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Sub-cultures, Women and Tattoos: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the concept of sub-cultural consumption with a particular focus on the role of tattoos as a symbol of membership. The emphasis is on the female ‘tattooee’ and in particular women who adopt traditional male images and body placements. The findings of the research identify the themes of exclusion/inclusion, neo-communities, challenging gender stereotypes, the contagion effect, and agony and ecstasy, as influencing the process of becoming a female tattoo ‘collector’.

Key words: Tattoos, consumer behaviour, women, deviant consumption, subcultures

INTRODUCTION

The study of sub-cultures has a well established history within the social sciences. In Britain, possibly the most influential work to date has emanated from the 'Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies', (CCCS) which was established in the 1970s at Birmingham University. Much of this work was, and still is, grounded in the Chicago School of critical analysis, exemplified in the work of, for example, Hall and Jefferson (1996), Clarke et al (1997/1975), Hebdige (1997/1979), and Willis (1990). The position adopted by these scholars is to locate sub-cultural movements within a framework of social resistance and reaction against dominant hierarchies of control. However, this position is open to question given the shifting and pluralistic life-styles that characterise contemporary society and the plethora of sub-cultures that exist within it (Bennett, 1999). This paper focuses on one particular sub-cultural activity undertaken by women; the act of tattooing, and suggests that there is more to the experience than resistance and rebellion.

CRITICISMS OF THE CCCS AND THE GENDER GAP IN SUBCULTURAL STUDIES

An important critique of the CCCS, is that most of the work is heavily gender biased, focusing almost exclusively on male activities. As McRobbie (1995) points out, from the earliest work onwards, the emphasis has consistently been upon male youth cultural forms, with studies of deviance, the machinery of the state, school, community and the workplace. Females, on the other hand have been relegated to the world of popular or mainstream culture, and when they do appear in the literature on subcultures they are perceived as either marginalized and abused, or viewed as...
static objects such as 'fag-hags', 'girl-fiends' or 'whores'. Accordingly:

"The signs and codes subverted and re-assembled in the 'semiotic warfare' conducted through style do not speak to women at all. The attractions of a subculture - its fluidity, the shifts in the minutia of its styles, the details of competitive bricolage - are offset by an unchanging and exploitative view of women."

McRobbie (1995, p35)

However, we suggest that this is a rather outdated analysis of female sub-cultural involvement. Indeed there are many examples, such as the 'New Romantics' of the 1980s, and the rave culture of the late 1980s to the present, which bear no relation to this interpretation. Increasingly, sub-cultural spaces are becoming sites of creativity and self expression for both male and female participants from all social backgrounds. Today sub-cultural activity is recognised as important for the construction and expression of identity, rather than as cells of resistance against dominant orders. As such, this activity involves acts of consumption, and the significance of this has not been lost on the marketing community. For example, Schouten and McAlexander's ethnographic study of 'new biker' behaviour and the consequent product constellations emanating from the Harley Davidson, has introduced the 'sub-cultural' consumer into contemporary marketing thought. In addition to the intrinsic value of studying such behaviours, Sanders notes that:

"there are a variety of reasons why the examination of such socially marginal commercial activities might be of concern to consumer researchers. Disvalued social activities are typically embedded in sub-cultural groups which provide norms and values which direct and shape patterns of cultural choice."

Sanders (1985, p17)

These cultural choices are also consumer choices. All sub-cultures have their trappings, their symbols, their music, fashions and their accessories, making them potentially interesting as consumer groups. This research looks at one particular type of sub-cultural activity, the act of getting tattooed and the meanings associated with this experience. However, rather than adding to the wealth of literature on male tattoos, we focus on a relatively ignored segment, the female tattoo recipient. On face value, this group may seem comparatively small, however, given the current trend for body adornment, tattoos have become a fashion accessory adopted by millions. Furthermore, Armstrong (1991) points out that her survey of the tattoo industry revealed that almost 50% of individuals getting tattooed were women, many of whom were counsellors, doctors, lawyers and business women. This would appear to contradict much of the theory on working class, sub-cultural activity with which tattooing has traditionally been associated. However, most research also indicates that there are very clear gender distinctions between male and female tattoos and even placement on the body (Sanders, 1991). This paper questions this and looks at the growing trend for female members of sub-cultures to adorn themselves with traditional male images in order to mark themselves permanently as a member of that group and communicate symbolically through the language of the tattoo.
A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TATTOO

