

Tattoos, piercings and youth: How does body modification fit into young people's life circumstances?

Carley Fraser

Monash University

Abstract

Tattoos and body piercings are forms of body modification which have received increasing attention in recent times, particularly in relation to young people. The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether young people's participation in tattooing and body piercing aligns with particular life trajectories that have become associated with the concept of Emerging Adulthood. Using survey data from a large sample (n=1,927) of young Queenslanders participating in the Social Futures and Life Pathways ('Our Lives') project, I examine how young people's participation in tattooing and body piercing varies according to factors including career, partnering and residential circumstances, controlling for a range of socio-demographic factors. The findings of these analyses indicate significant correlations between having a tattoo or piercing and gender, religiosity, personal income and involvement in post-secondary education. Correlations were also found between piercings, sexual orientation and father's occupation. These findings have implications how body modification is currently understood at a socio-cultural level, as well as how it fits into young people's broader sense of identity and increasing independence during their transition to adulthood.

Keywords: body modification; tattoos; body piercing; youth; demographics.

Changing understandings of, and participation in, body modification practices

Body modification has been defined as "cosmetics, coiffure, ornamentation, adornment, tattooing, scarification, piercing, cutting, branding, and other procedures done mostly for aesthetic reasons" (Myers 1992, p. 267). Of these practices, tattooing and body piercing have received an increasing amount of attention recently. In a 20th century Western context, tattoos have been affiliated with lower social status and deviancy (Roberts 2012), including criminals and gang members, those of marginalised social and occupational status, such as prostitutes and sailors, as well as youth subcultural groups and psychological patients (Ferreira 2014; Wohlrab, Stahl, Rammsayer & Kappeler 2007). Body piercings have held connotations with homosexuality, involvement in sadomasochistic sexual subculture and youth subcultures, such as punk (Hewitt 1997).

A surge in popularity of both practices has been attributed to ‘mainstreaming’ outlets, including the media and entertainment industries for tattoos (Kosut 2006), and the fashion industry for body piercing (Stirn 2003). Not only have these sources generated new understandings of these practices, but they have arguably challenged some of the longer-standing cultural associations highlighted above. For instance, Kosut (2006) asserts that the tattoo community has undergone a ‘demographic shift’ and now “transcends age, class and ethnic boundaries” (Kosut 2006, p.1036). However, as DeMello (2004) notes, the ‘traditional’ tattoo community remains – but these groups no longer feature as prominently in wider discourse about tattoos. As a whole, changing understandings of who participates in tattooing and piercing suggests changing social values around these practices.

Despite limited research on the socio-demographic correlates of body modification, that which does exist suggests several trends. General population studies have demonstrated rates of body piercing at approximately 8-10% in Australia (Makkai & McAllister 2001), with higher rates appearing among women, young people and those of lower socio-economic status in the UK (Bone et al. 2008). Rates of tattooing in the Australian general population are approximately 14% (Heywood et al. 2012), though with rates as high as 24% in the US (Laumann & Derick 2006). Mixed results have been demonstrated in terms of gender, with higher rates of tattooing among men generally, but also among younger women in an Australian context (Heywood et al. 2012). This study also found higher rates among those in their 20s and 30s, among men with lower education levels and men working in trades. Other studies have shown associations between modified individuals, lower socio-economic status and educational achievement (Silver et al. 2009), educational aspirations and less positive school attitudes (Dukes & Stein 2011). A number of these findings appear to correspond with associations of tattooed individuals being of lower social status or working-class, and of young people with piercings rebelling against traditional institutions. However, they also suggest some broad social changes surrounding these practices, such as higher rates of tattooing among young women working against masculine associations with this practice (Atkinson 2002). Both factors suggest a need to understand where socio-demographic associations are demonstrated among those with tattoos and piercings.

