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Poking, Prodding, and Piercing: Becoming a Successful Body Modifier

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Sociology

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by

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August 2015

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Keywords: body modification, tattoo, piercing, virtual self, relationships, pain

## ABSTRACT

Poking, Prodding, and Piercing: Becoming a Successful Body Modifier

by

Joshua A. Ison

Body modification is a global phenomenon. In the southeastern United States, two forms of modifications present themselves most often: piercings and tattoos. Much of the research conducted on body modifications looks at deviance as a primary concern, focusing less on what the individuals are like. This study examines the personal accounts of people with body modifications and add to the existing information about body-modified people. Interviews were conducted with fifteen participants across several months in different parts of two east Tennessee cities. Questions were open-ended and all responses were transcribed. Participants discussed a variety of topics, including pain, belongingness, and body image. This research offers suggestions for future research in focused areas of body modification.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Just about every group of people in the world has a history of body modification in some shape or form (Gay and Whittington 2002). Some cultures incorporate body modifications for spiritual purposes or to mark a person is transitioning to adulthood. Other people turn themselves into an artistic display or a side show freak at the carnival. Still others use modifications as a way to complement their beauty or looks. “The popularity of [body modifications] attests to their power as vehicles for self-expression, commemoration, community building, and social commentary” (Kang and Jones 2007).

Body modification is described most often as the alteration of the physical body (Featherstone 1999). Reasons for and methods of modifying bodies vary greatly throughout history and across different cultures. In the United States, some women (and men) have permanent make up tattooed (eye liner, eye brows, lip liner). However, the literature pertaining to body modification in the United States has largely been limited to the alteration of the human body for reasons other than efficiency (e.g. permanent make up). Most researchers (Antoszewski et al. 2009; Armstrong et al. 2004; Cano and Sams 2000; Deschesnes, Finès, and Demers 2006; Featherstone 1999; Guéguen 2012; Mayers and Chiffriller 2008; Preti et al. 2006; Roenigk 1971; Tate and Shelton 2008) focus on two types of modifications- tattooing and body piercing- the two most prominent types of modification in the United States. Tattooing is “the insertion of coloured pigment into the dermal layer through a series of punctures of the skin in order to create

a permanent marking” (Tiggemann and Hopkins 2011:245). Body piercing is the introduction of a rod or ring to a hole in the dermal layer of the skin generated by a needle (Tiggemann and Hopkins 2011).

This exploratory qualitative study was undertaken with a desire to learn how body modifications affect the personal lives of those who elect to obtain them. Fifteen participants answered questions pertaining to their life with modifications. The interviews covered as many different topics as the participants were willing to discuss. Most participants spoke at length about a handful of topics. These include the pain involved in modifying, contending with the permanence of modifying, their personal relationships with others in terms of modifying, avoiding a spoiled identity through selective location and disclosure of modifications, and educating children about being modified.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### History of Body Modification

In order to understand where we are in the field of body modification today, it is vital to know the history of body modification, both in the United States and internationally. “There is no known culture in which people do not paint, pierce, tattoo, reshape, or simply adorn their bodies,” read an introduction to an art exhibit in New York (Gay and Whittington 2002:14). Every populated continent of the world has practiced some form of body modification (Roenigk 1971). Going back as far as 4000 B.C., modification has been used

...as protection against danger, as love charms, to restore youth, to insure good health and long life, to implement fertility, to bring about the death of an enemy, to cure an illness, to divest a corpse of its malevolent powers, to insure a happy afterlife, to propitiate supernatural powers, and to acquire supernatural power (Roenigk 1971:179).

The Egyptians are credited with the first known tattoos, which were used as social status symbols (Porcella 2009; Roenigk 1971). They are also “associated with fertility rites, [and] ideas of heaven” (Roenigk 1971:179). Most western religious texts have attempted to ban the modification of the body; a practice that remains to this day (Porcella 2009; Roenigk 1971). Christianity’s history is mixed with regard to tattooing and other body modifications. According to some Christian followers, tattooing can be practiced, while others believe the body is sacred and should remain unblemished. The latter idea led to the decrease in popularity of tattooing in

the Middle Ages (Roenigk 1971). However, the popularity of tattooing grew in the late 1800s. Similar to the Egyptians, the nobility of this time period obtained tattoos. Czar Nicholas II, King Edward VII and Prince George of Greece were among leaders marked with tattoos. It was even rumored that Winston Churchill's mother had a tattoo on her arm (Roenigk 1971). Slaves and criminals, in some cultures, tattooed to mark them as deviant, effectively separating them from the general population (Porcella 2009). The slaves and criminals, in this example, were stigmatized, but the tattoo was used to indicate the stigma and therefore was not the source of the stigma (Mifflin 2013; Porcella 2009). This is counter to the current finding that people with body modifications are stigmatized because they have chosen to obtain the modifications (Swami and Furnham 2007). Native Americans used tattoos to mark warriors or show an individual's place within the tribe (Porcella 2009).

The history of body modification in the United States has shifted quickly over the years. When tattooing was first used in the United States, the well-traveled and well-off were the only people capable of obtaining tattoos. At a time when tattooing was reserved mostly for those with wealth, Samuel O'Reilly's invention of the tattoo gun lowered the price and time consumption of tattooing. Because the price was lowered, the lower classes of the general public were able to join in the practice. Once the general public was capable of modifying their bodies, the elite left the practice and began to associate it with the lower classes (Mifflin 2013; Porcella 2009). This led to the assumption that tattoos are for the lowest groups of society, or as Forbes (2001:774) puts it, reserved for the "perverts, psychopaths, prostitutes, and psychotics."

In contrast to the earliest American history in tattooing, disparaged groups on the outskirts of society have been, historically, most likely to partake in body modification (Tiggemann and Hopkins 2011). This includes people such as bikers (Drews, Allison, and Probst 2000; Forbes 2001). Military personnel are often involved in body modification (Laumann and Derick 2006; Mifflin 2013; Porcella 2009; Roenigk 1971). Body modified individuals have been exhibits in side shows for circuses, often as part of the ‘freak show’ alongside the bearded lady and the fat man (Mifflin 2013; Porcella 2009). More recently, however, the general population has begun to modify their bodies in greater numbers, turning it in to something of a trend (see, for example Guéguen 2012; Heywood et al. 2012; Koch et al. 2010).

Mayer and Chiffiller (2007) found that on a college campus 36 percent of males and 62 percent of females had a piercing at some point in their lives (excluding the ear lobes for females), and 23 percent of males and 21 percent of females had been tattooed. National data collected by Laumann and Derick (2006) showed that 24 percent of respondents (22% of women, 26% of men) had a tattoo and 14 percent of those who responded (21% of women, 8% of men) had a piercing at some point in their life. Eight percent of the population (10% of women, 7% of men) had both a piercing and a tattoo. They surveyed 500 individuals, asking questions about body modification, ethnicity, age, and other demographic information. They found that as age increased, the participant’s likelihood of body modifications decreased. Younger individuals were found more likely to have modified their body. Most tattooed people in the survey placed their tattoos in locations that are seen as “normal” placement for them (e.g.

arms, back, ankles for females, shoulders). Almost two-thirds (65%) of those with tattoos got them before they turned 24 years old. People who have modified their body are less likely to be high school graduates (10% of total population, 40% of tattooed had quit school before obtaining their diploma), but ironically almost just equally to obtain a graduate-level degree (15% of total population, 14% of tattooed obtained a graduate degree).

