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**Subcultural Boundary Maintenance in a Virtual Community for  
Body Modification Enthusiasts**

**Abstract**

While it has been suggested that tattoos and piercings have gone mainstream, there remains a body modification subculture dedicated to more extreme forms of modification than permitted by the majority of society. I present data from an ethnographic study of the subculture, focusing on various attempts to uphold group boundaries in a virtual community designed for body modification enthusiasts. As the website began to shift away from its subcultural roots, members increasingly criticised the new administration and mainstream body modifiers. Emphasising the social distance between themselves and those with discretely modified bodies, members of the subculture ultimately abandoned the online community they helped build in order to maintain embodied group boundaries.

**Keywords**

body modification, subculture, tattoo, virtual community, virtual ethnography, virtual flows

## **Introduction**

The growing number of Westerners participating in voluntary body modification, especially tattoos and piercings, has led some scholars (DeMello, 1995; Kosut, 2006) to suggest that the practice has moved out of the shadows and into the realm of mainstream acceptability. While women and highly educated individuals have increasingly found it acceptable to modify their bodies (Irwin, 2001; Sanders, 1988), not all body modifiers are willing to have their work on permanent display. With few exceptions, only discreet modifications that are easily hidden (e.g., shoulder, ribs, legs) are acceptable for mainstream individuals. Rather than pleasing the visibly modified (e.g., those with tattoos on the hands, neck and/or face) members of the body modification subculture discussed herein, the growing, albeit, selective acceptance of body modification has driven them to sharpen group boundaries. The following article is concerned with how a subculture uses virtual spaces in order to maintain group boundaries. The body modification subculture cannot be fully experienced online, but the internet does play a role in enhancing one's own subcultural status. Many users of social networking sites bounce around multiple virtual spaces in an attempt to solidify and position the self (Adler and Adler, 2008). Like a group of seasonal nomads, participants were ultimately willing to use and then flow away from the virtual space for body modifiers discussed below once it no longer suited their needs of maintaining and

enhancing their embodied culture and experience. Moreover, the group's online discourse (consisting of both written texts and images) combined with its willingness to relocate to another virtual space in order to keep unwanted individuals from crossing the subculture's boundaries.

### **A Virtual Space for Social Outsiders**

This article is the result of an ethnographic study of the internet site ModMagazine.com<sup>1</sup>, or ModMag. ModMag is a site designed for those with an interest in body modifications—including tattoos, piercings, brands, scarifications and subdermal implants<sup>2</sup>. Although the term 'body modification' could potentially include any intentional alteration to one's body, it should be noted that users of the website had a more restrictive interpretation of the term. This article's working definition of body modification, therefore, does not include practices such as weight loss, body building or plastic surgery. Founded in North America, ModMag

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<sup>1</sup> Names of websites and users have been changed to assure confidentiality of participants. Information from blogs and interviews, however, is presented with few, if any, edits to maintain the discourse in its "natural" setting.

<sup>2</sup> Subdermal implants are silicone (and similar man-made materials) objects inserted under the skin that allow wearers to have 3D modifications. Initially taking the form of beads or horns, they now include shapes mimicking traditional tattoo styles, such as swallows or hearts and daggers.

is a predominately English-speaking site with users from around the globe. Most users come from Australia, Canada, the UK or the US, but nations like Brazil and Germany are also represented. The majority of users are mainstream individuals with discreet modifications, and members of the subculture that founded the site are now the numerical minority. There are numerous subcultures that incorporate body modification into their symbolic repertoire (e.g., bikers and prisoners), but the subculture referenced in this study is built solely upon body modification (D'Amico, 2008; DeMello, 1995).

ModMag is comprised of several sections designed to support its mission of documenting and appreciating body modification, including the photo galleries which make up the largest portion of ModMag. All photos are submitted by site members. Users may submit stories about their body modification experiences, and the site also hosts a body modification-themed wiki. Finally, ModMag contains a section titled Mlog, which administrators use to highlight modifications deemed to be particularly interesting or of the highest calibre. Resembling infotainment websites (e.g., Yahoo!), Mlog combines short articles written by ModMag staff with pictures of body modifications. Users are able to comment on the Mlog postings, offering both compliments and critique.