Where body modification fits into young people’s lives

Youth is often considered a distinct period in the life-course – this proposition is put forward by Arnett (2000) in his concept of Emerging Adulthood. Arnett (2000, p. 469) suggests that the ages of 18-25 are a time “of relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations,” with an emphasis on identity exploration and demographic variability. At the same time, youth transitions are considered different from those of past generations, with current patterns including increased participation in post-secondary education and in a ‘precarious’ labour market, and delaying parenthood and marriage (Cuervo & Wyn 2011). This transition is also characterised as being increasingly complex and unpredictable, but with patterns of broader social inequality remaining (Cuervo & Wyn 2011).

Based upon these understandings of youth, it might be expected that young people’s engagement in body modification practices is related to identity exploration and emerging independence during their transition into adulthood. However, with the impact of inequality present, differences in engagement with these practices might be expected across social factors. With youth viewed as a period where transitions to adulthood are no longer as linear in some areas as before, and body modification practices seen to transcend social boundaries they were previously associated with, there is a need to undertake a preliminary investigation into whether socio-demographic factors and life circumstances are associated with differences in engagement in body modification practices by young people. As such, the research question which will guide exploration of this area is as follows:

How do young people who participate in tattooing and piercing differ in terms of socio-demographic characteristics and their present life circumstances?

Methods

In order to address this research question, I will employ a quantitative research approach, utilising secondary survey data collected as part of the Social Futures and Life Pathways ('Our Lives') Project. This multi-wave cohort study follows the lives of young people from Queensland, and their changing values and aspirations across a range of areas over time.

At present, four waves of survey data collection for this project have been undertaken. The first wave was administered in 2006 (Year 8, ages 12/13). In recruiting participants in the original cohort, an attempt was made to recruit all year 8 students from all high schools in Queensland. A response rate of 55% for schools and 34% of students within those schools was obtained, with a total of 7,031 respondents. Follow up waves of data collection were then conducted in 2008, (Year 10, ages 14/15; n = 3,653) and in 2010 (Year 12, ages 16/17; n = 3,209). Wave four (2013, ages 19/20, n= 2,206) was the first survey completed after respondents had finished high school. Fieldwork in wave 4 consisted of online surveying and Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI).

Unless otherwise specified, all variables for analysis are drawn from Wave 4. Table 1 provides the distribution of each of the measures to be considered. Where appropriate, system missing responses have been added to categories which account for missing values. After excluding missing cases on certain key analytic variables, the final analytic sample contained 1,927 respondents.

A binary logistic regression analysis will be executed to demonstrate the likelihood of having a tattoo or piercing across all categories of each IV, in comparison to a reference category. The reference category is generally chosen based upon the highest number of respondents within this category. A value which expresses how much the model itself accounts for the overall variation in having a tattoo or piercing, the Nagelkerke pseudo r-square, is also included in this analysis.

Dependent variables

The dependent variables in this study are tattoos and body piercings. Respondents were originally asked to indicate the number of according body modifications they had within a range of 0-20. For simplicity, responses have been transformed into categorical variables indicating if a respondent does or does not have a tattoo or body piercing, respectively.

Table 1. Distribution of measures

Dependent variables	%	
	No	Yes
Has piercings	80.7%	19.3%
Has tattoos	85.7%	14.3%
Independent variables	% or Mean	
Gender		
Male	37.8%	
Female	62.2%	
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual/straight	88%	
Bisexual, gay, lesbian or other	7.3%	
Unsure/don't know, prefer not to say	4.7%	

