

ENG 101.056

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### Tattooing and Body Piercing: A Cross-Disciplinary Study

Many people make the decision to permanently alter their bodies for a variety of different reasons. For some people, they are trying to express something about their inner selves, be it beauty or rebellion. Others simply succumb to peer pressure. Still others get a tattoo or body piercing simply for the rush of the pain. Regardless of why people do it, it is obvious that body art is becoming a growing trend in modern culture. Because of this, most people at least consider the prospect of becoming tattooed or pierced. While there is nothing wrong with body art, a decision can be made that some people rush into this permanently appearance altering decision too quickly, and regret getting it once it is too late. This research paper is meant to address the decision making process by comparing four articles about body piercing and tattoos, each written in a different discipline. The first article is from a popular source. "Cool Tat, Too Bad It's Gibberish", written by Cindy Chang, discusses Western society's fascination with Oriental tattoos, and the embarrassing situations that may be a result of mistranslated tattoos. The second article, "Complications of Body Piercing," written by Donna I. Meltzer, is written in the scientific discipline. Meltzer discusses the specific complications associated with piercing different areas of the body, and the risks of body piercing to those with congenital heart disease. The third article, "Are tattooing and body piercing indicators of risk taking

behaviours among high school students?”, is written in the social science discipline by Martha Dechnesnes, Philippe Fines, and Stephanie Demers. It is an experiment that tests the theory that teenagers with tattoos and body piercing are more likely to engage in other high risk behaviors, such as drug use and gambling. The final article, “Managing Meaning and Belonging; Young Women’s Negotiation of Authenticity in Body Art,” is a humanities article written by Sarah Riley. In this article, Riley argues that body art is “vertically representative”, and that the popularity of tattoos and piercing threaten to make it meaningless in this respect (261). All articles share the idea that, although body art can have negative repercussions, it is a practice that is becoming more and more popular in today’s society. Therefore, it is important that anyone faced with the decision of whether or not to participate in body decorating practices have enough knowledge about the topic to make a well-informed decision. The first type of writing that most people are exposed to is that from popular sources. The information in these sources are generally accurate, and can be based on any type of academic writing, but is rarely justified or explained within the article. Academic articles, although specialized in the science, social science, or humanities field, present information more thoroughly, and are written to explain the justification behind any claims they make. This paper is meant to explain what each type of article contributes to an individual’s knowledge on the subject of body art, and why it is important to review the topic from the standpoint of each type of article in order to gain a well-rounded understanding of the topic.

Popular sources are the general public’s first exposure to many issues, including that of body piercing. Popular writing does achieve the goal of making basic information

accessible to many people, but the way the information is presented is dependant on the opinion of the author, and usually not very comprehensive. "Cool Tat, Too Bad It's Gibberish" is an article that was published in the New York Times. It addresses the possible problems that could arise when combining culture differences and tattooing, but using a style of writing and a publishing medium that many people are exposed to. It describes the story of Shad Madness, a man who had to go through the painful and costly tattoo removal process after he got a Chinese character tattoo that he thought meant "one love," but that actually translated to "love hurts" (Chang). This article stresses the permanence of tattoos and the importance of making sure that the procedure is done correctly the first time. It is particularly valuable to those considering body art because it encourages people to take time and do research to make sure that their body art is something they will enjoy for the time it is on their body. This may help to minimize any permanent negative consequences of this individual form of self-expression.

Science articles written on the subject of body art deliver specialized knowledge about technology or medicine associated with these practices. The information is researched, objective, and sound, although it does not touch on the social issue of body piercing. "Complications of Body Piercing" approaches the topic of body piercing from a medical standpoint. In this article, Meltzer makes a specific point not to interject her own opinion. She simply states medical information as it had been gathered from people with piercings. Those that are worried about possible health risks involved with specific body piercings may find this article helpful. Meltzer explains diseases and complications associated with piercing specific areas of the body, and using specific materials and

shapes and sizes of barbells. She also explains how to prevent or heal each complication that she addresses. Those looking to get a body piercing would be able to reference this article for information about the maintenance of body jewelry, and deciding if it is worth the trouble and inherent risks.

Social science articles usually describe an experiment conducted to prove or disprove a hypothesis on the way people interact, with respect to whatever topic is being researched. The experiment can be biased and poorly done, but if done correctly, can be helpful. Also, the experimenter attempts to explain the logic or reasoning behind his or her results, rather than simply stating them as ultimate truths. "Are tattooing and body piercing indicators of high risk-taking behaviors?" is an article that describes a social science experiment. The authors state their hypothesis, that people with tattoos and body piercing are more likely to engage in other high-risk behaviors. Through a series of surveys and psychology experiments they go on to statistically prove their hypothesis. This article puts statistical backing behind the social stigmas associated with body art. It provides possible justification for this phenomenon in stating that people get tattooed or pierced in the first place due to a "sensation-seeking trait", which is characterized by a "willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of unusual and intense experiences"(Deschneunes, Fines, and Demers 391). The experimenters suggest that their research is accurate, but that there could be more follow up research to determine the justification for their study. This article might interest those that feel they would benefit from a deeper understanding of the reasoning behind people's reaction towards those with tattoos and body piercings, and whether or not body art will change an individual's

personality.

A humanities article generally attempts to answer why people feel compelled to feel or act the way they do. Although the theories can be interesting, most are just based on the speculation of the author and not universally accepted. "Managing Meaning and Belonging: Young Women's Negotiation of Authenticity in Body Art" is an article written from the humanities perspective. The author interviews several women with tattoos and body piercings, and develops from these interviews a theory about the ideology behind body piercing and tattoos. Extremely subjective and based on the interpretation of the author, this article discusses the idea of what body art really means to a group of women in Glasgow, England. It introduces the idea of "vertical representation", where the "outer surface reflects the inner self", and explains that the current popularity of body art threatens to make the vertical representation idea of body art meaningless (Riley and Cahill 261). This article may be helpful to those who wonder how body art and an individual's personality help shape each other.

In summary, although all four articles are very different, they share the common theme of things to consider when getting a body piercing or tattoo. They all address some negative aspects of the topic, but they all seem to deliver another common message. "Complications of Body Piercing" states that "in recent years, body piercing has increased in popularity and social acceptance"(Metzer). The authors of the social science article admit that tattooing and body piercing are "experiencing a growing popularity in Western societies"(Dechnesnes, Fines, and Demers 380). In "Managing Meaning and Belonging", Riley and Cahill write that "Body Art is an established aspect of

contemporary youth consumption practices in... industrialized nations”(261). Although Chang refers to only Chinese character tattoos, she informs her readers that they have been “popular for more than a decade” and seen on a range of people, as common on “college students from the heartland as they are on baristas in Berkeley”. All these articles seem to remind those getting a tattoo or body piercing not to rush into things, because they can be big mistakes if poorly planned, but, by contrast, articles from four different viewpoints on the topic all seem to concur on the point that these practices are growing in popularity. It may be beneficial to explore the reasoning behind people’s fascination with body art, despite its risks. For the average person, however, it is most important to simply be aware of the pros and cons of piercing and tattooing. That is why it is important to have informative, all encompassing material on the topic of body art that is easily accessible to the public.

Works Cited

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