THE COMMODIFICATION OF BODY MODIFICATION:
TATTOOS AND PIERCINGS FROM COUNTERCULTURE TO CAMPUS*

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ABSTRACT

Radical body modification has experienced expanded expression, appropriation and visibility within the last several decades. Most scholarly interest has cast such practices in the context of pathology, class-bound deviance or subcultural ideological expression. Decisions to obtain tattoos and radical body piercings (locations other than ears), as modest forms of body modification, are examined among a sample of college students at a midwestern, regional university. Subjects with and without these body modifications are empirically compared. Overall, evidence suggests that tattoos and body piercings are being deconstructed as expressions of pathology, deviance and subcultural expression and are becoming increasingly part of a consumer inventory for selection. Hence, decisions to acquire tattoos and radical piercings are no longer bound by social class, expressions of deviance and pathology, or themes of ideology, but are purchased merely as commodities in a consumer culture.
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Physical appearance, as expression of identity, is modified in ways that are regarded as routine and normative (e.g., shaving; cosmetics; waxing/electrolosis; hair styling; tanning; orthodontal correction; body sculpting, ranging from dieting and body building to breast modification, plastic surgery and liposuction) or extreme and disvalued (e.g., tattooing; piercing; \(^1\) scarification; branding; body sculpting, such as feet binding or implanting\(^2\); see Pitts 2000, pp. 444-5; Sanders 1989, pp. 1-4). From a western bias, the more extreme body modification, with roots in non-western traditions, is often cast as radical, as a stigma symbol (Goffman 1963, p. 43) because of historical association with deviant or marginal groups (DeMello 2000; Pitts 1999; Sanders 1989, p. 30).

Despite claims that tattooing (and other forms of body modification) are becoming increasingly diffused and embraced by a middle class (e.g., see DeMello 2000; Hill 1972; Martin 1997; Pitts 2000; Rubin 1988; Sanders 1988; 1989), DeMello (2000, p. 125) suggests that perhaps the middle-class presence has been over-emphasized and over-estimated. Moreover, scholarly research, which influences public perceptions of body modification (DeMello 2000, p. 33), explicitly or implicitly reiterates and perpetuates the stigma because . . . few studies make use of control groups [and] research subjects are drawn from highly selected populations . . . (Sanders 1989, p. 37).

Most studies examine body modification only in the context of marginalized groups, and research focusing on marginalized groups inevitably yields or implies correlations between body modification and stigma (Sanders 1989, p. 37). Some research casts such practices as
psychopathological (e.g., Favazza 1996; Hewitt 1997) or deviant (e.g., Vail 1999a), or associated with criminality (e.g., DeMello 1993). Though Vail (1999a, p.271) addresses tattoos from a deviance perspective, he calls on sociologists to . . . demystify the processes involved in enacting a cultural phenomenon that is rapidly losing its deviant status. Other studies, focusing on nonwestern traditions of body modification (e.g., Barker and Tietjen 1990; Hage, Harary and Milicic 1996), implicitly contrast such primitivism with notions that . . . the proper, natural body is pristine and unmarked (Pitts, 2000 p. 445). Even postmodern discourse fails to liberate body modification from stigma, instead juxtaposing dominant normative sensibilities with the identity politics of bodily-modified subcultures (e.g., sexual underground, see Pitts 2000; modern primitivism, see Klesse 1999) contesting the . . . hegemonic ideology of subordination and the patterns of inequality . . . (Marable 1995, p. 364). Such groups, already stigmatized, employ body modification as expressions of defiance, protest and identity. Moreover, studies focusing only on marked populations and not on general populations lack the comparative potential between those subscribing to and those rejecting radical body modification.

Finally, the ethnographic approaches generally embraced offer rich detail and depth. However, survey research may offer breadth and comparative value. We survey (research) a non-marginalized population, undergraduate college students, with and without body modification, enabling comparative analysis, to assess the liberation, appropriation and prevalence of tattooing and radical piercings (those other than ear piercings), the most common radical body modifications among college students. As Pitts (2000, p. 461) notes, while body modification has recently raised a good deal of interest, the sociology of body marks in cool societies, as
Turner calls this literature, is still emerging . . . and . . . will benefit from a more comparative analysis . . . .

**STIGMA TO STATUS**

Radical body modification has experienced increased expression, appropriation and acceptance in recent decades (Pitts 2000). Tattoos and radical piercings are the most (visibly) assimilated forms of body modification among college students. Tattoos and piercings, as with other forms of body modification, have (had) association with marginalized groups, emphasizing the oppositions of self/other, modern/primitive, gay/straight, lower class/middle class, deviant/normative, and reducing . . . complex relations to fixed . . . binary oppositions that are hierarchically ordered (Banks, Billings and Tice 1993, p. 292).

