

# Popular Culture and Identity Formation A Study on Tattoo Consumption Practices among Urban Youth

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Received: 19-04-2024

Revised: 07-05-2024

Accepted: 29-05-2024

## ABSTRACT

Tattoo has been transitioning to become a socially acceptable form of self expression from a stigmatized notion, and the youth are drawing images from the culturally available symbols to put together bodily appearances against conventional cultural standards. The notion associated with tattoos in the mainstream understanding is being challenged by the youth's bodily behaviour, and the widespread consumption of tattoo is breaking the stereotypes linked with the ink. The visibility of the tattoo in the popular culture represents an acceptance of tattoo as a legitimate art form by an increase in its consumption by the youth. The tattooed people started legitimizing their own tattoos by tattoo narratives that ascribe semantic meaning to their images. The identity formation of the youth through bodily comportment is enabling them to express his/her ideology through the social skin. Widespread tattoo consumption reveals how informal social control and judgments about socio-economic status play out in the realm of popular culture and personal embodiment. The current study focuses on how the youth is marking their identity with Tattoo.

**Keywords:** tattoo, body, popular culture, identity, urban india.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary urban youth continuously seek to form an identity for themselves during the transitional period from childhood to adolescence to youth. The youth explore various methods to locate and present themselves by constructing their own self in their own means. In the process, they experiment with their own bodies and look for various forms of self-expression. Lorrie Blair says 'Teenagers explore their identity through experimentation with their outward appearances' (Blair, 2007). They try multiple means of communication to convey their beliefs, practices and ideologies. The preference in investing on the body to build a particular social and cultural capital, and to construct an identity, is more or less an urban phenomenon that inspire and motivate the contemporary youth in modifying their bodies. The youth is characterised by consciousness of fashion and are heavy consumers of popular culture products, and the alteration of the body appearance is a viable act that holds a particular value and social function. As Riley and Cahil says - 'Body becomes both an important resource in the production of individualized identities and a social symbol of the person's self-identity' (Riley & Cahill, 2005)

The blurring of the boundaries between various nations due to the advancement in information and technological tools has eased the path for social, economic and cultural exchanges among the people. Globalization lead the people to get exposure to the diverse life styles of the world, consumption of global cinema, listening to the popular music, accessing the continental cuisines and transformation in the sartorial practices. The contemporary urban youth are growing witnessing this cultural transformations and consuming global cultural products under the garb of popular culture. To satisfy the needs of global requirements and to mark an identity as a global citizen, enmeshed with metropolitan lifestyle, the youth tend to adopt to the cultural changes. In the process, youth considers tattoo as one of the forms to identify themselves as a member of the transitioning global world. As Riley & Cahil says - 'Tattoos are particularly popular with teenagers who explore their identity through experimentation with their outward appearances and, since the 1990s, tattoos have become an established part of youth culture'(Riley & Cahill, 2005). My paper focuses on how the contemporary urban youth are forming their identities by consuming tattoos as a popular culture product. The methodology applied to do the study is informal semi-structured interviews with the tattoo bearers.

