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The social perspective of Tattooing and Piercing among Tamil speaking communities in Kotahena

K. Rewathy[1,a]**, S. Linojah**[2,b]

[1] Department of Geography, Faculty of Arts and Culture,
South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Oluvil, Sri Lanka

[2] Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts and Culture,
South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Oluvil, Sri Lanka

[a,b]E-mail address: reyarewathy@gmail.com , linojah05@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The study focus on the analysis of the developing deviant culture of Tattooing and Piercing. Most of the people in the modern world involve in tattooing and piercing as considering it as a fashion. But in Asian countries social historical context of being tattooed is different. Especially in Tamil tradition tattooing and piercing has its limitation bound to rituals. Identifying the social perspective of this behavior is essential for the future generation. Qualitative and quantitative methods have been used to analyzed the present situation of the social acceptance and perception of tattoos and piercing. Data collected through primary and secondary data collection methods. Questionnaire survey done among hundred elderly people from the study area. Structured and unstructured interviews done with both tattooed and non-tattooed persons and respondents. According to the social recognition of the phenomenon, the society restrict the tattoo acceptance as fashion. The piercing and tattooing considered to be a undesirable activity of culture. Though earlier the piercing culture was accepted for the Hindu rituals, they were only limited with ears and nose piercing. Tamils consider the fashionable youth behavior of tattooing and piercing as social deviant activity when it has gone beyond the border of rituals and norms. The study provide insight into topic for further research to social perspective affecting tattoo acceptance and the role of fashion. This study limited to a small part of an urban area and a group of Tamil people. Thus, the results cannot be generalized to a vast area.

Keywords: Body modification, Deviant Behavior, Piercing, Social perspective, Tattooing

1. INTRODUCTION

Tattoo is described in Webster's Dictionary (1993) as "an indelible mark or figure fixed upon the body by the insertion of pigment under the skin or by the production of scars" (Laurence et al., 2005). Body piercing involves the insertion of a needle into various areas of the body to create an opening through which decorative ornaments such as jewelry may be worn (Greif et al., 1999; Laurence et al., 2005). Earlier Tattooing is mostly a souvenir which is a keepsake mark an important moment. The tattoos were always sentimental: you didn't mark yourself for life if you weren't sentimental (Clinton and Angus, 2008). In the ancient period of time tattooing considered to be an important matter. In history such people who tattooed were identified as the high stated, culture oriented and most honored towards mother land. People from different countries involved in tattooing for various reasons. Along with the time tattooing become a matter of fashion and everyone started to tattoo letters, sentences, figures, sceneries and art objects. Furthermore, tattoos may have symbolic meaning or may simply be results of choices to become decorated (Tasha, 2011).

Tattooing and piercing were most popular among elders in the previous era, but it become most fascinated act among youngsters nowadays. The age group of tattooing and piercing become less till fifteen. Therefore, the objective and value of tattooing gradually going low. Some countries supporting the tattoo and considering it as an art. Yet most of the Asian countries does not allow tattoo and piercing. Greeks and Romans were known to tattoo slaves and prisoners as sign of ownership or punishment (Schildkrout, 2004). Some countries used the tattoo for their business identification, status, low cast and community symbolic tattoos. Asian countries are having high value for the culture, religious perception, and behaviors. Therefore, such culture prevailing countries as japan forbidden tattooing. Most of the youngsters in India and Sri Lanka get tattooed on their un exposure parts of body.

Since the tattooing become modernized, the practice underwent scrutiny and was generally not accepted in popular and strict cultures. Even though some countries prohibited tattooing and piercing, it is not the same in Sri Lanka. Generally most of the youngsters engaged in tattooing and piercing. There are noticeable shops can be found in the Colombo capital city since most of the tattooed are from there. Colombo is a mixed cultural and community centre. In the previous time Tamils consider the tattooing and piercing as a cultural remark. But the present generation find it as a fashion. Fashion is the prevailing style of the time (Sproles, 1981; Tasha, 2011).

Western culture and modern lifestyle already penetrated into the vein of Sri Lankans. Therefore, tattooing and piercing are not concern as a deviant behavior among the communities. Though pierced flesh part of the body may turn into normal after some times, tattoo designs remain permanent. The permanent tattoo may cause social changes of recognition of a person.