### The Choices in Modification

The full process of body modification is typically time-consuming. This includes the time considering body modifications, obtaining the modification itself, and the healing process. The literature has identified the types of people that are likely to go through the process necessary for body modification, but knowing the “why” and “what” are just as important as “who.”

Meanings for body modifications vary greatly by geographic location, domestically and internationally. In the U.S., people often get body piercings and tattoos out of a desire to be different (Benson 2000). People cultivate a deviant label through the use of body modification and join a modification subculture (Forbes 2001). Their group identity is founded in the ability to set themselves apart from larger society through body modification. This allows them to feel special and be different (Benson 2000). Wohlrab, Stahl, and Kappeler (2007) compiled people’s motivations for obtaining a tattoo or body piercing. Some of these included artistic expression, resistance, group affiliation, or cultural influences. These motivations give us some general idea of the meanings that people associate with their body modifications.

Most of the literature focuses on the reasons for obtaining body modifications. People report liking the appearance of tattoos, garnering attention, and uniqueness, among others, as reasons for getting tattoos (Gold et al. 2005). Many of the historical figures who obtained tattoos did so to show they had traveled the world and were well-versed and knowledgeable (Mifflin 2013; Porcella 2009; Roenigk 1971). Some modifying aficionados adorn their body to rebel against “normal” society (Benson 2000).

Paradoxically, much of the history of body modification finds a need for group membership to be a leading reason for getting a tattoo/piercing (Benson 2000; Forbes 2001; Kang and Jones 2007; Wohlrab et al. 2007). More recent studies show that the inclusion factor is far less influential now (Forbes 2001; Tiggemann and Hopkins 2011). Gold et al. (2005) found that among the people who have body piercings, 48 percent did so to differentiate themselves, but only 30 percent got their piercing because their clique wanted them to. The belief that modifications provide an appearance of belonging is often undone by changing societal norms and changing personal ideals and beliefs (Kang and Jones 2007).

People’s motivations for body modification can reveal important insights about them. People’s reasons for not modifying their bodies may be just as enlightening. One of the common findings about those who have tattoos and piercings is that they are less religious than those who have kept their body unmarked (Degelman and Price 2002; Seiter and Hatch 2005; Swami and Furnham 2007). Degelman and Price (2002) found that people perceived a woman with a dragon tattoo as being less religious, among other things, than her non-tattooed self. Despite this, between 3 percent (Gold et al. 2005) and 10 percent (Degelman and Price 2002) of tattooing is

religiously motivated, despite the practice being strongly discouraged by western religions. Nineteen percent of religious respondents in a national survey have tattoos. The national data also showed that 11 percent of religious persons had a piercing, and 5 percent have both piercings and tattoos (Laumann and Derick 2006). According to Pew Research, roughly 76 percent of the population is associated with some form of religion (pewforum.org 2014). There appears to be a stark divide between the modified and non-modified populations. Often those involved with body modifications get their first tattoo or piercing by age 24. Pew Research also found that of those aged 18-24, the “young Millennials,” only about 63 percent claim some form of religion. What causes such a strong difference between these two groups? Future research should seek to answer this question.

Making the decision to get a tattoo or piercing is often time-consuming. Possible modifiers must decide what appeals to them, what part of the body they want to get it on, and the tattooist or piercer they wish to go to (Firmin et al. 2008). This decision is not one that modifiers will undertake on their own (Firmin et al. 2012; Sanders 1988; Vail 1999). Beginners and collectors alike pursue socially acceptable means, such as professional tattoo shops and styles that appeal to their group. When deciding where to go to get their modification, Firmin et al. (2012) found that participants wanted to ensure their personal health was not at risk. Their interviews revealed a desire for clean shops, fresh needles, and artists who present themselves professionally. Collectors must take into account the type of image they want to show others. They elect to modify certain parts of their body because it can be easily hidden from sight and not affect the prospect of jobs or negative reactions from others (Firmin et al. 2012).

## Personality

The focal point of body modification studies in the past has been comparing those with body modifications and those without, examining their personality styles, drug use, risky behavior, etc. Most of the work has explored the perceptions others have for the modified individual (Degelman and Price 2002; Pitts 1999; Seiter and Hatch 2005; Swami and Furnham 2007; Wohlrab et al. 2000), while a few studies focus on modifiers' perceptions of themselves (Armstrong et al. 2004; Burger and Finkel, 2002; Koch et al. 2010).

Historically, negative perceptions are attached to those with body modifications (Forbes 2001; Heywood et al. 2012; Irwin 2003; Kosut 2006). This is possibly due to the association of modifications with incarcerated individuals or those committed to psychiatric hospitals (Sanders 2008). During one experiment, drawings of women were shown to a population. These drawings were to be judged based solely on their physical appearance. Depictions of women with tattoos were judged less attractive, heavier drinkers, and as holding looser sexual morals (Swami and Furnham 2007). Paradoxically, “more than two thirds of participants in [this same] study still indicated that they would consider getting a tattoo” even though the tattoo might reduce their social status (Swami and Furnham 2007:349). Degelman and Price (2002) found similar results. Perceptions from others about those with tattoos and piercings are typically negative (Degelman and Price 2002; Seiter and Hatch 2005; Swami and Furnham 2007; Tate and Shelton, 2008; Wohlrab et al. 2000).

How true are the views that other people hold about people with body modifications? Research has shown that college students with modifications, specifically piercings and tattoos, were more likely to involve themselves in riskier behaviors such as using drugs, having higher numbers of sexual partners, and not using any form of protection during sexual intercourse (Armstrong et al. 2004; Burger and Finkel 2002). This suggests that risk-taking and body modifications are related somehow. People with body modifications are associated with or engage in other actions considered deviant. Most persons with some form of body modification in the U.S. are involved with illegal drug use, unsafe sexual practices, and violence, among other actions (Tate and Shelton 2008). Some studies have found that the appearance of body modification can influence how others view the tattooed person; the culture and context of the social world can alter how outsiders and others in the subculture react and view the modified body (Kang and Jones 2007). Even the influences of the media may affect the way that outsiders view body modifiers (Pitts 1999). However, modifiers believe their body alterations are a form of control over part of their identity and “take offense at suggestions that they are mentally ill” (Pitts 1999:298). These modifications are an extension of who these people think of themselves as. Modifiers are not able to control the social context in which they live, and how outsiders to the subculture view them (Kang and Jones 2007).

