

Body Modification: From Normalcy to Deviance

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The term 'body modification' is often associated with a list of practices that include piercing, tattooing, cutting, scarring and branding which alter the appearance of a body. This list of practices can be expanded to include body building, plastic surgery, dieting, makeup, makeovers, manicures; indeed any practice in which the outer surface of the body is willingly transformed in some way (Featherstone 1999). In the last few decades there has been a noticeable increase in body modification behaviour. Many of these practices are considered everyday or 'normal' but there is an invisible demarcation between the everyday; body modification that represents resistance and finally, modification that is often seen as 'deviance'. Body modification therefore, refers to a body standard that can be contravened (Curry 1993). What contemporary factors cause an individual to transition from what is considered conventional tattooing and piercing, to forms of social resistance and then what current society terms 'deviance'? What are the major socio-cultural factors, particularly in modernity, that prompt individuals to progress from being lightly tattooed or pierced, to extreme flesh practices and radical body modification? Using the framework of existing social research and utilising observations of published interviews and online sources, I will attempt to make sense of the major contemporary socio-cultural impacts upon the passage from normalcy to perceived deviance, with a focus on body piercing and tattooing in the developed world.

Approaching the subject from this angle, assists in developing further understanding of the cultural and social influences on a variety of subcultural groups. This is particularly relevant to the field of urban ethnography, as marginal subcultures are inclined to flourish in an environment in which there is a large enough heterogeneous population to support them. A deconstruction and interpretation of the motives and influences on an individual's transition from resistance to deviance through body modification, heightens our awareness and deepens our understanding of the individuals involved, and the

social and cultural changes engendered by increasing urbansiation and modernity; reducing the potential for othering, deprecation and dismissive attitudes. Due to the ethical limitations of my research I will be forced to utilise only published interviews and surveys. In addition, due to the nature of my focus and the angle of my research, I feel that little can be garnered from real life observation of body modification, as it is the testimonies and motivations of the participants, and my de-construction and interpretation that heralds the required information. Further ethics issues also arise when approaching the notion of body modification observation. As a result, my method of observation in this paper consists of the research and interpretation of magazine testimonies, posted statements from modification participants and academic interviews. My research is limited to the major social and cultural aspects of my chosen subject. This is not to say that other elements such as psychology and other social and cultural factors do not play as equally important a role in the resistance/deviance relationship. I have tightened my focus in order to increase the depth and quality of my research in my focus areas. Another area in which I have not inquired, is discourse on ethnic minorities and other specific racial influences on body modification practices. My focus is primarily on caucasian individuals in the developed western world.

A Search for the ‘Self’

Giddens (1991) used the term ‘body project’ to indicate that the decay of tradition in late modernity co-occurs with ontological self-doubt and a reflexive focus on identity and the body. In the last few decades, the focus on contemporary fashion has escalated and fractured into an “eclectic and self referential system (Tseelon 1995:124)”. Falk (1995:103) refers to postmodern fashion as a “mish-mash of once potent styles and devices, desperately appropriated from a variety of sources in a vain attempt to lend authenticity to that which is no longer imbued with meaning”. Contemporary fashion is also known to change radically in a short period of time, leaving only a tenuous link to an external social reality; fashion therefore, predominantly refers to itself - lacking external referentiality (Sweetman 1999). In this environment, a sense of identity can become fractured, an individual’s body project in a constant state of metamorphosis.

For many, particularly those at an age where they are still forming a sense of identity or self-narrative; involving themselves in tattooing or body piercing may be a reaction against the perceived superficiality of post modern fashion - “an attempt to lend corporeal solidity to expressions of individuality (Sweetman 1999)”. To reinforce this point, Armstrong and McConnell (1994) asserted in a study of 642 high school students, that tattooing was prompted by a desire to communicate a specific image to others, an attempt to strengthen or stabilise one’s sense of identity. In addition, musician/writer and tattoo enthusiast Kyrsten Bean (2012) described her tattoos as “a way of making me look outside how I feel inside”.

In the same time span that mainstream fashion has developed into a heterogeneous, self referential construct, there has also been a notable increase in tattooing and body piercing. The mainstream image of the tattooed and pierced body has evolved; once associated with marginal subcultural groups, devotees now hail from a diversity of age-groups and socio-economic circumstances (Curry 1993). What was once thought a statement of identity or solidification of individuality, may for some, have lost its potency within a cultural environment in which tattoos and piercing have become mainstream, mere accessories in a “carnival of signs (Sweetman 1999)”. Gottschalk’s (1993) interviewees acknowledged that current ‘deviant’ styles were cliched; they could no longer be appropriated as an expression of one’s rebellious self-narrative. Could this increase in popularity be conducive to a push for more radical body modifications in those individuals with a tendency for resistance or deviance? What was once seen as a form of ‘resistance’ body modification may have been absorbed into the eclectic mish-mash of contemporary fashion, no longer imbued with meaning or external referentiality. The potential result is participants may search for further solidity of expression through more radical forms of modification. Adherents may obtain supplementary or larger tattoos, perhaps additional piercings in less mainstream areas of the body (Sweetman 1999). Closely linked to the diversity of fashion in modernity is the notion of consumer culture. How does this impact upon one’s search for the self in relation to body modification?

