Full Length Research

Body piercing trends and motivations among students at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the cultural meaning and implications of body piercings among the university students of Cape Coast, Ghana, relative to indigenous traditions and global processes; in so doing, it comes to understanding how such practices work as tools for peer alliance and identity construction. The paper reviews the literature on the current topic and collects both qualitative and quantitative data through mixed methods, focusing on the complexity of body piercings as statements of identity. Its revelations disclose the public health hazards associated with trending behaviors while reinforcing the case for an unimposing recognition of the ennoblement of self-concept and belonging. Towards that end, the paper concludes with recommendations for colleges to follow suited ways to enhance supportive networks, build intercultural understanding, and generate further research into changing identity struggles in higher education.

Keywords: Body piercings, Cape Coast, Ghana, university students.

INTRODUCTION

The increase in body piercings into the most mainstream option would matter much because earlobe piercings are so common; the latter are now universal traits themselves (Van Hoover *et al.*, 2017). Throughout known history, body piercing has been practiced in almost all cultures; quite often, this has been restricted to the lips, ears, and nose (Ferguson,2000). Research has examined the health consequences of body piercings, including the transmission of viral infections such as hepatitis B and C (Yang *et al.*, 2015). Also, body piercings have been associated with psychopathology, PTSD symptoms, and sensation-seeking behaviors (Bui *et al.*, 2010; Bui *et al.*, 2013; Wohlrab *et al.,* 2007a; Weiler *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, motivations for body piercings have been investigated, including needs for individuality, sexual pleasure, and the influence of popular culture (Carmen *et al.*, 2012; Caliendo *et al.*, 2005; Weiler *et al.*, 2021). It happens that body piercing has been associated with indicators of a risky lifestyle among adolescents (Oliveira *et al.*, 2006). The researchers were also interested in discovering the cultural meaning of body modification

habits, for example, body piercings in many cultures, which gave them a tip-off about how tattooing and body-piercing are accepted and widespread in different geographical areas (Stieger *et al.*, 2010; Deschesnes *et al.*, 2006). Likewise, the impact of body piercings on observers' ratings of physical attractiveness and intelligence has been examined while emphasizing body modification as one productive mode of social perception (Swami *et al.,* 2012). Higher population densities, improvements in health care, and calls for novel means to signal fitness have all been implicated in the evolution of the role of body piercing in contemporary society (Carmen *et al.*, 2012). The frequency, reasons, and attitudes of students who practice body piercing at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana will provide some insight into cultural identity and expression within this group. Due to the special cultural environment in Ghana and the possible health and well-being consequences, the necessity for a detailed analysis of such practices among students is very high. This, therefore, is to provide us with insight into how cultural practices interrelate with higher education

Figure 1. Piercing of nose, tongue, and ear, and Tattoo in the hand (Khemitoons, 2001).

students' identity and expression through the investigation of the reasons behind, frequency, and cultural relevance of body piercing among students at the University of Cape Coast.

Purpose and thesis statement

Body piercing has come to be embraced as rather mainstream body ornamentation and modification, especially among adolescent and young populations (Deschesnes *et al.*, 2006). Nevertheless, these rituals possess much greater symbolic meanings, providing the youth with a medium for being creatively expressive of group affiliations, identity, and nonconformity (Wohlrab *et al.,* 2007b). In the understudied context of Ghanaian university students, body piercing involves complex negotiations of identity occurring at the fertile convergence of scarification heritage and modern-day self-presentations. By employing theoretical positions and studies on motives, pierce locations on the body and societal responses, this paper explores body-piercing behaviors among students at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. The importance of group membership and intergroup relations in expressing identity through behaviors such as body piercings places the research under the umbrella of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 2010). In addition, the complexity principles of Roccas and Brewer, 2002, and the optimum uniqueness of Brewer (1991), frame this theory to appreciate the multidimensional nature of experience. Further, the situating of activities in relation to dominant social variables complicates the matter. Yet this complex but identity-centric model provides insight into how children use body piercing to construct favored identities and memberships with peers. Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) is pertinent to contextualizing the meanings of piercing made through social interactions that emphasize the interpretation of cultural symbols. The theory, however, should not evade consideration of structural aspects besides identification reasons (Hudson, 2014). Additionally, the attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived controls shaping intentions on piercing are