For thousands of years human beings have been dissatisfied with their bodies and have sought to change them. The reasons vary from fashion, beauty, rites of passage, and, or, group identity (Mercury, 2000; Gilbert, 2000; Atkinson & Young 2001). However, body modification (BM) has moved in and out of social acceptance in Western culture for centuries. According to Sanders (1988) tattooing is the most ancient and widely practiced form of body alteration. One of the oldest verifiable examples of tattooing was found on the mummified body of an Egyptian princess, dated about 2,000BC. Egyptian tattooing was practiced exclusively on women, especially dancers, singers and priestesses in the service of Bes, the deity associated with recreation. These tattoos afforded protection as well as publicly identifying them as devotees of Bes (Sanders, 1991). Thus, what is today usually regarded as a predominantly male activity, has in fact its roots in the adornment of the female body.

The negativity surrounding Tattooing in western society originally emanates from Judeo/Christian beliefs, as stated in the bible “Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves” (Leviticus 19.28). This was to set the Jews aside from the gentiles such as the Greeks who undertook tattooing. This opposition to tattooing was also noticeable in the customs of the Christian church when in 787AD Pope Hadrian I banned tattooing at the ecumenical council of Nicea. This was in direct contrast to the very first Christians who tattooed themselves to be marked out from the Jewish society that they came from (Hardin, 1999 & Hardy, 1988). The Western history of tattooing at this time is little reported, but the Celts, Picts, and Gauls are all understood to have practised tattooing (Hardin, 1999; Gilbert, 2000). Furthermore, tattooing was still though to be in existence in England in 1066, as it was reported that King Harold’s body was only recognised after the battle of Hastings due to a tattoo over his heart (Gilbert, 2000). Shortly after this period, tattooing in western societies disappeared. The modern history of tattooing is usually traced back to the voyages of Captain James Cook and his encounters with tribal tattooing in the South Pacific in the mid-18th century. This decorative practice became popular among sailors who wore tattoos as commemorations of their world travels and as magic symbols intended to protect them from harm (Sanders, 1988 & Hardy, 1988).

During the late 19th century the titled aristocracy began to flirt with tattoos and even those in royal circles such as Queen Victoria of England, Queen Olga of Greece, and the Queen Mother Elizabeth are rumoured to have had tattoos. Even Winston Churchill's mother is said to have had a tattoo of a snake around her wrist (Armstrong, 1991). However, by the mid 20th century tattooing had become firmly established as a deviant practice in the public mind (Sanders, 1988). It is fair therefore, to say, that tattooing has enjoyed variable social acceptance and significance throughout history. Nevertheless, over the last twenty-five years attitudes have changed to such an extent that tattooing and having a tattoo are now part of contemporary culture (DeMello, 2000; Camphausen, 2000; Mercury, 2000). In fact the Harford Courant (1997) in its reporting of a survey into the six fastest growing industries in America, named
tattooing as one of the six, alongside high tech industries such as internet services. And yet, despite its growing popularity and the fact that tattooing is now a global multi-billion dollar industry, body modification has received little attention from consumer researchers. Indeed there has only been one study, which specifically viewed BM as a service industry with providers and clients (Sanders, 1985).