Linked to ModMag is an online community called ME, which is only accessible to registered users. In order to gain access to ME, individuals must submit pictures or stories

of their own body modifications. For each submission, members receive site access for a set amount of time (e.g., one month for a picture of a nostril piercing). Alternatively, one may purchase a membership for a nominal fee (the cost for a six month membership is \$10). Many members disapprove of the fee option despite management claims that the money is needed for the site's maintenance. The introduction of a pay-for-access system was particularly despised by members of the subculture, who perceived it to be an attempt to exploit body modification for profit. Whereas many users have middle class roots and/or aspirations, members of the subculture have working class/poor backgrounds. Indeed, those placing themselves within the subculture often struggle financially and must barter or sacrifice for new modifications; this also contributed to the negative reception of paid membership. Regardless of how one obtains a membership, all members must have at least one body modification prior to receiving an account. Members of ME vary from those with nothing more than a nostril piercing to those whose bodies have been modified from head to toe.

Similar to other social networking sites, ME allows users to customise their personal pages using HTML. Most pages include pictures of the member, a list of current and previous body modifications, and a personal blog. In addition to photos, which are used to substantiate offline participation in body modification, the site norm of having a buddy

list with links to one's favourite members creates an atmosphere in which the online presentation of self is more likely to be an accurate presentation of the offline reality (Ellison and boyd, 2013). There are also numerous forums covering a wide variety of topics, including modification and non-modification issues. Examples of forums related to modification issues include one forum in which new piercers can seek advice about piercing techniques and another in which people with/people who want to have lip plates discuss the finer points of getting/maintaining the stretched piercing. Forums dedicated to non-modification issues include one for fans of Seinfeld and another where Christians can chat with other Christians. Many members who are active in the asynchronous forums further personalise their page by placing buttons in their About Me section that link to their favourite forum. Lastly, there is a messaging function that allows members to privately contact each other. The messages may serve as both synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication, depending upon whether or not both users are currently logged into the site. Using other ModMag sections sparingly, I concentrated on the data available on the ME site, as this was the space where discourse focused on boundary creation and maintenance, and where challenges to this discourse were most likely to occur.

With the rising popularity in body modification, the fact that an individual has a tattoo or piercing does not necessarily mean that they are interested in a subculture based

on body modification. Using ME members in the study presented a highly concentrated pool of people who are both visibly modified and interested in the culture surrounding modification. The benefits of increased access to the relatively small number of visibly modified Westerners (Laumann and Derick, 2006) outweigh the fact that utilising the virtual community excluded visibly modified people without internet access. The decision to focus on visibly modified people is not an arbitrary one, nor is it solely a result of my own hand and neck tattoos. Participants privileged the placement of modifications on always-visible body parts; the size and amount of modifications were of less importance. By distinguishing between visible and discreet modifications, participants mirrored Turner's argument that there is something inherently different about visible tattoos that cannot be denied in public and concealable tattoos that act as 'removable adornments' (1999: 47).

## **Methods**

I began this twelve month ethnographic study after three years as an active member of ME. My previous involvement with the site helped me become familiar with the "technical aspects of online communication and social norms," which is a critical step in the analysis of participant actions (Kendall 2000, 257). Given that I was already active on ME prior to

this study, the participant observation is more appropriately termed observant participation. Hughey (2008) invoked this term to emphasise the fact that he was initially a participant in the site and that he intended to continue his participation after research concluded. For Hughey, his primary status of participant offered better insight than could be achieved by a scholar who was merely there for research purposes, and I suggest my familiarity with ME made it the best setting for me to conduct a study on the body modification subculture. While the research site happened to be a virtual one, it is important to note that on- and offline realities are not inherently disparate (Hine, 2000). On the contrary, applying the principles of ethnographic research to the online setting allowed me to assess the social interactions of an embodied culture.

Multiple users expressed concern when asked to participate in a social research project, yet my visible modifications and previous experience as a tattoo shop employee eased their initial concerns about being misrepresented in an academic study. Similar to Kendall (2002), my verifiable time commitment to this online community showed participants that I would not under- or misrepresent the qualitative nature of their social space. While I did not conceal the fact that I was conducting research, I recognised the need to minimise my researcher status. Accordingly, I did not regularly discuss the research on my user page. I conducted interviews only when observant participation left noticeable

voids. For example, one participant was active in forums and commented on other users' blogs, but rarely posted his own blog entries. Using an informal interview to gather important details about the participant's engagement within the subculture allowed me to keep the participant in the study. Public areas of the website (frequented by both visibly and discreetly modified individuals) and personal blogs provided ample information, and I only had to conduct semi-structured interviews with five of the thirty-nine visibly modified users who granted me permission to use their blogs for this study. The final thirty-nine participants came from a pool of eighty-two contacted users. The owner of the website also granted me permission to conduct research, but was uninterested in an interview.