In past years, piercing and tattooing have been associated with groups of people who deviate from the norm (Armstrong et al. 2004; Deschesnes et al. 2006; Forbes 2001; Heywood et al. 2012; Koch et al. 2010; Preti et al. 2006; Swami and Furnham 2007). According to some, they desire to set themselves apart from all other groups and be seen as different in their lives

(Antoszewski et al. 2009; Koch et al. 2010; Wohlrab et al. 2007). But, if tattooing and piercing are becoming trendy as Koch et al. (2010) argue, how much longer can modifications still be viewed as deviance? Although a majority of the population has not engaged in modification, it is still a growing trend. However, many authors argue that although “modding” is on the rise, the people with modifications are still and will still be considered deviant (Burger and Finkel 2002; Deschesnes et al. 2006; Guéguen 2012; Koch et al. 2010; Preti et al. 2006; Swami and Furnham 2007).

There is a lack of information on meanings people have attached to their own modifications. Researchers have tended to use a roundabout approach toward body modification, getting to know the individual’s background (e.g. their criminal behaviors, their gang affiliations), but not who they identify as. In order to understand body modification it is important to get to know the people who are engaged in it. What meanings do modifiers attach to their modifications? How has modifying affected their relationships with others? This missing information provides insight into how people understand their modifications and the choices that they make when partaking in body modification.

### Becoming and Being Body Modified

How does a person become a body modification collector? What does it mean to be a part of the body modification subculture? Body modification has begun to lose its deviant status as more people have started to modify, but still remains outside of the norm. Vail (1999) argues that in order to become a collector, a person must have an affinity—a want to become deviant.

Beginners must also have a relationship with other people already established in the community, known as an affiliation (Firmin et al. 2008; Vail 1999). “For this conversion to be successful, one must want to be converted” (Vail 1999:261). Affiliation and affinity must coexist; one without the other will likely prevent a person from obtaining modifications. The last step of the process that Vail describes is signification: internalization of the status as deviant and rethinking actions and behaviors in terms of their status in a new subculture.

Tattooing and piercing are social activities. Modifiers do not act in a vacuum, separated from the rest of society. They choose to modify, where to modify, and the tattoo design or piercing type based on their interactions with others and their self-identity (Sanders 2008). Part of becoming a body modified person is the people that a person spends time with. Their peers begin to have a greater influence over the decisions these people make, especially compared to the person’s parents (Firmin 2008; 2012). As potential modifiers age, their parents begin to lose influence over them. Parents, in most cases, preferred to see their child remain unmarked by modifications, “however, when their children crossed certain age thresholds, then parents deferred their opinions to the choices of their children” (Firmin et al. 2012:82). The strength of the relationship between parent and child had less of an effect on whether a person got modifications than did the peer relationships (Firmin et al. 2012). As their relationships with peers and coworkers begins to grow, these people begin to desire to fit in, or stand out. According to Sanders (2008), when asked about why they choose to modify their body, most answered with a reference to peers.

To some, body modifications may seem faddish, a passing trend that will eventually fall out of public interest. Kosut (2006b) disagrees with this argument in terms of permanent body modifications such as tattoos. She argues that tattoos exist in their own special category because they are not something that is just done to the body; tattoos are put into the body. They are used as both a decoration and a permanent modifier to it. “As a tattooed person, you are the witness, participant, and life-long bearer of a unique production process” (Kosut 2006b:1041). Tattoos and some other modifications cannot easily be eliminated should the fad fall out of style; they are an “ironic fad” (Kosut 2006a).

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval for this study, participants (see Table 1) were recruited using posters advertising for body modified individuals with body modifications such as tattoos, piercings, stretching, and branding, among others. These were hung around a southeastern university campus and local body modification shops. Some participants were found via snowball sampling. Asking participants if they had any friends eligible for the study at the end of interviews yielded a half dozen more interview participants.

In total, there were seven males and eight females. Ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 32 years. Participants varied in backgrounds such as religion, types of modifications used, and location of upbringing. Pertinent participant information is listed at the end of the methods section. Five of the participants in this study work for, or apprentice in, the body modification business. One piercer, two tattooists, and two apprentices consented to be interviewed and offered their stories about what it means to them to be body modified. No participants involved in this study had fewer than five modifications.

#### Inclusion and Exclusion

In order to be included in this study participants must have body modifications with either (a) multiple body modification types (e.g. tattoos and scarring) or (b) multiple body modifications of the same type (e.g. multiple piercings). I sought out only participants who had

multiple experiences in body modification because they had more experiences and body transitions they could discuss. They were also required to be at least 18 years of age at the time of the interview and be willing to set aside at least fifteen minutes to conduct one-on-one interviews.

Certain types of modifications were not included in this study because they either (a) did not present themselves in the participants who volunteered, or (b) did not fit the criteria that were set forth for the study. Cosmetic surgery and cosmetic tattooing were outside the scope of this study. The reason these types were omitted was because past research on body modification does not look into them, instead focusing on other types of modifications such as tattoos and piercings. The interest in this study was in body modifications that served purposes beyond cosmetic appearances and conventional sexual attractiveness.

### Interviews

Each participant who expressed interest discussed a meeting place where the interview could be conducted, be it their own home, a tattoo shop, or my campus office. Interviews lasted from 14 to 38 minutes. I conducted semi-structured interviews, covering as many topics as the participant was willing to discuss pertaining to their modifications. Example questions follow (See Appendix for full guide):

- i. How have your modifications affected your interactions with people unfamiliar to you?
- ii. How did you feel about your appearance prior to modifying your body?
- iii. How do you believe you've changed since you began modifying your body?

- iv. How do you feel about your appearance now?
- v. How do you plan to modify your body in the future?

Other questions were not formally structured, but were asked of participants if the topic arose through the normal course of the interview. These topics include pain and the reasons behind certain modifications. Interviews were recorded using a handheld digital recorder. They were loaded onto a private computer for safe-keeping. After each interview, I completed transcription and open-coding for each.

### Coding

After transcription, I analyzed the first four interviews using open coding (Charmaz 2007). I then coded the remaining eleven interviews using focused coding from the commonalities found in the first four (Charmaz 2007; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). Certain topics were discussed at a higher frequency and at greater length than others in the first four interviews. Only those that were discussed with greater focus in the first four interviews were used in the focused coding procedure (Charmaz 2007; Emerson et al. 2011). The codes that I expected to find from the interviews were relationships with other people (i.e. family members, friends, strangers), types of modifications used, boundaries for children, body image, presentation of self, and surprises pertaining to body modification. After open coding the initial four interviews, other emergent themes presented themselves, such as pain, boundaries for self, and locations that people went to in order to receive their modifications. The interviewees' answer to each question was assigned using these codes. Occasionally, one answer would be placed into multiple codes, based on the themes mentioned.

