



## “LOVE FOR ARTWORK”: TATTOOING AND BODY PIERCING AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN, NIGERIA

**EZEIBEKWE, Uju Perpetual, OJEDOKUN, Usman Adekunle  
and  
ADERINTO, Adeyinka Abideen**

*Department of Sociology,  
University of Ibadan,  
Ibadan, Nigeria*

### ABSTRACT

*Today, tattooing and body piercing are increasingly gaining acceptance among the youths in Nigeria. Though these forms of body modification are not foreign to Nigeria, yet, their growing acceptance among tertiary institution students is remarkable. Against this background, this study examined the attitude and disposition of University of Ibadan undergraduate students towards tattooing and body piercing. The study was anchored on labelling theory. Data were generated through survey-questionnaire and in-depth interview. Multistage sampling technique was employed for the selection of 260 students. Findings revealed that whereas there is a growing convergence in the disposition of both male (67.0%) and female (33.0%) students towards tattooing, a sharp difference exists in their disposition towards body piercing. Fashion is the main (39.1%) reason behind University of Ibadan undergraduate students' involvement in these forms of body modification. However, 41% of the respondents perceived their colleagues who engaged in tattooing and/or body piercing as irresponsible. Relevant stakeholders should take necessary steps to sensitize the youths on health and social implications inherent in tattooing and body piercing.*

**Keywords:** *Tattooing, Body Piercing, Body Modification, Undergraduate Students, Nigeria*

### INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of the new millennium, tattooing and body piercing have been among the most widely consumed popular cultures among the youths in Nigeria. Although these forms of body modifications are not foreign to Nigeria, yet, their growing acceptance among tertiary institution students in the country is remarkable. Tattoo is a form of body modification made by inserting indelible ink into the dermis layer of the skin to change the pigment (Tiggerman and Hopkins, 2011). It involves an invasive procedure in which multiple punctures produce an indelible decorative design with pigment introduced into the skin (Armstrong, Ekmark, and Brooks, 1995). Body piercing, on its part, has been defined as the penetration of jewelry into openings made in body areas such as eyebrows, lips, tongues, nose, nipples or genitals (Armstrong, Ekmark, and Brooks, 1995).

Body modification has, over the centuries, been discovered and rediscovered by a wide range of societies (The Institute for Cultural Research, 2000). Both tattoo and body piercing have a long history, and are well known in various cultures in Africa, America, Asia and Oceania (Rubin, 1988). Although the appearance of the two varied geographically, they always possess a very specific meaning for a particular culture. Whereas piercings are often used in initiation rites with the purpose of assigning their bearer to a certain social or age group (Gritton, 1988; Jonaitis, 1988), tattoos are utilized to signal religious affiliations, strength or social status (Gilbert, 2001; Schildkrout, 2004). Utoh-Ezeajugh (2009) noted that body adornment is a significant cultural activity among many ethnic groups in Africa. These body modifications which may be temporary or permanent are often used for social, ritual and aesthetic purposes (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2009). For instance, among the Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria, Ichi marks are typically employed to



distinguish people of valour, people of honour, and people on whose shoulders communal responsibilities could be entrusted (Negri, 1974). Also, among the Baule of Ivory Coast, permanent body designing is usually made purely for cosmetic purposes (Vogel, 1988).

Body modifications are potentially an important aspect of human identification (Starkie, 2012); and they have significantly aided forensic anthropological cases in recent years (Thompson and Puxley 2007). Starkie (2012) articulates that the increasing use of body modifications encourages those undertaking the practices for their “extreme” nature to seek new methods of modifying their bodies. Today, tattoo and piercing are now becoming commonplace, particularly among young people who use them as means of self-expression (Balci, Sari, and Mutlu, 2015; The Institute for Cultural Research, 2000). The motivation for tattooing can be emotional, practical, complex or very simple (Wessely, 2013). Furthermore, Goulding, Follett, Saren, and MacLaren (2004) categorised tattoo wearers as “aesthetics,” “committed,” and “life-style” with members of each engaging in different life-style choices. On their part, Burgess and Clark (2010) found that people categorise tattoos as either “cute” or “tribal” with each having a different meaning. Also, tattoos and body piercing have been noted to be subjected to gender norms in which men and women are increasingly being evaluated differently (Totten, Lipscomb & Jones, 2009; Atkinson, 2003).

