

Dilemmas in the Expression of Multiple Identities: The Causes and Effects of Female Tattoos and Facial Piercings

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Abstract. Nowadays, more and more females choose to have tattoos or facial piercings and it is a trend in recent years. At the same time, those females may face discrimination or experience bias. Understanding the reasons that females have tattoos or facial piercings and revealing the dilemmas they are facing have been the focus of a large number of research papers. This paper aims at establishing the link between the reasons of females having tattoos or facial piercings and the dilemmas they are facing by review former researches. This paper reveals that there are still dilemmas for females who have tattoos or facial piercings to overcome in their lives. Different identities affect females in choosing to have tattoos or facial piercings. The reasons why females have tattoos or facial piercings stem from pursuing aesthetics, expressing emotions and expressing personalization. However, there are both positive and negative impacts on individual physical and mental development, academic and career development, and social interactions. This study offers a new idea of doing researches on females facing dilemmas with tattoos or facial piercings.

Keywords: Female, tattoos, facial piercings.

1. Introduction

In human societies, it is easy to find cultures and traditions to have tattoos and facial piercings which are usually with some special signs or meanings in some tribes. Martí pointed out that the Li people in Hainan, in China, and the example of the population in Equatorial Guinea, in west central Africa are two instances of having tattoos and facial piercings traditionally [1]. Therefore, many people think tattoos and facial piercings are not acceptable in the modern society. Female tattoos and facial piercings are not a main culture which means this may not be advocated by the public. But there are still a lot of females who have tattoos or facial piercings. Nowadays, the phenomenon of having tattoos and body piercings is becoming more and more common. The survey from Horne et al. reported the ratio of undergraduate males and females who have tattoos and piercings in a university [2]. At the same time, they may suffer some unequal treatment. Farley et al. mentioned that tattoos are a performance of arts in a cultural and personal way [3]. The research from Martino analyzed that visible piercings make females look more creative, artistic, and mysterious [4]. According to former researches, there is lack of studies of combining the expression of multiple identities with female tattoos and facial piercings from female identities and cultures perspectives. This paper reveals the current situations of female tattoos and facial piercings by analyzing the reasons and effects. From introducing relevant theories and analyzing the reasons of females having tattoos or facial piercings, this study reviews the dilemmas in the expression of multiple identities in both perspectives of individual and society.

2. Subcultural Identity Expression Theory

2.1. Subcultural Theory

The subcultural theory is to describe a kind of culture which is a part of the culture that the society advocating but belongs to a special area or group. The performance of the subculture is different from the main culture which includes actions, values, customs, dressing and so on due to different categorizations. Usually, when people think about subculture, it is seen as an underground culture. But the subculture does not only exist in music, dressing or adornments such as tattoos and facial

piercings, it is also produced by politics among different countries, regions, skin colors, races, religions, genders, sexual orientations, ages, classes, education, occupations and so on. As the development of the main culture, new things come out, then new subculture appears. Subculture is not totally marginal with its diversity and variation in the mainstream society. Ismail and Liu mentioned that the female Muslim punk group is still active in Malaysia, a Muslim country [5]. Subculture can spread as the main culture as well. In China, there was a trend called “Zu’ an” culture which was one of virtual servers in the game of league of legends. Due to many players who were from this server insulted other players, “Zu’ an” culture spread in many social media platforms such as TikTok. This made many people even kids start to follow this culture, so all the social media platforms strengthened their supervision for the bad words in any forms to build a positive and civilized social environment. After the subcultural group enlarges, it challenges the mainstream culture. Hence, when the subculture starts to propagate, the mainstream culture takes actions to the subculture either labelling or constraining. Beezer explained that subculture is not only a cultural phenomenon, but also a political expression and social movement which reflecting young people’s protest against social injustice and authority and the desire of freedom [6]. The characteristic of the subculture is the coexistence of de-massified and massified, popularity and marginality, and resistance and compromise.

