BODY PIERCING: DOES IT MODIFY SELF-CONSTRUCTION?
A RESEARCH WITH REPERTORY GRIDS

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This study aims to explore how an extreme and permanent modification of one's own body, such as the one realised by body piercing, can be connected to a concurrent modification in one's way of feeling and defining oneself. Referring to Kelly's Personal Construct Psychology we consider the person as a whole, a concrete actor and narrator of his/her own experience. Using repertory grids we explore how the self construction of 40 teenagers devoted to extreme piercing differs from that of 40 persons who don't practice this particular technique of body modification. The main differences deal with self-acceptance and attractiveness.

Key words: *Piercing, body, personal construct psychology, self, repertory grid*

INTRODUCTION

After a long history of negative stigmatisation, the practices of tattooing and body piercing have become fashionable in the last decade. A recent survey on more than 10.500 people revealed that 10% of the population of England aged 16 and over have some form of body modification in sites other than the earlobe, with a heavy representation of women and younger age groups. Preference about common body sites among women start from the navel (33%), followed by the nose (19%) and the ear (13%, other than the lobe). Among males, the order seems to be significantly different, descending in popularity from the nipple, eyebrow, ear, tongue, nose, lip and genitals (Bone, Ncube, Nichols & Noah, 2008).

The reason for modifying the body are varied and controversial in literature: some people pierce for religious or spiritual reasons, others for its aesthetic value, to demonstrate an artistic flair, for sexual pleasure or to conform to a culture or to rebel against it, to reveal the uniqueness of identity, or to express a bond to one other person or groups (Hennessy 2009). Moreover, unemployment and the lack of partnership posi-

tively correlate with body modifications (Stirn, Brähler & Hinz, 2006). Relational motivations are particularly important for researchers interested in investigating the reflexivity phenomenon and the ambivalence implied in processes of identification and differentiation of identity construction and maintenance (Mead, 1934; Erikson, 1968; Blumer, 1969; Hennessy & Walker, 2009). Human beings look for an identity that is entirely personal and circumscribed to their own experiential world, where they are in relation with others, but tend to differ from them. This striving for one's own identification leads to self-definitions which are mainly conveyed through physical appearance. The body and its ornaments, such as clothing, hair, and particular symbolic objects, seem to be the means of communication and the symbolic modality of self-expression and self-presentation (Burr, 1995). What makes it an identity plan, "concrete contact" or "tangible reality", lies in its being marked by those above-mentioned features of uniqueness and diversity, which form the basis of individual identity. For this reason, Goffman (1963a) defined identity as the last possible personal space, the purest type of egocentric territoriality.

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The characteristic of identity is to constitute itself as a public object and at the same time as a private one. Goffman (1963b) claims that "personal appearance", among the several self-presentation and self-expression techniques, constitutes the most important one. Our way of appearing allows us to project, fix and define a specific self-image which becomes the object of a ceaseless work of significance, as well as an attribution by the multiplicity of others with whom we interact.

The social actor, as Weigert (1979) asserts, is "condemned to appear to the others" (*homo apparens*) and the appearance sphere seems extremely complex, not only because the image offered by the body to external eyes is the first and more immediate contact with the world, but also because the fundamental strategy of meaning communication develops around the image. In fact, nowadays, the meaning of the body is given by its appearance and as such it is obliged to constantly face the relentless changes which characterise the world and the culture of appearance. From the difficult handling of one's own image derives the need, continuous in the history of human beings, to intervene artificially on the body in order to modify its meaning through every possible operation: from ornamental beauty treatments to the most traumatic mutilations.

From a sociological perspective, body modification has undergone major changes in function, particularly in the past two decades. Initially, tattoos in post-industrialised western societies were largely restricted to certain groups considered to have aggressive and/or criminal tendencies such as sailors, soldiers, bikers and prisoners. Specific tattoos or tattoo styles were used to identify group members and represented a protest against the conservative values of the middle class (DeMello, 2003). Thus, non-tattooed people associated body modification practices with criminal, aggressive and deviant behaviour. In the late 1980s, however, tattooing and body piercing experienced a boom in popularity (Rubin, 1988; Siebers, 2000). This fashion wave still exists and today tattoos, as well as piercings, are found in every social and age class (DeMello, 2003). This development was pre-

sumably accompanied by a change in the image of body modification in general, from an ill-reputed to a more broadly accepted mainstream practice. In this sense, some of the traditional attitudes towards tattoos and piercings appear to be outdated.

