



Motivational Differences for Tattoo Removal by Asian and Non-Asian Women

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors contributed equally to the design, analysis, literature review, execution of drafting and editing the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Reasons for acquiring and the subsequent desire for removal of tattoos are quite variable. The purpose of this study was to evaluate whether there are significant motivational differences for seeking tattoo removal between Asian and non-Asian women in particular.

Methods: Review of the literature was performed. Additionally, a survey of women in our plastic surgery practice investigated motivations for tattoo removal. Ethnic subgroups were evaluated comparing responses from 26 Asians (Japanese and Chinese) with 40 Caucasians (Hispanic and Non-Hispanic).

Results: Survey responses demonstrated that trends exist among different cultures. Asian and Non-Hispanic Caucasians females requested removal more often for professional reasons, while the Hispanic population often requested removal to dissociate themselves from a prior stage or period of life.

Conclusion: This study demonstrates that there is a difference in motivational desires for tattoo removal amongst Asian and non-Asian women with professional considerations dominating in both groups. Aesthetic values differ between these two groups of women and plastic surgeons should be sensitive to these differences when counseling these patients.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The alteration of body appearance by tattooing has had a significant variety of underlying motivations throughout history including, but not limited to, different cultural, social, religious, fashion, ethnic, and generational reasons. Individual choices to procure a tattoo may differ and tattoo patterns are highly dependent on individual preferences [1-3]. The generalization of these preferences from the standpoint of ethnicity may lead to inaccurate assumptions because even in seemingly similar ethnic groups (e.g. Pre-Columbian American Indian Cultures) the criteria of and desires for aesthetics and beautification may vary [4]. Conversely, there might be differences regarding the motivation for removal of the acquired “decorative” body modifications (tattoos, body piercing devices, scarification, etc.) between seemingly similar generational and ethnic groups.

The motivations for tattoo removal have been investigated before [5-10]. Although there was a shift in the criteria of attractiveness and cultural stereotypes of behavior between 1996 and 2006 (as studies were repeated), the predominant cause for tattoo removal was the desire to dissociate oneself from the “past” [5,6]. The aim of this study was to explore current trends and the motivation for removal of tattoo(s) in the specific culture of Asian females and to compare and contrast these motivations to other Non-Asian cultures.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sixty-six females aged from 12 to 36 years were included in this study between 2010 and 2020. Average age of females of Asian ethnicity was 16.5 years old (range 14 through 32 years), mean age of Caucasians was 18 years old (range 11 through 34 years). All patients were born in or resided in the United States for at least 5 years prior to their participation in the study. Information about the patients’ decisions for tattoo removal were collected using an in-office anonymous survey with appropriate parental consent for minors. Subjects were informed that by completing and returning the survey, they gave consent to participate in the study. The questionnaire consisted of 8 general items addressing motivation for tattoo removal patterned on reasons for tattoo elimination previously cited by Armstrong, Goldstein, and Apfelberg [5,6,9,10]. These survey items are depicted in Fig. 1.

Patients also had the option of writing in their own response. Survey responses from female patients from two ethnic and cultural group were compared: Asian (consisting of Chinese and Japanese patients) and Caucasians (consisting of Hispanic and Non-Hispanic Europeans). Four subjects (two Japanese and two Chinese with traditional pattern major body tattoos *Irezumi* (Japanese) and with messages expressing freedom (Chinese) were consulted for feasibility of tattoo removal but opted not to proceed and they were not included in the study.

Circle **the main** reason you decided to remove your tattoo:

- Professional (e.g., because of fear that I may not get or maintain a desired job)
- Religious (e.g., after learning that permanent tattoos – not henna – may be viewed as sinful)
- Personal: I “grew up” (e.g., because as I matured I simply felt that tattoos were not fitting me or I did not want my children to see them)
- “Gang” stigma (e.g., because of fear that some tattoos may stigmatize me as a member of a gang)
- Clothing problems (e.g., given my clothing style, tattoos, some of them visible, became an “unattractive” part of me or I had difficulty finding the right clothing)
- Relationship change (e.g., I did not want my new partner to see a tattooed name of my former partner)
- Desire to emanate different or “higher” level of social class (e.g., because of my own, my parents, or my peers perception that tattoos signify low class status)
- Fear of ink toxicity (e.g., because I have read that some ink compounds may be carcinogenic)