**Table 1. Participants**

| <b>Types of Modifications Used</b>   | <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Role</b>       |
|--|------------------|------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Tattoos and Piercings (including lobe stretching, self-piercing, and “stick-and-poke” tattoos) | Blaine           | 24         | Male          | Customer          |
|  | Jacob            | 28         | Male          | Customer          |
|  | Amanda           | 23         | Female        | Customer          |
|  | Kevin            | 28         | Male          | Tattooist         |
|  | Minnie           | 20         | Female        | Customer          |
|  | Adria            | 29         | Female        | Piercer           |
|  | Chandler         | 32         | Male          | Tattoo Apprentice |
|  | Victoria         | 18         | Female        | Customer          |
|  | Cynthia          | 19         | Female        | Customer          |
|  | Kyle             | 30         | Male          | Customer          |
|  | Bethany          | 23         | Female        | Customer          |
| Tattoos only   | Paula            | 21         | Female        | Customer          |
|  | Jack             | 30         | Male          | Tattooist         |
| Tattoos, Piercings, and Scarification  | Mackie           | 29         | Female        | Customer          |
|  | Ricky            | 32         | Male          | Tattoo Apprentice |

## CHAPTER 4

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BODY MODIFIED?

“Tattooed people voluntarily shape their social identities and enhance their definitions of self. Drawn by the affiliational and individuating consequences of their choice and despite the potential for disrupted interactions, tattooees choose to mark their bodies with indelible symbols of what they see themselves to be” (Sanders 1988:426). In this chapter, I analyze patterns in what it means to be a body modified person. Soon after their first modification, many interviewees wanted more. After some time, these people developed an understanding of what life is like as a body-modified individual. They learned the language of the trade, the symbols of each type and location of modification, and internalized the norms for the subculture. They sought tattoo artists who could make their thoughts and ideas look as aesthetically pleasing as possible, and with that skill comes a higher monetary price.

However, there are hurdles that each person anticipating modification must overcome. Sanders (1988) stated that body modifications can elicit a fear response from those involved due to the pain that is anticipated and the fear of permanence. Modifiers need to know how much pain they can deal with, as body modification can vary from slightly to excruciatingly painful. They also need to understand that the alterations to their body could impact many aspects of their lives for as long as they live. Participants typically have a level of comfort about themselves and their appearance, but still desire to complement it with art or jewelry. Body modifiers have “given off” information about themselves, using their appearance to reveal aspects of themselves

to others even before a conversation begins (see Goffman 1959). Body modifiers must make strides to succeed in the subculture. They undertake certain efforts to ensure they give off the correct persona. These people seek set boundaries on modifications. Would they be willing to get a tattoo somewhere on their face or hands? Body modifiers must also understand that getting modifications will have an effect on their relationships with others, whether it be the formation of friendships or the destruction of existing ones.

### Pain

Pain is integral to body modification; likewise it is central to the identity of being a body-modified person. Outsiders to body modification might assume that *avoiding* any and all pain would be valued, such as with surgery or dental work. The interviewees, however, never suggested that possibility. Instead, they treated pain as a requirement, as if it were a merit badge to mark their subcultural membership (Sanders 1988; 2008) or a means to signify movement into adulthood (Kang and Jones 2007). For example, Jack, an experienced tattooist and collector, said that people getting a modification must feel the pain: “If you get at least get one tattoo, I think you should feel at least some of the pain because that is a big experience that comes with getting tattooed... I think someone should experience what they're having inflicted on them for at least five to ten minutes if not more.” In this way, pain serves as a rite of passage to signal subcultural commitment to oneself and others.

Popular media portrayals of body modification overstate the amount of pain people should expect. They typically present modifications as so painful that people on the receiving

end will wail, groan, or faint, leading novices to dread the pain of their first modification. One of the major fears of pertaining to body modification is what the participants don't know: how much pain will be caused. "This process will cause more or less pain depending on the sensitivity of the area being tattooed" (Sanders 1988:412,414). The anticipation of pain can lead some to back out of their modification. Simply walking into a tattoo shop can elicit fear from newcomers and veterans alike. Seeing others poked, hearing the tattoo gun, eyeing the needle or a fresh tattoo, and even catching the scent of the location is enough to dampen the enthusiasm of people facing hours' worth of modifications.

Going into the ordeal, the participants understood there would be pain involved in the situation. What they did not know was just how much each of their modifications would hurt. Many of the interviewees revealed that they expected more pain from some modifications and less from others. There is not a set way to know how much pain a particular modification would cause for an individual. However, they did seem to understand that certain parts of the body would cause a higher level of pain than others. Minnie, as an example, managed to fall asleep during the first session of a tattoo on her back. During the second session, she says the pain was almost too much to bear because it was on her spine. Other parts of the body were also mentioned as being more painful than the rest of the body, most of which have a commonality between them: a limited amount of or no fat in the area. Other mentioned parts of the body include the ribcage, hands, and feet.

For the participants, managing their pain aversion to obtain a modification signified their membership in the body-modified subculture. By confronting the pain, they became a person who passed an identity test. The familiar phrase “no pain, no gain” both reassures and challenges modification seekers that they must address the pain. Many interviewees reported focusing their attention on the end result to deal with the pain. Blaine, for example, thought of pain as something that you can get used to: “I want the tattoo bad enough to deal with the pain that comes from it.” Blaine’s method seems to be the resounding method that the interviewees took. They would focus on their goal—wanting the modification—and find a way to deal with the sting, the bleeding, the healing, and the irritation from dry skin to reach their objective. Thus, pain, and the ability to push past it to get the modification, became part of their subcultural identity.

Just as the anticipation of pain served as a central concern before undergoing modification, excessive pain marked interviewees’ limits. All but one of the participants refrained from getting certain types of modifications including scarification, branding, and suspension because they saw them as more painful than tattoos and piercings.<sup>1</sup> Only one interviewee, Ricky, said he would be willing to undertake any of these. Ricky’s story differed in terms of pain. He volunteered that he enjoyed pain, at least when he was younger. Ricky described himself as a masochist, someone who gets some form of joy out of painful situations.

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<sup>1</sup> In Tennessee, it is illegal to perform scarification or branding for pay or otherwise. Suspension involves placing large hooks into the skin and the participant is lifted from the ground for a predetermined length of time. The hooks are removed from the skin afterward.

During his younger years, Ricky and his circle of friends inflicted bodily harm on each other by burning or scarring. He explained that the pain would cause him to see things differently,

When you do something that's exceedingly painful, it kind of creates this, like, instantaneous clairvoyance where, like, everything becomes much more heightened and, like, you're thinking clearly—you're not so absorbed in teenage emotion.

People like Ricky may use pain to escape the momentary troubles that ail them. Pain may offer some people a distraction from the world around them; however, most people balk at the idea of adding physical pain to alleviate their emotional pain. Most participants wanted to avoid physical pain as much as possible, even though they recognized that their modification would require at least a small amount. They were willing to put aside their fear of pain in order to obtain something they truly desired.

