

Body Piercing and the Re-Embodiment of Commodity-Based Identity  
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**Introduction:**

This presentation, these photographs, came out of the research I began in the fall of 2003. Between then and the spring of 2005, I studied the practice of body piercing among college-aged youths in Orange County, California. This research culminated in the spring of 2005 with a thesis entitled, "In the Flesh: Body Piercing as a Form of Commodity-Based Identity and Ritual Rite of Passage." I found that body piercing is a rite of passage performed during a liminal stage as a way to create or reconcile personal and communal identity through the use of commodities. To situate this argument, I am going to go through a very brief history of contemporary western body piercing and present you with my findings. I will then move on to argue that body piercing represents a re-embodiment of commodity-based identity.

**History:**

Body piercing as it is practiced today in suburbs across the nation, across the world even, originated from circus sideshows, closeted freaks, and later the gay, sadomasochistic, fetish subculture of the 1970s. In 1892, Horace Ridler and Ethel Granger were born. Ridler was British and Granger American. At the age of 22, Ridler decided to devote himself to a career as a sideshow performer and began acquiring a few, small, pictorial tattoos. He found that he could not make enough money off of these relatively reserved modifications and commissioned a tattoo artist to furnish a full body suit of curved stripes, like those of a zebra. He also had his teeth filed to sharp points and obtained large gauge ear and septum piercings. He toured Odditoriums under the name, The Great Omi until the early 1950s. During those years he appeared in Ripley's Believe it or Not, Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus, and at the 1939 World's Fair in Queens, New York. Granger, on the other hand, practiced her modification more privately, only her world record 13-inch corseted waist was known to anyone aside from her husband, who was the impetus behind her other modifications, which included nose, septum, nipple, ear lobe, and ear cartilage piercings.

Ridler and Granger are the only two westerners known to have practiced non-mainstream body modification to any significant degree before the 1960s. It was during this decade that body piercing began to emerge in the gay subculture which included participation in S&M and wearing of leather, metal, and other tough, hyper-masculine attire. It makes sense that body piercing found its way into this subculture as both are associated with ritual, pain, and adornment using tough materials. In this scene, body piercing spread from New York to Los Angeles with the movement of Jim Ward, who is recognized as the pioneer of body piercing as we know it today. Ward developed the basic jewelry and procedures now established as convention by the Association of Professional Piercers and practiced in piercing shops around the world. Some of the jewelry designed by Ward include the captive bead ring, internally threaded barbell, nipple retainers, locks, seamless rings, and septum retainers. Ward also introduced the use of surgical steel and niobium as construction materials. Ward began by piercing himself in New York in the late 1960s and then others when he moved to Los Angeles in 1973. In Los Angeles, Ward met two other influential body piercing enthusiasts, Doug Malloy and Fakir Musafar. Malloy and Ward were close friends; in 1975, with Malloy's financial support, Ward began a body-piercing business called Gauntlet.

Malloy organized social events he called "T&P (Tattoo and Piercing) Parties" where gay men would meet and pay Ward for piercings. It was through these T&P Parties that Ward gained the experience with procedure and jewelry necessary to open a full-fledged, storefront body piercing shop in West Hollywood in 1978. Ward chose West Hollywood because it was a hub of gay culture, his most likely clientele, and had a good relationship with local police. Even with its then subculture status, Ward ran his shop as a place where people from any walk of life could come to get pierced. In addition to his contribution to actual piercing procedure, Ward was the first to introduce hygiene practices now considered standard and even mandated by local laws and regulations on body modification where they exist. These practices include the wearing of gloves by piercers, the sterilization of jewelry and tools by autoclave, and the single use and immediate disposal of needles using medical sharps containers. In addition to its Los Angeles storefront, Gauntlet was instrumental in disseminating the practice of body piercing through its publication of *Piercing Fans International Quarterly* or *PFIQ*, a magazine

containing articles about and pictures of body piercing. The first issue was published in 1977 and continued until Gauntlet came to an end in 1998. I have addressed the historical aspects of the birth and growth of the modern body piercing movement, now I will move on to address how body piercing emerged from a subculture practice to a mainstream phenomenon.

