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INTRODUCTION

Body modification is one of the oldest forms of art known to man. It is unclear where these ideas to change one's appearance, usually in a permanent way, originated; it is also unclear where these ideas are going in the future. As body modification becomes more and more mainstream, we are seeing, and therefore dealing with, things that are new and different. Some call these things modifications, other mutilation. No matter one's personal perceptions about body modification, it is becoming more and more common in Western cultures.

This research attempts to answer the seemingly unanswerable question of why people choose to modify their bodies, tolerate the pain involved, and endure the social issues that may arise from these choices. I was able to talk to many different people from various walks of life, allowing me to see many sides of the modification world.

Why People Modify Their Bodies

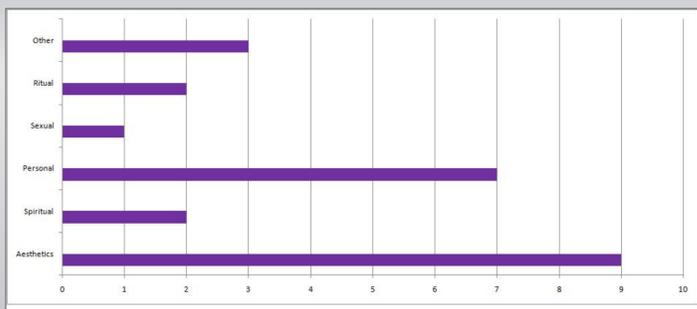


Figure 1

METHODOLOGY

For my research I did pure observation, participant observation, twenty surveys, a five person focus group, one formal interview, and four informal interviews. I used two studio field sites, one in Acworth, GA and one in Austin, TX. I also used the resources at my fingertips, BodyArtForms.com and BMEZine.com. Both of these internet sites are great resources. For example, BMEZine is an online site full of images, experiences, blogs, and its own modification encyclopedia for the modified community.

At my first field site in Austin, I spent a total of four days with my consultant, of which about eighteen hours were spent at his studio. My second field site, in Acworth, I spent about thirty hours total. My informal interviews happened during discussions with the people in the studio, while my formal interviews took place while driving with the Austin studio owner, with follow up questions being asked through Windows Live. The focus group took place on the BodyArtForms chat room and took just over two hours. I also watched *Modified* and *Flesh and Spirit*, two documentaries which are approximately an hour and a half each, and read experiences, interviews, and blogs on BMEZine to help formulate appropriate questions.

Entering the field was very easy for me because I already had preexisting relationships with my consultants. My first consultant is a friend I met through BodyArtForms and have known for a number of years. My second consultant is someone I met through an old friend who now works for him. We have developed a friendship over the past six years. I work as a moderator on BodyArtForms, which allows me access to the site and its members.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

- Figure 1: Why People Get Modified chart
- Figure 2: View of Field Site A
- Figure 3: Participant: 1/2" septum with pipe cleaners
- Figure 4: 4g conch dermal punch
- Figure 5: Flower Scarification
- Figure 6: Subdermal implants that resemble 4g barbells
- Figure 7: 6g transdermal implants in a forehead of a consultant
- Figure 8: Piercing room at Field Site A

RESULTS

As I conducted my research, I was able to conclude that many people became interested in body modification in early adolescence, when their peers are also experimenting with more adult aspects of American culture. It is also when people of the same age in other cultures are going through coming of age rituals, some of which involve body modification. Many of the influences for this age group are popular musicians or movie stars, some of which influenced many of my participants. One of my consultants went into this by saying, "I know the reasons I got the first piercing was from watching a Motley Crew video and seeing the ear lobe piercings and nipple piercings on them, and feeling that needs to be part of me. (March 9, 2010)

Even with the participants recalling interest at such a young age, many had to wait until eighteen to modify their bodies. This allowed many of them to think, and rethink their modification choices, making most much happier with their choices than they would have been at a younger age. However, even eighteen is not always the age of consent for some modification artists. One of my consultants told me that his magic number for more extreme forms, such as scalpel, implants, and dermal punches, is twenty one. Scalpelling is enlarging an existing hole or creating a new hole with a scalpel, or a dermal punch which is a round scalpel. There are two types of implants used, subdermal, totally enclosed under the skin, and transdermal, base under the skin with a small post sticking out of the skin, not to be confused with a microdermal.

Another thing I saw in my research, which surprised me, was that it appears that more females are getting modifications, but males had the bolder, more visible modifications, and usually had larger modifications, such as stretched piercings or tattoo coverage. Could this correlate to the animal kingdom for mating purposes, such as the noble peacock? Many people I spoke to usually assume that a modification artist is male, or assume that most modified people are male. I saw more females walk into the studios asking for work, and most of the traffic on BodyArtForms is female.

I also discovered that people get modified for a large variety of reasons. In my survey I asked if they got modified for personal, spiritual, ritual, aesthetic, or sexual reasons, and the least answered was sexual, with personal and aesthetic being the most answered (see figure 1). I also found the high response for aesthetics to be interesting, since a lot of body modifications are permanent, and if not permanent will leave scarring once removed.

CONCLUSION

This research explores the many reasons why people get body modifications. These vary from person to person, but in the end, distinct themes emerge. As people move through their lives their views on the world change, as well as their views on body modification, some become more accepting while others reject these ideas. The acceptance and rejection of body modification can be seen through the ages but looking at the past and seeing which cultural groups maintained these traditions and which groups rejected them and how this has affected the current culture of body modification may end up telling us something about this current trend taking place in the U.S.

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