## II. FROM ANCIENT PRACTICE TO POPULAR CULTURE PRODUCT

Tattoos have been a part of history and present ever since human kind. They are emblematic of an individual's identity, constructed beliefs, practices and ideology. They exist as strong symbolic communication means that generates a meaning. The practice of tattooing is spread across various geographical locations of the world from both history and time, and the earliest tattooed bodies date to roughly 6000 BCE. Mary Kosut says- 'the oldest and arguably most well-known (and well-studied) tattoo is the mummified 'iceman', discovered in Otzal Alps on the Italy-Austria border in 1991, dated to 5300 BCE'(Kosut, 2015). Tattoo as a form of body decoration serve as several functions like passage after life, protection from disease, fertility, magico-religious function, membership etc(Lippert, 1980). The demographic foot prints of tattoos are marked in wide variety of communities and they have moved across numerous social and cultural boundaries altering its patterns of social meanings from culture to culture, place to place and time to time. Corradi says - 'Tattooing has undergone many "voyages"' (Corradi, 1997). 'It has crossed continents, cut across class and gender lines, and hovered between high and low cultural milieus'(Kosut, 2006b). 'Tattoos exist within a geographically varied and extensive history, where time and place have resulted in a rich cultural practice extended over many locations across the world' (Merritt, 2014). Historically, tattooing is also seen as a sign of deviant behaviour and undergone (undergoing) stigma and taboo till the end of 20th century. As Mary Kosut says 'tattoos practice is a traditionally non-sanctioned modification steeped within a history of deviant discourse'(Kosut, 2006a). Exploring New Zealand's indigenous tattoo practices, Levi Strauss discussed how the inscription of tattoo on the body is an imprintation of culture and philosophy of the entire community (Strauss, 1963). Turner, in his monumental work on tattoos, used the term 'social skin' in his detailed discussion of how Kayapo culture was constructed and expressed through individual bodies(Schildkrout, 2004). Working on Polynesian tattoo culture Alfred Gell wrote, tattooing is "simultaneously the exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior (Schildkrout, 2004)

Tattoo was re-imagined during the 'Tattoo Renaissance' period, roughly from 1970s to 1980s, that this form of body art started achieving recognition and aesthetic legitimacy by the institutional experts (Kosut, 2006a; Rubin, 1988). 'Tattoo art has infiltrated the mainstream, and the identity of tattooees now transcends age, class and ethnic boundaries (Kjeldgaard & Bengtsson, 2005; Kosut, 2006a). Before Tattoo Renaissance period, tattoo was perceived as 'bad' by the then mainstream society which is adopted by the deviants, criminals, gang members. Tattoo was and is a part of sub-cultural practice varying to numerous demographic locations. Looking at tattoo as a sub-cultural practice, the people with tattoos were dismissed and denounced by the mainstream, considered as a threat to the public, and were placed apart (Hebdige, 1991). The image of the tattoo was gradually accepted by the popular culture and drifted to mainstream society through a process, to what Dick Hebdige calls it as 'bricolage'<sup>1</sup>. The shock and dismay of the mainstream society to the 'odd' practices of few groups or individuals slowly repositions itself as an acceptable behaviour. When the factor of shock is dead, the 'odd' practice is welcomed by the mainstream society and embraced into popular culture where people irrespective of class, race, gender etc categories adopt it without much of a hesitation<sup>2</sup>. During this 'bricolage', tattoos were viewed as 'as a decorative cultural product dispensed by largely unskilled and unhygienic practitioners from dingy shops in suburban slums' (Sanders, 2008). The shift of the tattoo from an outsider art to an established art was always challenged before its acceptance into popular culture. The developments like - discussion in the academia, exhibition of tattoos in art museums and influx of traditional artists into tattoo figurations were the three major developments that contributed to the legitimacy of the tattoo practice (Rees, 2016)

'The main reason for the extensive growth of tattoo consumption among the public is due to the increase in the availability of a wide variety of ink, entry of skilled artists and proliferation of celebrity tattoos'(Blair, 2007). Since the stigma associated to tattoo was slowly vanishing, people began inking the skin without being judged. The acceptance from the mainstream society is witnessed when tattoo was started getting recognized as a legitimate art. In the words of Mary Kosut 'Tattooing has been granted a degree of academic legitimacy through recent scholarship, and tattoo artifacts have attained aesthetic-cultural legitimacy via exhibitions in major cultural institutions in the highly influential New York City art world'(Kosut, 2006b).

The beginning of the internet era lead to globalization due to which the economic, social and cultural boundaries gradually disappeared. Trade relations among countries were simplified, cultural exchange among nations were heightened and the people's exposure to diverse life styles increased. The explosion of technologies from Meta<sup>3</sup> (earlier Facebook) to Instagram has created a space for emerging cultures, identities and associations. The increase in the access to social media and deep penetration of internet provided a greater understanding of tattoo art through this technological tools<sup>4</sup>. This exposure

<sup>1</sup> the processes by which people acquire objects from across social divisions to create new cultural identities.

