

# Tattooing and piercing: the body as a site for performing the self essay sample

[Health & Medicine](#), [Body](#)



Many people view the human body as an apartment rental rather than a house: They have the use of it during the brief season of their tenancy, but most are loath to initiate any permanent modifications beyond those dictated by nature and necessity. The tattoo and body piercing have long held negative connotations and is even forbidden in the Old Testament. In Leviticus 19: 28 it says “ Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead nor print any marks upon you. I am the Lord.” Though many view these forms of body art as sin and reduce it to body mutilation, others feel that it is merely a historical footnote about the cultural identity of this era.

The debates concerning body modification and self-mutilation often suggest that individuals who choose to decorate their bodies through tattooing and piercing are driven by harmful impulses that they cannot understand and do not control. Though the desire to mark the body does emanate from the inner sense of self, it cannot be read as ideographically as a message of harm of the individual self. The human body is a canvass for the expression of cultural ideas of men and women throughout time and around the world. Arguments of the positive or negative connotations of tattooing and piercing do not often justify or debase body modifications but only indicate a breakdown between morality and aesthetics.

The creatively pierced and multiply tattooed individuals of Western culture probably don't realize it-and neither, undoubtedly, do their unsettled parents, neighbors and teachers-but they belong to a tradition as old as recorded history-probably much older. Ever since our Neolithic ancestors invented art tens of thousands of years ago, humans have been painting,

sculpting and otherwise decorating the human body: is just the nearest and most intimate canvas. Body modification is a personal choice just like makeup and clothing. Some choose to be pierced or inked for aesthetic purposes, spiritual incentives, erotic reasons, excitement, or a variety of other personal motives. The validity of each purpose is equal. For some it is for attention or to make a political statement. For others it is like a sacred ritual. Many are searching for meaning and trying to find something that is true and worthwhile.

For centuries body art such as tattoos and piercings have been practiced all over the world in almost every culture. Both practices have different meanings and multiple levels from religious rites to pure decoration. Often times throughout the history of western culture, these practices have been shunned and outcast as the marks of Satan. In the last few centuries however, these fallacies have subsided to the thoughts of mere loathing of any permanent defacing of a person's body. It has been argued that body art is no more than just attention seeking self-mutilation, in which only heathens and criminals engage.

These often painful practices usually marked a rite of passage or indicated an act of bravery and courage in warriors. The art of tattoos have existed for more than 5300 years, appearing on all continents that have been inhabited by human civilizations. Piercing, however, is the most ancient form of body art, existing since the ninth century B. C. in Iraqi cultures. The common functions of piercings throughout the world were religious ceremonies and enlightenment, to show social wealth and standings, beauty and fashion,

sexual enhancement, and the marking of criminals and slaves. Tattoos and piercings have been around for millennia, and for the majority of that time, they have always been accepted as a form of art, not mutilation, and as an honor of immeasurable wealth.

Tattoos can capture an inordinate amount of beauty and complexity with each stroke from the artist's needles. It is an art that has been widely spread on almost every continent and was practiced at one time by virtually every culture. Some tattoos are self-motivated expression of personal freedom and uniqueness, while in ancient cultures they usually marked a person as a member or nonmember of a local group, or express religious, magical, or spiritual beliefs and personal convictions.

The oldest tattooed body known to date is that of an Bronze Age man who died over 5300 years ago (Raferty, History, 2002). The man was found frozen and well preserved in a glacier of the Otzal Alps between Austria and Italy. Ancient tattoos served as decoration and adornment, they were also thought to have magical purposes as well as therapeutic functions (Raferty, History, 2002). Archeologically validated works of art showing tattoos started to appear 30, 000 years ago

Tattooing was also a custom during the third and fourth dynasties (2686-2493 B. C.) in Egypt, while the pyramids of Gizeh were being built. By this point, Egyptians had already begun using needles in their process. Clay dolls were also adorned with designs similar to those of tattoos. The mummified corpse of Amunet, a priestess of the goddess Hathor at Thebes during the

eleventh dynasty, (2160-1994 B. C.) was found very well preserved with parallel lines tattooed on her arms and thighs as well as an elliptical design below her navel(Raferty, History, 2002).