neatly theorized in the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 2020). Along these lines, even while considering the sociocultural dynamics in Ghana, it is important to focus on the greater contextual impacts that go unnoticed too often (Armitage and Conner, 2001). Empirically, several psychological, social, and cultural factors (peer imitation, identity expression, and physical aesthetics, among others) develop preferences for or against piercing (Stirn, 2003; Carroll *et al.*, 2002). Apart from that, motivations were found to be affected by gender, age, and culture; for example, in certain cultures, females pierce their bodies to meet their societal beauty standards. Common body parts for body piercings include the nose, mouth, tongue, and navel. About half of the body piercings have complications due to risk factors, including infection. Also, sentiments vary from a constant transgression by piercings to a growing social acceptance of the invasion of modernity on traditional practices such as scarification.

Again, these points continuously influence the social experiences and identity development of pierced adolescents, as suggested by Vizgaitis and Lenzenweger (2019). In the end, situating behaviors at the crossroads of tradition-modernity in Ghana is necessary for the complete construction of understanding of students' piercing practices. It allows an interpretation of identity in terms of the use of cultural resources. The objective of the present study is to understand the motivation, prevalence, and what these students think about body piercing practices at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. An understanding of how identity expresses and negotiates from the tensions aroused between modern modes of self-expression and traditional modification principles was sought. Consequently, analyses undertaken here are geared toward reflecting on the social processes through which piercing meaning is constituted by this group. Through body piercing, students in Cape Coast, Ghana, embody their desired identities and peer alignment that allow negotiation in complicated socio-cultural landscapes soaked by modernizing globalization and hold onto their traditional roots. Ambiguous motives and cultural views evolve-it shows a struggle between emblems of adolescent independence and tradition's scarification.

As depicted in Figure 1, university students tend to adorn

themselves with body piercings in the nose, tongue, and ears, among others, along with tattoos. These body modifications reflect not only individual identity but also social trends and cultural influences (Caliendo *et al.*, 2005; Deschesnes *et al.*, 2006).

Aim and objectives

The study is developed to garner insight into the motivations, experiences, and attitudes concerning body piercings among university students in Cape Coast, Ghana. This study has aimed to fulfil, among others, the objectives of discovering what motivates students to have body piercings, what body parts are most likely to be pierced among students, and how society views individuals with body piercings and vice versa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The identity theory is what describes this approach where social status-enhancing behaviors and self-concept are construed as engendered through group memberships. In this case, the identity development within the student body concerning piercing is one differentiating themselves from other groups and aligning with their membership group. Tajfel and Turner (2010) and Hogg and Abrams (1988) propound that SIT is formed on the argument that people categorize themselves and others into social groups, based on certain characteristics such as gender and religion. This gives rise to a "social identity" attached to group membership that provides an avenue for obtaining respect and acceptance. Upon identifying himself/herself with a particular group, a person distinguishes the group from other groups, which affords him/her a feeling of parallelism with the in-group and differentially toward the out-group. This relative distinction proves revitalizing one's self-esteem through the wishful desire for positive distinctiveness (Hornsey, 2008; Turner *et al.*, 1986). Therefore, the students have body piercings presumably for identification with higher-status organizations on campus. The distinction between people as "body-piercers" and "non-piercers" in this model sheds some light on identity development wherein those embracing body art enjoy a more favorable view than their conservative counterparts. Body piercing as an act of cultural display allows one to prop up desired identities to develop further (Gill *et al.*, 2005).