Given the stigmatized contexts of tattoos and piercings, they have been sanitized and divorced from marginal associations, complete with justifying ideologies, to enter a broader cultural assimilation (DeMello 2000). Such cultural imperialism (Gans 1971; Hirschman 1981) denies practices grounded in socio-economic and ideological marginalization based on . . . sailors, prostitutes, criminals, . . . bikers [or] . . . a mythical, primitive past (DeMello 1995, pp. 48-49; e.g., modern primitivism or urban tribalism (Vale and Juno 1989) notion of finding self-expression through the body as a medium, or the queer (Pitts 2000) confrontation and provocation of heteronormative culture), and instead, reconstructs their historical associations via the emergence of legitimating, middle-class ideologies (see DeMello 2000).

Most recently, it seems body modification has been or is being objectified as retail consumer commodities (e.g., see Klesse 1999; Turner 1999), enabling appropriation without embracing ideology or identity (working class or deviant). Appropriation and ideological denial
are also facilitated by a lack of awareness. For example, only five (1.7%) in our college sample expressed any explicit recognized association between body modification and the gay community.

Without restraints of identity and ideology, tattoos and piercings are becoming more prevalent among college bodies. Such body modification is . . . not dissonant with . . . mainstream culture in any meaningful way except to the extent that it is deployed as such (Pitts 2000, p. 454). The appropriation of stigmatized practices by those who do not risk having attributed to them stigmatic status has been noted (e.g., DeMello 1995, p. 47; Foster and Hummel 1995, p. 162). Acquiring higher education is a manifest expression of social commitment, upward mobility and class aspirations, all goals historically assumed inconsistent with radical body modification. Traditional college students are of the age to be defining a sense of self and to legally incorporate body modification as expressions of that self, though little is empirically known regarding this or more general populations.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

A non-random sample approximating a representative sample of a public, regional, midwest university's student body was drawn from upper- and lower-division, general-education classes over two semesters. A 55 item questionnaire with both closed and open-ended questions, to be completed outside of class, was distributed to all 331 students enrolled in the courses. Some 90.9% (301) returned the questionnaires within two weeks.\(^5\)

Our research focus is two-fold. We test for empirical differentiation between those with and without tattoos and piercings and theoretically suggest that such body modification is being commodified, independent of ideology or class identity. Previous research, mostly addressing tattoos, employs class/deviance or ideological perspectives, suggesting hypotheses from those
orientations. However, tattoos and piercings have become . . . ubiquitous, having entered the . . . mainstream . . ., and they have . . . become an increasingly common feature of our . . . youth (Martin 1997, p. 860). As tattoos and piercings transition to cultural expression, they become less markers of ideological or class distinction. If tattoos and piercings are becoming commodified, free of ideology or deviance and class, traditional, empirical patterns should offer decreasing differentiation (either no pattern or no statistically significant pattern present) between those with and without body modification. Hypotheses examined in this research pose the following as independent variables: familial and childhood stability (number of moves/residences during childhood; marital status of parents during childhood; number of organized childhood activities); religiosity (measured by church attendance); measures of marginalization (social involvement via volunteerism, drug use, grade-point average, athletic self-concept); group affiliation; home community size; college major; and gender. These independent variables potentially differentiate those accepting and rejecting tattoos/piercings (our dependent variables).

**RESPONDENT PROFILE**

Of the 301 undergraduates in the sample (2.9% of undergraduate enrollment), 69.3% were female and 30.7% were male; 81.5% were white, 8.9% were African American, 5.4% Hispanic and 4.2% other ethnicities. The age range was 17 to 28, with a median age of 20. Some 60.1% had neither tattoos nor radical piercings. Overall, 24.9% reported tattoos and 25.6% reported piercings.

**TATTOO PROFILE**

There were 75 (24.9%; 43 with tattoos and 32 with both tattoos and radical piercings) tattooed subjects with 105 tattoos (range, 1 to 4). The age range was 18-26 (Md, 21). Some
27.3% of all females and 17.6% of all males were tattooed; 22.7% of all whites were tattooed, as were 39.1% of all African Americans and 12.0% of all others.

The age at first tattoo ranged from 14 to 23 (Md, 18.0), with 96.0% getting their first tattoo before age 21, the legal age for obtaining tattoos (without the assumed fiction of parental consent) in the state of study. Virtually all (94.4%) did so with parental permission, though several admitted to parental consent *ex post facto*. Most (97.3%) were accompanied by others when being tattooed (most frequently (87.6%) by friends and significant others), consistent with previous findings (Sanders 1988, p.406; 1989, pp.42-3). Over half (53.4%) of those who accompanied the subjects also obtained tattoos. Nearly equal proportions of females and males (96.4% vs 93.8%) acquired tattoos prior to age 21.