It is important for ethnographers to incorporate artefacts such as photographs (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), especially when the study involves the modification of the body. In addition to written data, photographs of modifications play a critical role in developing a sense of community on ME. Commentary on user photos of provided useful information, such as what placement and type of modifications were most desirable for members of the subculture. What members of the subculture wrote about mainstream modifiers shed light on subcultural responses to the mainstreaming of body modification and how social boundaries are created, maintained and challenged.

## **A Subculture Goes Online**

ModMag gained popularity within the body modification subculture a decade before Myspace and Facebook were launched. Though open to everybody with an active interest in body modification, ME and ModMag established a reputation for being a virtual meeting place for those interested in non-normalised forms of body modification. Many participants expressed an awareness of other social networking sites dedicated to tattoos and piercings, but ME's reputation at the onset of this study had drawn to it a virtual flow of extreme body modifiers. In the words of AussieChips, ME 'appeals to a subculture/community which is looked down upon from the masses as freaks or weirdos.' Combined with a later comment on extreme modifications that are 'illegal in many areas/countries,' this quote from AussieChips indicates the primary group of concern within ME. Despite the large number of people with discreet modifications on ME, participants were primarily interested in the site as a tool for interacting with other visibly modified individuals. Though participants had previously lived life without voluntarily and visible body modifications, they now qualitatively differentiated between their modified selves and those engaged in discreet modifications. Similar to self-injurers and johns, whose deviant body practices create social barriers in the offline world (Adler and Adler, 2008; Blevins and Holt, 2009), the extreme body modifiers in this study sought online relationships with like-minded individuals. This

could be observed within users' buddy lists, as over two-thirds of all participants' buddies were visibly modified and only six participants had more buddies with discreet modifications than buddies with visible modifications. Spending more time online following and interacting with visibly modified users served as a form of subcultural reproduction, as participants were able to 'gain insights into how their peers perform subcultural selves' (Williams and Copes, 2005: 68).

Participants were interested in other ME users who were members of the body modification subculture and used these relationships to further their own subcultural capital. Professional tattoo artists and piercers, for example, often used ME as an arena for talking shop, including a private forum promoting advanced piercing techniques that could only be accessed after one's job was verified. By controlling access to the forum, members of the subculture attempted to prevent knowledge contributing to one's authentic standing from being uncovered by members of the outgroup (i.e., discreetly modified people). This knowledge of subcultural practices is part of one's subcultural capital, a term Thornton (2005) coined when applying Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital to subcultures. The non-stagnant nature of subcultural capital allows members to maintain subcultural boundaries by altering what are considered acceptable indicators of group membership (Force, 2009), a process Bourdieu (1984) highlighted when discussing how shifting educational

qualifications of French citizens necessitated changes to the cultural capital of the French elite.

Several of the professional tattoo artists also provided links to their place of employment on their personal site. This encouraged other users to flow away from ME and towards other virtual spaces in order to further verify the authenticity of the participant. Despite the variety of information and destinations offered across the ModMag sites, such round trips reveal that the site could not satisfy all of the subculture's online need. Participants would ultimately take a one-way trip away from ME, but the virtual flows to and from ME earlier in the study actually strengthened the site.

Workers employed in the body modification industry (referred to herein as industry workers) also created photo galleries with pictures of modifications they performed in order to add to stocks of subcultural capital. While some galleries were designed to display the high level of one's piercing or tattooing abilities, others were used to present one's willingness to perform unique modifications. One practitioner from Central Europe, Abstrakt, posted and discussed pictures of minimalist tattoos and scarifications he performed. Upon noting that his style of linking minimalist art with tattooing was one of a kind in his country, Abstrakt was complemented by others who were visibly modified. Stasi's photos of dot work and abstract line tattoos similarly resulted in praise from other

subcultural members, especially those residing in North America, where this approach to tattooing is rare. By presenting their distinctive work, Stasi and Abstrakt were able to establish elite status for themselves within the body modification subculture at an international level.

