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Sexualized Symbols on Sexualized Bodies: The Sexual Objectification of Tattooed Women

Addie Heckerl

Introduction

Ornamented skin and scantily clad bodies: tattooed women have long been viewed as objects of speculation and lust. From sideshows of the past to popular culture today, women with tattoos are often seen as symbolizing desirability and sexuality. The degree to which tattoos are indicative of hypersexuality and promiscuity differs across intersecting identities, which in turn may lead to women of color with tattoos to be sexually objectified more frequently than white women with tattoos.

This paper is intended to begin the exploration into how tattooed women of varying identities experience sexual objectification, and how the experience of being sexually objectified may change in frequency and severity dependent upon one's intersecting identities, such as race and gender. I will first briefly discuss the history of women with tattoos in the United States, focusing on those who worked in sideshows and how that line of work contributed to the start of tattooed women being sexually objectified. Then, I will discuss intersectionality and how it may influence the perception of tattooed women of varying intersecting identities, focusing on the issue of the sexual objectification of these women and how intersectionality may influence the degree to which they experience being sexually objectified. Finally, I will conclude with how the awareness and understanding of this issue, as well as how it impacts tattooed women of varying identities, is important to not only the field of social science, but

society as a whole.

Tattooed Women in the 19th Century

Tattoos have long been interpreted as symbols of deviancy and rebellion. Beginning in the 19th century, some tattooed women in the United States performed in sideshows and circuses, which often involved acts that revolved around strip teases that showcased their decorated bodies (Waxman, 2017). Some argue that although the shows were exploitative of the women's bodies, it gave them an opportunity to have an income, independence, and a degree of fame during a time in which job opportunities were highly limited (Waxman, 2017). Sideshows did provide tattooed women with jobs; however, they had to undress in front of large crowds and have their bodies objectified in order to be economically independent.

A significant shift in the public's perception of women on sideshow stages came when newspapers began reporting and showing photographs of these women, leading to them being viewed as commodities (Braunberger, 2000). These often sensual performances, as well as the news coverage, contributed to the start of tattooed women being perceived as sexually desirable objects.

Women, Tattoos, & Intersectionality

It is crucial to utilize an intersectional approach when discussing the issue of sexual objectification of tattooed women, because not every tattooed woman experiences the same amount and/or frequency of

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objectification. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that explains how multiple dimensions of one's identity, such as their race, gender, class, etc., interact with one another. These interactions shape the individual's identity and influence the individual's experiences within society (Crenshaw, 1989; Jordan-Zachery, 2007; Nash, 2008). In general, individuals encounter different obstacles in life due to their intersecting identities. Therefore, when tattoos--which are already often stigmatized--are added onto an individual who may already face social stigmatization, marginalization, and/or objectification due to certain intersecting identities, that stigmatization and objectification will most likely increase.

Intersecting identities, such as race, gender, and class, can have an impact on how individuals perceive tattoos; for example, tattoos on women of color can be perceived differently than tattoos on white women. Tattooed and non-tattooed Chicana women in East Los Angeles, for example, are often labeled as prostitutes, sexually promiscuous, and cholas (Santos, 2009). When tattoos are placed onto their already sexualized bodies, they are seen as even more sexually desirable and acceptably erotic; however, if the women were to get tattoos that went against the Chicano tattoo artists' expectations, they would be labeled as whores, queer, masculine, etc. (Santos, 2009). Not only does this provide an example of the increased hypersexualization of tattooed women of color, but also the increased stigmatization they may encounter.

Black women with tattoos, in particular, may encounter heightened sexual objectification due to the long history of black women's bodies in general being fetishized and viewed as sexual objects. During times in which white, Western powers were participating in the slave trade, there were many accounts published from the

perspective of white males. These accounts expressed an ideological maneuver in which the white male traveler's gaze, as well as their descriptions of cultural practices they observed, contributed to the construction of black women as overtly sexual and immoral objects (Thompson, 2012). Black women's bodies have already been constructed to embody sex (Collins, 2000); therefore, a black woman with tattoos may lead to the misinterpretation of having higher sexual intent, more so than a white, tattooed woman.

Tattooed women of color are also not often present in the dominant portrayal of a tattooed woman in popular culture, yet they still experience sexual objectification. In popular culture (i.e. television, magazines, and social media), there appears to be a prominent image of a tattooed woman. She is often dressed in minimal attire, wearing heavy makeup, and her hair looks professionally styled. She is thin, yet curvy in the right places (i.e. breasts and hips), and more often than not, she is white. Not only does this dominant depiction present tattooed women in general as sex symbols, but it also reflects the societal system of whiteness over blackness, making women of color unable to live up to the dominant groups' beauty standards (Collins, 2000). Although women of color do not fit into what society has claimed to be the ideal standards of beauty, the color of their skin and their tattoos still have the potential to symbolize sexuality, which may lead to tattooed women of color to be viewed as hypersexualized objects.

Conclusion

There has been a long history of tattoos being perceived as rebellious, sexual symbols, and an even longer history of the sexualization and objectification of women. The female body has always been dehumanized by the male gaze, which only worsens when the body belongs to a woman of color. Dehumanizing the female body

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leads to a culture within our society that encourages the desensitization to, normalization of, and objectification of women (Egan and Hawke, 2008).

When tattoos are emblazoned on already sexualized bodies, the sexualization, objectification, and dehumanization deepens (Braunberger, 2000). Tattoos often lead to misinterpretations, such as incompetence, unmotivation, and above all, promiscuity, which, in turn, leads to men believing that tattooed women have higher sexual intent (Seiter & Hatch, 2005; Swami & Furnham, 2007). By understanding intersectionality and how it may have an impact on how women with tattoos are perceived, we can begin to understand not only why these women are sexually objectified, but also how

it differs among various intersecting identities.

As tattoos become more prevalent in our society, and the number of tattooed individuals increases, issues affecting the subculture will begin to pour over into mainstream society. Focusing on the subculture of tattooed women can bring to light issues of sexual objectification, hypersexualization, racism, exoticism, and fetishization. By understanding how tattoos impact the sexual objectification and hypersexualization of women, we can begin to tackle societal issues that revolve around sexual assault and harassment, the fetishization of women of color, and gender norms and expectations.

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