Previous research into tattooing has come from the field of the social sciences (Favazza, 1996), the humanities (Caplan, 2000), and medical Sciences (Anderson, 2001). Other studies have emerged from the field of anthropology, focusing on historical or cultural meanings and the reasons behind body modification. In particular, most medical (Ferguson, 1955; Fried, 1983) and some work from the social sciences (Jeffereys, 2000) have been hypercritical of the act of body modification in relation to the individual. The act of getting a tattoo has been interpreted by academics as a form of dysfunctional behaviour linked to childhood abuse (Jeffereys, 2000), and a sign of mental instability and criminality (Lombrosco, 1996). Others have conceptualised it as a flourishing new art form (Liu, 1990; Fleming, 1997), and an example of post-modern identity expression (Polhemus & Hous, 1996; Camphausen, 2000; Mercury, 2000).

THE SYMBOLIC NATURE OF TATTOOS

These interpretations demonstrate the fact that tattoos are more than mere objects of consumption. They are extreme statements which are highly symbolic and riddled with meaning. Mcabee (1997) discusses the symbolism inherent in tattoos and the current process of commodification and popularisation of body adornment. Accordingly, classic images such as the eagle, the snake, the anchor or the heart are deceptive in their directness and simplicity. Hidden behind these designs are years of technical and artistic experimentation that combine to make an art form. Indeed tattooing has always been closely related to the variety of the culture that surrounds it. However, the current explosion of interest in tattooing has pressed the art-form into a transitional period which challenges many time-tested values of the tattoo community. There is a process of gentrification occurring as new people from different walks of life become involved. Along with this, the aura of store bought has 'muscled' its way into what was once a personal hand made approach (Mcabbe, 1997).

TATTOOS AND THE BODY

In contemporary society ritualism is less prevalent or important in terms of marking rites of transition. Consequently, while tattoos were once associated with religion, status or the stratification system, today tattooing has become part of fashion rather than a necessary aspect of religious culture. However, it is still the case, for example among young men, that tattooing is a mark of social membership within an urban tribe (Featherstone, 1991). Nonetheless, today, possibly more then ever before in western society, females are engaging in the practice of body adornment and tattooing in particular. Most of the work on male and female tattoo placement suggests distinct differences in relation to the type, size and style of the tattoo and its placement on the body. For example, Sanders (1988) proposes that the design one chooses is typically related to the persons connection to other people, his
or her definition of self, or especially in the case of women, the desire to enhance and beautify the body. Furthermore, women tend to regard the tattoo, which is usually a small delicate design, as a permanent body decoration, primarily intended for personal pleasure and the enjoyment of those with whom they are most intimate. The tattoo is therefore usually placed on parts of the body most commonly seen by those they have personal relationships with. Placing them on private parts of the body also allows women to avoid the stigma associated with tattoos (Sanders, 1988). While men, typically have larger tattoos, inscribed on their arms, neck, hands, back and legs, women tend to locate tattoos on the breast, back of the shoulder, hip/pubic area or lower abdomen. These differences in placement are said to be related to conflicting perceptions of the function of the tattoo. Men commonly expose their tattoos to strangers and friends as an act of communicating aspects of their social identity, while women are more concerned with intimacy. However, recent developments in female behaviour are starting to challenge this as the number of women adopting traditional male designs, and body location grows.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The aim of this exploratory research was to identify the reasons behind the growth in female tattoos within particular sub-cultures. Consequently we were not interested in women with small, hidden or delicate designs which have become part of mainstream popular culture and fashion. Rather, the objective was to explore the relatively recent phenomenon of women adopting ‘old skool’ or traditional male tattoos, on typically male parts of the body.

Data were initially collected through an analysis of tattoo discussion websites such as [http://hampshire.edu/~tawF95/bodmodx p.html](http://hampshire.edu/~tawF95/bodmodx p.html). These sites are a means of communication for the tattoo community and those belonging to the sub-culture, particularly the new wave/punk/metal, also known as ‘punk/nu metal’. This subculture is an eclectic mix of former sub-cultures, including punk rock, heavy metal and the gothic revival. Participants further draw their inspiration from nostalgic imagery in terms of dress from 1940s and 1950s ‘Americana’. Tattoos also form an important role within the sub-culture for both men and women. An analysis of discussions, self reported stories, the experience of being tattooed, and differences in age and gender were analysed by ‘logging on’ over a three month period.