For others, the posting of pictures served to increase one's subcultural capital. T-Bone used his pictures in order to further his piercing skills by requesting critiques from other professionals. Upon posting a picture of an uncommon surface piercing performed on a friend, he mentioned struggling with the new technique. Other members responded with praise for his first attempt at that particular piercing, which served to legitimise his role in the community and his attempts to further his skills. T-Bone also received comments explaining the techniques employed and jewellery selected by others when performing the same piercing, an exchange contributing to the transformation of cultural knowledge from older to younger, or more experienced to less experienced, subcultural members. Comments also affirmed the practices as appropriate within the group.

In addition to pictures of modifications, which helped locate individuals within the subculture, written texts also served an important function for participants. For Bloodstain, an IT professional, ME was most important for granting the opportunity to 'have genuine conversations and share interests with those of this community.' The chance to discuss

body modification and life issues without the fear of being ridiculed in one's offline life was most important for those not working in the industry, as they were unable to withdraw from disapproving members of the mainstream to the same degree as those working with others who were visibly modified. Such participants mirrored Blevin and Holt's (2009) Johns, who found an online community offering a reprieve from the negative social sanctions accompanying their offline bodily practices. Baltimore Bunny considered ME 'my last safe place where I could express myself and just be me.' The employee of a government agency, Baltimore Bunny viewed ME as an outlet for escaping the 'too conservative' bureaucracy in which she was frequently located while offline. While participants had the added benefit (lacked by Johns) of having an offline subculture, all experienced times of physical isolation from the subculture. Whether temporarily isolated because of work, travel or other real world impediment, participants were able to find (emotional) support for their offline lifestyle in the virtual space of ME.

Some participants used the blogging function to gather opinions of other heavily modified individuals regarding future modifications. Unsure whether or not he should stretch his septum piercing during the winter, Mosaic wrote, 'Septum seems rather settled at Oga at this point. Texas did it some good. Time to stretch to 00? Or ride out the winter at 0? Can't decide.' Referencing the pain and lengthier stretching process accompanying the

cold weather, Luger responded, 'Ride out the winter at zero man. Winter's a horrible time for stretching and a few extra months will only make it easier when the time comes.'

RocknRollMelissa, a relatively new member of the subculture, also sought guidance while considering stretching her nostrils. While she did not want nostril jewellery so large that it would deform her nostrils (e.g., 'nostril droop'), she desired nostril piercings that were larger than the nostril piercings encountered in the mainstream. In asking if 'you guys think 8g is respectable,' RocknRollMelissa revealed her desire to be accepted as a legitimate member of the subculture. It is interesting to note the combination of RocknRollMelissa's statement making it clear that she wants to have an appropriate piercing for a member of her subculture with an expressed unwillingness to stretch her nostrils as large as others. Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1990) found that subcultural members who are too willing to fulfil all tasks or wear all symbols within a subculture's repertoire may be rejected as inauthentic. By drawing a line, RocknRollMelissa showed that she was not a zealous pretender. Her authenticity was then substantiated by other members who supported her decision not to stretch beyond an eight gauge piercing. While this dialog on authenticity indicates that this subculture does not want to be agglomerated with the larger culture, it shows that it still seeks legitimating at a community level (McLeod, 1999; Williams and Copes, 2005). Moreover, it also reveals the fact that subcultural members are not

instantaneously imbued with all of the subcultural capital they will need throughout their subcultural careers. Rather, subcultural capital is gradually built up as one gains and maintains membership in the subculture.

### **Criticising Mainstream Body Modifiers**

Texts critical of mainstream modifiers were also widespread, and they assisted in the boundary maintenance process. Mocking incorrect argot helped participants highlight boundaries by showing the ME members who used those terms that they did not belong to the ingroup, because they lacked the requisite subcultural capital<sup>3</sup>, which includes an awareness of appropriate talk/language (Williams, 2007). An example of participants mocking the incorrect argot of mainstream body modifiers was provided by Cheddar when she posted the incorrect names for piercings used by some of her customers and asked other users to guess which piercing was meant. Confused by her clients' improper terminology, Cheddar asked, 'Who thinks of this stuff??' Luger also mocked incorrect argot by posting a

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<sup>3</sup> Given the geographical diversity of ME users, participants were not concerned with the development of a highly specified argot. In other words, users were granted linguistic leeway based upon geographical differences. American users discussing 'microdermals,' for example, did not criticise Australians using the term 'skin divers' for the same body modification.

conversation he had with a young woman desiring to stretch her ears. Several users with visible modifications laughed at and praised his sarcastic comment that the client would 'have sick gauges in no time.'

