Contemporary Perceptions of Body Modifications and Its Acceptability in the Asian Society: A Case of Tattoos and Body Piercings

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Abstract

Radical body modification in the form of tattooing and body piercings has experienced expanded expression, appropriation and visibility within the last several decades and has become a part of everyday life for large sections of the population. Most scholarly interest has documented the perceptual trajectories of these practices across a wide range of societal context across time. Nonetheless, observations show that most of these studies were conducted in the American and European context and a scarcity of perceptual insights on this phenomenon remains in the Asian context. Contemporary perceptions on individuals who obtain tattoos and body piercings are examined among a sample of individuals in a multi-racial Asian country – Malaysia. The present study is exploratory in nature and adopts a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews. Overall, evidence suggests that the society perceives tattooing and body piercing practices as a form of art, spirituality, immortalizing significant moment memories, self-expression and representation of the dark. Nonetheless, a degree of uncomfortableness exists among most individuals in the current study when being around with individuals with tattoos and body piercing. Further, employment opportunities are also perceived to be negatively affected. Implications and recommendations from the research findings are also presented.

Keywords: body modification, tattooing, body piercing, perception, acceptance, contemporary, society

1. Introduction

The act of body modification, such as tattooing and body piercing (Featherstone, 1999), has had a long history across various cultures, including Asia, Africa, America, Europe and Oceania (Caplan, 2000; DeMello, 1995; Dorfer & Moser, 1998; Rubin, 1988). These practices have been documented in nearly every culture and were evidently used to communicate a number of messages, including group identity, religious commitment and individuality (Armstrong, Owen, Roberts & Koch, 2002). The work of Wohlrab, Stahl & Kappeler (2007) suggests that piercings were often used in initiation rites, assigning their bearer to a certain social or age group (Gritton, 1988; Jonaitis, 1988) while the use of tattoos represented a signal to religious affiliations, strength or social status (Gathercole, 1988; Gilbert, 2001; Schildkrout, 2004).

Contemporary perceptions about individuals who have tattoos and piercings abound in the literature (Greif, Hewitt & Armstrong, 1999). More specifically, many stereotypes and judgments remain surrounding these two forms of body modification. Recent studies in the Western context have suggests that social leaders are continuing to associate the practice of piercing and tattooing with rebellious, criminals and sociopaths while other members in the society perceive such practices as a form of fashion statement (DeMello, 1993; Firmin, Tse, Foster & Angelini, 2008), as seen among popular models and celebrities (Brown, Perlmutter & McDermott, 2000).

These modern-day findings, however, are often confined to understandings from the American and European contexts. In particular, while the body of literature has expanded to provide a better understanding on the trajectories of societal perceptions and motivations towards tattooing and body piercing in Western civilizations, there seems to be a lack of understanding on the perceptual changes of these body modifications in the other parts of the world.

The present study attempts to fill in this gap. In particular, this study explores the contemporary societal

perceptions of tattoo and body piercing and its acceptability in an Asian country – Malaysia. While a number of investigation strategies were plausible, Firmin, Tse, Foster and Angelini (2008) and Maxwell (2005) argues that qualitative research is often the method of choice when exploring terrain where relatively few studies previously have been conducted. A qualitative approach is, therefore, employed through the use of in-depth interviews to investigate the current research phenomenon. The outcome of this study will shed some insights on the modern-day perceptions of tattoo and body piercing and its acceptability from an Asian point of view.

2. Research Methods

The current study attempts to find out the perceptions and acceptance of the society in contemporary times towards the practices of tattooing and body piercing in an Asian context. The study has an exploratory nature. A qualitative approach is employed through the use of in-depth interviews. The sample is selected through mall-intercept systematic sampling at a conveniently selected shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The sample consists of twelve individuals - age eighteen to forty-six; five males seven females; five Malays, five Chinese and two Indians; non-tattooed and moderate piercing (i.e. one or two on each side for females). Responses were audio recorded and transcribed in a verbatim manner. Initial transcripts were sent back to research participants for verification and initial findings were discussed with scholars in the field of consumer behaviour and social sciences. The final findings are presented in the following section.

3. Results

Seven themes emerged from the data collected. Five themes relate to contemporary societal perceptions about body modification practices in terms of tattooing and body piercing. These included tattoo art, spirituality, immortalizing significant moment memories, self-expression and representation of the dark. On the other hand, two themes that emerged relates to the societal acceptance of individuals with tattoos and body piercing. These included degree of comfort around individuals with tattoos and body piercing and perceive employment opportunities. The themes are discussed below with illustrative support, supplying voice to various individuals in our sample.

3.1 Contemporary Societal Perceptions on Tattooing and Body Piercing

Art: From the interviews, a common theme was observed from some the responses of research participants – tattoo and body piercing are an art. To these individuals, tattooing usually involves some kind of design while body piercing involves the use of fashion accessories, in which both practices of body modification portrays a sense of artistic beauty to individuals who know how to appreciate such art.