While people expect and find ways to handle some degree of pain in the modification process, they expect that pain to end. Sometimes, continuous pain would lead a participant to remove a piercing. All modifications can result in complications, but piercings cause more complications than tattoos. Piercings are the result of a needle piercing through the skin and the insertion of a placeholder—often a ring, barbell, or stud—to prevent the full healing of the hole. Piercings often cause swelling, so the placeholder needs to be larger than the initial size of the pierced zone. When that location heals, the placeholder may move about in the hole and irritate the skin around it, causing pain and renewed swelling. Minnie and Jacob both described this

problem with their industrial piercings.<sup>2</sup> Jacob had his industrial for over a year and it never fully healed, forcing him to remove it for the swelling to subside and to alleviate his pain.

Piercings can cause other complications, but participants did not mention them: blowouts, the skin healing over the placeholder, and accidental removal by a strong pull.<sup>3</sup>

### Contending with Permanence

Although both are types of body modification, body piercing and tattooing vary greatly. A majority of the participants have both tattoos and piercings. Of the fifteen interviewees, thirteen had at least tattoos and piercings, with the remaining two choosing only tattoos. In most cases the first modification that a participant obtained was a facial or ear piercing. According to the interviews, the main reason for getting a piercing as their first modification offered opportunities for changing one's mind later on; they could easily remove the piercing and behave as though it had never existed.

Tattoos differ from piercings in permanence. Removing tattoos may require hours of painful lasers, dermal abrasions, skin removal, and possibly a skin graft if the excision is large. The idea that tattoos can, and more than likely will, last a lifetime can be a source of fear among newcomers (Sanders 1988). When a tattoo is removed, there is often a large area of scar tissue left in its location. In the interviews, only two participants initiated their modification career with a tattoo. If a person begins by getting a tattoo and decides he or she does not want to

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<sup>2</sup> An industrial piercing is a double piercing of the upper cartilage of either ear. It requires two piercings that line up and allow for an elongated bar to go through both holes.

<sup>3</sup> A blowout is the collection of tissue due to pressure in the piercing's location.

continue with modifying, that person is likely stuck with this tattoo for life. If the person in question gets a tattoo and it turns out different from what they expected, or does not turn out looking as what they would describe as good, they must either live with their decision, have it removed, or continue with body modification and cover it up. However, if the person gets a piercing and decides that body modification is not for them, the placeholder can be removed and the body heals, typically without leaving a scar. None of the interviewees discussed having removed a tattoo. Only three participants discussed covering up previous works with newer tattoos.

### Avoiding a Spoiled Identity

Tattoos, piercings, and other modifications, even when voluntary, require that people consider themselves as social objects (Blumer 1969). Depending on where piercings or tattoos are located, body modifications can be private or public. In the case of the public, visible body modifications, many interviewees spoke of the need to avoid what Goffman (1963) terms a “spoiled identity” and manage their presentation of self for settings or roles unfriendly to visible modifications. Body-modified persons find that in certain situations, such as spending extended amounts of time with other people, it becomes harder to control the sight of their modifications. This can lead to negative reactions from those with whom they are intimately associated (Sanders 2008). Other interviewees, such as artists, mentioned fewer constraints on where and what they modified. Negative reactions from outsiders are not uncommon, and need to be understood. Sanders (1988) found that often the only regrets that people considered were due to the reactions of others and the stigmatizing effects that modifications can have.

Piercings, unlike tattoos, offer a level of flexibility in presentation of self (Goffman 1959). This means that people could remove a piercing if they choose to, or keep it if it aided the impression they hoped to establish. The quasi-permanence of body piercing gives it an initial appeal that does not exist with tattoos. It can be removed for short periods of time, to give the impression that the person does not modify their body, or permanently, without major complication. Speaking to the former, participants discussed removing a piercing for short periods of time to give the location some rest from throbbing pain, to work at their job, or even to give prospective employers the positive impression that the modification does not exist.

A major consideration for the participants was what parts of the body they were willing to modify. Because piercings and tattoos have different levels of permanence, different parts of the body are off-limits for each. None of the participants in this study had a tattoo above their jawline, although Jack, a tattooist, shared that he was planning to have a tattoo on the side of his head. Most participants also stated they would be hesitant to tattoo their hands because they felt this would discourage future employers from hiring them. Certain interviewees held their own reservations toward tattooing certain parts of their body, such as Minnie's avoidance of tattooing her arms because she wanted to have "a big girl job" and Jack's refusal to tattoo his feet because he saw too much pain involved in it. Setting the limits on body modification is a social calculation that each participant must undertake, even if they decide they have no limit. Ricky, an apprentice, differed from others, saying that nothing was off limits so long as he thought it would "honor his ancestors."

In addition to placement boundaries, the interviewees occasionally mentioned types of tattooing and piercing that they consider off-limits. One of the first rules taught to new members of this subculture is to never get a name tattoo, a sentiment all interviewees followed. Others refused to get certain types of piercings to avoid being associated with unwanted groups. Jacob, for example, associates eyebrow piercings with what he saw as less-than-reputable people. During his interview he jokingly mentioned that he will wish that his daughters never get an eyebrow piercing, because of the impression it gives. Still others refused to get certain types of symbols because of what they represented. The refusal to get certain types of modifications can be a method to protect the person from something that could happen in the future. As an example, if a collector gets a tattoo of the name of their significant other, and somewhere in time that significant other breaks off the relationship, that person is faced with an issue: keep the tattoo and allow it to serve as a reminder of what was, remove it, or cover it up with another costly tattoo. This rule is a protection against the inevitable changes that happen to people over time. The present self may regret their past persona:

I got a tattoo when I was 18, 19 years old. I had a dream that I got this tattoo and so the next morning I woke and I said I need to get that tattoo. In my dream it changed my life... I use that as a cautionary tale all the time. And I woke up and the next morning I was like I'm gonna get this tattoo and in my dream it changed my life. And it was gonna change my life. But I was 19 and I had like a record store job and I had like \$50. And so I let an apprentice do it. And so I went and they were like "oh, for \$50 this guy can do it. He's learning." I was like that's

cool because it's going to change my life and it's going to change your life bro. And, yeah, I let him put a constellation on my foot. I still have it, I haven't covered it up. I debate constantly whether I'm going to cover it up. But part of me is like, at 19 that's who I was. I was like "it's in the stars, things are gonna change." And I embrace that now.

Interviewees said that the way they look now comes closer to their desired appearance. These people feel they are beginning to give off the image they have imagined for themselves. In doing so, they have begun to develop the identity they see for themselves. Even though others outside the modification community may negatively judge them, the participants feel as though they have avoided a spoiled identity. Had they experienced a spoiled identity, they would have described in greater detail how they would like to change their appearance with more modifications, or stopped getting modifications altogether. Bethany discussed her appearance as something that she is growing more comfortable with as time passes. As she and other interviewees get more modifications and move closer to their desired appearance they begin to feel more unique. "I like my appearance now. I think that I look more unique with my body modifications. And that's definitely what I strived to do was to get stuff that's unique that not a lot of people have. And I love that." Most of the remaining participants held similar feelings about getting modifications. This feeling of uniqueness is an ideal for many Americans. These participants have seized an opportunity to control the way they look. This control over their appearance has allowed the interviewees a means to create a positive virtual identity (Goffman

1963). Bell (1999) believed that she had created a positive outward image using her modifications as a point that set her apart from the normal world.

