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Honors Thesis

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Tattoos and Body Piercing - The Longevity of An Ancient Trend

Influence From Society

For centuries people have been participating in body modification. Tattoos and body piercings have become increasingly popular among young people in today's society. On a daily basis, more and more teenagers are participating in this ritual. Regardless of whether or not parental consent is given, teenagers are finding a way to get tattoos and piercings. Many rural high schools are trying to ban this behavior but to no avail. Problems are increasingly emerging due to this trend.

In past years people with tattoos and body piercings were seen as rebels and disgraces to society. These people were shunned in their communities and were viewed as outcasts. In America, this was greatly seen in the suburbs and this practice was thought to be an influence from heavy metal music, which many older people did not approve of. Parents would form society's to try and eliminate this kind of music from their homes and communities. They even thought this kind of music was related to drug use and devil worship. Boot camps were formed to help fight this cause. Children turned against their parents and a war in the home was created throughout many communities in the nation.

Society, in its current state, has become slightly more accepting of this trend. Many young adults and teenagers have tattoos and body piercings and are beginning to be judged on their inner character rather than the music they listen to. The trend of body

modification is also becoming less associated with drug use. Many young professionals are able to keep their tattoos and body piercings in as long as they are not exposed in the workplace, but if it is known that these individuals participate in this practice, a smaller stigma is attached. They no longer have to fear being fired from their jobs because of their appearance.

In some cases, people are still being discriminated against because of their appearance, which is a violation of federal law to a certain extent. Some companies view visible body modification as a behavior that infringes on company dress code policy. Many people have lost jobs and have been squeezed out of businesses because of their tattoos and piercings. There is some legislation that protects the people who display tattoos and body piercings, but it is ineffective most of the time.

The most interesting thing about this practice is the reasons why people choose to participate. Many people get body piercings for trends, some for personal style, and others for sexual stimulation. Many young people are even influenced by their friends to get these things done. The reasons for tattooing are similar as well as very different. People are now getting tattoos to show membership, loyalty, love, and to show respect for family.

Expansion of Dangerous Trends

People are now taking body modification to extremes. They are getting implants under their skin, tattoos all over their bodies to represent animals, and they are surgically altering their bodies. One notable case is the lizard man. He had implants throughout his head and spine to look like the spine of a lizard, green tattoos all over his body to look

like scales, and he even had his tongue split for independent movement, completing his lizard persona.

In a not so extreme situation, there is now a trend emerging among Europeans. There is now a practice where people are having tiny metal shapes surgically embedded into the whites of their eyes. "The procedure involves making a tiny slice in the membrane covering the eye and slipping in a small, flat piece of metal. The result in a tiny shape in the white of the eye." [1]

The procedure can cost thousands of dollars. Even though the trend hasn't popularized in America, Illinois lawmakers are already moving to illegalize the procedure. Kevin Joyce, a Chicago Democrat, is trying to have the process banned and legislation has been approved, making it a felony to implant jewelry into another individuals eye.

The main concern is the danger of infection in the eye, and the possibility of the trend becoming popular among young, inexperienced teenagers. The risk of infection is believed to be present as long as the jewelry is in the eye, risking blindness, among other things.

Kevin Veara, the owner of a tattoo parlor believes this trend is getting more attention than it deserves because people in the Midwest don't take risks as drastic as this when it comes to body modification. He believes that most people in the Midwest are conservative with their body modification and the trend has more of a chance of spreading on the coasts of the United States. The most risky thing Midwestern

[1] Tallon, Mary. "Legislation Would Ban Embedding Jewelry in Eyes." Associated Press. March 4, 2005. Springfield, IL.

Americans are doing now is enlarging piercings with large gauges in sensitive areas, which is what Coastal Americans have been doing for years.

Another problem within the trend of body modification is he fact that many young people are piercing themselves. Since most places will not perform services on minors, they go out on their own and have their friends pierce them or the individuals do it themselves. The same goes for tattoos.

