

A Pilot Study on Tattooing Culture in Peninsular Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is a multiracial and multicultural country. The aim of this pilot study is to analyze the tattooing culture among Malaysians. The study also investigates motivation for having it and its significance. The subjects are consented Malaysians and random, convenience samples survey with questionnaire was conducted on 109 tattooed participants, age ranges 13-60 years, at an urban area. The questionnaire assessed demographics including age, gender, racial or ethnic background and liking of tattooing. The result of the racial analysis indicated that Indians are more likely to have tattooing followed by Chinese and Ibans. The dominant Malays are against tattooing and permanent tattooing is forbidden in Islam. In religious consideration, result of the analysis shows that Hindus are more likely to have tattooing followed by Christian and Sikh. The procured data was complied, organized and analysed statistically. The descriptive results were presented as table using frequency and percentage.

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INTRODUCTION

The tattoo, or some form of bodily marking, has always held a certain fascination for people in many cultures. Tattoos and piercings (T&P) are ancient practices of body modification. The word tattoo comes from Polynesia and was first described by Captain Cook in 1769. The art form was named for the tapping noise made by a tattoo needle on the skin, which in the native tongue was tatau or tatu¹. The fact that certain people in a culture find it necessary or desirable to obtain such markings while others do not seems to lead

to the conclusion that there must be some factor, or factors, which makes this embellishment desirable². Adolescents and young adults increasingly have acquired body piercings and tattooing over recent years³. Piercing different body sites has been practiced globally by various cultures for centuries⁴. It is still popular in many parts of the world and in different cultures, serving as a rite of passage, a mark of status or rank, a symbol of religious and spiritual devotion, a decoration for bravery, a sexual lure, a mark of fertility, a pledge of love, a

punishment, a protection and as a mark of outcasts, (slaves and convicts)⁵. Nowadays people choose to be tattooed for cosmetic, sentimental/memorial/religious reasons, to symbolize their belonging to particular groups, including criminal gangs, ethnic groups or specific subcultures⁶. Since tattooing requires to break the skin barrier, they may carry health risks^{7,8} especially when body art is performed or removed without necessary means of prevention⁹. Social acceptability of these practices varies widely from culture to culture. Contemporary perceptions about individuals who have tattoos and piercing abound in the literature¹⁰. The modern day findings are confined to understandings from American and European contexts. In particular, while the body of literature has expanded to provide a better understanding on the trajectories of societal perceptions and motivations towards tattooing and body piercing in western civilizations, there seems to be a lack of understanding on the perceptual changes of these body modifications in other parts of the world¹¹. Some of the researchers showed about why people obtain body modifications. One body of statements comprises motivations such as embellishing the body, achieving a fashion accessory and obtaining a piece of art¹²⁻¹⁵. Other motivational investigations indicated that the cause of body modification is to demonstrate their self identity or individuality and distinctive from others¹⁶⁻²¹. Expressing sexual affectations or emphasizing their own sexuality through tattooing and body piercing are also common motivations²²⁻²⁵. Researchers found that men were much more likely to approach the women when they were wearing the tattoo, and took on average much less time to approach the sunbathing women in the first place. Although the appearances of tattoos are varied geographically, they always possessed a very specific meaning

for the particular culture²⁶. Malaysia is made up of two main regions, Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia, which are separated by the magnificent South China Sea. The present study aims to analyze the motivation for tattooing, prevalence among Peninsular Malaysians viz. Malays, Chinese, Indian and other races. The study also investigates the reason for having it and its significance.

METHODOLOGY

This cross-sectional study was conducted on a group of 109 consented tattooed participants (aged between 16 and 60 years, 93 males and 16 females), selected at random, with questionnaire, in tattoo centers and university students. The created tattoos in various body sites were photographed for the study. The survey was carried out in the period of September 2014/February 2015. The instrument for the survey was a questionnaire and personal interview. The procured data was compiled, organized and analyzed statistically. The descriptive results of investigations were presented as table using frequency and percentage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tattooing colors

Color play a vital role in tattooing and it depends on the choice of the tattoo wearers. The result of the investigation shows that 22 (20.2%) subjects used black color, 1 subject (0.9%) used blue color, 68 (62.4%) persons used green color, 16 persons (14.7%) used multi-colors and 2 (1.8%) persons' choice is green color. Thus the frequency of green color is the highest followed by black, multi-colors, green and blue color. Figure 1 shows the frequency distribution of color among the tattoo wearers.