Some industry workers also used ME to express frustration with their mainstream clients. For example, piercers and tattoo artists criticised clients for being more interested in receiving a cheap tattoo or piercing than a good tattoo or piercing. While some admitted to having been interested in cheap modifications of low quality in the past, they did so while mocking their previous thought process as immature and/or ignorant. This served to distance the now-modified individual from the previously unmodified self, effectively erasing the trail of one's transition into a visibly modified member of the subculture. Another source of critique of those with concealable modifications was their perceived lack of creativity. Bethany expressed her frustration over the 'dumb shit' she was regularly forced to do instead of more unique piercings that could be submitted to a piercing competition. Jamie is a retired piercer who created the 'Dumb Customers' forum for other body modification professionals. The forum's description was permanently located at the top of its welcome page and encouraged users to 'to bitch, rant and ridicule some of the asinine or insulting comments and questions we get.' Despite the forum's small target audience, it was one of the most frequently contributed-to forums, indicating the level of

frustration industry workers had with mainstream modifiers. Participants revealed their desire to remain a distinct subculture when they used their internet presence to complain about mainstream individuals. In contrast to Wilson and Atkinson's (2005) Straightedgers, who used their online presence to boost their offline image and created greater mainstream acceptance, my participants often used the internet to identify and exacerbate real world divisions.

### **Conflict with Other Users**

The use of forums and blogs to criticise the generalised other and discreetly modified individuals met offline was supplemented by direct conflict with other ME users who were not members of this subculture. Though less frequent, direct conflicts were referenced by both participants and others active on the site. While such conflicts were harmful to the harmony of the virtual community, they strengthened the subculture's boundaries. Some participants acknowledged ongoing conflicts with other users in their blogs, but chose not to list names in order to avoid violating the site's terms of service (TOS) agreement.

Website administrators, including BossLady, regularly scanned new entries for conflict between users and maintained a forum that listed expelled users and their TOS violations.

The threat of being removed from ME led most participants involved in a conflict to carry

out their negative interactions via instant message in order to prevent the conflict from being discovered by administrators.

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

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

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

The quotations from Pillpopper and others in this article exemplify participants’ preference for a certain style of language. It should be noted that quotes were selected for thematic relevance instead of shock value, and such vulgarity was commonplace in the

writings of my participants. Given the working and lower class backgrounds of participants, it could be argued that such language is the result of social class. According to Bernstein, 'the normal linguistic environment of the working-class is one of relative deprivation' (1960: 276). In other words, working class individuals like Pillpopper turn to cussing in order to compensate for their limited linguistic abilities. It may, however, be more beneficial to consider to role of vulgarity as a choice of style in boundary maintenance. Often an indication of group membership, one's language use may not necessarily be the result of unwilling social influences but an active attempt to fit in with a group (Guy, 1995). Not only can speech be a by-product of a social order, it can be used to create a social pecking order. In addition, language may be an important part of an individual's or group's style (White, 1992). The style of vulgarity displayed in participants' quotes may then be an attempt to solidify subcultural boundaries and the pecking order within the ME community, where only those willing to approach or challenge members like Pillpopper with the same style may contribute to the group's dialog.

### **Maintenance Through Abandonment**

Users increasingly complained about the degradation of their virtual community throughout this study. One repeated complaint was that ME transformed into a pornographic site

displaying sparsely modified, and sparsely dressed, bodies. Within a blog entry titled 'ME evolved for the worse,' T-Bone criticised the website's officials for the changing emphasis:

Just want to say that I think it's bullshit that I'm expected to pay to see pictures of standard, non genital piercings, but there is all kinds of hardcore genital torture/mods on Mlog for free... As someone who has supported ModMag and ME for the last 11 years and have seen it change from an educational website about body modification and contained a devoted community of like-minded people into what it is today...It's truly disheartening.