Youths in higher institutions of learning, music artists, movie actors/actress, beauty experts, sport men/women, fashion models are now engaging in tattooing and body piercing (Temilola, 2013; Brown, Perlmutter, McDermott, and May, 2010). Although there is a growing popularity of tattooing and body piercing among the youths in Nigeria, yet, their excessive consumption may have serious social and health implications for body modifiers. Skin damage and rashes are the common skin problems, while emotional detachments from the old images or collapsed relationships are usually difficult to remove (Sperry, 1992). According to Wohlrab, Stahl, and Kappeler (2007), tattoos can cause skin problems such as granulomas (red bumps caused by inflammation) and keloid scars. It can also provoke allergic reactions like skin itches and break out (Wohlrab, Stahl, and Kappeler, 2007). Also, viral infectious diseases, such as hepatitis A, hepatitis B and HIV/AIDs can also be contracted via discharged body fluids and needles used during modification exercise. In addition, tattoos and body piercing in some situations can limit the opportunity, as well as accentuate the tendency to discriminate against their wearers. Furthermore, despite the fact that tattoos and body piercing are rapidly gaining popularity among the youths in Nigeria (Temilola, 2013), there is still dearth of data on people who have these forms of body modifications, thus, making a lot of things unknown about them. Therefore, the major objective of this study was to examine the attitude and disposition of University of Ibadan undergraduate students towards tattooing and body piercing. This was done with the purpose of gaining insights into the motivating factors for body modification and how body modifiers are being perceived by their colleagues who do not engage in either tattooing or body piercing.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Labelling Theory**

Labelling theory was employed to explain the attitude of undergraduate students of the University of Ibadan towards their colleagues who wear tattoos and/or pierce their body. The theory emerged in the field of criminology in the early 1960s. It is an offshoot of symbolic interactionism theory developed by George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley. The labelling approach to deviance seeks to explain the problem of how and why certain individuals get labelled and the effect of the label on subsequent deviant behaviour (Gove, 1975). Howard Becker, a prominent labelling theorist, opines that deviance can often be in the eye of the beholder because members



of various groups have different conceptions of what is right and proper in certain situations. Further, there must be a reaction to the act. That is, deviance must be discovered by a group that does not share a belief in the appropriateness of the behaviour, and it must subsequently be called deviance (Becker, 1963). According to him, *social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance*, and by applying those rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an “offender”. The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; and deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label (Becker, 1963). Other students may erroneously label their colleagues who wear tattoo and/or pierce their body ‘deviant’ because they do not know the motives behind their action. Also, the belief that tattooing and body piercing are inappropriate may impact their relationship with their colleagues who have these body modifications.

### **RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY**

The study was descriptive and cross-sectional in design. The University of Ibadan in South West Nigeria constituted the study area. The Institution was established in 1948, making it the oldest University in Nigeria. It has a student population of about 20, 000. The choice of this institution was predicated on the fact that, in recent times, tattooing and body piercing are observed to be increasingly gaining popularity among the undergraduate students of the University. The study population comprised both the male and female undergraduate students. With regard to sampling of respondents, the multi-stage sampling technique was employed for the selection of 260 undergraduate students. The process began with a random selection of six faculties in the University of Ibadan namely, Arts, College of Medicine, Education, Law, Science and Social Sciences. This was followed by the adoption of the stratified sampling technique to select the students. Specifically, the process entailed a cautious selection of respondents across departments and academic levels of study in each of the designated faculties. This process was considered necessary so as to ensure adequate representativeness of the existing diversity in the population of the University of Ibadan undergraduate students. Generally, the composition of this group of students is typical of university undergraduates in Nigeria. In addition, some students who engaged in tattooing and/or body piercing were purposively selected. This was essentially done with the purpose of achieving balanced opinions from body modifiers and students who do not engage in body modification. The collection of data involved the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods. Copies of a semi-structured questionnaire were administered on 250 students. In addition, 10 in-depth interviews (IDI) were conducted with students who had tattoo and/or pierced some parts of their body (with the exception of earlobes for female). Data generated through the administered questionnaires were processed and analysed through descriptive statistics involving frequency distribution and simple percentage. The qualitative data were processed through content analysis and ethnographic summaries.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**



The socio-demographic profile of respondents covered in the survey is presented in table 1.

**Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

Characteristics	Categories	Frequencies	Percent
Sex	Male	101	40.4
	Female	149	59.6
	<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Religion	Christianity	209	83.6
	Islam	41	16.4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Age	16-20	98	39.2
	21-25	129	51.6
	26-30	23	9.2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Faculty	Arts	76	30.4
	Social Sciences	67	26.8
	Science & College of Medicine	54	21.6
	Education & Law	53	21.2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Level of Study	100	72	28.8
	200	43	17.2
	300	68	27.2
	400	67	26.8
	<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>100.0</b>

As indicated in table 1, about 60% of the respondents were female, while male constituted 40.4%. Also, the majority (83.6%) were Christians. With regard to age distribution of the respondents, the dominant age category was 21-25 with 51.6%, followed by 16-20 constituting 39.2%. Furthermore, students of the Faculty of Arts were the most represented with 30.4%, followed by those of the Social Sciences with 26.8%. The distribution of the respondents according to their level of study reveals that close to 29% were in 100Level, while those in 300Level constituted 27.2%. About 27% were 400Level students.