The medical profession, particularly in the field of plastic surgery, has used

tattooing to an extent not generally appreciated. Quite often, livid facial scars can be 'toned down' by tattooing the area with flesh colored pigment being blended into the scars. Bum areas on men frequently fail to produce a beard growth after healing. These areas can have false beard stubble tattooed into them. In one case of record, a gentleman whose hair was thinning had lines of 'hair' tattooed onto his scalp².

Gender

Survey respondents tattooist were 93 males (85.3%) and 16 females (14.7%). Figure 2 shows the Pi chart in body art (tattooing) according to gender.

Within the study group, in fact, male showed more "high interest" with respect to females. This finding is in accordance with the study of tattooing in Italy and United states^{7,27}.

Age when acquiring the first tattoo

It is usually performed when they are about ten to twelve years of age, and on different parts of the body²⁸. The participants were formerly asked about interest and age when obtained their first tattoos. Frequency and percentage distribution is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that 50.5 % of the subjects acquired their first tattoos in the age range ranged between 11 and 20 years, followed by the ages between 21 and 30 years and the least frequency in the ages between 31 and 40 years. Teenagers are more likely showing interest in obtaining tattoos than the middle-aged groups. These findings in accordance with many other research findings^{13,14,17,28}. The statistical calculation indicated that the mean age of the subjects where they obtained their first tattoo is 21.5. The median shows the value 20.4, wherein half of the subjects were tattooed below 20 years, another half above 20 years old. The most repetitive age of

getting the first tattoo is 19 years. Young people are attracted by body art (tattooing) and consider it as a way of being "different". Nowadays people choose to be tattooed for cosmetic, sentimental / memorial / religious reasons, to symbolize their belonging to particular groups, including criminal gangs, ethnic groups or specific subcultures⁶.

Race and religion

Tattoos play an important role in many religions. Tattoos have been used for thousands of years as important tools in ritual and tradition. Malaysia is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural country. It consists of two similarly sized regions, Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia) and Malaysian Borneo (East Malaysia) separated by the South China sea. The major ethnic groups are Malays, Chinese, and Indians mostly living in Peninsular Malaysia, while Ibans and other ethnic are prevailed in east Malaysia. Malays are following Islam while Chinese are following Buddhism and Christianity. Mostly Indians are Hindus while some others are Sikh and Christians. In religious perspective, tattoos are not permissible in Islam and several Muslim scholars believe tattooing is a sin because it involves changing the creation of God. Hence in the present investigation, Malay subjects are not respondents in this study.

Figure 3 and Table 2 show the frequency of tattooing subjects among Indian, Chinese and Ibans. Indians are showing highest interest in getting tattoos while Ibans and Chinese have been showing least frequencies in tattooing interest.

Tattoos and body site

It is very interesting to note that tattooed participant have chosen different sites in their body for body art/tattooing viz. neck, chest, abdomen, back, arms, biceps, wrist, leg, ankle region and so on. Tattoos

can be made on any site of human body by the tattooist and it depends on the choice of the individual. Before started tattooing, once after decided body site and tattoo design, two factors are being considered, viz. the cost and "pain tolerance". Sensitive areas such as neck, hip, chest may develop comparatively more pain than other body sites such as arm, back and legs. Concerning tattoos, males more often had them placed in arm, hand, leg, shoulder and foot region⁷. Figure 4 and Table 3 show the frequencies and percentage of body sites for tattooing.