Shilling (1993) recognises that the theory of body projects is a class bound, gendered and ethnicised phenomenon; the capacity for choice is restrained by a complex amalgam of factors centred around space, gender, class and ethnicity. Application of the theory of body projects therefore, is very effective when focusing on a discussion of body modification on caucasian individuals in the western world, as their capacity for choice is always present (Klesse 1999). Shilling (1993) states that the emphasis on the individualism of these body modifications marks the difference between traditional body modification and modern transformations. Diller (1992) an active body modifier, confirms this notion of body modification as a statement of individuality:

I am a different person now, and I realise that in many ways, I am not the average guy on the street. On a more public level, my tattoo affirms that difference. It visually sets me apart from the masses. Though it has gained in popularity over the last few years, tattooing of this size will never be mainstream.

Featherstone (1991) argues that contemporary individuals are increasingly concerned with their body image; the presentation of the body, emphasis on style and appearance is actively incorporated into a performance of identity. Consumer culture engenders an expectation of bodily performance and display, through consumption of services and commodities; a concept closely tied to the aforementioned self referential fashion construct. Body image in this context of consumer culture therefore, suggests a "strong sexualisation of the body (Klesse 1999)". In addition, consumer culture reinforces the notion that "the body is a vehicle of pleasure and self-expression (Featherstone, 1991: 170)". A byproduct of modernity therefore, is a self reflexive and self referential refinement of identity through utilisation of the body as a vehicle for performing identity. Participating in a marginal sub culture however, raises questions on the impact of external influences and the effect of a sense of community on behaviour.

Curiosity and Cohesion

In a study focused on contemporary body suspension; the act of hanging an individual from hooks that have been inserted through the skin or existing piercings; Forsyth and Simpson (2008) described the participants giving a variety of reasons for suspending: fascination, curiosity, spiritual, turning point, an extension of body modification and challenge to name a few. Most participants however, were initially drawn to suspending through contact with the body modification subculture. Through less extreme body modification, participants gained an insight into the therapeutic euphoria that resulted from the act of piercing the body. Exposure to the act of suspension created a curiosity about the acute and heightened euphoric, spiritual state that was often described by participants. Indeed, most participants had extensive experience with body modification and piercing prior to suspending. Engaging in light body piercing or tattooing therefore, has the potential to lower inhibitions; individuals with body modification history will often be more willing to experiment further than those that are not pierced or tattooed. In addition, once an individual is engaged in the subculture, further connections are made between participants through both shared experience and mutual interest. In relation to body suspension, Forsyth and Simpson (2008) state:

There is bond created between those that are suspending for the first time and those who are deeply embedded within this subculture, which works to further acculturate individuals into this group. Cohesion is generated by the moral support and feelings of trust, security, and friendship with the rest of the subculture.

Engaging in a radical act of body modification and being conscious of other individuals who have shared a similar experience, creates a sense of community in which those that are not yet initiated, desire acceptance from. Cruise (1994) a body modification enthusiast states:

Among the people I love and respect, whose world views I share in fundamental ways, so many have cut, colored, stretched, compressed, decorated, and

otherwise modified their bodies that I even want to do it too. I want to be like them: I want them to know when they see me across a crowded room that I associate myself with them; that we are family.

We can see from this statement that identity is closely linked to a sense of community and that a perception of community when on the fringe, engenders curiosity in those with an intrinsic desire for acceptance. There are other factors however, that cause initiates to experiment more. Further to the aforementioned notions of identity and community, is an analysis of the 'Modern Primitive' movement.

Modern Primitivism and Therapeutic Value

The term 'Modern Primitive' arose in the late 1980s; used to describe people who responded to so called primal urges to do 'something' with their bodies. Fakir Musafar, the self confessed father of the movement describes the purposeful, ritualised modification of the human body as 'body play'. Musafar believes that it is a universal urge that cuts across time and cultural divides (Klesse 1999). One of the key elements of the movement, is the adoption of primitive rituals as part of an overall search for profound spiritual, psychic and corporeal experiences. These 'revisited' primitive rituals primarily focus on body modification techniques of a syncretic nature. Those associated with the movement often see themselves as rigorous opponents of western modernity. In addition, body modifications are seen to enhance the value and individuality of the body (Klesse 1999).