Dependent variables	%	
Religion (1-10)	3.54	
Geographic region		
Urban	72.8%	
Regional/remote	27.2%	
Highest level of parental education		
Less than year 12	10.5%	
Year 12	10.7%	
Vocational	22.9%	
Bachelor's degree or above	47.3%	
Don't know	8.6%	
Mother's/father's occupation	Mother	Father
Managerial	9.6%	22%
Professional	27.2%	20.8%
White collar	28.8%	10.6%
Blue collar	3.8%	23.1%
Not employed	13.5%	5.2%
Don't know	17.2%	18.3%
Employment status		
Part-time/casual	58.8%	
Full-time	19.5%	
Not working	21.7%	
Income (per year)		
Less than \$5000	15.1%	
\$5001-10000	17%	
\$10001-15000	15.6%	
\$15001-20000	12.3%	
\$20001-30000	13.5%	
More than \$30000	15%	
Prefer not to say/skipped	11.5%	
Marital status		
Single	58.7%	
In a relationship (not living together)	29.7%	
Cohabiting/married	11.6%	
Living arrangements		
Living with parents	64.2%	
Not living with parents	35.8%	

Independent variables

Demographic factors were included for respondents' gender, sexual orientation, religiosity and geographic region. Due to some response categories of sexual orientation having too few responses for effective analysis, final response categories were coded as 'Heterosexual/straight' (reference cat.), 'Bisexual, gay or lesbian or other', and 'Don't know/unsure, prefer not to say or skipped'. Religiosity was controlled for with a continuous measure, where respondents rated the importance of religion in their life on a scale of 1-10 (1='not at all important', 10='the most important thing in my life'). Geographic region is based on respondents' postcodes and

differentiates between those ‘Major Cities’ (reference cat.) and those living in ‘Remote/Rural’ areas.

Parental socio-economic status was controlled for using two variables drawn from Wave 3 of data collection. Firstly, highest parental education level asks respondents to indicate the highest level of education achieved between both parents, from ‘Less than year 12’, ‘Year 12’, ‘Vocational’, ‘Bachelor’s degree or higher’ (reference cat.) or ‘Don’t know’. Respondents were asked to indicate their mother’s and father’s occupations, which were then coded into broad categories of ‘Managerial’, ‘Professional’ (reference cat.), ‘White collar’, ‘Blue collar’, ‘Not employed’ or ‘Don’t know’.

Lastly, respondents’ current life circumstances were accounted for with measures reflecting their career, partnering, and residential arrangements in early adulthood. Study status was examined with a measure of whether or not respondents were undertaking studies at the time of the survey. Employment was examined with a measure of respondent’s employment status and income. Employment status measured whether respondents were in part-time or casual work (<35 hours per week, reference cat.), full time work (>35 per week) or not working. Respondents indicated their gross income level from less than \$5000 per year up to more than \$80000 per year. These categories were recoded to reflect respondents’ overall distribution towards the lower end of this range, with a new upper threshold of ‘more than \$30000’ (reference cat.). Respondents’ relationship status variable included three categories: ‘Single’ (reference cat.), ‘In a relationship (but not cohabiting)’ and ‘Cohabiting/married’. Finally, respondents’ residential arrangement was examined with a variable indicating whether or not they were still living in the parental home.

Results

Table 2 displays the results of the logistic regression model analysing whether or not respondents had one or more tattoos. The Nagelkerke pseudo r-square value indicates that the model containing all variables explained around 15% of the overall variation in tattoo prevalence. Of the demographic controls included in the model, gender and religiosity significantly predicted whether or not respondents had a tattoo. Females were twice as likely as males to have one or more tattoos, whilst for every one point increase in religiosity the likelihood of having a tattoo decreased by around 10%. Meanwhile, when all the variables in the model are accounted for, sexual orientation, geographic region, and the parental SES controls were found to be uncorrelated with tattoo prevalence.