Some 69.7% of all females' tattoos were located on the torso (compared to only 25.0% of all males' tattoos), while 75.0% of all males' tattoos were located on the extremities (compared to 30.3% of all females' tattoos). This distribution by gender is statistically significant (Chi-Square: 34.662; DF=17; p=.01). Sanders (1988, pp.412-415; 1989, pp. 48-50) found a similar distribution by gender, suggesting females tend to regard tattoos as body decoration intended for personal pleasure and for intimates, while males regard tattoos as identity symbols and thus public display. Shoulder tattoos (15.2%, females; 29.2%, males) also showed gender differences. Shoulder tattoos for males were generally at the top of the arm, while shoulder tattoos for females were generally on the back of the shoulder. Females were more likely (49.1% vs 31.3%) to report that tattoo locations were influenced by ease of concealment. Only females (27.2%) indicated chosen location as erotic or intimate; males were less reflective in choosing location. Ethnicity also influenced placement. Whites, compared to African Americans, were more likely to
report ease of concealment (45.8% vs 22.2%) or both ease of concealment and display (25.0% vs 0.0%) as influencing location. African Americans indicated minimizing pain (22.2% vs 4.2%) as influencing location.

Tattoo subject matter clustered around butterflies (16.8%), animals (14.9%), floral/vine (14.9%), and cultural (Gaelic, Eastern and tribal) symbols and words (11.2%). Subject matter was not influenced by ethnicity, but females exhibited greater preference for floral/vine and butterflies (41.3% vs 7.4%), while males exhibited greater preference for cultural symbols (30.4% vs 9.9%). The most frequent reason given for acquiring a tattoo was the subject just wanted one (67.1%), regardless of gender and ethnicity. However, only females (27.9%) externalized reasons for obtaining tattoos (friends, tribute, subject matter), while males were more likely (18.8% vs 9.3%) to internalize reasons (birthday, beliefs, personality).

Most tattooed respondents (53.3%) gave considerable thought to buying tattoos, while 17.3% acquired them on a whim. Males more likely gave considerable thought to getting tattoos (62.5% vs 51.8%). Virtually equal proportions of African Americans and whites gave considerable thought to getting tattoos (55.6% and 56.3%), while a greater proportion of African Americans acquired tattoos on a whim (22.2% vs 16.7%). Only 11.7% reported regrets, and of those, 85.7% lamented either the subject matter or the location, but not having gotten tattoos. Sanders (1989, pp. 56-7) found 34.4% expressing regrets, but similarly, about quality, location or subject matter, and not about being tattooed.

PIERCED PROFILE

There were 77 (25.6%; 45 with piercings and 32 with both piercings and tattoos) pierced subjects with 121 radical piercings (range, 1 to 6). The age range was 18-24 (Md, 18). Some
31.7% of all females and 12.1% of all males were pierced. While 27.5% of all whites were pierced, only 4.3% of all African Americans and 24.0% of all others were pierced.

The age at first piercing ranged from 13 to 21 (Md, 18.0), with 38.5% getting their first piercing before age 18, the legal age for piercing (without parental consent); most (86.7%) had parental permission. Some 95.9% were accompanied by others when pierced, most frequently (80.3%) by friends and significant others. Nearly half (42.3%) of those who accompanied the subjects also obtained piercings. Like tattooing, getting pierced is a social activity.

While only 23.1% of males piercing were on the torsos, 68.8% of females piercing were on the torsos, a distribution with statistical significance (Chi-Square: 21.091; DF=6; p=.01). The most frequent location for females was the navel (62.5%), for males, tongues (53.8%). Ironically, while 30.0% of all females piercing were on the head, no female identified ease of display as the reason for location, consistent with females' claim of self-satisfaction for their piercings. The greatest influence identified by both females (54.4%) and males (42.9%) for piercing location was an ambiguous just wanted it there, followed by friends for females (17.5%) and erotic (28.6%) for males.

While 42.5% gave piercings considerable thought, 19.2% purchased piercings on a whim. Males were more likely to give piercing considerable thought (70.0% vs 38.7%) while females were more likely to give piercings some thought (41.9% vs 10.0%). Most pierced respondents (54.3%; 37.5%, males/55.7%, females) obtained piercings because they simply wanted to or liked the way they looked. Only 13.1% expressed regrets (involving location, parental objection, the judgement of others and scarring/infection), with no variation by gender.

UNMARKED PROFILE
Of the 301 subjects, 60.1% were neither tattooed nor radically pierced, and constitute our comparison group. Ages ranged from 17-28 (Md, 20). Some 53.7% of all females and 75.8% of all males were unmarked, as were 60.7% of all whites, 60.9% of all African American and 72.0% of all others.