<sup>2</sup> [https://digitalcommons.bryant.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=honors\\_english](https://digitalcommons.bryant.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=honors_english)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/28/technology/facebook-meta-name-change.html>

<sup>4</sup> Few Tattoo artists whom I interviewed told that they learnt tattooing from YouTube

broadened the thought process and altered the people's perspectives towards tattoos as an aesthetic legitimate artistic practice<sup>5</sup>. In the words of Michael Rees, "globalization process have taught us to be tolerant of other cultures' meaning systems and the processes of globalization have made the world a smaller place - what McLuhan termed the global village (2001, 2011) - interest in other cultures and their body practices has intensified". In their article, Mensah, Mensah and Inyabri identifies how the contemporary young Nigerian women's tattoos has its roots in western global youth sub-culture (Mensah et al., 2018).

The advent of globalization also lead to the growth of consumerism. The availability of the global products in the market for the people to access and experience global services, and to register themselves as a user and member of the global world augmented. In the words of Lee Barron, - 'Globalization of popular culture is central to the rapid growth of consumerism worldwide' (Barron, 2020). Cinema, music, food and fashion are the key thrust areas of popular culture development. Multinational food chains like McDonald's, Domino's, Pizza Hut, KFC arrived India in mid 1990s and by mid of the second decade of the 21st century they proliferated to small towns making it accessible to the people of non-metropolitan areas. Similarly, the mushrooming of multiplexes in the early 21st century and screening of Hollywood cinema to the wider audience increased. The development of music applications in smart phones exposed the masses to the world music. In his recent book titled '*Tattoos and Popular Culture*', Lee Barron talks about the role of film, social media, television and celebrity culture which reflect, inform and influence contemporary tattoo practices (Barron, 2020). People consuming these cultural products were slowly growing the need to modify their bodies in terms of appearance and attire. Saloons and gymnasiums started raising to a greater extent to magnify 'beauty' and tone the bodies to fit the standards of popular culture to develop new identities. This further paved a path to the growth of tattoo studios as part of body modifying practice. 'Tattooing has transformed dramatically, such that the practice has become commodified and embedded in everyday production and consumption practices' (Larsen et al., 2014). This paper focuses on how the global consumer world and popular culture helped the youth in forming an identity by tattooing their bodies of their desire.

During the course of my work, I interviewed six individuals in the age group of 18 to 20 to find their priorities and motivations in getting their skin inscribed with the ink and how they are identifying themselves with tattoos on their bodies.

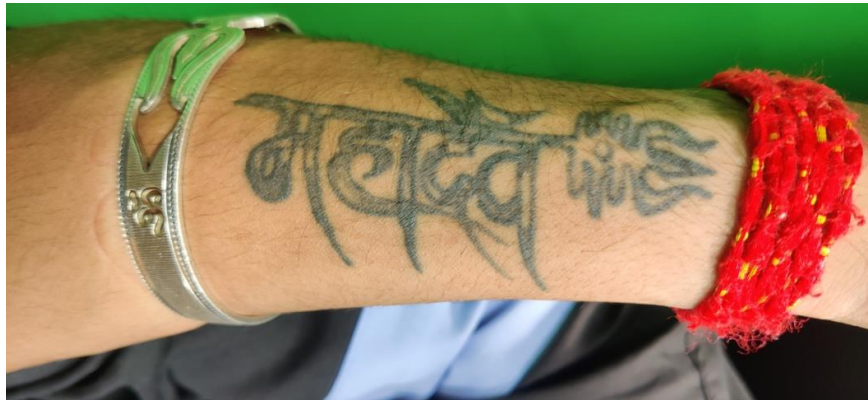
### III. TATTOO CONSUMPTION AMONG URBAN YOUTH: MOTIVATIONS AND IDENTIFY FORMATION

'I have a 'thrishul'<sup>6</sup> and 'mahadev' tattooed on my forearm. My Tattoo connects me with Lord Shiva. I am inspired by lord shiva who is a sorted and a calm person. He is a problem solver. He solved the samudra manthan problem by swallowing the poison oozed out of it. I am not similar to him but I adopt some things from him'. - Piyush.