Table 2: Logistic regression of odds of having a tattoo (1= Has one or more tattoos)

	O.R.	95% C.I.
Demographic factors		
Gender		
Male (ref)		
Female	2.008***	1.459,2.763
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual/straight (ref)		
Gay or lesbian, bisexual or other	.995	.596,1.662
Unsure/don’t know/refused	.699	.257,1.898
Importance of religion (scale 1-10)	.897***	.850,.947

	O.R.	95% C.I.
Geographic region		
Urban (ref)		
Regional/remote	1.105	.804,1.521
Parental SES factors		
Highest parental education level		
Bachelor's degree or higher (ref)		
Vocational	1.359	.909,2.031
Year 12	1.408	.871,2.277
Less than year 12	1.335	.816,2.183
Mother's occupation		
Professional (ref)		
Managerial	.707	.406,1.232
White collar	.980	.655,1.466
Blue collar	.890	.440,1.797
Not employed	.915	.562,1.491
Father's occupation		
Professional (ref)		
Managerial	.969	.603,1.557
White collar	1.466	.861,2.496
Blue collar	1.230	.767,1.970
Not employed	.874	.421,1.812
Current situation		
Employment status		
Part-time/casual (ref)		
Full-time	.975	.624,1.525
Not working	1.058	.692,1.617
Personal income		
More than \$30000 per year (ref)		
\$20001 – 30000 per year	.750	.471,1.196
\$15001 – 20000 per year	.542*	.306,.961
\$10001 – 15000 per year	.350***	.193,.635
\$5001 – 10000 per year	.203***	.106,.391
Less than \$5000 per year	.247***	.126,.485
Prefer not to say/skipped	.527*	.285,.975
Study status		

	O.R.	95% C.I.
Currently studying (ref)		
Not currently studying	1.203*	1.059,2.079
Relationship status		
Single (ref)		
In a relationship (but not cohabiting)	.900	.648,1.250
Cohabiting or married	1.227	.796,1.892
Living arrangements		
Living with parents (ref)		
Not living with parents	1.484	.857,1.688
Nagelkerke R ²		
	.152	
N		
	1927	

*p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

Only two of the current situation variables –personal income and involvement in study - were found to be significantly correlated with whether or not respondents had a tattoo. There was a strong, positive relationship between income and having a tattoo – generally speaking, the higher a respondent’s income, the greater the chances were that they had at least one tattoo. Compared to those in the highest income bracket (\$30k or more), respondents who earned between \$15k-\$20k were 46% less likely to have a tattoo. This relative decline in odds rose to 65% for respondents who earned \$10k-\$20k, and peaked at 80% for those who earned \$5k-\$10k. Finally, respondents who were not still involved in any post-secondary study two years after high school were around 20% more likely to have a tattoo.

Table 3 indicates the results of the logistic regression model analysing whether or not respondents had one or more body piercings. The pseudo r-squared value indicates that the model containing all variables explained around 27% of the overall variation in the prevalence of body piercings. All demographic factors considered except for geographic region significantly predicted having a body piercing. Females were approximately 12 times more likely than males to have a body piercing. Those who identified as bisexual, gay, lesbian or another sexual orientation, and those who indicated they were unsure or preferred not to specify their orientation were approximately 2.3-2.4 times more likely to have body piercings. A one point increase in the importance placed on religion indicated a 10% decrease in the likelihood of having a piercing. Of the parental SES controls in this model, only father’s occupation was found to be significantly correlated with whether or not respondents had body piercings: those whose fathers worked blue-collar jobs were around 60% more likely to indicate having a piercing than those whose fathers worked in professional occupations.

Table 3: Logistic regression of odds of having a piercing other than an earring (1=Has one or more piercings)

	O.R.	95% C.I.
Demographic factors		
Gender		
Male (ref)		
Female	12.431***	8.063,19.166