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

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

As the site began to promote sexually explicit material over modification-related material, it became increasingly common for users with few modifications to post explicit photographs, a ritual that was considered to fall outside community norms among participants. Others also critiqued this trend, but directed their frustration towards users instead of administrators. Jamie, for example, considered the "young girls on ME that put up nude and other saucy photos" to be the primary culprits. RocknRollMelissa also spoke out against these female users, writing, "I hate when girls...have pictures of them holding their tits and not for modification reasons." RocknRollMelissa's statement indicates that

she would accept the posting of sexually explicit photographs if the photographs were meant to display body modifications. Pictures with gratuitous nudity, however, were discredited in much the same way as body modifications that were used as attention getting mechanisms.

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

SO ME sucks nowadays, right? I mean that is what everyone says it would seem. Checking my buddy updates gives me a hint why. Of the 86 friends I have in my ME [friend list], 10 have updated in the last 24 hours. 2 in the last 12 hours... So ME sucks cause no one updates? How about updating? I know it is silly sometimes and we just talk about boring crap, but get it out. Use it as a diary, vent! Talk about that new tattoo or piercing you got. New jewelry? Post it. I know you fuckers have done/got these things, you show me when I see you in person. Or post it on Facebook cause it is easier. Big deal... Don't be a quitter.

Another participant exemplified the decreasing activity levels discussed by Mosaic. Jamie was one of the most active members in the years prior to this study and, as the study began, she regularly posted multiple entries per day. Following the site's update, however, Jamie

only posted three to four times per week. Still, Jamie's page became the third most visited page, which may be another indicator of decline in activity across the board.

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

The changes in structure and content implemented as part of ModMag's redevelopment contributed to its perceived demise. Website administrators were scrutinised for their decision to temporarily go offline in order to make (unrequested) changes to the site, and a delayed relaunch added to participants' frustrations. Jamie, the changed format in comment forums for user blogs became a reason for her decreasing activity. Prior to the updates, users had the option of receiving a message whenever another user posted a response in the same comment forum, and this encouraged further interaction among participants. The removal of this function, however, caused Jamie and others to forget

which blogs were commented on, leading to fewer exchanges between users. Mosaic criticised the new blocking function for making ME resemble Facebook, where only the pages of those who accept friend requests are visible. According to Mosaic, this reduced the likelihood of making new connections with other users. Others became upset as ME began to mimic the terminology of Facebook's messaging system. Participants mentioned their preference of ME over Facebook prior to the restructuring, and ME's decision to imitate Facebook was poorly received. Roughly half of all participants critiqued ME in response to changes in the user interface. Comparisons between ME and Facebook show that participants were already familiar with other social networking sites. Participants who wished to maintain a web presence during the lingering shutdown were, therefore, already in a position to revisit those sites and re-examine their potential benefits. These virtual flows increased in the following months as participants became more willing to seek out other virtual spaces that might help maintain their subcultural connections.

Many participants threatened to leave ME because of the changing structure, composition and/or activity level, and many followed through with these threats by deleting their accounts. What began as a slow trickle in the month prior to the site's update became a noticeable stream by the conclusion of this research, as 20 of 39 participants left the site in the months following the relaunch. Bloodstain was one of the members to abandon ME,

despite having free lifetime access for his tattoo of the ME logo. The changes in ME were not perceived as insignificant, and he withdrew from the virtual community once so closely associated with his own identity that he was willing to permanently alter his body in its honour. When asked why he left ME, C-Lo responded:

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

As this quote reveals, the unforgivable change in ME was a shift in its purpose. Users like C-Lo abandoned the site once they felt it was no longer primarily a resource pertaining to body modification. Rather than being focused on the subculture, ME became focused on the individual, making it less appealing to members of the body modification subculture seeking a community form that would enable them to validate their subcultural status. In other words, ME's expansion caused participants to experience first-hand what many of Watson's (1997) Phish.net users learned; namely, increasing site enrolments inevitably lead to less intimate/sincere communication. As participants felt they were no longer able to discuss the same things in the same manner they once did, ME began to resemble the expanded Phish.net-- many long-standing members simply left. Watson's Phish.net study was conducted at a time when, for many people, if not most, 'virtual community' insinuated that the connections and commune-ing taking place online were not genuine. In

the nearly two decades since then, the virtual is no longer stigmatised as less than. For example, people of all ages and backgrounds now interact online in social networks, and online dating no longer maintains the same stigma it did even ten years ago. Therefore, whereas Watson's participants' decision to leave the site may have contemporarily been seen as evidence that virtual communities lacked the essence of true community, the current acceptability of virtual community and relationships leads to an updated and different interpretation of the similar situation among my participants. The decision to leave their virtual space does not mean that the space is insignificant. Rather, it suggests that online spaces have become more like offline spaces, whose social meanings and occupiers continually evolve.