Result of the body site in male shows that the frequency is highest in arms (49.5%), followed by back (22%), chest & legs (6.4%), neck (2.8%) and the least is abdomen (0.9%). Result of the body site in female shows that the frequency is highest in arms (8.3%) as in male followed by chest (1.8%) and the least frequency is legs and neck (0.9%). Figures 5 shows the tattoos developed in arm region and figure 6 shows the tattoos developed on the hands of male and female. The result clearly indicated that the most preferable body site for tattooing in both males (49.5%) and females (8.3%) is arm region.

Motivation and significance of tattoos

What is the significance of a tattoo- any tattoo- to the person obtaining one? Why did he get the tattoo and what does it mean to him? There appear to be two or three schools of thought on this subject, depending upon your prejudices, which attempt to classify the motivation of the act of being tattooed: as the symbolism of the act, the exhibitionist element and the masochistic element². Table 4 and Figure 7 show the frequency and percentage prevalence for tattooing motivation. Figure 8 shows the religious and music node tattooing. Mostly the motivation for tattooing is for body decorations (45%).

The prevalence of body decoration is the highest (45%) in the study followed by the religious tattooing (19.3%), wordings (13.8%), belief (11.9%), club & love (3.7%). The result shows that music node is the least frequent (2.8%) in this investigation.

Figure 9 shows the example of "wording" tattoos. The religious motifs rarely appear on devout persons. Usually the person bearing such a design has used the religious theme to cover a basic exhibitionist tendency. It was found that persons bearing tattoos of a religious design are usually superstitious about symbols other than those with which they choose to mark their bodies². In cases where the subject had only one tattoo, his own name, initials, or nick-name was most frequently encountered. Some tattoos have specific meanings, such as marks of identification to others in a particular subculture.

CONCLUSION

Historically, tattooing has been a male-dominated activity and men are showing more interest in acquiring tattoos. Religions have perspectives on tattooing. Tattoos are not permissible in Islam and this study confirmed the same with respect to Malays, the followers of Islam. There is no prohibition against tattooing in other religions as observed in the present investigation. Indians getting Aum tattoos, a symbol of Hinduism, with a belief that this symbol protects them from evil and bad karma. Other races also make extensive use of them. The study also indicated that the motivation for acquisition of tattoos includes body decorations, religious belief, club, love, music, fortune and individuality. Malaysian Indians are showing more interest for having tattoos than other races in Peninsular Malaysia.

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Table 1. Frequency and percentage distribution of age range when obtaining first tattoos (N = 109)

Age when obtaining first tattooing (In range)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
11 – 20 years	55	50.5
21 – 30 years	43	39.4
31 – 40 years	11	10.1

Table 2. Percentage of races having tattoos

Races	Percentage (%)
Indian	92.7
Iban	3.7
Chinese	3.7

Table 3. Percentage of body sites for tattooing among males and females

Body site	Percentage (%)	
	Male	Female
Abdomen	0.9	0
Arms	49.5	8.3
Back shoulder	22	0
Chest	6.4	1.8
Legs	6.4	0.9
Neck	2.8	0.9

Table 4. Prevalence of motivation and percentage for tattooing

Motivation	Percentage (%)
Body decorations	45.0
Belief	11.9
Club	3.7
Love	3.7
Music nodes	2.8
Wordings	13.8
Religious	19.3