In the process of identifying themselves closer to their belief systems, people engage in tattooing their bodies. Piyush, a final year undergraduate student, tattooed his arm which reflects his belief and worship on Lord Shiva. He looks at Lord Shiva as problem solver and takes immense pride in adopting his way. For Piyush, Lord Shiva is a solution and a constant motivator. He got his tattoo in 2021 at the age of 19. He travelled to Goa, a popular tattoo destination in India, to get this tattoo. It was his childhood dream to get a tattoo done only in Goa. 'Tattooing is a way to construct one's body and self in one's own desired image, it is also a phenomenon that reflects cultural influences'(Kosut, 2006c). One can say that Piyush's tattoo reflects his religious identity as a Hindu and a strong believer of Lord Shiva. He has grown up in a Brahmin family listening to the mythological stories of the Lord Shiva. According to Riley and Cahil, - 'body becomes both an important resource in the production of individualized identities and a social symbol of the person's self-identity' (Riley & Cahill, 2005). In explaining the tattoo consumption practices among female youth in Nigeria, Mensah, Mensah and Inyabri draws the idea of 'how body is used as a site for cultural reproduction and how it becomes a symbolic resource for embodied social capital' (Mensah et al., 2018). Piyush says that he can constantly motivate himself through this tattoo on the body. Piyush also has a bracelet and a sacred thread tied to his wrist. He says, addressing his tattoo, 'I might lose the bracelet and the sacred thread, but this tattoo stays with me permanently'.

<sup>5</sup> This does not mean that tattoos were completely free of stigma, but they hold a bit of deviance in many societies.

<sup>6</sup> thrishul is the weapon of Hindu mythological god Shiva.



**Figure 1:** Piyush's tattoo on his right arm

'My tattoo identifies that I am an animal lover, It is an honour to my pets' - Neila.

Neila, 19, got her forearm inked with flowers centred in a dotted circle. She says that the circle symbolises her late dogs looking upon from heaven, and the flowers represent herself blooming. Neila lost her dogs a year ago and got into depressive state of mind. She couldn't finish writing her term exams due to the loss of her pets. She's emotionally attached to her dogs and took lot of time to get through it. Anderson and Sansone looks at this kind of body behaviour as 'means of acute affect regulation' (Anderson and Sansone, 2003). To contain that depressive state of mind, she got the tattoo inscribed on her body. 'This is a spontaneous therapeutic experience to contain depression in a more extreme psychosocial case study of tattooing' (Mensah et al., 2018).

The urban India has been witnessing a growing pet culture faster ever before. The pet population in India has grown from 7 million in 2006 to 10 million in 2014; on an average 6,00,000 pets are adopted every year (India International Pet Trade Fair, 2014)<sup>7</sup>. Globalization produce modern urban spaces that lead to individualization and the lack of companionship for individuals encourage alternate forms of emotional attachments. Adopting or parenting a pet has become one of the major characteristics the rapidly growing urban phenomenon and Hyderabad grew as a prominent market for pet care and with large pet population (APN News, 2022)<sup>8</sup>. Neila is emotionally attached to her pets and reflecting their loss on her skin through a body mark, tattoo. Her body is used as a canvas to ink the memory of her pets. She says that she wants to be identified as a dog lover and she represents that through this tattoo. Neila's tattoo is a stage marker and a reminder of a significant event in her life.