A few years ago, I encountered a young man who had a tattoo done by his friend at a house party. The artistry was questionable and the tattoo became infected soon after it was done. The tattoo was of the grim reaper and it was not outlined properly, the name on it was spelled wrong, and there were lumps on it that felt like welts. Before our encounter, he had the tattoo for a few years and the damage was still very prevalent. He recovered from the infection but he said it was a long, tough process.

An article from the *University Wire* speaks of young people getting piercings done by friends. This is true throughout many high schools in America. Shaundra Wise, a student at North Carolina State stated, "I let my friend pierce my belly button in high school and it got really infected. I had to take antibiotics for a week."[2] In most of these at home situations, poorly sterilized tools are used and infection is usually caused, along with death in some extreme cases.

It is not only at home where poorly sterilized tools are used. Sometimes tattoo parlors don't take care with the sterilization of the tools. This is how diseases are spread as well as infections. It is up to the individual getting work done to examine these things before the process begins. A lot of the time, young people have a naïve state of mind,

[2] Jackson, Jennell. "Extreme Piercings Have Consequences." University Wire. February 17, 2005. Raleigh, NC.

where they think nothing can happen to them. They are the easiest targets for shoddy work because the whole process is illegal for working on a minor without consent.

Lawmakers are taking the process of working on minors very seriously. Propositions have been made to refuse entry into these facilities for all teenagers. This is still being voted on, but if people keep trying to get around the law, it may be something seen in the near future.

Discrimination of Participants

Since so many people have had body modification done, and it is becoming more mainstream, the new method of differentiation is stretching the piercings, cutting, and branding. Branding has always been popular among Greek organizations, like fraternities, but now it is becoming a pop culture trend. Even young people on MTV are branding and cutting themselves because it has become so popular.

Stretching used to be something only extremists did, but now it is diffusing throughout the teenage population. Although some forms of body modification are becoming more accepted within the mainstream culture, a lot of people still have a conservative state of mind.

People have reported being kicked out of schools for piercings, their whole families experience adversity, they get turned down for apartments and jobs, among other things. These situations are mainly seen in conservative areas. Errol Enzelbrecht, the owner of Blue Flame Tattoo parlor says, “I once got turned down for an apartment because of my tattoos. In Raleigh, things like this are probably bigger issues than they

are in some places. Because Raleigh is a very conservative area, it would probably be a lot more difficult to get a job than if you were in San Francisco, for example."[3]

Church of Body Modification

The Church of Body Modification is an organization dedicated to get getting equal rights for participants of body modification. It is a rule of the church to incorporate spirituality with body modification. Common practices in this church are piercings, tattoos, cutting, branding, and stretching.

The church is based on ancient practices of body modification and has a doctrine that "teaches ownership over our own bodies. The church's purpose is for our modified society to harmoniously return to its spiritual roots that have been forgotten."[4]

There was a recent case about an employee of Costco. Kimberly Cloutier was hired as a cashier. She had numerous piercings and tattoos that were visible. A few years after she started working, Costco adopted a new dress code, prohibiting facial piercings and visible tattoos. After this, Cloutier claimed that she was being discriminated against because of religious reasons. She was a member of the Church of Body Modification.

The analysis of this case showed that she only became a member of the church after the dress code was implemented. So she had a weak argument. She also claimed that the church made it mandatory for her piercings to be displayed at all times, but this was not the case at all. Another woman working for the company was also a member of

[3] Jackson, Jennell. "Extreme Piercings Have Consequences." University Wire. February 17, 2005. Raleigh, NC.
[4] McKearin, Bob. "Must a Dress Code Yield to Religious Convictions?" Vermont Employment Law Letter. March, 2005.

the church and she had clear jewelry placed in her piercings, which was suitable for the new dress code.