The willingness of participants to either leave ME or reduce activity levels calls into question the statements made by ModMag administrators that the site was a leader in the body modification subculture. Although users withdrew from ME en masse, there is no indication that such action meant withdrawing from body modification and the subculture surrounding it. Whereas the demise of an online community may result in users disassociating from the social roles and relationships developed therein (Adler and Adler, 2008), the visibly modified people in this study took steps to remain committed to their culture outside the virtual confines of ME. Participants leaving ME typically posted

departing messages on their page with contact information so that connections made on ME could be maintained, indicating a desire to remain active within the group of heavy modifiers. Dick Tracy noted his intent to remain in contact with individuals met via ME by stating that he felt ‘most of the people that I used to stay in touch with on here are now my friends on facebook... and that really negates my need for ME anymore.’ Though there exist other social networking sites designed for body modifiers, users chose to relocate to other virtual spaces where they might network. Complaints about ME from participants continued throughout the duration of the this research and it is conceivable that ME will increasingly be neglected by heavily modified individuals, turning itself from the host site for the subculture to the site that helped the subculture strengthen its networking capabilities. Despite experiencing an exodus of subculture members, it should be noted that the site has not experienced the ‘swan song’ predicted by Luger, as membership numbers increased during the study. ME did not collapse or die as some participants suggested, however it was increasingly viewed as a dead zone for the more active members of the body modification subculture. Like gentrification in an inner-city neighbourhood, whether or not the changing make-up of ME is a positive development depends upon one’s point of view. For the mainstream users with middle class backgrounds and aspirations, the site continues to become more appealing. Similar to the manner in which the disadvantaged are

squeezed out of gentrifying neighbourhoods, the non-normative participants lost control of this virtual space and could no longer recognise the space as their own. Yet, the fact that the more extreme community of visibly modified individuals has been diminished does not mean there is no longer a community occupying this virtual space. On the contrary, like a trendy neighbourhood filling with respectable young professionals, the virtual space is merely occupied by a different community that is more palatable to the mainstream. The extreme modifiers on the wrong side of this virtual gentrification are then left to find a new locale for their community.

The shifting composition of site users resulted in participants turning to other internet spaces. Interestingly, such participants preferred to congregate on sites widely used within the mainstream rather than to remain on ME, where they would be associated with the people with concealable modifications who infringed on their space. Accordingly, participants indicated that the new ME users were not a part of their ingroup. One possible explanation for participants' willingness to leave ME for mainstream sites such as Facebook is that they may not be as likely to be lumped together with discreetly modified individuals in those spaces, diminishing the risk of group boundaries being misperceived by outgroup members. Turning to mainstream websites reveals the subculture's desire to separate itself from closely related outgroups (e.g., people with concealable modifications).

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

## **Conclusion**

Although ME is officially a site welcoming anybody who has modified their body, participants distanced themselves from mainstream body modifiers by excluding them from buddy lists and criticising them in blogs. Frustration with the administration's shifting focus away from heavy and extreme modifications and towards (sexually explicit) members with few and unexceptional modifications led many members to leave ME for popular social networking sites like Facebook. Though such virtual relocation may seem contradictory, it shows that the closely related outgroup of mainstream body modifiers is the greatest threat to the ingroup's sustainability.

The unexpected site relaunch provided valuable information about the role of the internet in the maintenance of subcultural boundaries. Despite their previous affinity for the specific virtual space of ME, as evidenced by some members' willingness to permanently mark their bodies with the ME logo, participants readily and rapidly abandoned the site once the process of virtual gentrification made it clear that it was no longer the optimal location for maintaining their subculture. By displaying the flexibility to flow across virtual spaces, they helped the subculture avoid the same virtual death as the ME community-- as they previously knew it. Participants did not view the virtual spaces they occupied as the subculture, nor did those spaces take precedence over the subculture. Rather, they served as rest stops for members traversing the information superhighway in search of a stronger offline subculture.

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