2.2. Multiple Identity Theory

Multiple identity theory is a form of expression for people who identify with multiculturalism. The multiculturalism is the diversity of the differences from races, ethnicities and cultures, reflecting in politics, economy, social actions and so on. Song discussed about the relations between multiculturalism and liberalism. She thought the development of the multiculturalism was based on the liberalism but multiculturalism is the freedom from domination [7]. As more and more different cultures appear, there are more and more identities which are accepted by people who seek for groups to adapt. In different countries, the policies of the multiculturalism are varying with different purposes. For example, Berry mentioned that Canada implemented a policy of multiculturalism to improve all Canadians to get involve in the various cultures [8]. Elias et al. analyzed that every state in Australia had already implemented the policies and continued refining to admit the diversity of the cultures in Australia and maintain the balance of the society [9]. After people finds their own interests in one or a few groups with different cultures, the identity is formed. When people belong to a few groups, they have multiple identities to look into themselves. For instance, F. Naude and L. Naude discussed about tattoos are related to families, memories and the expression of the identity, which showed that tattooing was a way to help people find and tell their identities [10]. Multiple identity also helps people express themselves more personally, which shows their identities’ structures.

2.3. Gender Identity Theory

Gender identity refers to the feeling and the acquaintance of a person in gender. Feminism becomes to one of the most significant issues in gender studies. Stets and Burke explained femininity and masculinity from psychological and sociological perspectives, which showed that environments and interactions with people could affect people’s gender identities [11]. Wood and Eagly mentioned that gender identity was formed by various factors [12]. It can be same or different with the gender identity in biology. Whether it is different or not, it is an identity that people agree with it by themselves. In the most human societies, based on human body structure, the most popular genders are males and females, which is called gender binary. However, gender identity is not totally related to individual body structure, it is related to the person’s acquaintance. Therefore, other gender types come out, such as genderless and transgender. This also means people find themselves in a group which forms their identities. More and more regions are open to any genders than before, and implement some policies to safeguard those people’s rights. For example, in Taiwan the government enacted law to make same-sex marriage legal, which is the first region in Asia to admit the same-sex marriage fact.

As many people acquainting themselves in the correct gender, the gender identities are more and more complex. The gender identity is also related to the space, voice, memories, horizons and so on.

3. Reasons for Tattoos and Facial Piercings in Females

3.1. Aesthetic Pursuit

In the long history of human society, human beings pursue the aesthetics in many different aspects, such as home decorations and appearances. Females are a big group of people who like to study beauty and art. Beauty and art are a part of life which is the spirit world. Different from the real physical world, in the spirit world there is only pure imagery for art. Pursuing aesthetics is a positive life attitude, a spontaneous motivation and a yearning for a more glorious life. It is also a sign of saving ourselves from the darkness because beauty and art is an external dominant sign of daily lives. Combining beauty and art with life to find the tiny beauty in the world with an aesthetic sight. Aesthetics not only reflects self-recognition and confidence, but also shows people's tastes on fashion and the ability of innovation. Pursuing aesthetics is not to follow the fashion, it is to show the personal unique charm. Tattoos and body piercings are among the beauty and art which people are chasing. Swami and Harris stated as kinds of body art, tattoos and body piercings had significantly increased in the last 20 years, which showed more and more people accepted these types of expression of art and pursued beauty [13]. Many people who have tattoos and facial piercings just think they look pretty on their bodies. Hill et al. mentioned that girls were more likely to have tattoos and facial piercings for the purpose of getting beauty [14]. It is rational to pursue beauty because they are brave and happy to accept themselves. Tattoos and facial piercings can be customized by people themselves, such as the place, the pattern, and the shape. They are just two types of decoration art forms on the body to make people become what they want to look like. Ornaments like rings, bracelets and necklaces express the opinions of understanding beauty same as tattoos and piercings.