Also, it is empirically researched that students must pierce since an act differentiating them from other conservative norms (Carroll *et al.*, 2002), associating with social groups (Wohlrab, 2007a), or be acknowledged from favored groups (Stirn, 2003). The only grouse one can hold against SIT is that it provides a conceptual framework for self-explaining this scope of motivations. Sociologists have criticized SIT for simplistically conceiving identity as an in-

group and out-group phenomenon and ignoring the complexities of individuals' identities and influences of larger sociocultural processes (Roccas and Brewer, 2002). SIT by itself cannot explain adequately how social structures influence altered cultural practices like body piercing (Pitts, 2003). This is where the Gwollu realizes the utmost principles of differentiating oneself from others while acknowledging some heterosexual identities within different contexts (Irving, 2007). Another area that it interrogates is modern tattooing and scarification, whereas piercing practices among the Ghanaian communities are contextualized against the social background. This framework informs the present study of students' perceptions of piercing, and it is based on Social Identity Theory, which allows this study not to be overwrought.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the relationship between social identity, group favoritism, and self-esteem plays an important role in understanding body piercing practices among university students. This model highlights that body piercings act as marks for group alignment and individual identity expression (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Hornsey, 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review provided strong theoretical foundations based on empirical findings in the study of body piercing among college students. Many aspects of behavior are explained based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 2010), wherein the psychological need for self-esteem or relatedness is associated with behaviors. It highlights the identity motives that are linked to cultural behaviors. Indeed, this model does not apply because it embeds principles of optimum distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991) and situates behaviors in social and cultural contexts. In the same line, it captured symbolic interactionism theory, heavily relying on methods of interpretation of symbols by Blumer (1969) and identity development through social interactions. This perspective represents important developments in understanding the sense of meanings students associate with their body piercings. However, the consideration of the validity of its application to complex sociocultural interactions can rightly be alluded to the very weakness of this model in treasuring structural factors. While also courting the danger of overlooking environmental effects, the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) joins the fray by considering predictors of attitude and behavior. Studies have shown that individuals generally pierce for aesthetic reasons, rebellion, or peer imitation (Carroll *et al.*, 2002; Stirn *et al.*, 2011). Conversely, concerns such as infections are contrastingly cited as aversions to these piercing types in nose, tongue, and navel locations (Walonski, C. 2021; Deschenes *et al.*, 2006; Hoover *et al.*, 2017). It not only covers the spectrum of perceptions from deviance to growing acceptability but also offers a roadmap for the
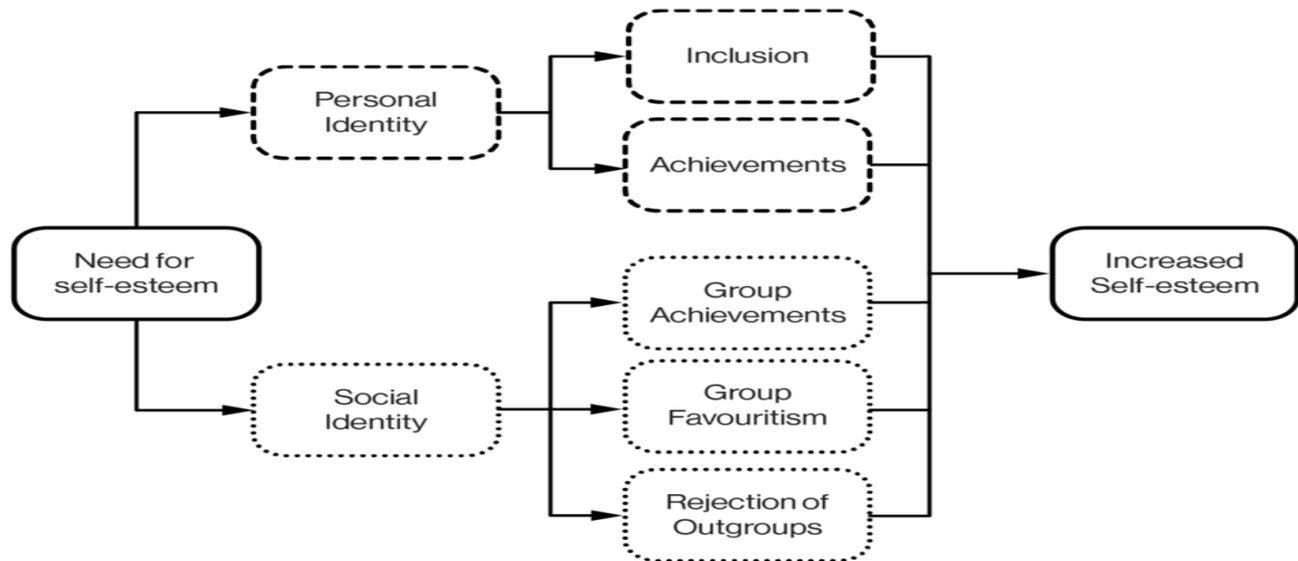
Figure 2. The relationship between social identity, group favoritism, and self-esteem.

