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TATTOO AND SYMBOLIC MEANING: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF TATTOO PHENOMENON AMONG TATTOO USERS IN THE CITY OF MEDAN, INDONESIA

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Abstract
The tattoo phenomenon is not something that just emerged from modernity or something that popped out in the cities. Historically, tattoo originated from the culture in the hinterland, which is traditional and ancient. The presence of tattoo in the modern city society has experienced a change in meaning. Tattoo has developed and has become a popular or competitive culture, which the young generation perceives as a symbol of freedom and diversity. However, the elder generation perceived it as a wild and negative culture. Consequently, pop culture has become the like of a semiotic battle among the apparatus of meaning carried, sentiment, and social identity. This study used the qualitative approach, which is descriptive in nature. This method expresses the current situation of the objects or observations of the objects based on observed facts as they are. The focus of this study is the tattoo phenomenon, which encompasses the development, the motivation and the tattooing process, the symbolic significations, and the management of the effect in the communication among tattoo users in the city of Medan. This study was conducted in various places such as in tattoo studios, in the community of musicians, and various other places in the city of Medan. The informants used in this study were 10 permanent tattoo users selected by purposive sampling technique. Data collection techniques used in this study are observation, interviews, and documentation. The result of the study showed that tattoo users can be categorized based on the following categories: (a) tattoo as expression of feelings, (b) tattoo as a symbol of identity, (c) tattoo as an art and beauty, and (d) tattoo as a tool of communication. The perception of tattoo users encompasses the identification, the meaning, the feeling, and the conception of tattoos. Further scrutiny will show that there is a great difference, starting from the tattooing process, the choosing of various tattoo designs, the positioning on the body which expresses attractiveness, the belief, and the behavior of tattoo users. Tattoo can also be observed as an indication of choice of taste. Good communication is highly required in a tattooing process. Interpersonal relationship between the tattoo artist and the customer is important to produce a tattoo that matches the desires, apart from the skills and creativity of the tattoo artist and the availability of tools that support the safety elements of the tattooing process.

Keywords: Tattoo, Symbolic Meaning, and Tattoo Users.
Introduction

Lately, tattoo has become a trend among the society. At the beginning, tattoo was a part of the rituals in traditional ethnic culture. However, currently it has become a part of popular culture. The social signification of popular culture in the modern era can be mapped out based on how the popular culture has been identified through the constructs of mass culture. The development of the construct of mass culture, especially since the decades of the 1920s and 1930s, can be viewed as one of the historical sources from the theme or perspectives related to popular culture. The conceptual characteristics of mass culture is to represent a culture whose value has dropped, trifled, become superficial, artificial and standard; a culture that absorbs the strengths of folk culture and high culture, but opposes intellectual evaluation of cultural taste (Srinati, 2003).

One of the most popular and oldest reasons for this change is that this body art enhances the beauty of the owner. In the West, tattoo is usually perceived as a form of a person's expression and creativity.

Besides showing individuality, tattoo also shows that the owner is a member of community group which appreciates body art. In the US, tattoo has produced a "bad" effect to the owner. However, now tattoo is regarded as a part of the American culture.

In Indonesia, there was a time when tattoo was perceived as "bad." People who have tattoos are regarded as identical with bad guys, wild kids, and naughty. Consequently, people who live by the road side and having tattoos are always regarded as disturbing peace in the society. The negative perception of society with regard to tattoo and the prohibition of wearing figures or tattoos for followers of certain religion perfected the tattoo image as some sort of prohibition, haram (illegal), something that cannot be done. Therefore, having tattoo is regarded as being rebellious. However, the term "rebellious" attached to the activities of decorating the body is what makes the rebellious style popular and searched by youths. People who are isolated by the society use tattoos as a symbol of rebellion and existence. Abandoned children use tattoo as a symbol of freedom. Tattoo is regarded as an identity, which includes the ability to express and position individuals using nonverbal signs such as clothing and appearance.

Many communities make tattoos as one of the characteristics of their community, even though there is no special symbol required to be tattooed on their bodies. The punk community, the Genki motor club, big bike communities, and hard boys mostly use tattoos on their bodies as one of their group characteristics. However, there is no specific design or position for the tattoo. As tattoo is an art and beauty, it becomes a form of motivation for them to be willing to beautify their bodies using tattoos.