Neila's tattoo of larkspur on her forearm

'I got my tattoo done on my neck after getting inspired from Justin Bieber. I was very aggressive from childhood and never tolerant enough. To calm down myself, I got the 'patience' tattoo on my neck similar to Justin Bieber'. - Suvojit.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/fashion-and-trends/animal-instinct-here-is-why-urban-india-is-bringing-pets-home-faster-than-ever-before/story-vPwK5yRIOPH98EGRBlvNzM.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.apnnews.com/hyderabad-is-a-prominent-market-for-pet-care-city-has-a-large-pet-population-an-expert/>

Suvjoith, 20, have five tattoos on his body. He got his first tattoo when he is sixteen years old. He got that tattoo in a local carnival on a foot path. He says that he's excited about the tattoos from childhood and searched on internet to know more. Suvjoith identifies himself as an aggressive personality with low patience levels. As a teenager, he used get into fights. To restrain himself from fighting with people, he got his neck tattooed with 'PATIENCE', mimicking popular culture artist, Justin Bieber. With expansion of popular culture music across the world and widespread access to technological tools, the listenership of pop music increased. People don't limit themselves in listening to music but also imitate their favourite artist's attire, mannerism, body language and style. Justin Bieber, one of the popular icons in popular culture is an influencing person for youth like Suvjoith who got his neck inked like his favourite artist. As Kosut argues the 'fact that many lionized public figures are tattooed may lead some people enamored with celebrity to follow in their path. At the very least, the celebrity tattoo phenomenon contributes to new understandings of tattoo and elevates tattoo's cultural status'(Kosut, 2006c). Suvjoith have four more tattoos on his body; a. Rose flower on his left arm, b. football on his foot, c. his ex-girlfriend's name d. his name as dev. He says that his tattoos are representations of some important events and people in his life. All his tattoos are visible and neighbours/aunts chide him for having 'too many' tattoos on his body. He often has to listen - 'dheko iska body ('look at his body', in a disgusting tone), don't be friends with him'. To the neighbours, tattoo is a signifier of deviance (Armstrong & Murphy, 1997; Atkinson, 2003). The social unacceptance and categorisation of tattooed individuals as 'bad', 'good for nothing' is still a notion that is being carried. As Cooley says - 'a person's physical appearance affects his/her self-definition, identity, and interaction with others (Cooley, 1964). Suvjoith says that he is going to get a tattoo of 'wings' on his arm which is also an imitation of Justin Bieber who has the same on backs of his neck.



**Figure 2:** Suvjoith's 'patience' tattoo on left neck

'I share everything with my mom. She is with me all the time. I got 'mom' tattooed on my knuckles. Getting tattooed on knuckles is so painful and mom took more pain to give birth to me' - Thabitha.

Thabitha,17, has got three tattoos on her body. She travelled all the way to Pondicherry from Hyderabad to get a tattoo. She was told by her uncle that a tattoo studio in Pondicherry is very popular and even celebrities get their skin inked there. She says her mother is the most important person for her in life since she always stood next to her in difficult times. Her first tattoo is on her right hand four upper fingers with symbol of infinity on little finger and letters m, o, m on ring, middle and index fingers respectively. She equates her mom to energy, strength and source of power to her. She identifies herself as a 'cool', 'chill' person. She says that many of her friends got inspired by her tattoos and nearly ten people got inked. While two of her tattoos are visible for public, one tattoo is invisible. Her second tattoo is a symbol of support from her cousin who is more than a friend who constantly guides and holds her as an anchor. For Thabitha, the tattoo is a symbolic investment of the love and support she receives from her mother and the cousin. Thabitha didn't speak about her third tattoo.



**Figure 3:** Thabitha's tattoo on fingers of right hand



**Figure 4:** Thabitha's 'Hold me' tattoo on inner arm

'My Tattoo reflects my back story. I went through a rough patch and thought to give up my life and attempted suicide'. - Sneha.