In addition to websites, a two year retrospective analysis of ‘skin deep’, the tattoo magazine for devotees, was conducted. This publication features detailed consumer stories of becoming a ‘collector’ and the meaning of these tattoos to the individual, their sense of selfhood, and their identity and a selection of typical extracts from these stories in included in the interpretation. Other publications which included female accounts of the process were also consulted.

Finally, in order to start the process of theory building, grounded in the generation of our own data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), two key informants were interviewed in-depth. These two informalts were Angie, a tattooist herself who is heavily marked, and Joanne, a female ‘tattooee’ who has a number of ‘old skool’ traditional male
tattoos. Both are members of the ‘punk/nu metal’ sub-culture. These were recruited through a male tattooist contact named Winston. They agreed to take part in the research and participated in three one hour interviews each. As the data were collected they were simultaneously analysed by looking for recurring themes and patterns, which were noted, and form the basis for the final part of this paper.

THEMES INFLUENCING THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A FEMALE TATTOO COLLECTOR EXCLUSION AND INCLUSION

Today tattoos continue to express and communicate meaning, not only to the tattoo community, but also to mainstream society, which still continues to stigmatise or demonise that which is unexpected, unconventional or defies societal norms. Within the field of consumer behaviour there is growing interest in the notion of consumer resistance (O’Hermann, 1993; Fournier, 1998). For example, in relation to alternative anti-materialistic lifestyles such as the new age travellers discussed by Heatherington (1992), and increasingly, in the body as a site of resistance (Joy and Venkatesh, 1994). The relationship between the body, identity and the development of a sense of selfhood is well documented (Thompson and Hirschman, 1997; Synott, 1993). However, the practice of ‘marking’ the body as an active, conscious and symbolic act has received little coverage from consumer researchers. Tattooing the body is probable the most common form this behaviour takes and the permanency of this act has in many cases resulted in a deliberate decision to exclude the individual from many spheres of social and economic life, whilst at the same time marking inclusion or acceptance into an alternative lifestyle or sub-culture. The limited work that exists in the field largely centres around what might be termed post purchase feelings of regret (Sanders, 1985); namely the impulsive youth commissions a tattoo and then has to cover up in order to hold down a respectable job. Nonetheless, there is far more to the experience for the committed tattooee than regret. Those who choose to permanently modify their bodies in ways that violate prevailing appearance norms risk being defined as socially or morally inferior. Public displays of voluntary acquired physical deviance effectively communicate a wealth of information that shapes the social situation in which interaction takes place. The historical course of tattooing in Western society has conventionally defined the wearer as alienated from mainstream social networks. In other words it is a voluntary stigma that symbolically isolates the wearer from the ‘normals’ (Sanders, 1988). For example, the following quotes highlight some of the attitudes of people towards women with tattoos:

Margo DeMello (1995, p78)

“Women especially, are expected to maintain their bodies in a state of near perfection: slender, hairless, and smoothed skinned; by becoming tattooed, they publicly reject those ideals. Thus, heavily tattooed women are seen of low ethical standards, unfeminine (or its counterpart, homosexual), or ‘loose.’ (On one memorable occasion, I was accused by a woman in the supermarket of being a devil worshiper!)” p78

Skin Deep No 76: September 2001 (p27) Interview with Kat

“as a tattooed woman, I do believe that people may judge me
unfavourably. But once they understand that I am not a nasty scumbag, they generally accept me for who I am. I often get stared at in the street which I find a bit odd. I suppose it is a natural instinct to look, whether one admires or is disgusted at what one is looking at....When I go back to my parents I cover up. My mother absolutely hates tattoos. She thinks I am ruining my body. That is her opinion and I respect that. I don’t want to upset her.