Tattoo in its original Tahitian language "tatu" means "sign." According to experts in the history of tattoo culture, tattoo has been in existence since 12,000 years BC. In the olden days, tattoo was expressed as a ritual for ancient tribes such as Maori, Inc, Ainu, and Polynesians. In Egypt, historical evidence
shows that tattoo culture, which is the oldest tattoo culture, was found on the pyramid.

Historically, Egyptians were the originators of the tattoo experience. In the olden days, Egypt was well known as a strong nation. As they spread their territory to other nations, they brought the tattoo culture along with them to other parts of the world such as Greece, Persia, and Arabia.

In Indonesia, the Mentawai people in the Mentawai Islands, the Dayak tribe in Kalimantan, and the Sumba Tribe in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) have been exposed to tattoo since the olden days. In fact, for the Dayak tribe, a person who succeeded in beheading his enemy will be tattooed on his hand. Similarly, among the Mentawai people, tattoo is not treated lightly. Before a tattoo is made, there is an initiation ritual (i.e., *Panen Enegah*) performed at the house gallery of the traditional Mentawai tribe (i.e., *Puturuk Uma*). The ceremony is led by a medium known as *Sihlevi*. The tattooing process starts after the ceremony.

Initially, the materials for making tattoo originated from charcoal, from coconut kernel mixed with sugar cane juice. The tools used were still traditional, such as wood branches, needles, and mallets. People in the upcountry still use the manual technique and traditional materials. For instance, the Eskimos use needles made from animal bones. In the Shaolin temples, they use heated brass barrel to press tattoo pictures on the body skin. Shaolin students who are regarded as having fulfilled the requirements to be awarded with the symbol can get the symbols printed on their arms by pressing both their arms to a sort of dragon picture print found on both sides of the hot brass barrel. Nowadays, the method used is so much different. Currently, especially among urban community, tattooing is done using an electric machine. This machine was created in 1891 in England, and the dye was made from synthetic ink.

**Literature Review**

**Symbolic Interaction**

This study used the symbolic interaction theory, which originated from phenomenology school of thought. This theory is used in trying to understand “symptom” that has a close relationship with a situation, belief, and pattern of thought that becomes its background. Melecong (2000) said:

The emphasis of the phenomenologists is the subjective aspects of a person’s behavior. They try to enter into the conceptual world of the subjects until they understand what and how a meaning that developed around their daily life events. (p. 9)

**Tattoo** is a work of art loaded with symbols. It gives meaning to a as an integral and interaction part of various patterns of thought and communications that later becomes a unanimity. Furthermore, tattoo is a structural material, such as a physical form, color, and as an intermediary.
Basically, every individual human being is unique because everyone has his or her own past experience, which creates different beliefs and memories. However, the parts that are visible externally are uniform. When studied in more details, the individual differences in every person will gradually be seen. This is evident in the case of tattoo where even though overall there is a uniformity in style and design from average to general, such as the picture of a rose, a skull, a fish, wolf and dragon.

On looking deeper, there is a nuance of difference, beginning from the tattoo motivation that is based on past experience, the tattooing process, and even up to the choice of favorite colors. Various design selections and location on the body show the attraction, held values, and behavior. Tattoo can be seen as an indication of taste selection. The symbol creation proves that human beings have the common sense that later creates a culture. A symbol is a thing that is used to express something different, based on the agreement among a group of people (Mulyana, 2000).

Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols. The sign concept visualizes the meaning that appears when there is a relationship of association or in absentia between the signified and the signifier. Sign is a form of signifier with an idea or the signified. In other words, the signified is "a sound which has meaning" or "scribble with meaning." Semiotics studies meanings, uses of signs and everything that is related with signs. In other words, semiotic meaning tools (sign, meaning, denotatum, and interpretation) can be applied to all aspects of life, as long as its requirements are fulfilled, that is, there is a given meaning to it, there is a signification, and there is an interpretation (Cristomy & Untung Yuwono, 2004).