3.2. Emotional Expression

Tattoos and facial piercings are also seen as two ways to express the emotions. Hwang and Matsumoto mentioned that emotions are something that people were born with and it could be wakened up in many situations [15]. The emotions exist and there should be methods to release them. Any emotions are meaningful to express in an apposite way, especially those harmful emotions which should be released to get out of them. To express emotions and feelings is not something losing manner, otherwise it is a helpful way to get what we really need or want, which is also a progress to know ourselves better and look into ourselves. Emotional expression is seen as an attachment of shortening the distance between person and person. Usually, people only share their feelings or emotions with someone they are intimate, so that those emotions and feelings can be accepted and understood. Tattoos and facial piercings are a way for people to seek emotion identity, when it comes to females who are probably shy to express emotions and feelings by talking or sharing, so tattoos and facial piercings are their signs for similar people to understand each other. Vanston discussed about that having tattoos and piercings could help develop new friendships [16]. However, there are a group of people who have special experience, such as traumatic events or memories. These people choose to have tattoos and facial piercings to memorize something special or just feel the pain to let them feel they are real in this world. Swann-Thomas and Buckley studied that tattoos with sad memories could help relief pain of the memories and express their emotions [17]. The process of having tattoos or facial piercings is definitely painful, but for some reasons people can feel excited, free or relax because it is one of the methods for them to express their emotions and feelings. After having tattoos or facial piercings, the long process of taking care of the tattoo or the facial piercing can heal hearts like moms take after their babies. The patterns and places of tattoos and the places of facial piercings can be decided by people themselves which gives people who are under control the ownership of their body.

3.3. Personal Expression

Tattoos and facial piercings are tools to help people express themselves' uniqueness. Many people express their unique characters and attitudes through tattoos and facial piercings. With specific patterns, shapes or places, people show different experiences, beliefs, interests, values, identities and styles. For instance, Christians are like to have a cross pattern as their tattoos to show their belief in God. Punk people prefer to have unique facial piercings on unusual places, such as their nose bridges, or they put nails under their skin to form some protrusions like some bones. Everyone has own special stories and experiences, so tattoos and facial piercings can be a sign to show people unique. People use tattoos and facial piercings to memorize some events or some important people. Tattoos and facial piercings are the subcultural expressions, but more and more females choose to modify their bodies to challenge the traditional society norm and express themselves in their own way, which shows their dominance of their bodies and personal expression. Females combine various cultural elements to express their appreciation of understanding different cultures and styles. For example, many western females choose Chinese characters, Japanese or Korean words as their tattoos patterns to display their interests on Chinese, Japanese or Korean cultures and their inclusiveness of cultural variety. Sims pointed that a survey from a tattoo shop showed that choosing Chinese characters as tattoos was popular [18]. Some females like to use some characters from anime for their tattoos as well. As females growing and experiencing, tattoos and facial piercings can be increased, removed or covered by their changed ideas, which shows their different life phases. Tattoos, as a customized method, females can draw a draft by themselves to customize their own unique patterns or words, such as some memorable images and handwritten sentences. To increase or erase tattoos and facial piercings, females show their diverse individuality and inclusiveness, although some people have bias with having tattoos and facial piercings.

4. The Impact of Tattoos and Facial Piercings on Females

4.1. Impact on Individual Physical and Mental Development

Farley et al. studied that having tattoos had potential risks for females in both physically and mentally [3]. From the statistics of Garcia-Pola et al., it is common for facial piercings to cause some related complications [19]. Females who have tattoos or facial piercings are more likely to suffer some special diseases than males, such as the complications when females are pregnant or during the process of giving birth. In addition, after getting tattoos or facial piercings, the skin may get infected and form lumps around the tattoos or piercings. The ink using for tattooing may cause allergic reactions or skin infections on females' bodies. Particularly, in the case of lip piercings, eyebrow piercings or nose piercings, it can cause the allergy of materials. Females who are pursuing tattoos or facial piercings are probably to get involved in troubles with their families especially young females because their parents consider that having tattoos or facial piercings is possibly to get addicted. Therefore, it may put too much pressure on the females to let their families accept the fact that they get tattoos or facial piercings. For instance, there are a lot of families which are traditional to trust that skin cannot be hurt intentionally, so they do not allow their children to get tattoos or facial piercings. In additionally, those families also may think that having tattoos or facial piercings a is unforgivable thing. After they notice that their girls have tattoos or facial piercings, they may take drastic actions to force their girls to remove their tattoos or facial piercings. This can trigger a contradiction between girls and their families, furthermore, it may cause girls to do some extreme actions or suffer depression because they are not understood by their intimate families, which is harmful to develop their mental health. In contrary, those females who are supported from their families or having strong willpower may become more confident and love themselves more with their tattoos or facial piercings.