**Skin Deep; No 56; January 2000:(P28)**

Interview with Zoe

“It’s a generation gap thing. People our parents’ age have a set image in their head of tattoos. I think the second half of this century, it’s been so associated with prisoners and sailors. Before that it seems to have been more accepted, with socialites and upper class people having them.”

**Skin Deep; No 56; January 2000 (p30):**

Interview with Zoe

“I’ve had negative reactions from people. The most common one when I am at work is ‘Are they real?’ When I was travelling in the states I got a totally different reaction. They have a different attitude to tattoos over there. People were just interested and would say ‘That’s really nice.’ You see tattooed people working in Safeways! You can’t imagine it over here. We could learn a lot from their attitude.”

At the same time as exclusion takes place, tattooing marks the acceptance or inclusion into an alternative community with its own norms and values.

Theresa Wall (bod/mod site http://hampshire.edu/~tawF95/bodmodx p.html )

“The subculture that body modification has evolved into is an almost separate society with it’s own rules, values, and morals. It has societal standards that one must live up to, although they are not the same kind as mainstream society. The criminals become the hackers: the people who pierce and tattoo because of the money, not for the art; and the poseurs: those who think this is a really cool trend. They can only deal with the short term modifications; they plan to remove their piercings and become ‘normal’ again when they grow up.”

**NEO-COMMUNITIES AND THE TATTOO**

Maffesoli (1996) talks about the rise in what he terms ‘neo-tribes’ or the transitory group which is neither fixed or permanent, but involves a constant back and forth movement between tribe and the masses. These neo-tribes may be "effervescent, aesthetic, oriented toward the past or future; they have as their common characteristic on the one hand, a breaking with the commonly held wisdom and, on the other, an enhancing of the organic aspect of the social aggregation" (p96). Moreover, solidarity is expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form. According to Sanders (1988), fellow tattooees commonly recognise and acknowledge their shared experience, decorative tastes and relationship to conventional society. Tattooing has an affiliative impact in that it is routinely employed to demonstrate ones indelible connection to
primary associates or groups whose members share special interests and activities (Sanders, 1988).

"Becoming tattooed is a highly social act. The decision to acquire a tattoo (and the image that is chosen), like most major consumer products is motivated by how the recipient defines him or herself. The tattoo becomes an item in the tattooee's personal 'identity kit', and in turn is used by those with whom the individual interacts to place him or her into a particular interactions-shaping social category"  
Sanders, 1988, p405)

However, unlike the temporary neo-tribe discussed by Maffesoli, the wearing of a tattoo is not temporary, but permanent. It denotes a strong commitment to a particular group or lifestyle, and the larger or more prominent the tattoo, the greater the commitment. For example, there are many instances today of women being tattoooed on their faces, their arms and hands, their legs, chest and their backs; all traditional parts of the body associated with male tattoos. The following photographs illustrate some of the designs and body parts that women are choosing to have tattooed. These tattoos are primarily ‘male’ or ‘old skool’, as in the case of the sacred heart depicted in pictures 1 and 4 (a design traditionally associated with sailors who wore it for protection from being whipped), and the birds in picture 2 (meant to represent swifts and meaning ‘swift of fist’). Moreover, these women have tattoos on very male, almost taboo areas on the body, such as the ‘full sleeve’ (total arm coverings), hands, neck, and in the case of picture 3, on the face.

CHALLENGING GENDER STEREOTYPES AND TATTOOS

One interesting point to make on the subject of the masculine image adopted by females, is that in the contemporary sub-cultures which utilise tattoos as a symbol of membership, women are not trying to emulate men by trying to be 'masculine', as the photographs clearly show. On the contrary there is a sharp distinction between male and female expressions of identity. In other words, men dress, look and act like men, while the women tend to take femininity to the extreme.