Symbol originated from the word symbolizing or symbolizing, which means signifying. In terms of terminology, symbol has a linguistic meaning such as the appearance that is realized in the form of picture material that surprisingly has been agreed upon unanimously. For instance, the cross is a symbol of Christianity, and the shape of the heart is a symbol of love. Symbol is the deepest aspect from an unreachable statement by other identifying tools. Therefore, the unanimity and the human ability to use symbols, especially symbols of tattoo on the body is the most important preliminary mode.

Tattoo is a work of art loaded with symbols, which gives meaning to a symbol. It is an integral and interaction part of various patterns of thought and action communication that later becomes a unanimity. Communication needs a structural material, such as a physical form, color, and sound as an intermediary. In case these few prerequisites are not fulfilled, then it will be seen as telepathy, in a sense that it does not contain various premises.

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Sensation is regarded as a trait marked by the need for various kinds of sensation and new experiences, abnormal and complex, and the readiness to take physical and social risks to gain the experience.

The tendency to search for high sensation can direct a person towards a positive behavior when he is confronted with challenges from behaviors or activities performed, such as becoming an artist, and performing high risk activities such as mountain climbing, canoeing, and scuba diving.

However, this tendency can direct a person towards a negative behavior when the individual is a high sensation searcher and feels that he or she is confronted with challenges in ways that are not usually accepted by the society. Challenges can be driving a motorcycle at high speed on the road without a safety helmet or it can be practicing free sex. Individuals searching for sensations have the desire of actualizing themselves as less praiseworthy.

Popular Culture

Initially, tattoo was a culture that existed as a regional culture. However, nowadays tattoos are found all over the world. Tattoos have become a popular like icons enjoyed by societies or groups. Popular culture, more often called pop culture, is a phenomenon concerning anything that occurs here, every day, be it dressing styles, movies, music, food and in fact, dressing can be included as part of pop culture. Tattoos have a meaning as a culture and a pop culture. Counterculture is a culture that was developed by the younger generation as an arena of struggle against the supervision of the real group (parents, the elites in society, strict social norms, and so forth).

This struggle is shown, among others, in the form of clothing, attitude, music, and lifestyle. In other words, ideally tattoo is a form of social political protest, including the semiotic guerrilla warfare against that is distinctively establishment (Olong, 2006).

A simple definition of popularity is that it is something that can be liked, or approved by the public. Meanwhile, culture simply defined, is in the unity of knowledge, beliefs, and habits that depend on human to learn and to pass it on to the next generation. Culture can also be used as a habit derived from beliefs, social order, and the habits of racial faith groups, or social groups.

Conceptual Framework

This is the research which are used as the foundation in a theoretical framework able to generate concepts which are called conceptual framework. Nawawi (1995), conceptual framework is the result of critical rational in predicting the possibility that the research results will be achieved. To allow these conceptual frameworks to be studied empirically, they are operationalized into concepts. Concepts used in this study are as follows:
Methods

This study used the qualitative approach and the descriptive method. This method describes the state of the subjects or objects of research at the present time based on observed facts or the situation as they are. A descriptive study only describes a situation or event. It does not look for or explain a relationship, nor test hypotheses or make predictions. In addition, this study focuses on interviews and observations under the natural atmosphere. The researcher acts only as an
observer, categorizes observed behavior, and observes the symptoms and
recording them down.

This method is chosen to describe the phenomenon of tattoo as a tool that
has a message that contains a specific meaning. Basically, the descriptive
method is used because it can give more flexibility to the researcher to provide the
existing discourse in the research as an attempt to explain the phenomenon as a
whole.

The researcher sees that this descriptive research method can
accommodate research interests that are directed to produce a holistic whole
event. For that reason, the descriptive method was used in this study as it is the
most suitable method. The descriptive research method can also be viewed as an
attempt to understand the behavior of tattoo users and the tattoo community to
obtain a more in-depth understanding of them.

The descriptive method is used to study the problems and procedures that
occur in the community and in certain situations. This method can describe the
phenomenon, facts, or characteristics of a particular subject or field
systematically, factually, and accurately.

The subject of this research is tattoo users who stay and are active in
Medan. In general, this subject covers whoever uses a tattoo in the city of Medan.

The purposive sampling technique was used in selecting informants
because this technique allows the researcher to select informants through various
specific evaluations according to the needs of the researcher, which he or she
considers worthy to be used as a source of information. These informants are
determined according to the research interests.