In Libya, both male and female mummies were found tattooed with images of Egyptian gods such as Ra, the Sun god, as well as the fierce goddess Neith, who led warriors into battle. The first known tattoo of a person was of the god of sex and overseer of orgies, Bes, and was discovered on Nubian female mummies dating to 400 B. C.

Tattooing was a primitive practice that died out in Europe as Christian civilization advanced; the Christian body was only marked as a sign of shame. The Greeks used tattooing for communication among spies, while Romans marked only slaves and criminals. The Danes, Norse, and Saxons tattooed family crests. Pope Hadrian banned tattooing in 787 A. D. but tattooing continued to thrive until the Norman Invasion of 1066. Tattoos disappeared from Western culture from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. (Raferty, History, 2002)

From the Far East, the Ainu people influenced the Native American tribes of Alaska. In the America's, tattooing had also established itself in the social life of the Indians. Jesuit missions reported that tattooing was practiced by almost all of the native tribes they encountered. Most tribes used thorns, sharpened bones from a fish or birds, or chiseled rocks to carve their elaborate designs into the skin. The Indians would use soot and the pigments from certain berries to inscribe color into their designs. Tattoos in South

America are believed to have existed since the twelfth century. The Aztecs, Mayans, and Incas all engaged in the art of tattoos. Many Native American tribes used tattooing for therapeutic reasons (Raferty, History, 2002).

Tattoos are the permanent marks of “civilized” art all over the world and continue to hold their value to this day in most societies.

The art of body piercing can be found in stone carvings dating as old as the ninth century B. C. in the civilizations that make up modern day Iraq. In addition, the Mayans, Aztecs, Romans, Egyptians, and Victorians practiced body piercing to represent firm religious beliefs, rites of passage, and to distinguish royalty from “commoners.” Egyptian pharaohs marked the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood by navel piercings. Roman soldiers demonstrated their manhood, strength, and virility by nipple piercings. Male and female royals of the Victorian age engaged in nipple and genital piercing to demonstrate their royal status” (Raferty, History, 2002).

The biblical reference to body piercings is mentioned in the book of Exodus, when Hebrew servants would have their lobes pierced to show allegiance to their masters. In Genesis 24: 22, Abraham ordered one of his servants to find a wife for his son Isaac. The servant found Rebekah and gave her a Shanf, or nose-ring, as a wedding gift. In some parts of Australia and New Guinea one tribal custom is a pierced septum, giving the warrior a fierce and savage appearance. Some women of India pierce their noses to induce a state of submissiveness, (they claim this happens by proper placement in a marma or acupuncture point) (Raferty, History, 2002). Ethiopian men and women have various facial piercings and some are identified by over sized ear discs.

Lip plates for women, help to gain social status and command a higher bridal price. It was thought by primitive tribes that evil spirits would enter the body through the ear, because demons and spirits are supposed to be repelled by metal, ear-piercing prevents them from entering the body” (Raferty, History, 2002)

Lip piercings and Labrets have significance for the people of Mali and Ethiopia because speech was believed to have developed by their ancestor spirit weaving a piece of thread through her lip. For the many tribes who pierced the septum of their warriors, it was merely a sign of fierceness and courage. Despite the diversified reasons for piercing, all these cultures from around the world were unified in their belief that body piercing was an art form with highly important, empowering, and positive connotations.

With this much ancient and modern history of permanent body art, why does Western society view it as disruptive, crude, and self-mutilation? Though there is much more tolerances surrounding the issue than in the past, many feel that tattoos and piercings are marks of disgrace and social deviance and never consider what motivates people to decorate their body in such a way. These forms of body decoration have existed in art and marked numerous ideals in societies such as social class, servitude, and several religious rites.

The fact that Western society is not overtly tribal or strictly racially segregated is perhaps one of the reasons why the importance of bodily appearance in constructing social identity is regarded so suspiciously.

Western civilization has no history of group body modification, and where we

have encountered it in others, it has often been regarded as evidence of their primitivism and savagery, and efforts have been made to eradicate it as part of the 'civilization' process. So now, all the practices traditionally employed by groups to distinguish them physically from others are now contained within one society. The "other" is now your next-door neighbor.