In general, participants responded positively toward their modified appearances. This is not to say that the participants were displeased with the way they appeared before modifying, just that there was a desire to alter their appearance to fit better with their ideal outward look. I asked three questions pertaining to this: how the informants felt about their appearance without the modifications, how they feel now, and what changed. I found that the participants reported feeling comfortable before they modified, but preferred life with the modifications, because it gave them a sense of control over the way they appeared and the way that others saw them.

One change that occurred through the use of body modification was that having their body modified altered how they regarded others. They came to see that body modifications are not just something that deviants do to fit in with their group and stand apart from the crowd; they embraced others with body modifications. Bethany explained this well,

I've definitely become more open to things. Of course, you never realize that you're judging people until you become the object of judging, I guess. So, now when I see a big biker with tattoos, I think he's probably a softie that talks to his little Yorkie dog. Instead of, oh I should be scared of that person because he might be in a gang, or whatever.

For Kevin, modifying his body gave him a new way to look at things. He stated that that getting modifications could alter the way that individuals look at others in their lives:

It's kinda changed my perspective on things. It tends to broaden your mind and the way you think about people, culturally and things like that. And by doing things like that, you know, you've...in changing your appearance like that you kinda get a look, a more of a depth of the journey into the human psyche, I guess.

Body modifications are a means to control a person's physical appearance. However, these modifications can also be used to bring about a positive self-regard. Tattoos, perhaps more than piercings, enable people to signify valued identities, such as a cross tattoo for their religious belief. Jack has a tattoo on his arm that memorialized a deceased brother. Part of his identity is his relationship with his family. Chandler and Adria, a married couple, have similar tattoos in different locations on their bodies. These tattoos mark their relationship and the difficulties they have overcome together. The participants in this study did not seek modifications as novelties; they wanted their appearance to signal both uniqueness and their connections to others. They come to a positive virtual self, not lone individuals, even though their initial motivations stressed individualistic values.

Selective Disclosure. Negative reactions from others may lead a person to begin to think about themselves and their modifications differently (Sanders 2008). Modified persons may elect to remove their piercing or tattoo, but more likely it seems that a person will choose to cover their modification in certain situations in which they may be judged. Through the manipulation of body modifications and planning where and how to get new modifications, interviewees treated themselves as social objects in order to obtain approval from others, as Cooley theorized with the "looking-glass self" (1902).

When Minnie planned a tattoo she considered the effect that it would have on her chances of getting a career in the future. She wanted modifications without harming her future career prospects. She found a way to live out her subcultural identity without spoiling her future career goals by pursuing new modifications while advancing her education and career-seeking. She and many other participants chose modifications they can hide from others when needed. They controlled how others see them, in hopes of making a positive impression. This type of control did not appear in the participants that work in the body modification industry.

Managing a “Professional” Identity. Certain participants, namely those who worked in the body modification industry, set fewer restrictions on managing their public persona. They choose body modifications that others did not, because they did not have to meet the same occupational appearance norms. The boundaries they did set were typically related to their artistic tastes, or pain avoidance. For these people, their circle of friends and business associates was built from their work location, tilted toward those who have, or accept people with, body modifications. The five interviewees who worked in the modification business did not express caution about visible tattoos or piercings, as all five had at least a few visible tattoos or piercings. By working in the modification business it seems to be expected that these people will modify themselves as a means of improving their skills as an artist. Rather than a “spoiled identity,” visible modifications signal their identity commitment as artists to themselves and customers. Kevin, Jack, Rickie, and Adria all described having either tattooed or pierced themselves at some point. The work tattooists practiced on themselves was placed on body locations that are easily

hidden by wearing shorts or a t-shirt, as these works were practice for their future career in body modification. For Adria, the easy removal of body piercings proved a positive aspect, as she did not need to leave the piercing in should complications arise. These people were also more open to having certain parts of their body tattooed or pierced. Jack mentioned that he had plans to have a tattoo on his head by the end of the year. Kevin has tattoos all the way around his neckline and a subdermal piercing under his eye. It seems that working in this business allows for the expansion of boundaries by the people that enjoy having their own body modified; however, these participants still set boundaries on what they were willing to undergo. None of these participants had the name of another person tattooed on them. All but one said they would be unwilling to do any modifications outside of tattooing and piercing.

Although they spent less time managing their presentation of self with outsiders to body modification, the artists sought to manage and protect their reputation on another front: their artistic identity. They exercised control over their work and where they worked. For example, tattooist Kevin said he would never be willing to tattoo any sort of hateful statement onto another person, because he wanted himself and his art to be respected in the tattoo world. The artists feared that doing hateful or disrespectful tattoos would ruin their artistic reputations. By refusing to complete the artistic equivalent of permanent hate speech, the artists maintained their sense of professionalism (Hodson and Sullivan 2012) and avoided a spoiled professional identity.

Artists also protected their professional identity by distinguishing their custom work as aesthetically superior to reproductions or mass-produced “flash art.”<sup>4</sup> The ability to draw and ink a one-of-a-kind tattoo was a badge of honor for the artists and apprentices. This skill can allow a person to move farther and faster up the ranks in the modification world. As another protective strategy, participants working in the body-modification field avoided shops with questionable health and safety practices. Reducing the threat of infection was an important way to uphold a professional reputation and combat negative perceptions of danger from outsiders.

However, occasionally an artist that does great work would be located in a shop that is less than reputable. Most of the participants (artists and collectors alike) spoke about how they would avoid getting work done from an artist who tattoos from home or works in one of these shops. The fear stems from health and safety concerns. If a tattoo shop has low scores on its cleanliness by the state health inspector, many of their possible patrons may be lost. Improperly storing needles, inks, and tattoo guns can lead to complications, both with that modification and the personal health of the individual. It is important that the person receiving a tattoo or piercing sense a certain level of professionalism in the artists and modification shops they seek out.

Kevin, a local tattooist, said

[You] don't want to be tattooed somewhere that isn't regulated by a health department official and a licensed official because [of] sterility and things like

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<sup>4</sup> Flash art is tattoo designs on paper called flash, which is often placed on the walls of body modification shops.

that because in the wrong environment, somewhere that sanitation hasn't been kept up you can get all kinds of crazy diseases and infections.

Victoria, a customer and collector, looked at things differently. She was more than willing to do her own piercings and tattoos. From the time she was fifteen, Victoria was piercing and tattooing herself and her friends. Using a tattoo method that she described as "stick-and-poke," she tattooed herself on her hand with an X about half an inch across. Using supplies obtained at a craft shop, she pierced her septum and tattooed herself twice. She and her friends would complete their own modifications while they were under the legal age to purchase them in tattoo shops. As she aged, however, Victoria says that she now prefers to go to these tattoo shops because they have more artistic skill than what she was able to do.