Nevertheless, many studies in literature investigated the link between pierced people and the prevalence of antisocial and risk-deviancy behaviour (Carroll, Riffenburgh, Roberts & Myhre, 2002; Roberts & Ryan, 2002). Nathanson and colleagues examined tattoos and body piercings as indicators of cultural deviance markers. The authors suggested that they "may be indirect markers of personality" (Nathanson, Paulhus & Williams 2006) and it is interesting that even children have certain negative perceptions of tattooed adults (Durkin and Houghton, 2000). Tattooed individuals seem to obtain higher scores in Sensation Seeking (Roberti, Storch & Bravata, 2004) as well as in extraversion and body consciousness (Delazar, 2005). In addition, body piercing has been seen as a symptom of the borderline personality disorder (Bui, Rodgers, Cailhol, Chabrol & Schmitt, 2008).

This kind of research, however, emphasizes an external perspective and is not able to investigate the advantages for the pierced person in terms of identity. Postmodern perspectives of body piercing and tattooing interpret these as signifiers of the self and attempt to attain mastery and control over the body. Carroll and Anderson (2002) sustain that body alterations are ways to compensate for a bad self-image that one perceives about him/herself. Drews, Allison, and Probst (2000) found that tattooed males tended to rate themselves as more adventurous, creative, individualistic, and attractive than those without tattoos. These perceived assumptions give a clear reason as to why a person with low self-esteem would engage in the alteration of their bodies. Teenagers would decide to alter their body to make someone notice them. Body alterations could even favour a stronger characterization beyond others. However, findings on this issue are controversial. Stirn and Hinz (2008) found that body alterations tend to change the participants' attitude toward their body considerably: 34% of the participants in-

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volved in their study reported body modification practices in conjunction with decisive biographical events. Kuniansky (1997), exploring self-esteem among high school pierced and tattooed students in comparison to non-pierced and non-tattooed, observed that such forms of body modification are not associated with positive self-esteem.

Hennessy (2009) noticed that the meaning of a tattoo may often be covert to the wearer. Nevertheless, its function is played in interaction, in terms of a stronger identity, perceived by the pierced person and by the observer, without either being aware of this effect. In this sense, tattoos could represent a pre-verbal construct. From a constructivist point of view a body modification can help people "express something about themselves that they find difficult to put into words" (Hennessy, 2009, p. 227). Consequently, the advantages generated by modifications are more easily comprehensible in terms of contextual self-representations than in terms of awareness about meanings and the reasons for piercing or tattooing. Hennessy (2009) hypothesised that body modification can help people extend their construct system. Focusing on tattooing, she noticed that it needs to include pain and resistance to pain in self representation and a different adjustment of the construct system depending on the visibility of tattoo placement. When discrete, it requires a slight "disturbance" of the construct system (Hennessy, 2009) and when more visible, it requires an extension not only in the wearer's construct system, but also in that of the people observing it.

We extended the research on the possible modifications of one's own personal construct system due to a body modification technique to pierced people.

RESEARCH AIM AND HYPOTHESES

We aimed to investigate whether and how a permanent and extreme body modification form like body piercing, consisting of the perforation of the skin and the tissue below with needles and the insertion of ornamental objects made of various material and different forms, might lead to modifications in one's own way of feeling and defining oneself, thereby exploring the role of the pierced body in its own definition of identity.

Body modification obtained through piercing may well represent an alternative way of body expression that could be the bearer of a further and different view of reality. From a constructivist perspective each action can be understood only taking into account the person who does it (Kelly, 1955; Maturana & Varela, 1980). Therefore, piercing also represents, for people who practice it, a way to give reality significance, and we explored how this permanent body modification is related to the construction of self. To do this, we explored the personal constructions of the piercing devotees as regards their own self-image and the image of others using some of the measures identified in the previous literature, namely those that Feixas and Cornejo-Alvarez (1996) defined "the self-construction measures".

First of all, we explored self acceptance, inferred from the discrepancy between the present self and the ideal self. Robson (1988) defines it as the consideration that the subject develops with regard to the self when he/she compares his/her personal expectations or ideal self-image with his/her present image and places it in relation with an "efficient functioning and a subjective sensation of well-being". The rising of such a discrepancy indicates an increasingly higher difference among the self components that could lead to a low consideration of the self. Our hypothesis was that body piercing might lead to an increasing of self acceptance.

