing environment, innovation and creativity are often keys to survival. In our study, innovation and creativity as manifested in tattoos are not strictly speaking used in this sense, nor for commercial or social media branding reasons, but rather in the preservation of self and the celebration of memories, art, and youth, and as a token

of permanence. Although none of the respondents indicated that they use tattoos as an antidote to the digital world or to counteract social media, a new category, “permanence”, did emerge as a reason for having a tattoo among the second cohort group. Permanence is a key reason that guides different perspectives among the participants—especially at the starting point of deciding to acquire a tattoo or not—yet it is not necessarily or explicitly stated as a motivation for sharing or refraining from sharing tattoos online. Among the participants the main reason for not sharing tattoos on social media was the personal and private nature of their tattoos, best described as an example of personal, personal branding.

The complexity and variety of students’ perspectives regarding tattoos as a form of personal branding are best expressed on a continuum that captures a variety of branding categories. On this continuum, the terms “social media”, “branding”, and “tattooed students” can be integrated. These conclusions are reached based on the characteristics of social media, the permanence inherent in tattooing, our participants’ reasons for tattooing, patterns in tattoo use, and narratives or—specifically, in our case—personal, personal brand stories.

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