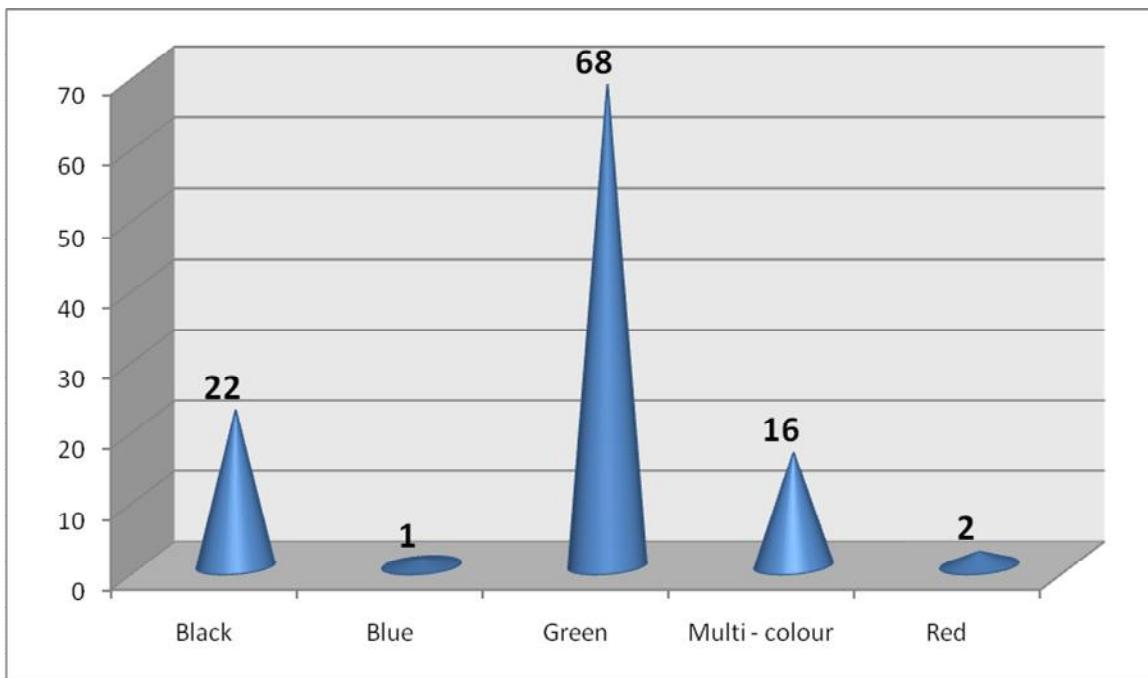


Figure 1. Cone graph showing the types of color used by the participants

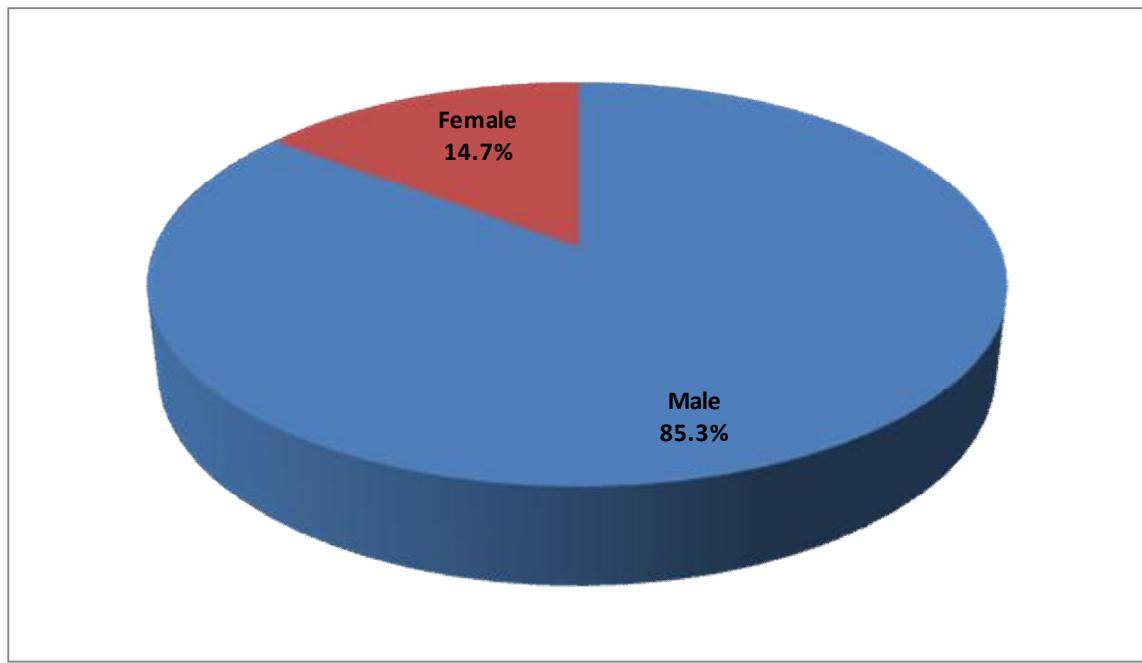


Figure 2. Pi chart showing of the interest in tattooing according to gender

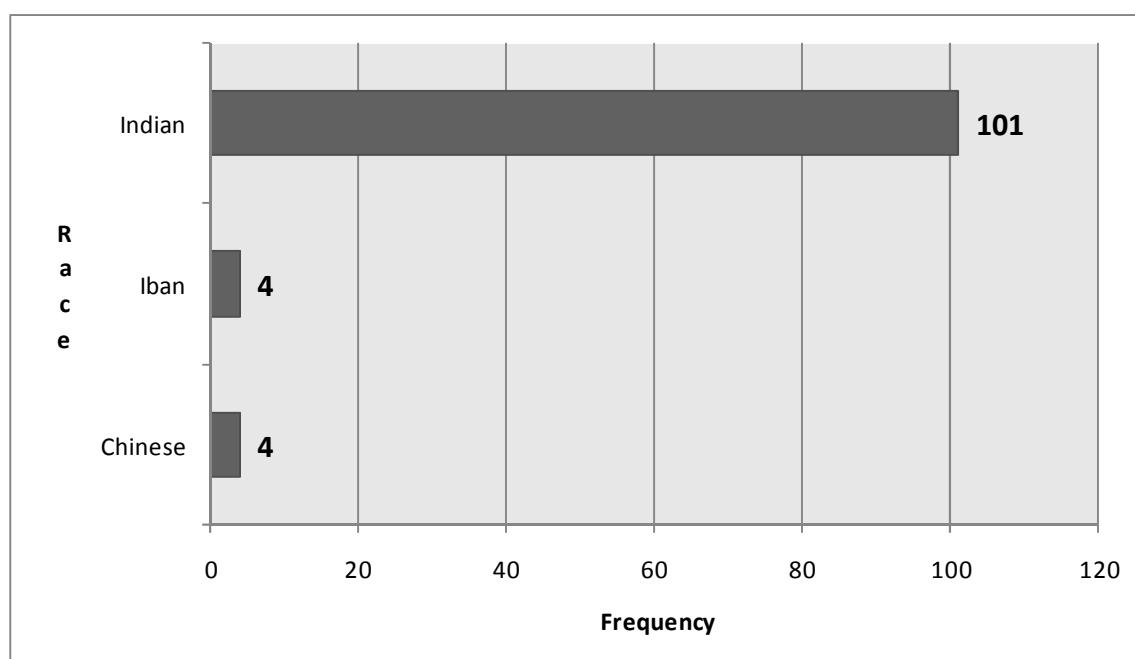