If considered as an act of celebration of one's own individuality, both physical and mental (Marenko, 1997), the practice of piercing may be seen as supporting the perception of one's own being as continuous over time and as a distinct entity from all the others. We hypothesised the existence among "Modern Primitives", as Vale and Juno (1989) call piercing devotees, of a clear, distinct, stable and solid notion of their own identity. We then considered the sense of personal identity. Adams-Webber and Davidson (1979) pointed out that "within the framework of Kelly's (1955) Personal Construct Theory, each individual has a clear and distinct notion of

his/her own identity, only to the extent that he/she is able to discern a specific pattern of similarities and differences between himself/herself and the others." (p. 518). They found out, in fact, that people tend to assign themselves and others to the same poles of constructs approximately 63% of the time and to the opposite pole 37% of the time. These differences themselves play an important role in the definition of personal identity as separate from the others, and in a more or less unified personality organisation.

In the previous literature, which considered the act of flesh perforation as a "spiritual, mental and emotional" ritual of purification (Sander, 1997), which implies "past-self death" with the concomitant "new-self rebirth" (Marenko, 1997), piercing was associated with a feeling of personal change over time. To explore the psychological transformation associated to piercing, we calculated the discrepancy between the present self (with piercing) and the past self (without piercing).

Starting from the hypothesis that the practice of piercing involves a scrupulous personalization of one's own body, which goes from the improvement of the body image to the development of a pleasant experience of the body, up to its extremist affirmation and re-appropriation, we explored the self attractiveness of the body modifiers by measuring the discrepancy between the present self and the physically attractive person. Contrary to common opinion, which sees 'modern primitives' as people who do not love themselves, but are fond of masochistic and self-disfiguring behaviours, and are lacerated by unsolved problems "vented on" the body (Myers 1992; Sander 1997; Rubin 1985), we hypothesised that the personalization of one's own body obtained through body piercing could generate a kind of self-satisfaction, an improvement in one's own body image and a higher self-acceptance (Marenko, 1997).

Moreover, we considered two further variables concerning the relation of the pierced individuals with the social world: the social acceptance, given by the discrepancy between the present self and the accepted person, and the social desire, given by the difference between the pre-

sent self and the unaccepted person. We supposed a feeling of lack of social acceptance in piercing devotees, as they are promoters of a new body model in a society which believes in the good visibility cult (Grandi & Ceriani, 1995). This would not necessarily mean that "pleasing the others" is fundamental for them, but rather that they need to "like themselves". In fact the research carried out by Armstrong et al. (1994, 1995, 1997, 1999) and Holtham (1997) did not highlight any tendency in the pierced people to build or maintain a good relationship with people, except that concerning self-achievement and self-realisation. It seems that piercing aims at speaking especially to the self, while the social aspect is neglected.

Modern primitives make the physical appearance itself a substance, superimposing the image conveyed by the 'different body' to the image conventionally suggested or to the attitude of disdain or mistrust induced by this different body. We hypothesised that this would have been translated into a perception of well being and into a sensation of completeness, coherence, satisfaction and authenticity, that is of self-fulfilment in piercing devotees. We explored this self-fulfilment feeling and the perception of well being by measuring the discrepancy between the present self and a self-fulfilled person and between the present self and an ill person, respectively.

The last two aspects we considered, dealing with the social world, were the identification with the authority and the negativity towards the social world. We considered the first as an index of the adhesion to the dominant social order and we measured it calculating the distance between the perception of the present self and the perception of the authoritarian person (Cipolletta, in press). The negativity towards the social world, considered by Feixas and others (1991, 1996) as the perceived adequacy of the other, was measured by the discrepancy between the ideal self and those figures who populate the relational universe of the subject.

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METHOD

Participants

We chose a sample of 80 teenagers: 40 (20 males and 20 females) piercing devotees, and 40 (20 males and 20 females) non-pierced persons. The members of the first group were contacted through a Piercing Centre in Padua (Italy), a shop where clients can ask to have piercing performed on them and to buy jewels for piercing; members of the second group were undergraduate students at the University of Padua.

In choosing the sample, we took into account characteristics which had been considered significant in previous studies, namely age – ranging between 18 and 24 – and the type of piercing the pierced subjects had chosen, preferably extreme (genital piercing, and all along the lobes) and/or multiple (made on different and extensive parts of the body), made respectively using a needle and without anaesthesia. The non pierced subjects had no piercing or were only pierced in the lobe using a pistol.