### **Prevalence of Tattoos and Body Piercing among University of Ibadan Undergraduate Students**

Information was sought on respondents' awareness on the prevalence of tattoos and body piercing among undergraduate students of the University of Ibadan.

**Table 2: Respondents' Awareness of Prevalence of Tattoos and Body Piercing**

Awareness	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	238	95.2
No	12	4.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 2 shows that the overwhelming majority of the respondents (95.2%) averred that both tattoos and body piercing are prevalent among undergraduate students of the University of Ibadan, as against only 4.8% who claimed that they are not prevalent. These findings established the fact that the two forms of body modification are increasingly gaining ground among undergraduate students of the institution. This finding agrees with DeMello (2000)'s observation that tattoos and piercings have increased tremendously in popularity, rising not only in numbers, but also involving a broader range of social classes.

### **Sex and Preference for Tattooing and Body Piercing**

The recognition of the fact that sex plays an important role in every individual's identity formation makes it imperative to find out if there was a variation in the University of Ibadan undergraduate students' preference for tattooing and body piercings based on sex. The analysis is depicted in table 3.

**Table 3: Sex and Preference for Tattooing and Body Piercing**

Sex	Tattooing	Body Piercing
Male	163 (67.0)	35 (14.0)
Female	80 (33.0)	208 (86.0%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>243</b> <b>100.0</b>	<b>243</b> <b>100.0</b>

With regard to sex preference for tattoos, the majority of the respondents (67.0%) indicated that male students were more favourably disposed to tattooing as against 33.0% who opined that it was more common among female students. However, 86.0% of the respondents, constituting the majority, contended that female students were more involved in body piercing compared to 14.0% who indicated that it was more popular among the male students. It can be deduced from this finding that unlike the growing convergence in the disposition of the two sexes toward tattooing, a sharp difference still exists in the involvement of the two sexes in body piercing. This identified difference can be interpreted as resulting from the fact that most cultures in Nigeria are more favourably disposed to multiple-body piercing by females than males. These findings are in tandem with the submissions of Totten, Lipscomb, & Jones (2009) and Atkinson (2003) that tattoos and body piercing have been noted to be subjected to gender norms in which men and women are increasingly being evaluated differently.

### **Reasons Students Wear Tattoos and/or Engage in Body Piercing**

Respondents were asked to give reasons why University of Ibadan undergraduate students wear tattoos and/or engage in body piercing as a way of understanding the motive behind their decision.

**Table 4: Reasons Students Wear Tattoos and/or Engage in Body Piercing**

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Fashion	84	39.1
Sexual Attraction	25	11.6
Peer Pressure	20	9.3
Strength & Identification	42	19.5
No Idea	44	20.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>215</b>	<b>100</b>

Of the 215 respondents that responded, 39.1% stated that students wear tattoos and/or engage in body piercing purely for fashion, while about 20% claimed that students who embraced these two forms of body modification believed that they serve as sources of strength for them. Also, about 12% indicated that tattooing and body piercing enhance sexual attraction of those that have them. Less than 10% of the respondents attributed students' involvement in them as resulting from peer pressure. Furthermore, the output of the survey was equally corroborated by the responses generated from the interviews conducted. One of the respondents stated:

... nothing, I like tattoos and body piercing. I like the two, right from the time I saw them on my uncle. So, I just went ahead and got mine too (IDI/Male/400Level).



In the words of another:

It is due to love for artwork. I have seen it (tattoo) on different people. I really like it. So, I said I should get one too (IDI/Male/400Level).

Another respondent said:

That (tattoo) was the first line in my poem. My first line was about my mum and I decided to write it on my chest (IDI/Male/200Level).

These findings indicate that University of Ibadan undergraduate students engage in tattooing and body piercing for a variety of reasons which include: fashion, show of strength, sexual attraction, love for artwork and imitation of role models. However, fashion seems to be the major reason influencing the decision of these students to get tattooing and body piercing. Craik (1994) and Turner (1999) have similarly observed that tattoos and body piercings today are mainly fashion accessories. In addition, these findings equally corroborate the position of Wessely (2013) that people’s motivations for tattooing could be emotional, practical, complex or very simple.