Today, Betty Page, the American 1940s/1950s pin up, is the role model for the look, which is a mix of 1950s nostalgia and contemporary punk/nu metal. For example, many sport the Betty Page bobbed hairstyle, cut off halter neck tops, slim fitting skirts and ankle strap shoes. Make-up is used liberally, with red lipstick, pale foundation and dramatic eyes. In this context, the tattoo is not reported so much as a symbol of rebellion against society, but as an object of beauty. However, the act of becoming tattooed is described as having a liberatory effect, and may be a subconscious act of resistance which rises above the outwardly aesthetic form.

Interview with Angie

"They are a pretty adornment, making myself nicer. I keep going after the same things, I go after them subconsciously. I mean people say to me you do that to stand out, I don’t it’s the way that I express myself, a natural progression in making myself unique....I studied art in particular Celtic art, but I didn’t get it (a Celtic tattoo) due to that. I get my tattoos because they are
attractive to me not because of the symbol. Some designs are universal; I used to design jewellery, making unique pieces that I designed myself. I used to buy cheap silver and gold from this stamp shop and make them. I did this piece the once, it came from nowhere, then afterwards I bought this book on Navaho art and there was the same design. Style and fashion is a shared thing and unique at the same time."

Unnamed Informant – Skin Deep (September 2001, p3)

“Tattoos are a method of modifying the body in a way that pleases the individual. They have the potential to make a body more beautiful and more interesting. They allow the wearer to bring their inner feelings out. After all, plain skin is pretty boring. Since I have got tattooed I wear less make-up then I used to....When we look better, we automatically feel better and others react to us more positively. It’s natural for us to want to look our best.”

The tattoo is also a creative act which denotes control over the body and a way of creating and transforming the physical appearance. This fits with Bordo’s (1993) assertion that the truly resistant body is not the body that wages war on feminine sexualisation and objectification, but the body that uses simulation strategically in ways that challenge the stable notion of gender as the edifice of sexual difference; an erotic politics in which the female body can be refashioned in the flux of identities that speak in plural styles (Bordo, 1993; Schwichtenberg, 1990). The practice of tattooing oneself may also be viewed as an act of empowerment, as noted by Margo DeMello, a female tattooed anthropologist:

“by far the most popular tattoo discourse today centres around notions of personal growth and borrows it’s language from the new age and self help movements of the 1970’s and 1980’s. The key word is “empowerment,” and women today highlight that concept in their “tattoo narratives,” or stories that they construct describing their tattoos and their motives for acquiring them. Many women get their first tattoo as a means of regaining control over their lives such as divorce, or coming to terms with rape and abuse. For some, the tattoo is an important step in reclaiming their bodies and the narrative in which they describe this process is equally important...

As tattoos are traditionally associated with masculinity, tattooed women, regardless of their conscious personal motivations are subverting conventional notions of femininity and masculinity. The body, as many postmodern theorists have pointed out, is both the site of inscription of power and the primary site of resistance to that power. .....Through marking the body with tattoos, then, one can argue that women are working to erase the oppressive marks of a patriarchal society and to replace them with marks of their own choosing which contest patriarchal power.”

Margo DeMello (1995, p74)
THE CONTAGION EFFECT -
THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY

According to Sanders (1988) women usually have their first tattoo placed on an unexposed part of their body. Thereafter, if they choose to have another tattoo, a more visible area of the body may be selected, after which a contagion effect may occur which results in a form of addictive consumption (Elliott, 1994). Vail (1999) discusses the process of becoming a collector; a transformation which is physical, due to the alteration of the skin, psychological and sub-cultural. It also alters how the individual perceives his or her skin, and in turn how that skin is perceived by others. Being heavily tattooed still stands outside of conventional norms, and becoming a collector requires devotion to a lifestyle that might be considered marginal. “In short one must want to become a collector”. Becoming a collector, or someone who is ‘tattooed’ as opposed to having a tattoo, is also an educational process, through which the individual learns about the appropriate designs, their meanings and their aesthetics on the individual’s canvas.