Informants of focus in this study are permanent tattoo users. In this study,
10 informants were used out of 15 who were interviewed. This is because these
10 tattoo users were considered adequate to represent the research interest in this
study. All the 10 informants have a lot of tattoos on them and they have various
reasons for having themselves tattooed.

Findings and Discussion

Tattoos as Expression of Feelings

Tattoos are a sign of a tribe or status. In addition, tattoos can also express
the difficulties faced by a person going through maturity. In short words, they
show the expertise of the tattoo master. One of the most popular reasons, also the
most important, is that it is a body art that adds to the beauty of the owner. In the western
world, tattoos are usually regarded as a form of expression and creativity of the
owner. Besides showing the owner's individuality, tattoo also shows that the
owner is a member of a community group, which loves body art. In the United
States, formerly tattoos might create a bad impression on the owner, however,
tattoos are considered as a part of the American culture.

Currently, tattoos that have mostly accompanied the life of urban
society, turned out to be in a condition deprived of their natural habitat.
They are used as a sign of love and care, and have been in the world, which totally did not know anything about it, and have
taken into the world, which totally did not know anything about it, and have
the rules should be observed. A portion of the modern society is less averse to tattoo, use it arbitrarily, and as well, as self-expression, a projection of expression that is contrary to the old customary beliefs of the other sections of the community. Others have, in fact, learned to define the wordiveness that signifies the negative activities, which makes tattoo synonymous with criminality (Ong, 2004).

Some tattoo users make the design to reflect the expression of affection and love. Among others, they reflect the expression of love for children, the expression of affection and love towards their spouses, and the expression of endorsement and heart due to love.

Tattoos as a Symbol of Identity

Identity includes efforts to express and position individuals using nonverbal cues such as clothing and appearance. Many communities make tattoos as one of the characteristics of their communities, although there may be no specific symbol that must be tattooed on bodies. Examples are the Punx community, the Gwark community, the Nga Returnees community and members who may tattoo their bodies as one of the characteristics of the group, without having any special design or position where the tattoos are to be located on their bodies as an absolute rule.

Tattoos as an Art and Beauty

Making tattoos as an art and beauty is a motivation that most often done by a group of tattoo users. Art can appear to be "the expression of a specific feeling" as an art is not a measure of morality (ethics) anywhere, and used to give advice. The value of art appears as all entities which are emotional, individualistic, and expressive. Art becomes conceptual entities related with tattoo, which can be conceptualized as an artistic entity. That is because apart from being a visible artifact which can be seen and felt, it is also concerned with values such as aesthetic, simple, happy, emotional, individualistic, and subjective. Thus, when there is tattoo on a physical body, then there are various textual meanings to it, whether it concerns aesthetic values, bravery, or evil expressions and values. Therefore, the meaning of body tattoos as an art can not be detached from the way of an emotion and effort only, but rather it contains meanings behind the text, whether expressed or implied (Ong, 2004).

The value of art emerged as an entity which is emotional, individualistic, and expressive. Art has become a conceptual entity related to tattoo. It can indeed be categorized as an artistic entity because apart from being a visible artifact, it can be seen and felt. Nevertheless, it is also concerned with aesthetic values, simplicity, happiness, emotional, and subjective to the individual (Sanardjo, 2000).

Tattoos as a Communication Tool

Tattoo is a symbol- laden work of art. The meaning of a symbol is an integral part of the symbol and the interaction of its power of
creation thought and action, which later become unanimity. Action needs material structures, such as a physical form, color, and a transmitter.

Basically, every individual human being is unique because each person has a past experience which gives a person different principles and memories. However, what is visible on the outside is uniformity, though when further individual differences will be more visible. This is reflected in tattoo, on average there is consistency in style design from simple to the more such as images of roses, skulls, koi fish, wolves, and dragons. When further, then there are shades of difference, ranging from motivational tattoo on past experiences, the process of tattooing, up to even the favorite colors.

Various design options and their placement on the body express interests, values, and behaviors. Tattoo can also be seen as an indication of choice. The creation of a symbol is evidence that humans have minds which culture. Symbols or signs are used to refer to something else, based by a group of people (Mulyana, 2006).