analysis and interpretation of the cultural meanings associated with body marks (Abimbola *et al.*, 2022). Unfortunately, only a fraction of the gleaned evidence has relevance to the local Ghanaian mix of modernity and tradition. Western research may offer a foundation; however, it generally lacks the cultural relevance and sensitivity requisite to capture the sociocultural nuances inherent in Ghanaian college students. Nonetheless, it synthesized the contemporary literature on the subject extremely well by directing further research yet to be done on body-piercing practices at the University of Cape Coast and by clearing away certain cultural glitches that stood in the way of collecting data with scientific credibility.

METHODOLOGY

This present study aims to understand the body-piercing behavior of college-going students within the framework of a mixed-method approach that marries together quantitative survey data with qualitative semi-structured interviews. In-depth interviews of twelve participants are conducted: eight students with piercings- four males and four females- and four students without. These interviewees provide an assortment of viewpoints in the qualitative component. These interviews address such topics as motivations for first piercings, impressions of social responses, consequences for identity, and cultural significance. Open-ended questions can inspire a free discussion while other precursory questions deal more directly with peer-group dynamics and with signifiers of individual identity. Interviews are audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim into NVivo 12 software for in-depth coding. Main themes are reached through iterative coding which shows the relationships among identity construction,

piercing behaviors, health concerns, and social constraints. Quantitative survey inquiries into the rating of marks on acceptability, perceived risks and benefits, and sociocultural understanding in a representative sample of 50 with and without body piercings.

SPSS Statistics 26 was used to analyze the survey data, compute descriptive statistics, and run one-sample t-tests to establish differences in opinions among the groups. The integrated approach-that is, the combination of subjective experiences with empirical attitude data- gives a rich analytical take on body piercing among university students in Ghana.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The findings of the study portray various aspects of university students' practices, motivations, and views regarding body piercing. Statistical analysis of the data from the survey and qualitative coding of interview transcripts points out that peer influence is the major factor that affects students' decisions to get pierced. This corroborates with Oliveira *et al.* (2006), who found that social context was an important factor, which influenced risk behavior among adolescents in terms of body modifications. Moreover, Stirn *et al.* (2011) notes how peer imitation is frequently a driving force behind body modification decisions, which further supports the finding that social alignment has the highest mean score (4.2/5) as a motivator.

Body piercing also functions as a mode of identity expression for the student community, which has close affiliations with in-group alignment and self-representation.

This is supported by Tajfel and Turner's, (2010) Social Identity Theory, which describes how people categorize themselves in groups to gain self-esteem. In addition, Brewer (1991) and Roccas and Brewer (2002) describe the theories of optimal distinctiveness and social identity complexity, describing how people strive to find a balance between similarity and difference, like the student who uses a nose ring to identify herself among her peers.

Gender piercing preference differences were also found. For example, the cultural significance of nose studs to female students is consistent with Caliendo *et al.* (2005) findings that gendered motivations exist for body modification. In an equivalent vein, Wohlrab *et al.* (2007a) shows that gender is an important factor in body modification decisions. This study also found a significant number of females reported a strong cultural affinity with the nose piercing.

The mixed social perceptions and acceptance of piercings, neither fully normalized nor viewed as entirely deviant, resonate with the findings of Swami *et al.* (2012). This article shows how body modifications impact observers' judgments on attractiveness and intelligence, which further solidifies the dual social positioning of piercings among university students. Furthermore, the study by Deschesnes *et al.* (2006) on adolescents provides support for the idea of variability in social acceptance depending on the cultural context.