Cultural analyst Dick Hebdige theorizes that subcultures become incorporated into mainstream culture through reification and stylization perpetuated by mass media. Hebdige draws his theories from his study of punk culture in London in the 1970s; the punk movement gained the attention of the general public and was commodified, through both the consumption of images and the emergence of consumer goods, mainly fashion products, based on the aesthetics highlighted in those images. In this same way, the gay, S&M, fetish subculture of body piercing was incorporated into mainstream culture. In the mid to late 1980s, body piercing shops like Gauntlet began to emerge, celebrities such as Madonna and Axl Rose were showing off their piercings, and by 1991 Lollapalooza concert goers could choose from several different vendors to obtain their piercings. In 1993, supermodel Christie Turlington strutted down the runway with a navel piercing, as did a 1997 Miss America Pageant contestant. So, when Super Bowl 38 rolled around in 2004, America was more shocked to see Janet Jackson's breast than to see that she had a nipple piercing. I have historically situated the contemporary western practice of body piercing and will now present you with my research findings.

### **Research Findings:**

My findings, from ethnographic interviews, have shown that among college-age individuals body piercing is seen mainly as a way of expressing personal and communal self-identity ("self-identity" being the identity one chooses for oneself as well as the process one goes through to attain that identity). When asked why they chose to get pierced, most interviewees said that they did it because they wanted to do something different to mark themselves off from everyone else. Some put a temporal aspect on their self-identity stating that their piercings were a way to demonstrate to themselves and others "who [they are] now." Of those who said this, a few responded that they probably would not keep their piercings, while others said they would never think of getting rid of them. These conventions even differed amongst various piercings on the same individual who felt that some of her piercings

were more definitive of and important to her concept of self, while others were less so. The majority of interviewees believed that getting a body piercing was a means of creating self-identity because it is seen as a practice of youth and those concerned with being unique. When I asked how body piercing, which is now common, can make one unique, respondents said that the uniqueness came from the fact that the piercings have to be inserted in the flesh and “almost [become] a part of you.” Considering the pain aspect of body piercing, most interviewees responded that they appreciated and even enjoyed the pain because it helped to solidify the meaning of the piercing for them and for those who viewed it because they too would know that it was a painful process. In support of this observation of pain by others, pierced individuals state that strangers will, upon seeing their piercings, most commonly say “That must have hurt,” or, in the form of a rhetorical question, “Did that hurt?” In addition to pain, many individuals recall feeling an intense tingling at the site of piercing and across the rest of the body during and after the piercing procedure. One respondent stated that she felt a “buzz” beginning at the moment the needle pierced the skin and continuing on for several hours. Additionally, it is not uncommon for individuals to feel faint and even pass out when getting pierced. These experiences are caused by the body’s chemical response to excitement, fear, and pain through the build up and release of hormones including adrenaline. When asked about the commodity aspect of body piercing, respondents said that they saw body piercing as separate from most other commodities because it cannot simply be purchased, it must be performed on the body.

To theorize these findings I draw upon the work of cultural theorists, Kim Hewitt, who deals with the issue of pain in body piercing. Hewitt reasons that the pain of body piercing creates a heightened sense of subjectivity for the individual undergoing the process and thus lends itself to being a means of self-identity. As for the commodity facet of body piercing, social scientist Paul Sweetman argues that although body piercing cannot be separated from commodity culture, it fails to fit into theorizations of commodity fetishism because the production aspect of body piercing cannot be denied or overlooked. The individual buying and undergoing the piercing is, like the individual selling and performing the piercing, a producer in that she must actively participate in its enactment as a commodity, she must decide exactly why, how, and where she wants the piercing, and in that regard the piercing becomes defined by

the piercee and reflexively defines her. But, body piercing is not only a form of commodity-based identity, it is also a rite of passage. Anthropological theory holds that a rite of passage is a way to deal with liminality. Anthropological study also shows that most rites of passage consist of rituals which include marking the body and sometimes an ordeal of significant pain. Calling upon this knowledge and my research, I propose that the marking, pain, and temporal aspects of body piercing are evidence of its status as a rite of passage among college-age individuals. I also argue that the prevalence of body piercing among college-age individuals can be attributed to the identity crisis that many may undergo as they leave their parents for the first time, when they occupy a liminal stage, situated between definition based on their family unit and definition based on their peers and future profession. Now that I have outlined my findings and their historical and theoretical foundations, I will present my argument for body piercings as a re-embodiment of commodity based identity.