Conclusions

To improve their self-concept, in their social interactions, the tattoo not keep themselves distant from society. Instead, they prove that the found on their bodies do not signify negative behaviors, meaning that cannot be equated with daily behaviors. In general, the earliest self-influenced by the family and others nearest to us (Mulyana, 2006).

Parents have their own ideas about tattoo. Similarly, other family and people around us also have their own ideas. People expand their self-concept through interactions with others in the community, and that occurs communication.

Therefore, we identify our self through other people, which become our that reflect our image. This is significantly determined by what we think of ourselves. This emphasizes the importance of the responses which are interpreted subjectively as a prime source of data on our selves (Mulyana, 2000).

Technological advances, exchange of information, acculturation, and the rise of tattoo studios should become an excuse for tattoo to be seen as a development. Tattoo that is not only seen as obsolete study of a primitive era seems to be not strong enough to be justified as a behavior that is common and ordinary. Specifically, people of the old and parents look at tattoo as a “disgrace” because of the presence of resistant towards standard behavior norms.

The religiosity of the Indonesian society that connects religion as a for not having tattooed themselves, becomes a strict major for not having tattooed themselves becomes a strict major. This is especially felt by few people who have expressed to their desire to get themselves tattooed. Indonesia as a nation with the
Iargest Muslim population in the world may become a strong reason why religious attitude becomes a strong reason for society to at least, forbid the use of tattoo. Islam sees tattoo as something that should not be done. It is forbidden (haram) in Islam. Therefore, it is not surprising if the Indonesian society which looks at tattoo from the religious viewpoint, associates it as a sinful act on the part of the user.

It seems that it too narrow to look at tattoo from the angle of criminality and generalizing it as close to evil, whereas there are many evil people who do not even have any tattoos on them. That is the situation in the Indonesian society, which often looks at tattoo as a form of cultural setback, if it is associated with its position as a form of modern lifestyle. However, the case is different if it is viewed from the various tribes that use tattoo as form of necessity and reverence. Nowadays, tattoo has much of its role shifted towards a work of art, a product that has artistic value. Hence, it is often heard that appreciating the work of art as a strong reason for legalizing the use of tattoo.

A modest statement that later proved to be not so modest that emerged in Communications Science studies. When studied in depth, the body is not only seen solely in the physical perspective, but also is connected with all cultural and social objects. The phenomenon that emerges later is that studies about the body is a study about symbolic in a semiotic process that is perpetual. This is because, in its subjective and cultural signification are always created. In addition, body studies also involve socialization movement that is going to be experienced for life with different aspects such as political control, religious community, right up to control of the self. It is from here that research about tattoo deserves to be uplifted in academic studies so that the entity can be seen in a proper discourse.

The body is a material entity that has established its position as the self-central point. It is a medium most appropriate for promoting and for visualizing the self. The body is a part that sticks with us, thus providing unlimited space to display all kinds of self-identity, desires of the heart, up till idealism of thought. With its parts, the body is capable and is concerned with various symbolisms whether cultural, individual values, public, positive, economic, political, sexual, and even anything controversial. Consequently, the body emerges in various phenomena that have social dimensions.

Tattoo has become a symbolism of the counter cultural movement by opening up more innovative ways for self-expression. Tattoo can be used for commemorating victory or sadness; or people may tattoo themselves for fulfilling vows, or for symbolizing a vision on their body.

In its development, tattoo has not only been signified as a symbolization which is capable of sending to the user to have visible strength to a group of people, but also the number of people following the actions of making tattoo keeps on increasing because of the culture that is making tattoo increasingly popular. For a section of society, especially the younger generation, tattoo is an art. With tattoo, they are able to express themselves, to actualize their presence in the center of the society. However, there are still many who regard people with tattoo are identical with thugs. This may be due to their relationship with the
operations, or because of the many evidence that thuggery is characterized by the tattoo, though tattoo users cannot be generalized as criminals.

Tattoo users in Medan will obviously face the issue, experience, whatever the understanding of people towards understanding it. Tattoo, cannot hide the large number tattoo users who are presenting with their bodies to be used as an effective medium in delivering images through tattoo images.

References


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