**Social Implications of Tattoos and Body Piercing**

Since tattooing and body piercing are increasingly gaining popularity among University of Ibadan undergraduate students, it was considered important to examine how students who wear tattoo and/or engage in body piercing are perceived by their colleagues who do not engage in any form of body modification. This was done with the purpose of determining if these practices have any negative implication for students who have them. The ways students with tattoos and body piercing are perceived by their colleagues are presented in table 5.

**Table 5: Perception of Students with Tattoo(s) and/or Body Piercing by their Colleagues**

Perception	Frequency	Percentage
Bad & dangerous	64	29.0
Indifferent	47	21.0
Irresponsible	90	41.0
Fashionable	20	9.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>100.0</b>

As shown in table 5, 41% of the respondents considered their colleagues, who wear tattoo(s) and/or engage in body piercing, as irresponsible, while 29.0% believed that they are bad and dangerous. However, 9.0% saw them as being fashionable. The outcome of the in-depth interviews further buttressed the survey. In one of the interviews conducted, a respondent observed thus:

Some people that do not know you from Adams will just see you and judge you based on your tattoos. Most times, this is what they do until they get to know one better (IDI/Female/400Level).

Another had this to say:

People do tell me that the first time they saw me, they thought I was a bitch; that I was mean or something like that. Eventually, they just see me and are like... “Oh, she is actually okay” (IDI/Female/100 Level).



In the words of another:

You know the kind of environment we are in. Some people do not like them (tattooing and body piercing). Most people see one as irresponsible while some people do understand. If you go outside Nigeria, people have tattoos and piercings and they attend classes. Some lecturers have too, so they don't see it as anything serious (IDI/Male/400Level).

From the above findings, it is clear that in spite of the fact that tattooing and body piercing are increasingly gaining ground among undergraduate students of the University of Ibadan, those who engage in any of them are still largely viewed by their colleagues, who do not embrace the practice, as irresponsible. Rather than trying to know more about body modifiers, other students, in most cases, regard their colleagues involved in tattooing and/or body piercing as irresponsible and dangerous. These are stereotypic views that may not necessarily reflect the true personality of body modifiers. Moreover, these findings also show the relevance of labelling theory, which posits that deviance is often in the eye of the beholder because members of various groups have different conceptions of what is right and proper in certain situations, to this study.

Meanwhile, respondents' willingness to date someone wearing tattoos and/or engaging in body piercing was equally investigated to determine if their perceptions of their colleagues who are involved in these forms of body modification influence their attitude towards them.

**Table 6: Willingness to Date Someone with Tattoos/Body Piercing**

Willingness	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	64	26.1
No	181	73.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>100</b>

The table reveals that the majority of the respondents (73.9%) maintained that they can never date someone with tattoos and/or body piercing, compared to 26.1% who indicated that they could. When probed further on the reasons that informed their decision, about 58% of those who claimed that they could not date someone with tattoos and/or body piercing stated they always feel uncomfortable around them, while about 30% regarded them as irresponsible. Close to 13% attributed their decision to the fact that the act of body modification is religiously unacceptable. The implication of these findings is that people who wear tattoos and/or engage in body piercing stand at the risk of being deprived some opportunities because other people who view them as not conforming to societal expectations may not want to relate or interact with them. The presence of tattoos and body piercings may cause people to avoid social contact and intimacy with the wearer, since they are presumed to have physical abnormalities and deviations that occur naturally (Jones, 2010; Sperry, 1992).

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined the attitude and disposition of University of Ibadan undergraduate students towards tattooing and body piercing. The study revealed that these two forms of body modification are prevalent among undergraduate students of the Institution. In addition, multiple reasons were identified as influencing the decision of the students to wear tattoo and/or engage in body piercing, with fashion being the main motivating factor. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that there is a growing acceptability of tattooing and body piercing among undergraduate students



of the University of Ibadan, students who indulge in these practices are still largely perceived as irresponsible by their colleagues who do not embrace any of these forms of body modifications.

This paper strongly recommends that individuals who wear tattoo and/or engage in body piercing should not be discriminated against by other people by virtue of their body modification because the quality of a person's personality can never be accurately judged by his or her outward appearance. It is important to note that the fact that they wear tattoos and/or engage in body piercing does not necessarily make them different from the so-called 'conforming' members of the society. Also, the Federal Government of Nigeria in collaboration with relevant health institutions and other stakeholders should put in place necessary frameworks through which youths, including tertiary institution students, can be adequately sensitized on the potential negative health implications inherent in unhygienic tattooing and body piercing. Equally, the Federal Ministry of Health in collaboration with other relevant stakeholders should design effective strategies to ensure that service-delivery involving tattooing and body piercing are always done in hygienic and healthy environment.

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