> *"When you look at tattoos, it usually has some kind of design, whether it's a good design like an angel or a bad design like skulls or devils, or even if it's just words, it's not really plain as it's drawn or written with some kind of style."*

> *"Body piercing can be anywhere, from the ears, to the nose, lips and belly button, which is often accompanied by some kind of fashion accessory. I guess it's a way of making themselves look good by applying some individual artistic talent on the self."*

Spirituality: Spirituality was uncovered as one motivation on societal views for body medication practices such as tattooing and body piercing. Although they recognize that some individuals may pierce their bodies for reasons of spirituality, these perceptions were confined to those individuals who were older as the younger individuals in the current study did not see their peers tattooing and body piercing for the purposes of spirituality.

> *"Spirituality could be one of the reasons as it brings people closer to God and his teachings. Some disciples of some religions may tattoo the chanting on their backs for beliefs of mystical powers and protection whereas others may tattoo it as a religious symbol on their bodies."*

> *"I often hear people tattooing for spirituality reasons but I guess that's the older generation. The younger generations aren't that religious anymore and you will see that most of their tattoos are to express their love to their partners or simply being artistic in nature, such as dragon and tiger tattoos or piercings on the lips and belly buttons for fashion purposes."*

Immortalizing Significant Moment Memories: To some individuals, tattoo and body piercing represents a way to immortalize significant moment memories. These memories are usually those which represent some significant events, happenings or milestones in the timeline of the individual.

> *"Some of my friends have tattoos and piercings, and especially for tattoos, they tend to make new ones when something comes up in their life, such as marriage, a new born child and other milestones in life. So I guess these body modifications could represent the changes in their life and help them to recall*

significant happenings and immortalize memories."

Self-expression: Although all individuals in the current study do not have any tattoos and have moderate piercings on the ears, some individuals viewed that the practice of tattooing and body piercing is a form of self-expression. It was argued that such body modification practices enable some individuals to create a special and unique identity that is distinctive from others as they believe that it would be extremely rare to see two individuals will have the same combination of tattooing designs and body piercing accessories.

> *"I guess it's a way of self-expression. In a way, they can "customize" themselves to the form they want others to see them as."*

> *"My friend once told me that he expresses himself through his tattoos such as creating new tattoos which symbolizes his love to his girlfriend."*

Representation of the dark: Practices of tattooing and body piercing, however, are not viewed entirely in a positive light. A large majority of respondents understood that while such practices of modification may be a representation of art, for spirituality purposes, as a way of immortalizing significant moment memories and as a way of self-expression, a trend of associating individuals with tattoos and body piercings with someone who is bad, such as triad gangsters and criminals, was visible in most interview responses.

> *"Even though not all individuals with tattoos and body piercing are bad people, but overall, I guess there's a negative perception on such individuals. I personally feel that individuals with tattoos and excessive body piercings are usually those who have a history with triad gangsters or may have been criminals or prisoners before."*

> *"It's usually on those people who are bad, like gangsters and criminals. We don't see such practices among our leaders in society, don't we?"*

3.2 Societal Acceptance of Individuals with Tattoos and Body Piercings

Degree of Comfort: Generally, most individuals expressed that they are uncomfortable with individuals with tattoos and body piercings. While some said they would not mind hanging out with these individuals as they could understand the purposes of such body modification practices, others argue that they dislike the negative associations when they are spotted handing around with individuals with tattoos and body piercings, especially those with extravagant body modifications.

> *"When I have to hang out with excessively tattooed and body pierced friends, I will feel uncomfortable. People around me will put their eyes on me and they will start to judge me as bad person. Same goes when I walk beside him or her. Moreover, I am afraid that I will meet one of my family members. They are afraid that I will be influenced by him or her because my family still thinks that those with tattoos and piercings are bad people".*

Perceive Employment Opportunities: The issue of employment for those with noticeable tattoo and body piercing was raised in the interviews of the current study. From the responses obtained on the societal perception and acceptability of individuals with tattoos and body piercings, it was found that a negative perception on body modification practices was prevalent and this was perceived to largely affect these individuals when they interact with others in the society, particularly when applying for a job. In particular, individuals in the current study were asked on their willingness to hire individuals with tattoo and body piercings. Results indicate that all respondents chose to hire applicants with no tattoos and body piercings (except for moderate piercings on the ears for female applicants).

> *"I will not hire applicant with tattoo and body piercing. It will affect the customers and the company, especially when they are required to market a product. Generally, people with tattoo and body piercing are viewed negatively by society"*

4. Implications and Recommendations

In the last decade, tattoo and body piercing have increased tremendously in popularity, rising not only in numbers but also involving a broader range of social classes (DeMello, 2000). For some individuals, tattoos and body piercings are nothing more than fashion accessories (Turner, 1999). For other individuals, however, such practices of body modifications are perceived as negative and unsavory.