The participants were informed of the aims and procedure of the study and gave their informed consent to participate in the research. To avoid the social desirability-effect we presented the project as aiming to explore self perception in different groups of people without presenting our specific hypotheses.

Materials

We used Kelly's Repertory Grids (Fransella, Bell & Bannister, 2003) to explore the construct system of the piercing devotees and of people without piercing. We selected 15 elements relating to themselves and to the relevant people in their interpersonal life: present self, ideal self, past self, self as seen by friends, self as seen by strangers, their father, mother, brother (or sister), a dear friend, an attractive person, an ill person, a self-fulfilled person, an accepted person, an unaccepted person and an authoritarian person.

We used the triadic sequential method to elicit the constructs, presenting the same triads in sequence to each participant. In this way we obtained fifteen bipolar constructs and we asked to rank each of the 15 elements on each construct using a 7-point rating scale. The grids were completed during an individual interview lasting about two hours.

Measures and analyses

Using the GRIDSTAT program by Richard Bell (2002) we calculated the Euclidean distance between each couple of elements for each grid. We used these measures as indices of the variables introduced above. Except for the measure of change, given by the distance between the past and the present self, the greater the distance between two elements is, the lower the congruence between them is. For example, a wide gap between the present self and the ideal one indicates a lower congruency between the two, which means a lower self acceptance.

On the concatenated data as a whole we used t-test to verify the significance of the differences between the two groups with regards to each variable and ANOVA test to verify the influences played by gender and the interaction between gender and the group the subjects belonged to. We chose to use these statistics sequentially instead of doing a unique multivariate analysis because we wanted to test the hypotheses as they emerged from the previous analyses. The results presentation follows this procedure and focuses on only a part of the wide range of results obtained.

RESULTS

Our main hypothesis was that self-acceptance would have been higher in the group of pierced persons than in those subjects without piercing. In fact, the distance between the present self and the ideal self was significantly different in the two groups ($p < .001$). The average in the group of pierced persons (M = 2.23) was lower than that of the other one (M = 6.93). Even if the high standard deviation registered in the non pierced group (DS = 5.64) indicates a high vari-

ability of the self-acceptance inside this group, self-acceptance is generally higher in body modifiers. Table 1 shows the main results ob-tained by the comparison of the two groups.

Table 1: *Comparison of the distances means between elements, which relate to the main variables ex-plored in the two groups of subjects (with and without piercing).*

Indices	Piercing		No Piercing		T	P
	M	DS	M	DS		
present self - ideal self	2.229	2.038	6.934	5.641	4.962	<.001***
present self - past self	5.794	5.137	4.489	4.740	-1.066	.290
present self - self as seen by friends	3.785	3.634	5.170	3.992	1.623	.109
present self - self as seen by strangers	7.729	6.917	6.143	4.557	-1.211	.230
present self - attractive person	2.393	1.984	7.799	5.253	6.089	<.001***
present self - accepted person	6.662	5.430	5.156	5.402	-1.243	.218
present self - unaccepted person	8.329	6.416	7.036	5.226	-0.988	.326
present self - self-fulfilled person	3.018	2.633	8.287	5.365	5.576	<.001***
present self - ill person	10.561	7.713	5.689	4.705	-3.410	.001**
present self - authoritarian person	9.279	7.447	8.606	5.150	-0.470	.639
ideal self - attractive person	2.932	2.129	7.354	2.966	-7.655	<.001***
ideal self - self-fulfilled person	3.60	2.437	5.953	3.623	-3.404	.001***
ideal self – accepted person	9.50	4.414	7.482	3.266	2.332	.022
ideal self-authoritarian person	14.432	3.112	11.50	2.801	4.418	<.001***

With regards to the sense of personal identity we discovered, from the calculation of the ratios of self and other people's perception as similar or as different ("golden section"), significant differences between "pierced bodies" and "anonymous bodies". Our results confirmed the similarities and the differences that we hypothe-sised between oneself and the others in 'modern

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primitives' (who placed themselves and the others at the same pole of a construct in 62% of the cases and at the opposite pole in 38%), whilst these data had no replica within people without piercing (whose percentages are 59% and 41%, respectively).

In spite of "the critical age" (Erikson, 1968) of our participants, the notion of their identity appears solid, coherent and stable. The practice of piercing their bodies seems to be a useful tool to face the difficult task of individualisation and identity formation.