**Argument:**

My argument for the re-embodiment of commodity-based identity is based on the historical and theoretical narrative construction of western society's progression from pre to post-modernity. In pre-modern western society, identity was largely based upon the inter-related aspects of class and occupation. Before the Industrial Revolution, identity was based upon labor, work performed by the body. The Industrial Revolution brought about the mass mechanization of labor and transport and therefore the mass creation and distribution of commodities; identity became less based on production and more based on consumption. Mass media and advertising perpetuate and further this use of commodities.

Although, identity is no longer based on the physical work performed as part of one's occupation, the body is not removed from the concept of identity; occupational labor has been replaced by other forms of bodily labor enacted through consumption and commodities. Of course, people still work and still base their identities, in part, on their occupation, however through positional and conspicuous consumption, individuals can now create personal identity narratives for themselves. And, in these narratives, the body plays a crucial role. I quote cultural theorist Mike Featherstone,

“While the body incorporates fixed capacities such as height and bone structure, the tendency within consumer culture is for ascribed body qualities to be regarded as plastic – with effort and ‘body work’ individuals are persuaded that they can achieve a certain desired appearance.”

Some of the “body work” to which Featherstone refers has become so commonplace, expected, and obligatory that it seems almost detached from its physicality. Examples of such include shaving, exercise, make up and clothing. Even though all require and bring about some body modification, most are done without regard to that aspect. I argue that the decrease of occupational labor as a source of identity and the increase in commodified sources of identity without conscience regard to bodily manipulation represent a disengagement of the body from identity, particularly in my population of study, college-aged youths.

Among those adolescents who move away from their parents’ home to attend university, the basis of identity definition lies neither in their family unit nor their profession, for they have not yet assumed one; they exist in a liminal position. While defined neither as a child, a body subordinate to elders, nor as an adult, a professionally laboring body, youths may also feel disconnected from their corporeal identity, and, I argue, use body piercing as a way to reconcile this disembodied and liminal crisis of identity.

During this stage, youth actively buck the system of signs which labels them “children.” As Dick Hebdige states,

“as a condition of their entry into the adult domain, the field of public debate, the place where real things really happen, they must first challenge the symbolic order which guarantees their subordination by nominating them “children,” “youngsters,” “young folks,” “kids.”

And, as adolescents possess little in the way of socially charged and socially powerful capital aside from their physical selves, the easiest and perhaps the best way to buck the system is through bodily adornment, again Hebdige, “If teenagers possess little else, at least they own their own bodies. If power can be exercised nowhere else, it can at least be exercised here.” To say that adolescents own little more than their bodies is true, but does not accurately capture the full dynamic; youths usually possess a relatively large amount of expendable income as they

often have jobs, yet have relatively few expenses compared to adults. This allows youths to purchase and use superfluous commodities in their elaborate and highly aestheticized creation and maintenance of identity.

But, as I previously argued, body piercing is not the same as other commodities in that it must be enacted in the flesh and therefore is considered a more legitimate commodity to use in the creation and maintenance of identity. Finally, this argument may seem to suggest that people are somehow, at some point disembodied, however I would like to end with a quote from an informant who had been contemplating getting rid of his piercing to highlight that it is not that people are ever disembodied but that there are certain circumstances under which individuals may yearn to re-engage their body with their concept of identity:

“ . . . this piercing doesn't mean me . . . right now it's just really for sentimental reasons . . . it's been with me for so long and . . . I just can't see myself putting it out just yet . . . I don't feel like this piercing . . . is . . . my ticket to that society; that ticket to that society . . . I already had it in me, I still have it in me.”