Anticipatory Socialization. Parents tend to have a great deal of influence over the choices their children make throughout their lives, from the jobs they take to the clothes they wear. Body modifications are no different. In every interview, I asked the participant how they would feel about their child, or future children, someday getting modifications. Of the participants in this study, only Blaine, Kevin, Jacob, and Amanda had children. These children ranged in age from about a month to more than five years old. Interviewees expressed their desire to have their children, or future children, have an understanding of the permanency of body modifications. Most participants wanted their children to wait until they were a certain age before obtaining their first body modification, often stating the legal age for modifications without parental signature: eighteen years old. At this age, the participants believed their children would have a better level of understanding over the choices that they make in terms of

tattoos and piercings. The interviewees want to protect their children from the regret of getting modified, by conveying that tattoos last their entire lives.

A few of the participants expressed a desire for their children to avoid certain modifications. They wanted their children to avoid the possibility of a spoiled identity. Jacob, for example, said that he would prefer his three daughters to avoid getting what he described as “trashy” tattoos and piercings. Instead, he wanted them to focus on getting something that would be meaningful for them throughout their lives.

I will lean them in the direction of getting a tattoo that means something to [them] and not just “oh, look I got a Pooh Bear on my ankle.” Some of the wall art that they have in there. Flash art, it’s not good, you don’t wanna get flash art. Get something that means something to them, if they wanna do it. They won’t have any regrets.

These parents want their children to be protected from the choices that they may have, or see others make in their modifications. Showing children where they ought to set their boundaries and implementing some rules indicates how much importance interviewees placed on preventing spoiled identities in their children and the attendant regret of past choices. The interviewees placed a high level of significance in how their children will be perceived and showed a strong preference for educating their children to make the less damaging choices with their modifications.

### Relationships

Body modification is the result of a person's own conscious decision to alter their physical appearance. For some, this change can also alter the way that others see them. The result of this can cause new relationships to form, or an old relationship to break down (Sanders 2008). During the interviews, both were discussed by participants. People who the participant was friends with before their initial modification began to gradually move out of the newly modified person's life in some cases. In other cases, friendships were formed through the use of the same artist, or a general camaraderie toward body modifications, a shift in their identity to one where body modifications are more central.

Body modifications still have a stigma about them; not every person sees body modifications as artistic or personal expression (Sanders 2008). Many people see modifications as deviant and the mark of poor impulse control. According to participants, this is especially true of older generations and devout Christians. For those people who spend time and have formed relationships with members of these two groups, getting a modification could bring negative reactions. The negative reactions ranged from slightly upset to leaving the modified person's life. In many cases, the parents of the participant were not modified themselves. In all of these instances, the parents' reactions were slightly negative: they were not happy with their child altering their appearance. However, in none of these cases did the parent attempt to ostracize the participant. Kevin's family is an example of this type, his parents and grandmother did not have modifications when he first began modifying. He reported that when he started to obtain them they did not approve, but after some time had passed they began to grudgingly accept his choice. Many of the interviews revealed that the non-modified parents would dislike their child getting

modifications, and then later come to accept them, “to a point.” That line, “to a point,” was repeated at least four times by different interviewees. This means that their parents still care about their child, and tend to tolerate the modifications they choose to get, but would prefer the participant discontinue modifications. The parents of the interviewees put their parental moral identity (Katz 1975) ahead of rejecting a child for getting modifications. Kevin was raised by his grandmother, a woman he described as traditional. When he was sixteen, Kevin set out to get his ears pierced, and rather than say no, his grandmother stipulated that he get good grades in school. Kevin became a tattoo artist later on.

[My grandmother] actually went from being like ‘I’ll never get a tattoo.’ She was that person that would never have one, never would get one. She actually hounds me about tattooing her now... I have tattooed her three times. And when I first started [getting tattooed] she cried and begged me not to get tattoos, or to do them. And I gave her her first tattoo.

In three other interviews, the participants’ family members already had modifications themselves. Andrew, Adria, and Jacob all had family members who already had tattoos. The reaction from their family was not as severe as those without modifications. They were accepted by the family before the modifications and after. Modifications could be a type of bonding experience in these types of families. The family elders can teach their children the different types of modifications and guide them toward a better understanding of body modification.

In one instance, the use of body modification led to the breakdown in a friendship according to the interview. Cynthia grew up in a religious family that attended church regularly. She drew her circle of friends largely through her family's church. Her best friend attended the same church. At age fifteen Cynthia decided to get her nose pierced, with her mom's blessing. Cynthia's best friend immediately stopped spending time with her. It seems that Cynthia's "deviant" piercing presented too great a risk as a potential "courtesy stigma" for her friend (Goffman 1959). Other than Cynthia's case, no other interviewees gave examples of losing relationships due to their modifications.

Instead, most of the participants indicated that modifications helped them form new relationships. Not all result in close personal relationships, but these participants described how their modifications opened conversations with others who might otherwise have ignored them. Body modifications, as with other visible body deviance renders the people "open" (Cahill and Eggleston 1994; Goffman 1959). Minnie says that she made friends through the use of modifications because some people have similar interests. Body modifications can signal shared subcultural membership. Knowing that the other person has been through a similar situation, uses the same tattoo artist, goes to the same tattoo studio, or even has a similar tattoo can help forge a relationship. Chandler says that he has made "some connections with tattoos" but would not necessarily say that he has made friends: "But definitely, it's a jumping off point. Particularly, depending on the type of tattoo, if you're like this (indicates tattoos) rather than just an infinity symbol somewhere, small one on your foot or whatever. It's more of you're on the same page kinda thing."

The relationships in people's lives are part of their identity. Their relationships with others may influence how they modify their body. As I mentioned earlier, people may select modifications that express their dedication to a specific group (see also Orend and Gagné 2009). During his interview, Blaine said that both a current and a future tattoo represent his dedication to his two children. Blaine grew up in a family that, for the most part, accepts his modifications. He did not experience alienation from his parents or siblings when he got piercings and tattoos. His friends are comprised largely of the modified community. For Blaine, the use of body modifications reveals his subcultural membership and his moral identity as a parent. Many participants announced and memorialized their relationships with others through modifications: Jacob had a tattoo for "the girls in [his] life," Victoria's modification for her parents, Jack for his deceased brother, and Kyle had tattoos from his days in the armed forces. The most important aspects of the participants' lives were often reflected in their tattoos, a topic covered well by Kosut (2000).

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study offered the opportunity to gather information about body modified people and what they have to say about modifying their body. My goal in collecting and analyzing this data is to reveal the personal stories of the body-modified and to add to the collection of studies already completed in this field. In this section, I will summarize the findings, discuss the limitations of this particular study and how those limitations can be resolved in the future, and cover how this study can be used by those studying similar types of people.