HYPOTHESES

To test for differences between those with and without body modification and to examine our assertion that tattoos and piercings are transitioning from class and ideological practices to commodities, we offer hypotheses positing relationships between such body modification and familial/childhood stability, religion, marginalization, affiliation, community size, college major and gender, all variables that would fail to distinguish those accepting and rejecting body modification if our thesis is correct.

FAMILIAL/CHILDHOOD STABILITY

The checkered history and stereotypical assumption about tattoos promote a number of conclusions regarding those with such body adornment. Some (e.g., Grumet 1983, p.489; Howell, Payne and Row 1977) suggest that those with tattoos more likely experienced family discord and parental divorce, or that the permanence of tattoos counter the instability of childhoods marked by divorce (e.g., Martin 1997, p.861) or frequent relocations. We assessed the number of times families moved prior to subjects beginning college and the marital status of parents while subjects were living at home, as imperfect measures of childhood stability.

Hy 1: The proportion of subjects with tattoos and piercings will increase with the number of moves during childhood.

Data fail to support the hypothesis. The sample exhibited remarkable stability regarding
moves; 71.7% experienced two or fewer moves. Moreover, our data show a pattern converse to that hypothesized. Those with two or fewer moves, compared to those with three or more moves, were more likely to have tattoos (14.6% vs 12.3%), piercings (17.1% vs 11.1%), or both (10.7% vs 9.9%), suggesting that stability in childhood is (at least now) not a factor in obtaining tattoos or piercings, and is not inconsistent with such modification being part of a consumer inventory.

**Hy 2:** Subjects from two birth-parent households are less likely to acquire tattoos and/or piercings.

Our data offer no support. In fact, those raised in and those raised outside two birth-parent households were just as likely to have neither tattoos nor radical piercings (60.6% vs 61.4%). Those raised by both parents were less likely to have tattoos (11.9% vs 18.6%) but more likely to have piercings (16.4% vs 11.4%), and more likely to have both tattoos and piercings (11.1% vs 8.6%). Thus, familial stability in childhood is not a predictor of tattoos and piercings in this sample, and again lends credence to tattoos/piercings moving from class- and ideological-bound practices to broader consumer contexts.

As some additional measure of childhood stability and socialization, subjects were asked about participation in organized childhood activities (e.g., scouting, baseball, softball, soccer, basketball, football, band, dance team, cheerleading and so on). Some 88.7% of all females and 97.8% of all males had such participation, as did 93.8% of all whites, 82.6% of all African-Americans and 84.0% of all other ethnics.

**Hy 3:** The fewer childhood activities reported, the more likely is body modification.

The data exhibit the pattern predicted, though fail to support the hypothesis. Of those
claiming no organized activities, 57.1% had tattoos, piercings or both; of those claiming one activity, 40.4% had body modifications; two to three activities, 36.7% possessed tattoos, piercings or both; four or more activities, 32.0% had such body modification. An examination of tattoos and piercings separately reveals more erratic patterns. Without a longitudinal perspective, we cannot say this is a change in pattern but involvement in childhood activities for our sample has only a mild (at best) prophylactic effect on body modification.

**RELIGIOSITY**

Perhaps also a measure of familial stability, though presented as a measure of religiosity, is church attendance. Stereotypically, at least, body modification is not consonant with those expressing importance of religion.

**Hy 4:** . . . people who are less religious are more likely to get a tattoo [or piercing] than people who are religious (Morgan 1999, p. 11).

We assess religiosity imprecisely with church attendance. As expected, those who regularly attend church are more likely to be unmarked (74.3%) than those who occasionally or never attend (59.1% and 46.8%, respectively; see Table 1), and those with both tattoos and piercings increases as church attendance decreases. However, those who attend regularly are most likely to have radical piercings (16.2% vs 14.8% and 14.9%). The relationship between church attendance and body modification is statistically significant, suggesting that religiosity (at least as expressed by church attendance) is a proscriptive influence for tattoos but not piercings. This is likely a function of gender since more females than males (62.4% vs 53.9%) regularly or occasionally attend church and females are nearly three times more likely to be pierced (31.7% vs 12.1%), and only about one-third more likely to be tattooed (27.3% vs 17.6%).
MARGINALIZATION

Hypotheses asserting inverse correlations between tattoos/piercings and childhood stability and religious commitment suggest a marginalization (Sanders 1988, p.423-425) of those who acquire such cultural products. A number of variables — volunteerism, drug use, GPA, athletic self-image — as indicators of marginalization, were assessed.

Subjects were asked about volunteerism for community projects/activities such as Habitat For Humanity, Special Olympics and so on. If body modification is some expression of marginalization or diminished social involvement, volunteerism might offer some measure.