This process does not seem to result in a higher perception of personal change of the piercing devotees, as compared to the non-pierced persons. In fact we did not find a significant difference between the two groups. Contrary to our expectations, the introduction of this small jewel does not represent a process of self-transformation for the pierced devotees of our research. This data can be clarified in the light of the significant effect of gender showed by the ANOVA, $F(1,76) = 6.147$, $p = .015$. As the results of a successfully performed t test show, while females did not significantly differ in self-perception over time (non-pierced females: M = 5.87, DS = .88; pierced females: M = 4.21, DS = 1.30), the difference between present-self and past-self in boys with piercing (M = 7.37, DS = 3.80) is much higher than those without piercing (M = 3.11, DS = 7.08), $t(37.09) = -4.204$, without assuming the same variance, $p = .021$. The introduction of this small jewel seems to represent for boys a process of self-transformation, whereas girls do not attach such a meaning to it.

One of the guiding hypotheses of our research dealt with the self attractiveness in the member of the "Piercing Tribe", coined by Camphausen (1997) to describe the communities of enthusiasts of piercing. According to our expectations, the difference in the measure of love for one's own body between subjects who practise body modification and people who do not personalise their bodies in this way is highly significant (p<.001). The average in the group of pierced persons is 2.39, and 7.80 in the group of non-pierced persons: this difference confirms our hypothesis, namely that the body experience is much more satisfactory in body modifiers.

They live in a dynamic of acceptance and respect for their own bodies, which is constantly nurtured day by day and which is felt *sensual*, *beautiful*, *seductive*, *fascinating*, *improved*, *pleasant* and *exciting*.

As regards the social dimensions of the self construction, the distance between self-perception and how the subjects believe they are perceived by their peers, friends and strangers, did not show significant differences in the two groups. We also failed to find significant differences between the two groups in the distance between self-perception and an accepted person's perception (social acceptance). The ANOVA may help us to interpret this result: the interaction between group and sex was significant, $F(1,76) = 5.176$, $p = 0.257$, but, while the girls of the two groups did not significantly differ on this dimension, pierced males felt themselves to be much more distant from the accepted person (M = 8.26 DS = 5.91) than males without piercing (M = 4.05, DS = 5.05). Applying the t test to compare these two groups, this difference was significant, $t(38) = -2.417$, $p = .021$.

This result suggests that acceptance was probably derived from the adhesion to the conventional laws of aesthetics according to the cultural and social standards. Wearing a piercing, also extreme or/and multiple, has a lower impact on others for the girls than for the boys. The image of woman adorned with jewels, decorated with make-up and eccentric hairstyles is something that we are socially accustomed to and this can explain the social acceptance, or at least the lack of social exclusion from society, that we found in pierced females and not in males.

We found a further explanation for the dynamic of social approval and exclusion in relation to the next two variables we examined: the perception of self-fulfilment and of well-being. T test showed a highly significant difference between the two groups in the self-fulfilment rate (p < .001): piercing devotees had a higher feeling of self-fulfilment (M = 3.02) than non-pierced (M = 8.29). The main constructs used to define a self-fulfilled person are: *authentic*, *genuine*, *real*, *complete*, *stable*, *resolute*, *tolerant*, *sensitive*, *respectful*, *unconditional*, *with clear ideas*, *in agreement with oneself*.

For the same reasons, we suggested a significantly higher distance between "how I see me now" and "how I see an ill person" (well-being) in the group of pierced persons in comparison with the other group. The difference in the rate of this index is actually significantly higher (p = .001) in people with piercing (M = 10.56) then in those without piercing (M = 5.69).

For both hypotheses, our data seem to show the existence of a close tie between the introduction of this small jewel and the sensation of well-being, in the sense of a profusion of positive feelings and experiences of satisfaction and completeness: the constructs most frequently applied to the ill person are diametrically opposed to those assigned to the self-fulfilled person (*incomplete, easily affected, not well defined, yielding, not genuine, dominated by others, not determined, instable, malleable*).