Body modification has been seen by outsiders and researchers alike as a form of deviance. These modifications are often used by their collectors as a means to represent the self in a unique way or to reveal independence from others, especially parents (Irwin 2012). In past years, other “visual codes” (i.e. ripped clothing, heavy metal band shirts) were used in conjunction with body modifications to reveal a person’s connection to the deviant subculture. Like these now-mainstream cues, tattoos and piercings are moving toward trendiness (Kosut 2006a). This popularization of body modifications threatens the fringe status that elite collectors and tattooists celebrate (Irwin 2012). Body modifications are a means, for some, to stand apart from the crowd. They use these painful methods to separate themselves and create a new identity (Irwin 2012), but body modifications are not for everyone.

The analysis of interviews helps expose the pathway to become a “successful” body-modified person. Becoming successful in the modified community requires the person to

undertake four essential steps: 1. They must contend with the permanence. Understanding the varying levels of permanence between modifications and where to place modifications on the body can help a person thrive. 2. Handle pain. Instead of trying to avoid pain altogether, an effective body-modified person recognizes that pain is unavoidable, deals with it, and attempts to limit their pain aversion. 3. Believe that modifications are a path to a unique self (Sanders 1988). Interviewees discussed becoming themselves through the modifications, and used them as a method to create their own distinctive identity, expressing their independence (Irwin 2012). They used modifications as a means to represent themselves through the symbolic interpretation of tattoos and piercings (Irwin 2012; Sanders 1988). 4. Recognize that as a modified person they now belong to a subculture (Sanders 1988), and refrain from judging others who are subculture members. Part of being modified is the judgement from others outside the subculture, something all participants learned to deal with. However, with this last point, some of the participants failed because they still see some modified people as having spoiled identities (e.g. “trashy”), perverted (masochists), or not truly unique (flash art collectors). Using “defensive othering” (Ezzell 2009) the participants saw themselves as “elite collectors” (Irwin 2012) and attempted to keep separate from these three groups in particular, because those groups are viewed as less desirable by the subculture.

Researchers in fields such as body modification, deviance, identity, pain, relationships, and boundary maintenance will find use of this study. Because of the wide breadth of the topics discussed with the participants, researchers in other fields may find something that interests or aids them in their own research. Historically, both quantitative and qualitative methods have

been used to reveal aspects of body modification; this study was designed to add more light onto the personal lives of body modifiers and understand the way that individuals think and talk about their lives with modifications. Body modifications have been approached as a form of deviance historically, so this study could aid deviance researchers by establishing how deviance helps people come together, and also drives people apart. Pain is an inescapable, and possibly necessary (Sanders 1988), part of modifying, and this study helps explain why some people are attracted to certain types of painful situations. The recognition by the participants that body modification can spoil their identity could elicit other researchers to take a look at other forms of deviance and understand their selective disclosure at a deeper level. My study has also focused a great deal on how relationships are formed, maintained, or destroyed through modifications, which resonates with other studies of deviance.

### Limitations

As with every study, there are limitations. First, the study was limited by the sample size. I recruited fifteen participants for interviews. Most were white, with one Hispanic male and one Persian female. Interviewees' gender was split almost down the middle with seven males and eight females. The age range was not very wide, going from the legal modifying age of the state, 18, to only 32 years. The number of participants who were interviewed discussed some similar topics, and a few that were not as widely discussed, such as their personal meanings for their modifications. A larger sample could have led me to analyze a broader set of patterns.

There is a great deal of past research on the topic of body modification using quantitative methods and qualitative methods. Most of the questions asked in qualitative studies were not discussed in writing by their authors. As such, most of the questions used in this study were based on quantitative methods, in hopes they would translate well across methodological strategies. My hope in completing this study is to provide future researchers with a place to begin their own research on the same topic, and expand upon the questions to provide more detail.

The questions asked of the participants in the study were also an unintended limitation. The participants were asked a limited range of questions, pertaining only to a small group of topics. The interviewees were free to answer the questions in any manner they saw fit, but because of the narrow range of questions, a great deal of insight may have been omitted. The study's questions were open to interpretation and allowed for some enlightening discussions, however, it may be possible to rework the questions and allow for other topics to be elicited.

### Future Research

Future research on this topic is necessary in order to continue to understand people in the modification community. It would be wise to interview more participants and have greater inclusion of racial minorities. Qualitative research on this topic should also begin to drive in towards particular subject matter, such as focusing on the pain of body modifications. Another means to add depth would be to interview different sub-groups involved in body modifications, such as artists. This study did include two professional tattooists, a piercer, and two tattoo

apprentices. However, the focus of their interviews was on their own use of body modification and not on their work in the field. Including persons at different stages of modifying their body would allow researchers to gain the understanding that each group level has. No participants involved in this study had fewer than five modifications. Future research should seek out participants who have recently obtained their first modification, or go a step farther and interview those contemplating their first. Focus should also be given to the topics that were only discussed minimally in this study, such as the drop off on use of piercings as time goes on and the definitions that individuals give to their own body modifications.

As body modifications become more prevalent, understanding their connection to social identity, spoiled identity, and virtual selves as “deviance” declines may be useful. With the increasing number of modifications being obtained today, studying and understanding the lives of modification novices, veterans, collectors, and artists can promote a deeper understanding of the importance of virtual identities and any ongoing stigma carried by deviant characters.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview Guide

- A. Self-introduction. (I am Joshua Ison. I am currently a graduate student at East Tennessee State University, in the department of Sociology and Anthropology. I obtained my undergraduate in Psychology from the same school. I have an interest in body modification, and have had one for about 6 years now. I'm very interested in why people want to modify their bodies. I'm interested in the reasons that people give their modifications. So I brought you here to learn about why you decided to modify your body.)
- B. Recording of conversations using handheld recorder. Confidentiality. (I will be using a recording device to make note of everything that is said here. After the interview has been completed I will transcribe everything on the recording to a text format. Any questions about this?... Any questions?... I will not give any information about who you are to anyone. The only people that will have any access to this information will be myself and Dr. Joseph Baker. Anything that is shared in this interview is strictly between us. We will not use identifiable information about you in any way. The piece of paper in front of you involves the matter of informed consent. By signing this piece you accept that you are giving us permission to use what is said here in a study. If for any reason throughout the interview you need to take a break, please just let me know. Feel free to end the interview at any time.)
- C. Ice breaker and introductions. (What was your first body modification? I'm Joshua and I got my lip pierced with snake bites on my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday.)

#### Questions

1. When did you first become aware of your want to modify your body?
2. What was your first modification?
  - a. Was it an impulse?
3. What is your most recent body modification?
4. What is your favorite modification?
  - a. Why?
5. What is your least favorite modification?
  - a. Why?
6. How did/do your friends/family view your [modification]?
  - a. Are they more/less accepting?
7. How have your modifications affected your interactions with people unfamiliar to you?
8. How did you feel about your appearance prior to modifying your body?
9. How do you believe you've changed since you began modifying your body?
10. How do you feel about your appearance now?

11. How do you plan to modify your body in the future?
12. What locations do you use for modifications? (tattoo parlor, mall piercing kiosk)
13. Were there any surprises pertaining to your modifications?
14. What modifications do your close friends have?
15. How would you feel about your children getting modifications?
16. Have you ever covered up, removed, or reincorporated a modification?

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