**Hy 5:** A greater proportion of those who do not volunteer have tattoos/piercings.

Data fail to support the hypothesis. Some 25.6% were active in such projects, with no variation by body modification. Virtually identical proportions of those who do and do not volunteer had tattoos (13.2%/14.0%), piercings (15.8%/14.9%) or both (9.2%/10.9%), suggesting tattoos/piercings are independent of expressions of social conscience or responsibility. This is not inconsistent with tattoos/piercings becoming part of a consumer inventory available to all, regardless of class/ideological orientation.

Drug use, marginalized along two dimensions — illegal drugs and the illegal use of legal drugs (based on age) — might also distinguish those with and without body modification. Subjects were asked about current drug use and not about drug use when they acquired tattoos/piercings, but in most instances, the interval was relatively short.

**Hy 6:** Those who use drugs are more likely to have tattoos/piercings.

While tobacco is legal for those over 18 and alcohol for those over 21, no one under 18
used tobacco (though few respondents were under 18), but 64.9% of those under 21 consumed alcohol. Of the sample, 45.2% used tobacco, 68.4% used alcohol and 28.9% used illegal drugs. Table 2 almost consistently reflects the pattern predicted, though fails to support the hypothesis, the only significant relationship being between tobacco and body modification, with a significantly smaller proportion (49.3% vs 69.1%) of those using tobacco possessing neither tattoos nor piercings.

**[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]**

While those pursuing higher educations have already defied marginalized statuses, some might consider lower grade-point averages (GPA) an expression of marginalization that would accompany the acquisition of body modification. We excluded those who have not yet established GPAs.

**Hy 7:** The lower the GPA, the more subjects with tattoos, piercings or both.

Data fail to support the hypothesis. Some 45.0% of students with GPAs of 3.50 - 4.00 had tattoos/piercings; 32.5% with GPAs of 3.00 - 3.49 had tattoos/piercings; 46.8% of students with GPAs of 2.50 - 2.99 had tattoos/piercings; 54.8% with GPAs of 2.00 - 2.49 had tattoos/piercings; and none of those with GPAs below 2.0 had tattoos/piercings (N size (2) was small since they cannot remain in school without improvement). Thus, GPA has little influence on body modification.

Also emphasizing marginalization is the notion that tattoos are psychic crutches for crippled self-images (Grumet 1983, p.491) and low self-esteem (Howell, Payne and Roe 1971). While sense of self was not assessed, 62.8% of the sample considered themselves athletic, which we employ as some proxy of self-esteem.
**Hy 8:** Those who consider themselves athletic, as an indicator of positive self-image, are less likely to have tattoos/piercings.

Data do not support the hypothesis; in fact, those considering themselves athletic were more likely to have tattoos and/or piercings (40.6% vs 36.9%). A competing perspective suggests that those with tattoos harbor more positive feelings toward their bodies in that they tend to be more muscular and well proportioned (Grumet 1983, p.486; see also, Mosher, Oliver and Dolgan 1967; Eitzen (1998, p. 47) claims that athletic participation is an outlet for those already imbued with self-esteem). By controlling for sex (Table 3), we are able to specify the nature of this relationship. The hypothesis holds for females to a statistically significant extent; for males, however, the relationship is obverse to a statistically significant extent. In other words, athletic women are more likely to be marked than non-athletic women while athletic men are less likely to be marked than non-athletic men. Table 5 shows that most males (87.9%) consider themselves athletic, though only 20.0% of such males had tattoos/piercings. Some 52.2% of all females considered themselves athletic, and 55.7% of them possessed tattoos/piercings. Several females with navel piercings, all of whom regarded themselves as athletic, stated that they thought navel piercings would motivate them to stay in shape. There is then some minimal evidence to support the contradictory perspectives that non-athletic males and athletic females are more likely to have tattoos and piercings, reinforcing perceived gender differences of body modification already acknowledged.

**[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]**

**AFFILIATION**

Tattoos and piercings have been identified as marks of affiliation to significant groups
Sororities and fraternities, as mainstream groups of affiliation, lend themselves particularly to tattoos via Greek letters. Hence,

**Hy 9:** Members of sororities/fraternities are more likely to have tattoos and non-mainstream piercings (Morgan 1999).

Data fail to support the hypothesis. Nearly equal proportions of Greeks/non-Greeks (64.1% vs 59.9%) had neither tattoos nor piercings. Greeks were less likely to have tattoos (7.8% vs 15.1%), more likely to have piercings (21.9% vs 13.4%) and less likely to have both tattoos and piercings (6.3% vs 11.6%). Accepting Greek membership as some measure of group affiliation, tattoos/piercings have no statistically significant relationship to group allegiance. Those who are not members of fraternities/sororities are most certainly members of other groups/affiliations and their tattoos/piercings may be in reference to those memberships. However, as tattoos/piercings become more prevalent among a general population, affiliation with those who already have tattoos is sufficient to influence like decisions.