Interview with Angie:
“I have been into tattooing for as long as I can remember, I have always been interested in art, my background is in jewellery manufacture, I have always been arty and to me it was just another form of artwork. I had my first tattoo when I was twenty five, it was a tiny spiral, I have always been into spirals and Celtic artwork, I had always wanted one, I didn’t want it normal, I wanted it more cartoon like, more free form. I got it when my boy friend at the time went to get one (a tattoo), and the tattooist had some spirals in his flash, but they were too perfect, too regular. I told him to **** it but I’ve never been too happy with it as it is too regular. At this point in time I have five tattoos in all, the spiral on my ankle, stars and flames on my abdomen, hot rod flames on my wrist, stars behind my ear, and the white tattoo on my back. I have lots of different stories that I tell people, some times if they are annoying me, I tell them it was done with needles dipped in bleach. Everything I have I have drawn myself, I like some tribal stuff but not the spikey stuff. I sketch what I want every time, I know what I want and I know what I like. But with the white one I really wanted that one to look like a Scarification, you know the whiteness of a scar, it was a bit of an experiment. I first got it done by the person I used to work for, he used to say that you couldn’t do just white tattoos and when I saw a photo in a magazine I showed him and said to him I told you so! So I got him to do it, Winston has just gone over it again. ….. I have recently got into traditional body decoration, like the stars behind my ear and flames up my left arm, I wouldn’t want pictures, traditional designs seem to flow with the body. The same with old skool designs, my views on them have developed over the last few years, I didn’t use to see the appreciation in traditional tattoos before, but all of them are personal.”

Interview with Joanne:
“I was 17 when I got my first tattoo done it was not very good and it was done as part of a thing
where every one in the crowd got one. Unfortunately I chose through price instead of quality, it was a small supposed Celtic design on my left arm. As you can imagine it is now covered up with a better design. This sort of put me off getting anything else till I was 25, this was a good thing because it allowed my taste to develop. Otherwise I would have got just the usual sort of crap that everyone gets instead of something that means something special to me and no-one else. I decided to go get another tattoo as I said when I was 25, I was working down south at the time and two of my male work colleagues had absolutely beautiful designs, the work was so intricate it was unbelievable. I asked were they got it done and they told me. This tattooist was literally world class, he had at least 20 years experience, this was all evident when I went to his shop for the first time. I chose a design paid my money and then had to wait six weeks, this was how good he is there was and still is a four to six week waiting list to get a tattoo from him. I mean he isn’t your usual ‘mom and dad’ or little itty bitty rose tattooist. After I got my first big one, on my right shoulder, I thought well I can take the pain, what about another, this was due to the fact that I came out of the tattooist with a huge grin on my face, but at the same time I wanted more, not just due to the fact that I actually enjoyed the tattoo (apart from the pain) but I felt that a large tattoo on one arm and a small one on the other would not balance out right. This way of thinking has continued to the present day where I am just going to get my lower left arm finished sometime in the near future, I have already planned how to finish the corresponding part of my right arm so that they are not lopsided. I have heard other people that are heavily tattooed feel an itch on an area that makes them feel where they need to get another tattoo. I have never felt like that but I do feel I know where the next one is going to be placed......perhaps it is subconscious?"

This process of collecting and becoming a collector may be considered a form of what Van Gennep (1960) describes as a contagious rite of passage. This is based on the belief that natural or acquired characteristics are material and transmittable. Within the sub-culture, tattoos mark the individual as a member, and the more extreme, symbolic or complicated the tattoo, the higher the position in the hierarchy. However, there is one aspect closely related to the tattoo ritual or rite of passage, and that is the actual experience of being tattooed which involves physical pain and reportedly, pleasure.