The influence of traditional and modern practices on body piercing among students reveals a negotiation between scarification heritage and contemporary self-expression. Ferguson (2000) and Yang *et al.* (2015) present historical overviews of bodily modifications, suggesting how traditional practices of scarification run parallel to modern piercings as cultural expressions. Moreover, Vizgaitis and Lenzenweger (2019) examine how body modifications aid in the development of identity, particularly in the process of negotiating modern and traditional cultural intersections.

From a health and social implications perspective, piercings entail physical risks that should be well thought out. Hoover *et al.* (2017) talks about health complications as far as body piercing is concerned, which backs up the call for campus health education on safe practices. In the Ghanaian context, Abimbola *et al.* (2022) have reiterated the need for culturally sensitive approaches to body modifications, emphasizing the importance of health policies that respect students' cultural identity while promoting safe practices.

According to Table 1, peer pressure and the need for social alignment are the top reasons for body piercing among students, with nose and earlobes being the most frequent piercing sites. The table also displays varied social perceptions of body piercings, from general acceptance to its association with nonconformity (Oliveira *et al.*, 2006; Swami *et al.*, 2012).

Impacts

This exploratory study elucidates the way students use body piercings in negotiating their multiple identities and accessing high-status peer groups across cultural divides. Like Hornsey (2008), it positions Social Identity Theory as a framework for understanding how individuals negotiate their identity within complex social landscapes. Students balance traditional cultural expectations of them with modern expressions of individuality through body markers like piercings—a process also explored, although from a differing perspective, in Pitts (2003) on the cultural politics of body modification.

This study also highlights the positive health implications of body piercings, specifically the need for university health services to address potential risks. Hoover *et al.* (2017) discusses these health concerns, emphasizing the importance of policies to ensure safe practices for students choosing body modifications.

From a psychological and social development perspective, Gill *et al.* (2005) states that body modifications are related to self-esteem and identity formation, which lends credibility to this research about self-expression through piercings. Body piercings are a form of identity construction through which students can acquire self-esteem and engage with their social world by employing practices that carry cultural meanings.

It finally recommends that university policies embrace cultural sensitivity in respect of students' diverse identities navigating between traditional and modern cultural influences. Abimbola *et al.* (2022) emphasized the need for culturally sensitive views toward body modifications and called for institutional policies that respect and support diverse forms of self-expression.

Weaknesses

Thus, this study could only be regarded as preliminary, having failed to gather a sizable enough sample representative of experiences encased within the institution. In themselves, though, the mixed method may provide for a broader contemplation than those adhered to by one singular technique; focused examination of either surveys or interviews promotes better statistical establishment or qualitative depth. Some potential limitations of this study include that this study analyses only one institution-an institution within which considers limited contextual variations-the present study may miss elements inherent in these other institutions. There is a very thin line wherein one can presume too much from the things concerning the symbolic meanings of piercings, without taking the time to assess the personal relevance students attach to these piercings. This problem raises questions regarding the validity of the sociocultural

Table 1. Statistical summary of motivations, practices, and perceptions of body piercing among university students, based on survey data and qualitative interview analysis.