Figure 3. Bar group showing the tattooing frequency among the races under study

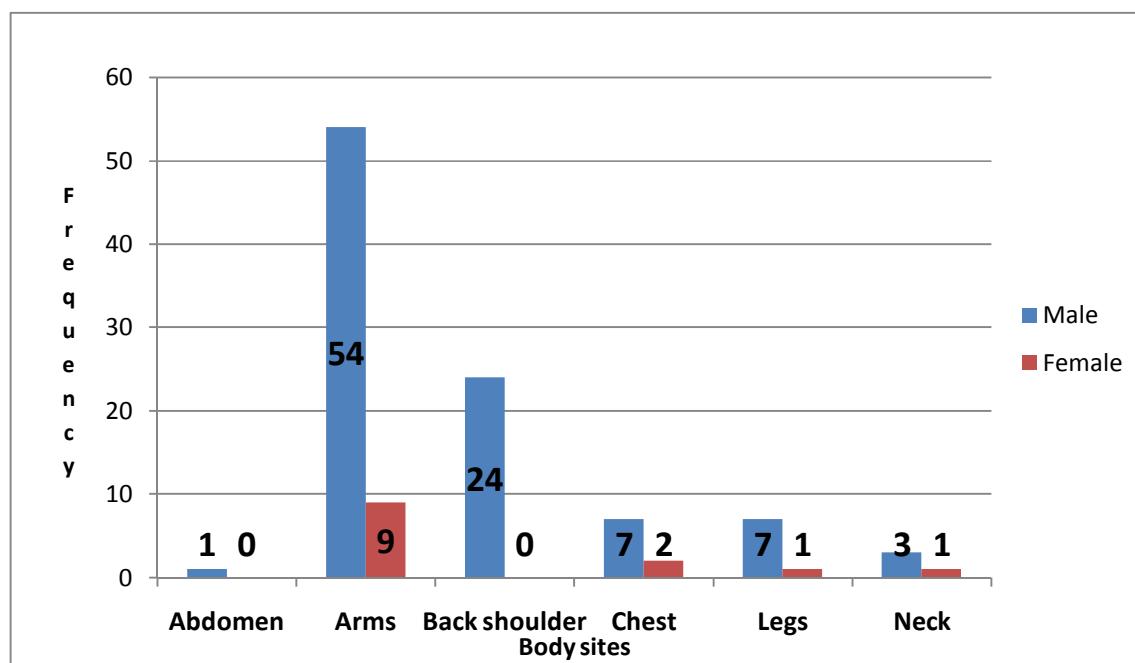


Figure 4. Bar graph showing the different body sites and frequencies



Figure 5. Tattoos developed in arm region



Figure 6. Tattoos developed in hand regions on male and female