**COMMUNITY SIZE**

Stereotypically, body modification, such as tattoos and piercings, seem more an urban practice, larger communities being more worldly and less conservative. However, implied is the marginalization of the decadent urban compared to the wholesome rural.

**Hy 10:** People from larger communities are more likely to have tattoos and radical piercings (Morgan 1999).

Data do not support the hypothesis. Communities identified as 2,500 or less, 2,501-50,000, 50,001-100,000 and over 100,000 yielded the following results. While the proportion of
those with tattoos or piercings was smallest (22.2%) in the smallest community category, it was next smallest (37.3%) in the largest category. Proportions of those with body modification were identical (44.2%) in the two middle categories. Proportions possessing tattoos were 8.5%, 14.5%, 20.9% and 11.9%, respectively, again, smaller in the smallest and largest community sizes. Proportions possessing piercings reflected a more erratic pattern 8.5%, 16.7%, 14.0% and 16.4%, respectively, though the smallest proportion was in the smallest community category. Finally, the smallest proportion having both tattoos and piercings (4.3%) was from the smallest community size, the next smallest proportion (9.0%) was from the largest community size, while proportions from the two middle community sizes were 13.0% and 9.3%, respectively.

Given the diffusions of mass media, the only thing left to distinguish large communities from small communities is size, and just as mass media have diffused cultural practices and trends to communities, mass media have also diffused commodities and their acceptance.

MAJOR

In some sense, major makes a poor independent variable because 83.7% of all tattoos and 75.0% of all radical piercings were obtained before the end of the subjects' eighteenth year, and 93.3% of all tattoos and 86.5% of all piercings were obtained before the end of age nineteen. However, many consider careers and majors before entering college, and such consideration may influence acquiring tattoos and piercings. Stereotypically, majors fall on a continuum of liberal/conservative, and while such classification defies precision, fine arts and social sciences may be considered more liberal, while business and education are more conservative.

Hy 11: Proportions of those with body modification will be greater in liberal majors (and
After majors were assessed, collapsing, following conventions of higher education, yielded seven categories. Proportions of majors having tattoos and/or piercings were fine arts, 46.4%; applied sciences, 42.9%; social sciences, 42.1%; undeclared, 41.9%; education, 40.9%; sciences, 37.0%; and business, 26.2%. Education majors were most likely (22.7%) to have piercings (virtually all torso piercings, and thus concealable) and least likely (9.1%) to have tattoos (all of which were concealable). Visible body modification would likely reduce chances of employment in many school systems. Concealable modification would not impede employment, while still allowing self-expression. Business had the smallest proportion with any body modification (26.2%), the smallest proportion with piercings (7.1%) and the smallest proportion with both tattoos and piercings (2.4%), consistent with the perspective that those entering this major are aware of the conservative business climate. Moreover, these tattoos and piercings were concealable. Fine arts majors were most likely to have modifications (46.4%) and most likely to have both tattoos and piercings (17.9%), reflecting an assumed, free-spirited nature of those selecting that major. Science majors were most likely to have tattoos (22.2%). Distributions of body modification across majors exhibited patterns that sometimes defied prediction, failing to support the hypothesis. However, this is consistent with our suggestion that tattoos and piercings are becoming more a part of a cultural inventory and less a part of an ideological or class inventory.

**GENDER**

Historically in western culture, males have had greater license to acquire tattoos, regardless of class, but if tattoos are transitioning from class/gender/ideological inventory to
consumer inventory, and subject matter is softened, tattoos might be regarded as another expression of body adornment, and females are already more sophisticated in such considerations of the body. Piercing, already a domain of women, is extended via expanding notions of body adornment and sensuality.

**Hy 12:** A greater proportion of females than males will be tattooed and pierced.

Table 4 supports our hypothesis. While 46.3% of all females had tattoos or piercings, only 24.2% of all males were marked. Women were slightly more likely to have only tattoos, but substantially more likely to have piercings and both tattoos and piercings.

![TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

**FUTURE CONSUMPTION**

Of the unadorned portion of our sample (60.1%), 53.1% said they were likely to get tattoos, piercings or both; hence, only 28.2% of the sample claim an aversion to such body modification, suggesting a growing currency of body modification among college students and perhaps the more general population. A greater proportion of unmarked males, compared to unmarked females, (40.8% vs 33.1%) are more likely to obtain tattoos and a greater proportion of unmarked females are more likely to obtain piercings (17.3% vs 7.0%) or both (12.0% vs 5.6%). Conceivably, males regard piercings as more gender specific because of the gendered history in western society and because of the more sensual context females have constructed for piercings.