Findings/Variables	Statistical Value/Score	Methods/Analysis Used	Interpretation
Main Influencing Factor - Peer Pressure	Normalization value approach	Quantitative analysis of survey data	Peer pressure is identified as the primary influence on students' decision to get pierced
Motivating factors for Body piercing	Mean scores: Social alignment: 4.2/5, Rebellion: 3.1/5, Aesthetics: 3.8/5	Survey data mean scoring	Social alignment has the highest mean score, indicating it as a more significant motivator than rebellion or aesthetics
Peer Imitation Impact	$P<0.05$	One-sample t-test	Students with piercings are more influenced by peers' imitation compared to those without piercing
Social Circles and Ingroup Marker (interviews)	62 Common Piercing Sites	Nose: 41 Gender Differences in Ear Piercing	Women: 47 Cultural Value of Nose Studs (Interviews)
Social Acceptance of Piercings	Mean score: Social acceptance: 3.1/5, Social abnormality: 2.4/5	Survey Mean evaluations	Piercings are viewed as somewhat socially accepted (3.1/5) but not as socially abnormal (2.4/5)
Positive Opinions of Marking (Pierced vs. Non-pierced)	$P<0.01$	One -sample t-test	Students with piercings hold a more positive opinion on marking than their non-pierced peers
Range of Opinions on piercings (Interviews)	-	Qualitative analysis	Views vary widely, from seeing piercings as self-expression to associating them with mental illness or religious deviations
Prime Motivators- Peer Alignment and Identity Expression	-	Triangulated quantitative and qualitative studies	Peer alignment and self-representation emerge as top motivators for body piercing among university students.
Social Mapping- Modernity and Scarification	-	Combined analysis of quantitative and qualitative data	Students use piercings to navigate and create social identities, positioning themselves along a spectrum of modernity and scarification

representations derived when analysis is performed using preconceived notions, instead of igniting new understandings. On the other edge of the spectrum, quantitative data provides us sometimes with temporarily flimsy glimpses that are perhaps not adequate to capture the majestic changes that influence motives and worldviews during their time as students at the university. In conclusion, while this study offers very valuable insights, its limitations open the need for larger sampling and consideration of student perspectives in any attempt toward an improved understanding of this topic.

Outcomes

Despite some limitations, discussed in the next section, that hamper the clarity of this study in Ghanaian higher education, this hybrid move is incubating the best understanding of cultural metamorphoses by revealing some of the intricate interrelations between traditions and how they shift among adolescent identities. The interpretations are useful for those forging university policies in the representation of their bureaucratic approaches when it comes to student support and development programs relevant to diverse contexts.

Further, the knowledge assists such medical practitioners as must provide answers regarding health risks correlated with the modification in body adornments. Although the study cannot claim to be exhaustive, the cross-cultural insights into identity contestation sung to the tune of body piercing allow the students to express an interplay of their changing self-concepts with social prescriptions. Such findings show how these balances can be negotiated between recent freedom and long-embedded cultural constraints, with a modicum of influence from an increasingly interconnected global perspective. The final contributions of the study lie in suggestions for theoretical instruments on behalf of the hybrid identities, joining traditional and modern values.

Conclusion

This study employs a mixed-method approach to explore the motivations for and consequences of body piercing among students in Cape Coast, Ghana. Research suggests that piercings are acquiring currency for the performance of identity, social construction of self in the company of friends, and negotiating balance between locals versus global culture. Among the students in a

contemporary school setting, piercings offer a means of communicative self-presentation. Professionals in the administration are apprised of the significance of piercings in enhancing self-esteem and identity formation through group discussions about their cultural implications to instate rules that will ensure safety. As piercing fads escalate, healthcare services need to adapt to the new risks that this procedure poses. The current study allows for broader generalizations by instigating comparative studies across the institutions and shows how narrower rules need to be put in place that mirror changes in the use of piercings. Eventually, this research reshapes ideas of identity negotiation and cultural dissemination to show how students are engaged in active process-learning activities of balancing modernity and tradition toward an in-depth characterization of complex identities among interactions of global connectedness.

Recommendation

It is thus recommended that colleges modify their codes and policies concerning body piercings to reflect respect for students identified by their cultural stance. This kind of collaborative platform will not only enhance interaction between students, administrators, and health experts but will often lead to mutual understanding and, therefore, to safety guidelines. This will improve support services for students to have avenues for peer interaction and develop higher self-esteem, based on an understanding of how piercings are critical in establishing identity. The universities must provide health education on the possible risks associated with piercings and how to pierce safely. Training that educates about cultural sensitivity among the faculty and students can de-stigmatize and offer a more welcoming atmosphere, while comparable longitudinal studies examining the evolving meanings of piercings would benefit researchers in the field.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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