Tattoo and body piercing was first practiced as a form of cultural expression (DeMello, 2000). Individuals included tattoos and piercings to indicate their social standing, to identify themselves, and to express their religious or spiritual views. The findings of this study further adds support as individuals perceive practices of tattooing and body piercing as a spiritual practice. However in today's modern society, tattoo and body piercing

is no longer confined as a cultural expression and may not be applicable to the younger generation. Instead, some individuals perceive tattoo and body piercing as an art. There is no doubt that the number of individuals with tattoos and body piercings have increased tremendously in contemporary times, especially as its services are more accessible in the marketplace (Newman, 2006). Findings in this study further indicate that the contemporary society view tattooing and body piercings as a as a way for individuals to express themselves. This is in line with the work of Atkinson and Young (2001) who found that individuals feel that tattoos and body piercings are a permanent way to express their individuality and as an avenue to create and maintain self-identity, being special and distinctive from others. Some individuals were also found with a desire to show the world that they are rebellious, able to make important decisions, not control by their parents or anyone else, and that they are able to take the pain of receiving tattoo and piercing (Flaherty, 2005). Further, some individuals are reported to make tattoos so that they will be able to reflect back on a certain time of their life that was important or special to them.

Despite some awareness on the reasons for tattooing and body piercing practices, results show that individuals with tattoos and piercings may not be acceptable to the society at large. In particular, societal perceptions that body modification practices of tattooing and body piercing is a representation of the dark exist. It is because of such perceptions that some individuals are not comfortable being around with those who have tattoos and body piercings due to dislikes of being attached with the negative perceptions of being associated with individuals with such body modifications. Further, existing research has also found that individuals with tattoo and body piercing are often covering their noticeable tattoos or piercings when interacting with others who are skeptical perceptions. In society, especially among the older generation, individuals with noticeable tattoos or body piercings are often judged as deviant or those living outside of society, whereby these individuals may be associated as being members of triad gangsters, criminals or prisoners (Koch, Roberts, Armstrong & Owen, 2010; Lichtenstein, 2007). Moreover, parents or guardians tend to protect their child to avoid making friends with those who are tattooed and body pierced because these body modification practices are often connected as indicators of societal problems and risk-taking behavior (Carroll, Riffenburgh, Roberts & Myhre, 2002). Besides that, the presence of tattoo and body piercing may significantly influence on employment opportunities. As individuals with excessive tattoo and body piercing are judged negatively, the society and employers may have pre-conceived negative evaluations on such individuals. Thus, when it comes to employment, individuals with excessive body modification may face more difficulty to secure a job as compared to individuals without body modifications. Notably, individuals in the current study further indicate a preference to hire applicants with no tattoos and body piercings. In the work of Bekhor, Bekhor and Gandrabur (1995) it was found that the number of individuals requesting of tattoos and body piercing removal is on an increasing trend, in which the reason revealed behind their removal was in order to obtain employment. For this reason, it could be shown that the presence of visible tattoos and body piercings militated against the employment of job seekers.

From the findings of the current study, it is arguable that body modification practices of tattooing and body piercing remains less acceptable among individuals in an Asian society. A high degree of stereotyping and negative pre-conceived evaluations of individuals with tattoos and body piercing may exist among Asian individuals. To avoid being associate with negative evaluations, it is recommended that excessive tattooing and body piercing should be avoided as it will cause others in the society to feel uncomfortable and insecure with such presence. More importantly, it is important that social marketers and educationists inform and educate the society on the consequences of body modification practices of tattooing and body piercing, including potential negative evaluation of others in the society, influence on employment opportunities, and the difficulty of future removal and recovery. In events where individuals want to remove tattoos, there is some light afforded through technology advance. In particular, the development of pulsed lasers, such as the Q-switch Nd: YAG and Q-switched Ruby, has made it possible to remove or significantly fade tattoos without residual scarring (Kilmer & Anderson, 1993).

5. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has, hopefully, provided some exploratory insights on the contemporary societal perceptions of tattoo and body piercing and its acceptability in an Asian context. The study concludes that the society may perceive tattooing and body piercing practices as a form of art, spirituality, immortalizing significant moment memories, self-expression and representation of the dark. However, the society may have a degree of uncomfortableness when being amongst individuals with tattoos and body piercings. Employment opportunities are also found to have a potential to be negatively affected. Recommendations from the research findings were also afforded, including a need to avoid having excessive tattooing and body piercing; the need to inform and educate the society on the consequences of body modification practices of tattooing and body piercing; and the technological

advancement opportunities afforded to remove or significantly fade tattoos without residual scarring. Nonetheless, this study is limited in generalizability due to its small sample size. The integrity of the research results, however, can be uphold as the study is the first of its kind in providing some exploratory insights into the current societal perceptions of tattoo and body piercing and its acceptability in an Asian context. Future studies are encouraged to include a larger sample and expand its scope to include a cross-cultural comparison. Further, the insights from this study represent the responses from a third party view – none of the research participants had tattoos or body piercings (except on the ears for females). It will be potentially fruitful to gain some firsthand insights on the investigated phenomenon among individuals who actually have tattoos and body piercings and look at the responses from their point of view.

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