Whites and other ethnics (50.9% and 58.8%, respectively) were less likely than African Americans (85.7%) to express intentions of getting tattoos or piercings. Some 35.1% of all unadorned respondents cited permanence of tattoos/piercings to explain their reluctance. Other objections expressed included immaturity (23.1%), concerns of appearance when older (10.8%),
pain (8.1%), tacky (10.8%), religion (6.8%), parents (4.1%). Clearly, these claims of intent to acquire tattoos and/or piercings are consistent with an increasing prevalence as commodities.

CONCLUSIONS

Our research suggests that tattoos and piercings are being obtained by college students, substantially free of class and ideology, much as any other commodity is purchased in a consumer culture (e.g., see Vail 1999a, p. 270). The vast majority of respondents were generally inarticulate in explaining why they obtained piercings or tattoos and in expressing why they obtained the tattoos (subject matter) they did. If any of the respondents had obtained tattoos or piercings as expressions of subcultural ideologies, that was not expressed, though seven (2.3%) identified affiliation with LGBAU (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Allies Union). Perhaps this is a deficiency of open-ended survey questions and ethnographic field conversation would have likely been more fruitful, though it is conceivable that in-depth interviews would have merely compelled an articulation of ideological meanings by creating a context of expectation.

Commodification of tattoos, bereft of ideology, is suggested by the 34 (11.2%) with cultural symbols (Gaelic, Eastern, tribal). Few (17.6%) remembered explicitly what the symbols meant, though they knew when they purchased the tattoos. Similarly, none of the respondents could be considered part of the tattoo community. Most were not aware of tattoo magazines and none read or could name any tattoo magazine. Most were not aware of tattoo conventions and none had ever attended a tattoo convention (see DeMello 2000, pp. 20; 97-135). Finally, none of the respondents, even the seven (2.3%) with three or more tattoos, are collectors. Multiple tattoos on single subjects were not thematically unified but were separate, discrete and
autonomous (see Vail 1999a; 1999b).

Certainly, it seems that tattoos (and piercings) are becoming more acceptable and more commonplace and the nature and style of tattoos have changed (DeMello 2000, p. 77). Initially, this may have been due to expanding and new ideologies, but seems now due precisely to an absence of ideology. They are becoming commodities in a consumer-culture inventory for increasingly more customers.

Of the relationships that we examined, only four (church attendance, tobacco use, athletic perceptions by gender, and gender) were statistically significant, and only three (church attendance, tobacco and gender) as predicted. Given the small sample, examination of a larger, more general sample is warranted. Typically, when data lack statistical significance, the research lacks significance. However, in this research, the consistent lack of statistical significance holds sociological significance as some evidence that our contention regarding the transition of body modification is warranted. While in the past, tattoos and piercings were anticipated and patterned by various independent variables of social class and deviance, and later by ideology, our research offers credence for our contention that such body modification is transitioning to a cultural inventory for adoption without class or ideological reference. Tensions and dissention are substantially intergenerational, between the previous generation which casts tattoos as class- and deviance-bound and based, and this generation which sees them as simply another expressive item selected from the cultural menu. However, even such assumed tension is questionable. The vast majority of respondents who obtained body modification while underage claimed to have parental permission, though only 8.6% of all parents had tattoos and
only 3.1% had radical piercings.

This research, unlike previous research drawing from highly selected populations, focuses on college students as a more general population, and again unlike previous research, makes comparisons between those with and without body modification. However, while there is no evidence to suggest that our sample is uniquely atypical of college students, it is not presented as more broadly representative. Hence, replicating this or similar research in other university settings would be warranted and valuable. Finally, survey research misses the richness of ethnographic study which allows subjects to speak more fully and represent themselves and such intensive study among less highly-selected populations, such as college students, would offer substantial dimension.

Our inferred hypothesis that body modification has been objectified as commodity is not to imply that tattoos and piercings will no longer have ideological or class expression but will have increasingly diverse meanings for different groups, not unlike the Harley Davidson as symbol or commodity. As various expressions of body modification are appropriated and commodified, tolerance of body modification should increase, and perhaps, incrementally, tolerance of those displaying modification, regardless of ideology or lifestyle may increase. In this manner, hegemonic culture is incrementally deconstructed as the symbols of those embracing variant identities and ideologies permeate the mainstream.
1. Piercings can be minimized by removing the hardware. Another modification of the tongue splits it from the tip back about an inch, giving it a forked appearance.

2. Implants involve the subdermal placement of surgical steel or plastic objects to cause surface distortion of the skin. Cranial implants allow steel prongs and other appliances to be screwed into the top of the head.