The issue here is whether or not Costco was discriminating for religious reasons. The Church of Body Modification has in fact been proven to be a real religion with over a thousand people practicing it, but because her case was so weak, the case was thrown out. The main reason Cloutier was fired was due to unexcused absences, not because of her religion. People are always being forced to compromise certain things with regard to religious dress, as long as they can comply with the dress code to a certain extent. The court saw that Cloutier's coworker was able to compromise, and she should have done the same thing. Her dress was a direct violation of the code. Tattoos and piercings are somewhat acceptable in some cases, if it is not detrimental to the business.

Research In The Field

It was very important that the research done not be skewed in any way. So the method I used focused on observation in the tattoo parlor, followed by some questions about what I observed and about typical stereotypes. The most truthful research findings are due to earning the trust of the people being studied and being able to blend in with them. If you are a member of the society, people are much more willing to divulge information as opposed to a researcher just bombarding them with questions.

My method involved me supporting my friend as well as looking for work to have done on myself. Initially, I began looking for some tattoos and after not being satisfied with the designs, I looked for some new jewelry for my current piercings. I earned the trust of the piercer during this process, and then I went on to support my friend, having work done, while studying her at the same time.

During the fall of 2002 I conducted a field study, examining the lives of people who get tattoos and piercings in excess. The research was conducted in a tattoo parlor and in a park on Long Island. I wanted to find out the underlying reasons why people participate in body modification, so I accompanied a friend who was getting a piercing and I interviewed the woman piercing her.

It was a warm, sunny day in 2002 when a friend and I entered a tattoo parlor in Brooklyn, NY. I quietly stayed in the background and observed what was going on around me. She was first handed papers basically stating that she relinquishes the right to a suit incase anything harmful happens to her during the process of getting her nipple pierced. After signing the papers, we watched the piercer set up the station.

Trixie, the piercer, explained the process to Stephanie before she began. She stated that her nipple would be sterilized with alcohol, and then clamped. After this, she would pass the needle through her nipple and finally insert the jewelry.

I was not allowed to see the whole process because I had to remain in the waiting area. But after the process was complete, Trixie requested a bed. Her assistant quickly unfolded a cot and Stephanie was told to slowly lie down. Stephanie felt lightheaded and almost passed out. Trixie explained to us that this is a normal reaction, especially with piercing sensitive areas, because of the initial shock. Stephanie was given a soda to raise her blood sugar and a cold compress was applied to her head.

While Stephanie was recuperating, suddenly, the man sitting next to her, getting his tattoo retouched, also felt lightheaded and was placed on the bed next to her. It would have been a frightening sight for someone not familiar with the process of tattooing and

body piercing. After all of the commotion, both clients felt better and were happy with the results of the experience, even though there was a close call.

Most people in tattoo parlors are repeating the practice, especially when they go alone. This was the third piercing my friend was getting and truthfully, I was more nervous and excited than she was.

I also did some interviews with some students of Nassau Community College whom I was familiar with through a mutual friend. Matt Ciccotto and Steve Camillone are both residents of Long Island who participate in excessive tattooing. There was no need to use a persona with these subjects because I knew they would be candid with me because of our personal relationships.

The interview was done on a rainy day in a local park on Long Island, which did not delay the interview at all. The pictures came out very clear and there was no rushing at all for any of us, so the results were not compromised here either.

Research Findings

It is true that there are some young people who fit the stereotype that getting tattoos and piercings are done mainly to increase social status among peers. But after this age, and after being introduced into the "real world," the trend becomes less acceptable. People then experience adversity they never had to face before and become discriminated against even more.

Even if the tattoos are done for emotional reasons and piercings are done for religious reasons, if the participants want to be treated fairly, they must compromise their beliefs in order to be treated as an equal. As far as major corporations are concerned,

there is a code set for people that must be followed and if not followed, they can judge by appearance alone.