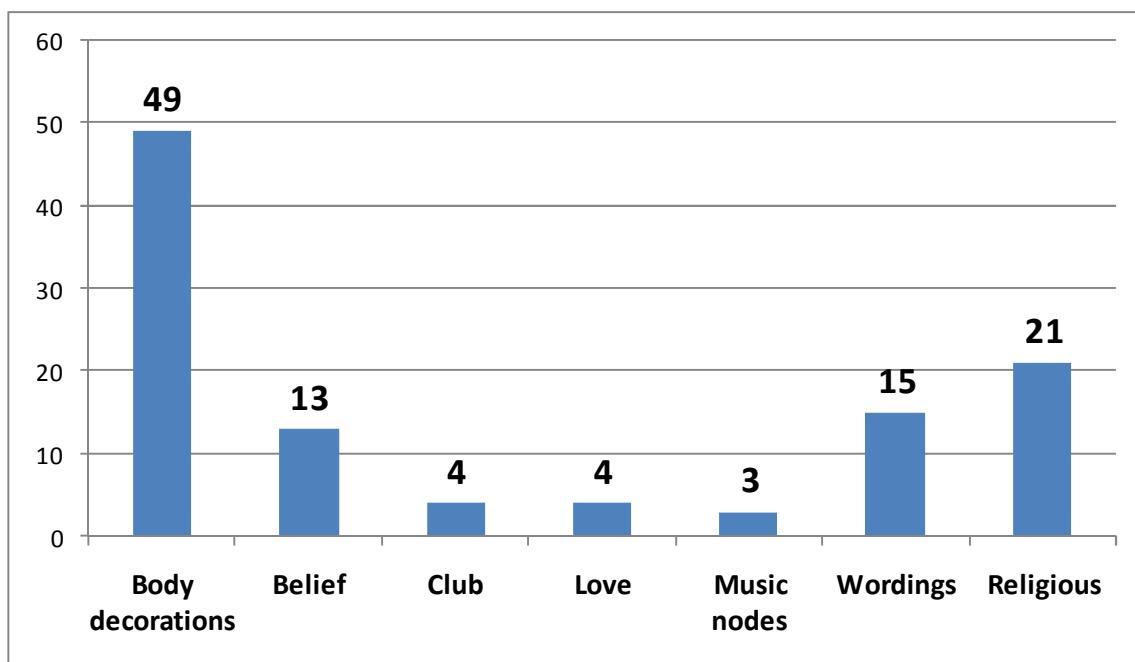


Figure 7. Bar graph showing the frequency and prevalence of motivation for tattooing



Figure 8. Illustrative examples showing religious and musical node tattooing



Figure 9. Illustrative examples showing “wording” tattoos in various body sites