Interview with Joanne

“When I am getting a tattoo done it is a very strange experience as to begin with you have pain, this pain diminishes as the tattooing continues. Not just of that tattoo you are getting done but as you get tattooed more you get used to the experience and it hurts less...the pain diminishes as the tattooing progresses. As I said, for me personally it gets to about a third of the way through and I start to actually enjoy the process and by two thirds of the way through I’m usually high as a kite. I think this is partially to do with the
excitement of getting tattooed; you are actually getting something that you really want that really means something to you as an individual, and can show off later; it is also partially to do with the amount of endorphins that are pumping round my body. I said that it gets less painful, well this also depends on where you get the tattoo done, some places are more painful than others; for example the tattoos on my shoulder blades were really sore. This is due I think to the differences in skin thickness. The body is very strange, when I got the inside of my left arm done I was getting tattooed about 3-4 inches away from my armpit yet it felt that I was actually getting tattooed there. It felt that real I had to have a look to see what the hell the tattooist was doing; the body does some strange things to you when you get tattooed."

Some describe getting hooked on the experience and taking it further into the realm of scarification and even sadomasochism:

Theresa Wall (bod/mod site http://hampshire.edu/~tawF95/bodmodxp.html)

“Two months later, I got my first scar. It was on my left shoulder, cut by my friend Amber. It was done in a Beltaine ritual (May 1st) and was the most incredible experience I have ever had. It was at this point that I realized exactly why John was into pain, it was more like a warm feeling that enveloped my entire body, heightening all my senses, making me ALIVE!! I don’t believe that there has ever been a more vivid moment in my life. I could feel everything, the trees around me, the moon, the stars, the night time sky. Amber was as energized as I was and we danced around in the darkness for a while, dispersing the energy that I had created when I transformed the pain into something that was not pain. This is my addiction now. I have no other and I figure that well, this is as good a vice as any.”

However, this is an area that needs much deeper research!

CONCLUSION

Tattooing has in recent years become a multi-billion dollar industry which involves a process of production on the part of the tattooist, and consumption on the part of the tattooee. Further more, its popularity is on the increase for both males and females. The current interest in tattoos is no longer confined, as in earlier periods of western industrialization to the working class, youth cultures, or criminal communities. These days tattoos extend across the social scale, where they are used to produce an aesthetic enhancement of the body (Turner, 1999). “In short, tattoos have become a regular aspect of consumer culture, where they add cultural capital to the body’s surface” (Turner, 1999, p40).

However, Vail points to the fact that both the marketing and psychological literature on tattooing tends to conceptualise the act in terms of deviance or extreme exhibitionism, verging on the criminal. This, of course, may be the case within certain subcultures, but it is far from generalizable. Indeed the women who formed the basis
of this study, from reading their stories, revealed few deviant characteristics. They were taking control of their bodies and subjecting them to a process of beautification. This in itself may still be viewed with some suspicion by mainstream society, particularly when seen on the female form, but it is valued and appreciated within the context of the sub-culture as an act of creativity and an art form. Tattoos imbue the wearer with a form of sub-cultural capital (Thornton, 1996) which denotes status, knowledge and commitment to a permanent lifestyle which may be based on exclusion from the mainstream. Furthermore, the increasing trend for women to adopt traditional male tattoos on predominantly male parts of the body may also be seen as an act of empowerment. These women are not trying to look like men. On the contrary, their dress and general appearance are overtly feminine. It is an expression of confidence in their sexuality, their attractiveness and importantly, their individuality or uniqueness. However, this expression of identity also carries with it a high which can become addictive, to the extent that some women are now taking body modification to the extreme, as in the case of ‘full body suits’ or scarification. This, depending on the position adopted, might arguably fall under the umbrella of deviant consumption. Nevertheless, this and the themes outlined in this paper require a fuller interrogation before any conclusions may be drawn.

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