Sneha, 19, has a tattoo of an arrow and a semi-colon on her right arm. She says that her tattoo reminds her to be strong and bold. She was in depression for two years during lockdown (Covid19, 2020-22). She also says that her tattoo is a reflection/consequence of what she went through in the past two years. To her, the arrow indicates a leap forward in life even if pulled back. She was a moody and depressive person earlier but she says that came out of it. She says that she is confident, enthusiastic and different personality and always 'positive' now and proud of herself. When she becomes mentally weak, she looks at her tattoo and regulate her mind and try to get back to normal. Taking a medical approach to tattooing, Anderson and Sansone states that tattoo is used a 'means of acutely regulating negative emotional states of mind' (Anderson and Sansone, 2003). Sneha looks at her tattoo as an agency to express about herself on how the public perceive her as. Explaining about the semi-colon she says - 'In life , there is no end to our story until we die, there is no full-stop to our story. Where one ends the next starts'. Sneha identifies herself as someone who conquered pain, and marches ahead in life.



**Figure 5:** Sneha's arrow tattoo on her right arm

'I was body shamed and colour shamed constantly by the people around. I went through continuous torments from my school friends. I hated myself. In order to come out of this obnoxious suppression, I got a butterfly tattoo on my shoulder back' - Bandhu.

Bandhu, 26 says that her tattoo is a sign of freedom for her. She identifies it as a freedom mark. For all the trauma she faced, her tattoo of a butterfly is an indicator of liberation for her. Having faced body shaming for not fitting in the conventional body standards, Bandhu was humiliated in her school days which continued in her pre-under graduate education. She says that she hated her body and colour of the skin, and hardly loved herself. She was isolated and it affected her social life. Not meeting the cultural criteria of beauty affected her social and personal import, as Jones et al says - 'attractiveness has considerable impact on our social relationships' (Jones, et al., 1984). To exit from this depressive state of mind, she got a tattoo inked on her body. For her, the tattoo is an icon that identifies herself as a butterfly coming out of cocoon. The cocoon is the beauty standard trap that she was set in. She says that she regrets her tattoo since it was an impulsive decision too. Since she wanted to stand out of the crowd, she took to this form of bodily expression. As Madifs and Arford observe that 'Internal changes in values and beliefs often take place over the course of one's life, and an embodied symbol of a previously held belief can cause the tattooed person to experience identity crisis and tattoo regret' (Madifs and Arford, 2013).



**Figure 6:** Bandhu's butterfly tattoo on her shoulder back

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Mensah et al, says that 'the acquisition of contemporary tattoos by young people is perceived as a consequence of western influence and an offshoot of post-modernism' (Mensah et al., 2018). In the quest for forming an identity for themselves, the urban youth are choosing to tattoo their bodies. Tattoo, as a choice, is being increasing due to the permanency of the ink on the body. Various motivation factors are being involved in tattooing, and are differing from individual to individual. Tattooing to overcome pain, as a remembrance, as a motivation, painful past, celebrity inspiration, love for their

loved ones etc are some of the major reasons for the youth. Tattoo is also seen as a 'fashion icon' and 'standing out of the crowd'. It is 'cool' to have a tattoo and the youth are identifying themselves as unique individuals. Tattooed people draw a sense of attention from the common public and the urban youth are choosing this means of bodily communication to convey their identity of what they are, and partially controlling how others want them to perceive as. Many of the respondents said that they feel recognised and identified when someone asks them about their tattoos. The contemporary urban tattoo doesn't identify to a community of belongingness to one particular group, but it acts as an individual identity marker. As Ahmed and Stacey says - 'the post modern subject no longer accepts the power of the institutions or society's power to fashion his or her identity, and sometimes believes in the possibility of self creation, maybe in the form of playing with his or her sexual identity or making out of him or herself a work of art'(Ahmed & Stacey, n.d.). The subject is free from traditional authority or family structure who chooses his/her own identity freely. Though the tattoo bearer creates an identity with the tattoo, the meaning of it cannot be controlled 'since external referents change and shift, revealing multiple, contradictory, and mutating meanings' (Springgay, 2003). The urban youth's exposure to the larger entertainment industry that produces, markets and sets a new trend inspires them to adopt to this practice. Favourite actors donning tattoos on screen-life and real life, witnessing friends with tattoos, creates a sense of interest towards tattoo among individuals.

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