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'Flowers are more of a feminine thing than say, a skull': Constructions and representations of women's tattooed bodies



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Background context

The popularity of tattoos is ever increasing within our society, with research suggesting almost 1 in 5 adults in the UK has a tattoo (Williams, Thomas & Christensen, 2014)

Despite their popularity and seeming acceptance in mainstream society, the traditional, negative stereotype for those who bear tattoos is still held (Roberts, 2012)

The tattooed female body can be seen as a subversive act against normative hegemonic social constructions of femininity (Atkinson, 2002),

Current research

This research explores the ways in which tattooed women portray themselves and their identities through their bodies, and the ways in which tattoos can often be mis/interpreted by others.

It explores the ways in which tattooed women experience perceptions and representations of themselves, and how the placement and style of a tattoo can come to embody or rebel against traditional notions of femininity.

Methodology

Qualitative exploration
– women's lived
experiences

In depth interviews,
followed up by image
based interviews

Women from a variety
of backgrounds



Media Representations

'Tattoos are no longer about standing out. They're about fitting in'

'Some things I have heard about women's tattoos: they are chavvy, common, tasteless. They are the mark of the slut, the slapper, the loose woman'

'When a woman makes her own mark [on her skin], she isn't quite as available to receive whatever fantasies you might want to project on to her'



Defining Femininity



CL: 'Ok so more than anything I think it means being true to yourself, erm, being strong and being true to yourself, two things that I live by every single day'

AA: '(long pause) oh, erm, (pause) wow, that's a really difficult question, I would describe it how each individual woman portrays herself, because I don't think there's no definite, obviously we know things that are feminine, but each individuals, erm, each individuals different, I don't see myself as very feminine'

LU: 'Well, I wear make-up, I do my hair, I colour it, I buy nice clothes, I dress up nice, I don't know (laughs)'

Acting Feminine



KD: 'Okay I can be feminine when I want my husband to do something for me... If I want to be feminine I can dress up, and I can act feminine, but I don't think I'm a feminine person, unless I want my husband to do something then I'll do it'

AA: 'So if I'm going out with my partner, or if I want to look nice for him, or if I'm going somewhere where it isn't just, like I come to uni to do work I haven't got time to look good (laughs) erm, like obviously I will put make up on like last week on two occasions where I haven't worn make up, the first time someone said to me you look really ill (laughs)'

Embodying Femininity



CL: I think (pause) to be honest, in most women, getting tattooed gives them a sense of power as well, because it is so frowned upon, especially on them, because I know I do, like inside it gives you a sense of power, it makes you feel like you're you, you're still going to be who you want to be it doesn't matter what everyone says, and that's what it does'

DO: 'I think if like with my flowers, it's a feminine thing and maybe people who also have flowers associate it with more feminine things than say a skull'

Discussion

What we display publicly, and what we withhold, tells us a lot (Doss & Hubbard, 2009)

Mystery/ Allure / Emotion / Rebellion

Through the adornment of tattoos on the body, society is unable to project its hegemonic notions of femininity (Thomas, 2012)

The focus remains on the body of the woman, placing it in sexual gaze (Grosz, 1994)

In conclusion

Femininity shouldn't be considered in the singular – women have multiple femininities

Consideration for individual experiences over stereotypical representations

Intersections with gender, class and age