The cause of controversy surrounding the issues of tattooing and piercings is directly rooted in the message that these forms of body modification present. In modern contexts, these acts function as an avenue of symbolic death and rebirth; the death of conventional beauty standards and the rebirth of new-fangled ideals of attractiveness by challenging the classical ideal of the skin as "a pristine smooth closed envelope for the self" (Pitts, Flesh, 2003) contradicting the Western notion of the body and self as fixed and unchanging.

Arnold Ruben suggests that body art, tattooing, and piercings are not bizarre forms of deviance peripheral to society. Instead body art represents what he suggests is "the quintessential imposition of conceptual-cultural-order upon nature. Given their heavy loading of cultural values, the media of irreversible body art are typically taken for granted by insiders and arise strong (predominantly negative) feelings among outsiders- usually fascination blended with distaste, even repugnance. (DeMello, Bodies, 2000) This suggests that "outsiders", may be fascinated with the beauty of the art but lack understanding regarding motivational factors of body modification through tattoos and piercings.



Since the late 80's, the demographic and imagery of tattoos has undergone profound change and reflect the economic, political and social upheaval that has taken place. Though dominant cultures often look down upon sub-cultures, it is important to realize that while sub-cultures reject the ideology of mainstream society, they also reflect many of the same issues. Body modifications impact not only the individual modifying their body, the person performing the modification, but those who will observe the change as well. In part people are using their bodies to reject homogenization of popular capitalist culture.

In an era in which large multinational corporations dominate the socio-economic landscape, tattoos and piercings cannot be mass produced. They are a personal expression of one's self. Body modification, through ink and flesh, as well as piercing is an act of self-creation. It is a protest of transient socially constructed features of desirability, inferiority or power. It constitutes a statement of control and ownership over the body in a cultural context characterized by accelerating commodification and alienation. The violation of social norms calls into question basic cultural mores in Western society. As such these individuals represent society at its simplest expression.

Tattooing and piercing have become vehicles for people to altar their appearance which can be of significant importance to the individual and can publicly express a rite of passage as well as break accepted cultural code. As such these forms of body modification are primal forms of self-expression and reflection of cultural reality. Modified bodies invariably provoke a strong

reaction among those who are not. They elicit a primeval response which touches the core of who we are as people and a society. Individuals engage in body modification through piercing and tattooing to challenge personal and social invisibility while adding cultural capital to the body's surface.

Through these forms of body decoration, individuals attempt to resolve “ontological insecurities of modernism by deliberate self-identification.” (Pitts, Flesh, 2003). Body art, despite its interest in intervening with the physical flesh and creating blood and scars and so on, actually is not a violent practice. Individuals partaking in such body modifications such as piercing and tattooing are taking a kind of libertarian or civil libertarian attitude towards their bodies. These are acts of personal choice that demonstrate social independence. The willful act of modifying one's body is not a passive, but a deliberate and successful attempt to direct the gaze of society where the individual chooses. In essence, tattooing and piercing puts control into the hands of the individual; control over their body and control over the objectified body- liberating it with alternative forms of power. Tattoos and piercings not only give power and a sense of control to the individual but permits them to record one's own history and developmental milestones on the body.

People show a multitude of semiotic symbols through body art. Because of the “fashion conscious pro change nature of the west, our is a world where to have body decoration such as a tattoo or a collection of facial piercings is, ipso facto, to be different from the norm” (Hewitt, Blood in Ink, 1997), and because a new set of cultural and social meanings are being ascribed to

bodies and redefining beauty, society must become more accepting and adjust cultural norms to accommodate a novel yet historic culture of social communication through the decorated body. The body is the one thing the individual has ultimate control over. Tattoos are a way of committing to something permanent and stable, of recording who and what you are right now. . . . The traditional stereotype is gone.

Consider this: every decision you make about your appearance is the result of conscious or unconscious decisions about how you wish to be regarded by society. You might, as a female, wear your hair long to indicate your femininity, wear jeans to signify you are dressing casually or a dress to mark a formal occasion. You wear make up, not just because you feel it makes you look more attractive, but because you wish to signal that being attractive is something that is important to you. It is important because society has imposed such ideals upon you. These kinds of decisions are also taken by people who more radically change their appearance, but instead of bringing them closer to a socially approved norm, they lead them to deviate from it, challenge it and assert personal control. “ Bodies have always distinguished individuals from one another- the reason was the common denominator” (Focault, Power, 1980)

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