Fig. 1. Circle the main reason you decided to remove tattoo

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 26 Asian (13 Chinese, 13 Japanese) and 40 Caucasian (22 Hispanic, 18 Non-Hispanic Europeans) patients completed the surveys. Demographics for the sampled patients along with motivations for tattoo removal are found in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Asian and Caucasian motivational factors for tattoo removal

	Asian		Caucasian	
	Chinese	Japanese	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic
Total no. (%)	26 (100%)		40 (100%)	
Subgroup	Chinese	Japanese	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic
Subgroup no. (%)	13 (50%)	13 (50%)	22 (55%)	18 (45%)
Mean age at time of tattoo (yr)	16	17	13	22
Mean age at time of tattoo removal (yr)	28	30	36	29
Reason for Tattoo Removal				
Professional	9	6	3	10
Personal: "Grew up"	2	1	3	3
"Gang" stigma	0	1	6	0
Clothing problem	2	1	1	3
Relationship change	0	1	7	1
Desire to emanate different "higher" level of social class	0	3	2	0
Fear of ink(s) toxicity	0	0	0	1

The most frequent reason for the request to remove tattoo(s) was for "professional" reasons. Patients often cited concerns of possible career impairment or inability to secure a desired job because of their tattoo (15 of 26 Asians, 58% and 13 of 40 Caucasians, 33%). In two subgroups, the rate of professional concerns leading to tattoo removal was particularly high: in Chinese subjects (9 of 13, 69%) and in the subgroup of Non-Hispanic females of European ethnic background this percent was also high (10 of 18, 56%). Three of thirteen Japanese females (23%) wished to remove their tattoo not for professional reasons but specifically for elimination of external cues precluding social advancement (e.g., ability to enter traditional high-end hotels). Interestingly, one patient cited her boyfriend's diagnosis of urethral carcinoma, allegedly thought to be due to chronic high-levels of acridine in his urine from his tattoo ink byproducts, requested removal of all her yellow and orange tattoos as a preventative measure [11,12].

A relatively high (although the group overall was small) percentage of Latinas requested tattoo removal for de-stigmatization of their relationship with a particular social group or individual; frequently citing both "gang" stigma and

relationship changes, even though the survey requested only one principal motivation be selected (13 of 22, 59%). Notably, Hispanic females requested tattoo removal at a relatively older age compared to the average age of this request by subjects from other groups (Table 1). Tattoo images in this group frequently are supposed to emanate a menacing look, promiscuity, "ownership," or subjugation to "ownership" by another individual or group [3,13]. Three of these patients were human trafficking victims who were forced or coerced into getting tattooed to signify that they belong to a certain trafficker. Conversely, it appears that "voluntary" tattoos solicited by Hispanic females at a relatively young age, are inspired by "celebrities" or in celebration of their "Quinceañera".

Individuals motivated to obtain a tattoo by social pressure frequently quoted professional reasons for their subsequent removal, compared to those with "coerced" or "forced" tattoos, who were more frequently motivated by the desire to remove a tattoo's projected negative societal image [8,13]. Interestingly, no individual was motivated to remove her tattoo for "religious" reasons.

With the 21st century trending toward globalization and the growing population with

access to the internet, traditional regional aesthetic trends have spread worldwide. Further propagated by social media and a desire to emulate celebrities, some tattoo styles have become “transcultural” as many Asian females had non-Asian tattoo patterns and non-Asian females had Asian tattoo patterns [13]. Despite the impact of globalization of cultural stereotypes by social media, however; length of stay in the United States, level of educational background, and interaction with peers may lead to a bias in survey responses. As this study is continued into the future, delineation of fine differences between groups may be refined as the sample size will increase and readers feedback may help to improve the survey itself and reduce limitations of this pilot study [14].

4. CONCLUSIONS

The reasons individuals pursue tattoos removal are as varied as the reasons they are pursued originally. However, as the results of our survey show, there are some trends among different cultures. Asian and Non-Hispanic Caucasian females requested removal for professional reasons while the Hispanic population often requested removal to move on from a prior stage in life, allegiances, or – in general – personal and social components of that period of their lives. Plastic surgery providers should be aware of these differences as it will influence their ability to understand their patient’s motivations and expectations.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, patient’s written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

ETHICAL APPROVAL

As per international standard or university standard written ethical approval has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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