The world is slightly changing every day but as long as there are conservative individuals in the world, it will be tough for a person with extreme body modification to get a fair chance. At a certain point in life, they must choose between their beliefs and their future. They may be forced to lead a double life, in which at work they may appear as the typical corporate upstanding citizen, and at night they are a portrait of the stereotypical social deviant. The world sees this as a personal choice. It is not yet seen as an exercise of the American's first amendment right. Someday this might change, but it doesn't seem like that day will be soon.

Below are the complete interviews held with each of the participants and all of the discoveries.

Appendix A

Interview with Trixie

Trixie: Body piercer for 11 years
Works at Enigma Studio (5 years) in Brooklyn
Married to a tattoo artist

1. **What made you decide that body piercing is what you wanted to do with your life?**

   I wanted to do it because it became very popular in Europe and it was a good way to make money. I started doing it in Ireland and I worked in Italy for 5 years. Then I moved to America and came to Brooklyn and started working here at Enigma.

2. **What made you decide to get the piercings on yourself? Do you find that most piercers and tattoo artists get piercings along with other types of body art?**

   I think my piercings are very attractive since I keep them limited. That's why I don't have many on my face. Some people can get away with it but it's not for me. Most of the time, people who have tattoos have piercings but sometimes not the other way around. It just depends on personal preference. But from my experience, most artists do have piercings as well as tattoos.

3. **Why did you get all of the tattoos?**

   The tattoos started as one. Then I married a tattoo artist and the rest is history. He introduced me to different styles and methods of tattooing that I had never experienced before and he opened my eyes to more than I had been exposed to. I believe tattoos are an expression of one's self. They have become very personal

for me as well as many other people. It's a form of art that will stay with me for the rest of my life. This is something that I find very spiritual and it connects me with the subjects of my body art.

4. **What would you say to someone who believes the only reason young people get tattoos and piercings is for rebellion?**

   I agree that some get it for rebellion and a lot of them get it as a fashion statement. These are the people that will definitely regret the tattoos in the future. Nowadays they are much more accepted in society. But I have seen that a lot more teenagers are getting piercings because they are less permanent. I believe that piercing is a less damaging trend that can be easily reversed and is a much safer choice for young people.

5. **Why did you get the specific tattoos you have?**

   I got certain ones because of the design. Some of them I got because I like the work of the artist and others because I incorporated some of my own ideas. The artwork you get on your body is very important and it is equally important to be a participant in the whole experience. This is a permanent exhibition on your body and if you are not a part of it, it can be a huge mistake, which was not a problem for me.

   a. The dedication piece is to my mom and dad because I am away from home and I miss them. It's a heart shaped lock with a clover inside which symbolizes my own heart. My heart will always be in Ireland and my parents will always be all around me. It means a lot to me that I can always be reminded of them. I don't get to go home that often and when I

miss them, I can just look at it and remember everything they have done for me and what my life was like in Ireland.

b. The angel is my guardian angel for protection. Being in a different country has made me feel like I need one and so far it is working. (Trixie smiles)

c. A Japanese artist tattooed the fish on my arm. It is going down my arm for good luck and also because I am a pieces (zodiac sign).

d. I got the Celtic ones because I am Irish and they remind me of my heritage.

e. The cats because I thought they were cool.

f. The skull is Elvis. The die is there, symbolizing that life is a gamble. It all symbolizes life vs. death. Nothing in life is certain and anything can happen. That is the inspiration behind my Elvis tattoo.

g. I got the sacred heart for my religion. I am Catholic and religion has always been big in my family and I carry that tradition with me to this day.

Appendix B

Interview with Matt and Steve

Matt Ciccotto: 21 years old

Steve Camillone: 20 years old

Levittown, NY

1. **When did you both get your tattoos?**

   Matt: I was 16 when I got my first one. After a year I had the majority of my arm done which was 20 hours of work. It wasn't that bad because I knew the guy who was doing them and it was more like we were hanging out instead of doing work.