	O.R.	95% C.I.
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual/straight (ref)		
Gay or lesbian, bisexual or other	2.409***	1.545,3.756
Unsure/don't know, prefer not to say or skipped	2.310*	1.118,4.774
<i>Importance of religion (scale 1-10)</i>		
	.902***	.859,.946
Geographic region		
Urban (ref)		
Regional/remote	1.000	.743,1.345
Parental SES factors		
Highest parental education level		
Bachelor's degree or higher (ref)		
Vocational	1.201	.832, 1.733
Year 12	1.028	.646, 1.638
Less than year 12	1.260	.800, 1.986
Mother's occupation		
Professional (ref)		
Managerial	.960	.602,1.532
White collar	.820	.570,1.181
Blue collar	.933	.495,1.757
Not employed	.787	.503,1.231
Father's occupation		
Professional (ref)		
Managerial	.843	.553,1.284
White collar	1.162	.705,1.917
Blue collar	1.603*	1.053,2.439
Not employed	1.359	.748,2.470
Current situation		
Employment status		
Part-time/casual (ref)		
Full-time	.770	.487,1.217
Not working	1.123	.776,1.623
Personal income		
More than \$30000 per year (ref)		
\$20001 – 30000 per year	1.327	.812, 2.168
\$15001 – 20000 per year	.571	.318,1.026

	O.R.	95% C.I.
\$10001 – 15000 per year	.573	.323,1.017
\$5001 – 10000 per year	.465**	.261,.830
Less than \$5000 per year	.306***	.162,.576
Prefer not to say/skipped	.583	.315, 1.081
Study status		
Currently studying (ref)		
Not currently studying	1.631**	1.168, 2.278
Relationship status		
Single (ref)		
In a relationship (but not cohabiting)	1.208	.906,1.610
Cohabiting or married	1.030	.680,1.562
Living arrangements		
Living with parents (ref)		
Not living with parents	1.211	.888, 1.651
Nagelkerke R ²	.272	
N	1927	

*p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

As with the results for tattoos, personal income and study status were the only current situation variables found to significantly predict one's likelihood of having at least one piercing. The odds of having a piercing differed significantly only when comparing those who earned more than \$30k per year and those who earned \$5k-10k and less than \$5k per year: these two groups were approximately 55% and 70% less likely to report having piercings, respectively. Finally, those who were not currently studying in post-secondary education were 60% more likely to indicate having a piercing than those who were studying.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to address how young people who participate in tattooing and piercing differ in terms of socio-demographic characteristics and current life circumstances. Overall, it was demonstrated that these factors account for the variation in engagement in tattooing and body piercing to a degree, and that there were significant correlations between young people's participation these practices and a number of the factors of interest.

Considering these variables individually reveals that these practices are not necessarily reflecting traditional groups who engage in them, but rather, in some cases they have shifted away from those associations. This is the case for gender, where women were found to be more likely to have tattoos, which have roots in male-dominated occupational groups and subcultures. This also reflects recent research which demonstrates increasingly popularity of tattoos among women (e.g. Heywood et al. 2012; Laumann & Derick 2006). Similarly, the finding that tattooed and pierced young people are more likely to have higher incomes works against framings of young people with these modifications, such as deviancy, lower social class and lack of connections to institutions (Dukes & Stein 2011; Adams 2009).

Despite these developments, a number of the differences found do seem to be connected to traditional associations of body modification, including connections to sexual preferences (Hewitt 1997). The findings that young people who have tattoos and piercings are more likely to be earning higher incomes and not studying may link their occupational pathways to a more working-class orientation. As such, it can be considered that some socio-demographic associations with body modification practices have transcended their traditional meanings, whereas others appear to reflect these.

Another implication of these findings is that engagement in tattooing and piercing does not appear to be correlated with markers of independence in terms of work, relationship status and residential status. Such findings reflect the lack of demographic predictability and identity exploration associated with emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000). However, differences in income level and study status suggest that engaging in these practices as a form of identity exploration is limited or enabled by economic resources and institutional involvement. Furthermore, the socio-demographic differences found in regards to gender, sexuality and religiosity also highlight that body modification practices may be influenced by particular socio-demographic factors during this time.

This research presents a preliminary analysis of the relationship between having a tattoo or a piercing, and socio-demographic factors. These results provide a starting point for further investigation into the influence of broader social factors in the decision to engage in body modification practices. Further research is needed to examine young people's motivations for undergoing body modification, and how these contribute to their broader understandings of their own emerging identities and life pathways.

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