Taking into account the original meaning of rebellion and refusal towards society, which the youth movement attached to piercing at the beginning of the last century, and even nowadays, even if not in such subversive terms, we hypothesised a significantly greater distance between self perception and authority in those persons who choose to pierce themselves in comparison to people who embody the predominant body model. Strangely enough, and contrary to our expectations, we did not find significant differences between the two groups as regards the identification with an authoritarian person. This result gives us important information, especially when we relate it to what we observed in the dynamics of social acceptance/exclusion, namely that piercing is nowadays fundamentally 'carried out' by young people only for themselves, or to be themselves. In this sense the 'piercing tribe' does not want to be called an opposition, a rebellion, a deviance or a counterculture, but rather a subculture. Authoritarian figures, because of their restricted or restrictive role, can hinder the people who, like the 'pierced bodies', cry out for freedom of self presentation and self expression: they do not want to go against society, but simply towards themselves. On the basis of the attitude of intolerance or suspicion and criticism which the piercing tribe's members have to face every time they deal with society, one might ex-

pect a consequent feeling of general discontent towards the people around them (negativity towards the social world). However, we found no statically significant results along these lines. In fact, the comparison of the distances between 'ideal self' and the figures of the social world listed in the grids did not show significant differences between the two groups.

Instead, we discovered a higher congruence in the piercing devotees' group between the ideal self and the attractive person and the self-fulfilled one, compared to the other group, t(70.75) = -7.665, p = <.001 and t(68.29) = -3.404, p = .001, respectively, as if underlining, in reply to the signals of depreciation coming from outside, the desire to adhere to extremely positive images. On the contrary, the congruence between the ideal self and the accepted person was significantly lower in piercing devotees than in non pierced people, t(71.85) = 2.332, p = .022.

Combining these data with the one related to the distance between the ideal self and the authoritarian person, significantly higher in the pierced group with t(71.15) = 4.418 and p < .001, we can claim that what pierced people keep at a distance is the authoritarian and socially accepted image of the self. By comparing this data with the one referring to the identification with the authority we can conclude that there is no struggle, but a kind of intolerance towards the authoritarian figure. This is probably due to the oppressive and intolerant attitude of the authoritarian person, which fits in badly with the traits of the personality and the desire of self-expression that, according to the present results, the piercing devotee shows.

CONCLUSION

The importance of the results of our research seems to be twofold: first of all they confirm the advantage of considering body piercing as a body modification technique consciously practised and highly meaningful for individuals who practise it. Secondly, they underline, by virtue of the indivisibility between physical and mental self, how a substantial modification of one's own body can correspond to a concurrent

substantial modification of one's own self-identity sense.

In particular, we found a positive self-conception, an extremely coherent and stable sense of personal identity, a high level of self-attractiveness and self-fulfilment in piercing devotees. They seem to relate to their own body in a satisfactory way feeling "whole, realised and complete" (Holtham, 1997). They show a perfect coincidence of the two "dimensions of judgement" introduced by Higgins (1989); the "effective self", related to the subject's opinion about himself/herself, and the "ideal self", which deals with the self concept as a realisation of one's own existential ideals. However, male piercing devotees seem to combine their self-esteem and their image with something that goes against the stream, namely they do not submit to their "imperative self", which tells them how they have to be in order to conform to social expectations.

The social aspect seems to play a secondary role compared to the personal one. Self-fulfilment appears to be the primary aim, whose realisation can also be obtained at society's expense, namely assuming unconventional or subcultural behaviours.

We can, therefore, conclude that piercing represents for the Piercing Tribe's members much more than a simple body ornament. Piercing the body doesn't have the same meaning as putting a dress on, but it implies something more: pierced people want to communicate in a radical way, and they do it using their own bodies as a means of communication, which is pierced and marked. The choice of this extreme mode of communication, which goes *through* the skin, seems to be compatible with the message they want to transmit, that is their own authentic way of being and feeling. Moreover, Charmet and Marcazzan (2000) add: "Body communication is extreme and primitive, for this reason it is suitable to express one's most genuine parts, prior to intellectual processing and reasoning. If we leave aside the oral one, this is the most effective way to communicate in a determined, mature and conscious manner" (p.84).

The perforation of the body's, thus, implies a deep inner pursuit. And the pierced body, clearly visible and perceivable, is an authentic and concrete expression of "who you are" and "who you want to be". It's an experience with autoplastic purposes, a kind of self-message made in public, a private dialogue spoken aloud. "It derives from the desire to explore the blind area between the mental and the physical sphere in order to pursue an hidden expressive freedom you have got to recover and it is expressive of an inner search which you want to communicate by setting free a creative part of yourself to express a part of your own essence" (Martinelli, 1997, p.7).

If we consider that the world of "spectacular identity" (Hebdige, 1979), which we managed to enter into in our research, raises such important questions as those outlined above, and remains relatively unexplored, it will be clear why the questions we have answered are probably outnumbered by those yet to be explored.

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