   Steve: I got my first one when I was 15 on my leg. They are very addictive. I got half of my arm done in one year and the other half the next year. I go back and forth whenever I draw something up. I don't usually trust people or the walls when choosing my design.

2. **What made you decide to get so many? On your arms specifically?**

   Matt: I got one and I kept on going. You keep thinking of ideas. Once you start you have no idea when to stop. That's how my arm was covered so easily. The creativity never stopped flowing and I collaborated with my artist and it just all came together.

   Steve: I always kind of wanted a lot of them. I always figured I'd be covered in them. I've been drawing since I was a little kid. I planned on having both of my

arms covered but I haven't gotten to it yet. Definitely some time in the near future though.

3. **Did either of you influence the other?**

   Matt: I got mine right after my brother. He was my influence. We go to the same artist. This guy is amazing. You just tell him what you want, he draws it up, and until you both agree on something, he will not do it. That's the best way to work. With someone you trust.

   Steve: No one really influenced me. I have always been interested in art. Ever since I was little I have been doodling and drawing and I thought it would be great to have all of that artwork on my body.

4. **What would you say to someone who believes teenagers just get tattoos and piercings because it seems cool now?**

   Steve: A lot of kids do do that. It's annoying when people say it's going to look bad when you're 60. It is my personal choice to get this is done and I hate it when people have negative judgments about it. My tattoos haven't gotten me any more popular. It attracts attention especially when you have a lot but I don't let people influence me. I think you see that more with younger kids who don't really know who they are yet.

   Matt: Teenagers will do anything to be popular. It doesn't matter anyway because when you actually do become 60 you're going to be all old and wrinkly anyway. I got mine before they got popular just because I was into them. A lot of kids out here do get them though because they thin they will be popular or it will

make them stand out. But if everyone is doing it then it kind of defeats the purpose if that is your only motivation.

5. **What do your tattoos symbolize? Which ones are your favorites?**

   Matt: Not all of them symbolize something. I have one on my chest for my friend who died. I don't have his name on it because I know who it's for and that's all that matters. The one on my back was done after my grandmother died and I don't have her name on it for the same reason. These are personal to me and not everyone needs to know about it. It's only for me and the people they represent to know about.

   Steve: Mine are just symbolizing everything I like. I like cars so I had a Mercury drawn and I like old horror movies. I cant say what Pray For Me symbolizes. I don't tell anyone. It's very personal. On my wrists I have beautiful mother written in Italian.

   (**FYI:** After this comment was made, it was reported by Matt that Steve used to date a girl named Bella and if you look at Steve's wrists the Italian translation of beautiful mother is backwards. So one can suspect that Steve had his girlfriend's name on his wrist and when they broke up he put Mama on his other wrist as a cover up.)

6. **Do you regret any of them?**

   Steve: No because it's all things I drew up. I would never go to a place and pick something out. I appreciate the fact that all of my tattoos mean something special to me, which is something no one else can ever change. But if you pick one out from the wall, hundreds of people can have the same tattoo.

Matt: I tried to start a sleeve on my other arm with a different artist. He didn't do it justice so I am getting it done over.

7. **Do you believe in the curse that if you get a significant other's name tattooed on you body, you are destined to break up?**

   Steve: I have never had anyone's name on my body so I wouldn't know. Even if my tattoos are in remembrance for other people I don't get the names tattooed on my body.

   Matt: I believe it's true (laugh's under breath).

8. **Steve, what made you decide to get your lip pierced?**

   I always liked the way it looked so I just got up one day and had it done. It's just a style thing.

Extra Info: Matt and Steve hate talking about their tattoos because they equate it to talking about their jobs. When people ask about the tattoos they usually shut down. Trixie exhibited the same manner. She seemed slightly uncomfortable. So this could have altered my discoveries. Very few people were used in the research because of limited time and resources, so the discoveries might turn out differently if a larger sample was used but I highly doubt it.

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