Friedman (1994) argues that the development of modernity as a social reality has led to an identity crisis and a wholesale "subjective feeling of alienation (Klesse 1999)". Closely related to my initial discussion on a search for the self, Friedman defines alienation as the detachment of individuals from their sense of place in a meaningful and cohesive world. The current environment therefore, leads to a situation of permanent adaption or variable identity. As a result, there has been an eruption of new cultural and subcultural movements such as the Modern Primitives, searching for

validity. Lending weight to this notion, Musfar stated that he felt "like an alien in this culture" since he was a child (Vale & Juno 1989: 6). Modern primitives reject the western notion of progress and the cultural assumptions that result. Accordingly, this perceived social construct of modernity, can only be overcome by a return to primitive ways through an integration of primitive lifestyle and knowledge; of which marking the body is considered foremost. Musfar states "in pure, primitive societies, there is not cruelty, ugliness, no possessive attitudes, no sexual violence and no transgression (Vale & Juno 1989: 21)". A somewhat idealised view, this statement demonstrates a desire or a search for validity through primitivism; a quest for what was 'lost' on the road to contemptible modernity, from which Modern Primitives feel alienated.

Closely linked to the search for profound corporeal experiences, is the appeal of the potential therapeutic value associated with body modification. Participants in the Modern Primitive movement, often see the ritual as a way of expressing or working through their grief and emotional turbulence relating to the death of friends from AIDS (Klesse 1999). Lader (2006) described body modification behaviour as "coping strategies, an effort to control the out of control, to distract from the elusive and painful emotional to the tangible and palliative physical". The physical pain of body modification therefore, may serve as a potential distraction from emotional pain. In addition, the participant is then left with a symbol of their experience, a constant reminder of a physical pain that assisted in overcoming inner emotional pain or turmoil. Looking at body modification from this perspective, one can see the participant as receiving therapeutic value from the modification. Carroll & Anderson (2002) in a study of 76 adolescent girls found a correlation between body modification and anger, depression and negative feelings toward the body; perhaps illustrating a different take on the 'therapy' of body modification. When pondering the aftereffects of participating in body suspension, Kelsey (2011) an advocate of suspension stated:

Small annoyances and pains in my life now seem so insignificant, and I feel like I can accomplish anything. I am definitely a stronger person because of my

experience. It may not seem like much to most people, but it was absolutely a life-changing experience that I can't wait to repeat.

Conclusions

Through the framework of existing research and interpretation of posted statements and magazine interviews, I have provided discourse on the major socio-cultural factors that may influence individuals to transition from what is considered conventional body modification practices, to forms of social resistance and then what current society terms 'deviance'. Initially, I discussed how the decay of tradition in late modernity co-occurs with ontological self-doubt, and a reflexive focus on identity and the body. Contemporary performance of identity through fashion has become a self referential and eclectic construct; potentially fracturing an individual's sense of identity. As a result of the increase and diversity of participants in modification behaviour, the mainstream image of the tattooed and pierced has evolved - becoming increasingly accepted or 'normal'. The increase in those participating in body modification may also be a reaction against the perceived superficiality of post modern fashion. What was once seen as resistance may have been absorbed into the eclecticism of fashion in modernity, leaving so called 'resistors' searching for solidity of expression through more radical forms of body modification. An additional by product of modernity is the ever present capacity for choice and the consequent consumer culture. Consumer culture engenders an expectation of bodily performance and display, reinforcing the notion that the body is a vehicle of pleasure and self-expression. As a result, a self referential and reflexive refinement of self-narrative occurs, through utilising the body as a vehicle for the performance of identity.

A sense of place and community is a fundamental part of the transition from normalcy to perceived deviance. Through shared experience and mutual interest, body modifiers of varying degrees come into contact and influence each other. As a result, previous inhibitions may decrease, resulting in a willingness from those that are lightly pierced

and tattooed to experiment further. This works to further acculturate individuals into the subculture. Identity formulation through body modification therefore, is closely linked to community. In addition, a perception of community when on the fringe, engenders curiosity in those with an intrinsic desire for acceptance.

Modernity as a social reality has led to an identity crisis and a feeling of alienation. As a reaction to this, movements such as the Modern Primitives search for validity through integration of primitive rituals, knowledge and techniques; the foremost of which is body modification. In addition, it is perceived that the deplorable condition of social life in contemporary society, can be overcome through a return to primitive ways; a search for something 'lost' on the path to modernity. Participants in this movement and in body modification as a whole, also utilise the therapeutic value of body modifications. The physical pain associated with body modification serves as a distraction, or a way of coping, expressing and working through emotional pain; a diversion from the elusive emotional to the palliative physical. The participant is then left with a symbol, a constant reminder of a physical pain that helped overcome emotional turmoil.

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