3. Such examination has recently become prolific (e.g., Anahita, Keister and Perkins 2000; Bruton 2000; Foster and Hummel 2000; Morgan 1999; Noll 2000).

4. For example, tattoos achieved softer subject matter, contrasting with harsher, working-class subject matter. This transition went from massive tattoos... depicting service insignia, eagles, or dripping daggers entwined with stylized snakes - as well as the more traditional naked broads, slavering wolves, cartoon characters, crucifixes, or such delightfully whimsical innovations as a drunken monkey swinging on a parking meter [to]... softer, more fanciful, more purely decorative and less violent designs. Signs of the Zodiac, occult and religious markings, and personal totems... (Hill 1972, p. 247; see also, DeMello 1995, pp. 48-49; Sanders 1988, pp. 401-402).

5. Students in and not part of the sample found the research of interest and would drop in, some several times, to discuss body modification. Such informal opportunity interviews enriched researcher insight into the subject matter.

6. Parental permission for tattooing under age 21 is a fiction. Illinois statute (720 ILCS 5/12-10) allows no exceptions for tattooing anyone under age 21, except as done by a physician. Piercing the body of a minor (under 18) is accommodated with written consent of a parent (720 ILCS...
7. Navel piercings have become so prolific that they are now a form of fashion, but just a few years ago, they were cutting edge among college students in the Midwest.
REFERENCES


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Body Modification</th>
<th>Regular Attendance % (N)</th>
<th>Occasional Attendance % (N)</th>
<th>No Attendance % (N)</th>
<th>TOTAL % (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None (181)</td>
<td>74.5 (55)</td>
<td>59.1 (104)</td>
<td>46.8 (22)</td>
<td>60.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos (40)</td>
<td>6.8 (5)</td>
<td>15.3 (27)</td>
<td>17.0 (8)</td>
<td>13.5 (40)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Piercings (45)</td>
<td>16.2 (12)</td>
<td>14.8 (26)</td>
<td>14.9 (7)</td>
<td>15.2 (45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both (31)</td>
<td>2.7 (2)</td>
<td>10.8 (19)</td>
<td>21.3 (10)</td>
<td>10.4 (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (297)</td>
<td>100.0 (74)</td>
<td>100.0 (176)</td>
<td>100.0 (47)</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Chi-Square: 16.815 (DF=6; p=.010)
TABLE 2

BODY MODIFICATION BY DRUG USE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Body Modification</th>
<th>Tobacco¹</th>
<th>Alcohol²</th>
<th>Drugs³</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No  % (%N)</td>
<td>Yes  % (%N)</td>
<td>No  % (%N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>69.1 (114)</td>
<td>49.3 (67)</td>
<td>62.1 (59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos</td>
<td>10.3 (17)</td>
<td>19.1 (26)</td>
<td>13.7 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piercings</td>
<td>11.5 (19)</td>
<td>19.1 (26)</td>
<td>12.6 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>9.1 (15)</td>
<td>12.5 (17)</td>
<td>11.6 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100.0 (165)</td>
<td>100.0 (136)</td>
<td>100.0 (95)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹Chi-Square: 12.625 (DF=3; p=.006)

²Chi-Square: 0.741 (DF=3; p=.863)

³Chi-Square: 11.085 (DF=3; p=.011)
TABLE 3

BODY MODIFICATION BY ATHLETIC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Body Modification</th>
<th>Females(^1)</th>
<th>Males(^2)</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Athletic</td>
<td>Athletic</td>
<td>Not Athletic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>64.9 (63)</td>
<td>44.3 (47)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos</td>
<td>13.4 (13)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Piercings</td>
<td>16.5 (16)</td>
<td>21.7 (23)</td>
<td>18.2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>5.2 (5)</td>
<td>19.8 (21)</td>
<td>27.3 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100.0 (97)</td>
<td>100.0 (106)</td>
<td>100.0 (11)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\)Chi-Square: 13.200 (DF=3; p=.004)

\(^2\)Chi-Square: 14.964 (DF=3; p=.002)

\(^3\)Chi-Square: 2.047 (DF=3; p=.563)
TABLE 4

BODY MODIFICATION BY GENDER*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Body Modification</th>
<th>Female % (N)</th>
<th>Male % (N)</th>
<th>TOTAL % (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>53.7 (110)</td>
<td>75.8 (69)</td>
<td>60.5 (179)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoos</td>
<td>14.6 (30)</td>
<td>12.1 (11)</td>
<td>13.9 (41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piercings</td>
<td>19.0 (39)</td>
<td>6.6 (6)</td>
<td>15.2 (45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>12.7 (26)</td>
<td>5.5 (5)</td>
<td>10.5 (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100.0 (205)</td>
<td>100.0 (91)</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
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*Chi-Square: 14.931 (DF=3; p=.002)