4.2. Impact on Academic and Career Development

From the research of Martin and Cairns females with tattoos or facial piercings are more likely to have stigma in their careers [20]. A fact that cannot be denied is that there is still a lot of discrimination against females who have tattoos or facial piercings, especially the visible tattoos. Henle et al. gave the result that females with visible tattoos suffering bias when they looked for job opportunities [21]. The research did by McElroy et al. showed that people with facial piercings were affected with the negative effects when they applied for jobs [22]. The researches above show that females who have visible tattoos or facial piercings are influenced by the bias or stereotypes as job applicants. Foltz discussed about undergraduate students knew that tattoos might have negative effects on their job opportunities, but they still decided to have tattoos [23]. When it comes to females who are students or working in academia, they might be judged by their peers or professors due to the bias, which could have impact on their study or researches. For example, females with tattoos or facial piercings are discriminated by their peers or professors who have negative opinions about physical modifications. This may cause the obstruction of those females studying or getting academic opportunities even they may suffer mental diseases for under pressure. In contrast, there are more and more people who consider that females having tattoos or facial piercings is to show their individuality, which they can boost more creative and innovative ideas.

4.3. Impact on Social Interactions

The view of females having tattoos or facial piercings is influenced by different cultures or societies. It is more common for people to accept females who have tattoos or facial piercings in Western countries compared with Asian countries, and also in some religious communities they may have negative thoughts with females who have tattoos or facial piercings. During this generation, young people are more likely to accept that females have tattoos or facial piercings than the people from old generations who have bias with females having tattoos or facial piercings. They may think those females with tattoos or facial piercings are unprofessional or aggressive. From the study of Vanston, females who have tattoos or facial piercings may be easy to start friendships with those people who have or appreciate body art [16]. Sharing the experiences of having body art can strengthen their friendships and get support of pursuing the subculture, which can help these females be a part of the community to gain belonging that they need. This also gives a chance for females who have tattoos or facial piercings to meet new friends or develop a relationship. However, if females in a religious or traditional society want to have tattoos or facial piercings, they will face challenging obstacles due to the lack of acceptance of having tattoos or facial piercings. Since body art is seen as a form of expression of art or identity, females with tattoos or facial piercings may get better acceptance from the society.

5. Conclusion

For the information given, females having tattoos or facial piercings are out of complex reasons such as pursuing aesthetics and the expression of emotions or identities. This review mainly focuses on the motivations of having tattoos or facial piercings on females and the discrimination those females facing in their careers, academia or social lives, which has potential impact on their mental health. From the theories of subcultural identity, multiple identity and gender identity, having tattoos or facial piercings is the performance of females as different identities. The reasons of females having tattoos or facial piercings are from aesthetic pursuit, emotional expression and personal expression. By stating the impact on individual physical and mental development, academic and career development, and social interactions, females who have tattoos or facial piercings face dilemmas. Even though there are more and more females who have tattoos or facial piercings, the discrimination against females still exists either in their careers or in the society. For further studies, this review will serve as a base and the questionnaires are necessary to study the dilemmas that females who have tattoos or facial piercings deeply. By analyzing the statistics, the dilemmas will be presented more

specifically. The current findings add substantially to our understanding of females having tattoos or facial piercings. However, there are several limitations to this study need to be considered such as the experiences of females who have tattoos or facial piercings in their real lives. To further study this issue, a questionnaire or interviews is needed to prove the statement.

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