The following research question were developed to explore tattoos and social perspectives:

- What is the social perspective towards the tattooed and pierced personalities?
- Is there any different perception between the various age groups regard tattooing and piercing?
- How does the permanence of the tattoo contribute to the personal identity of a person?
- How does the tattooing and piercing culture spread through Tamil speaking community?

1. 1. Objectives

The principal objective of the study is "to explore the current perspective of tattoos and piercing among the local Tamil folks". To accomplish the basic objective, there are two other subordinate objectives have been set:

- To context analysis the perception of tattooing and piercing culture among different age groups.
- Identifying the reason for the urge to tattooing and piercing.
- Define the effects of tattooing and piercing on personal identity.

1. 2. Study area

The spatial location of the study area situated in the western province, Colombo district. There are Thirty five (35) Grama Niladhari (GN) divisions in the Colombo Divisional Secretariat (DS) division. Total population of the Colombo DSD is 323,257. The selected study area has 15,794 amount of total population in both Kotahena West and East. Most of the Tamil speaking people from various religions live around East and West Kotahena in Colombo. And most of the young tattooed victims have been identified as well. Therefore, the study area is highly suitable and require for the research.
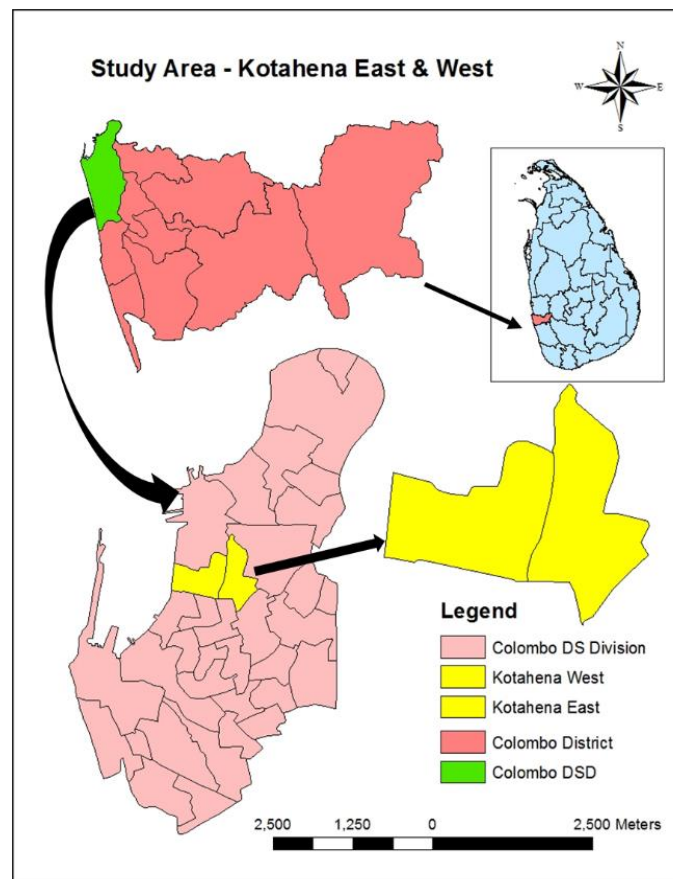

Figure 1. Spatial Location of the study area,
Source: By the researcher from Arc 10.3

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of this research is much familiar in the western world but in developing countries the context of tattooing and piercing is a new aspect. The existing knowledge of the study has been taken and studied in a various perspective such as empirical, conceptual and prescriptive works. Tattooing and piercing may be sounded in a fashionable way. But the social acceptance and perception of that mentioned culture vary. Most of the researches under the concept of tattooing conducted in United States of America, since many involved in such activity. When it comes to Sri Lanka, studies related to the concept are less since there are not so many people engaged in tattooing and piercing.

Some countries mentioned that social psychological interpretations of tattooing as irrational "risk taking behavior" (Carroll et al., 2002; Roberts and Ryan, 2002). At the same time some researchers say that "Tattooing is interpreted as pro-social and affectively regulated act of communication, rather than a pathological instance of self-injury" (Michael, 2004). Sociologist and other academics, however, almost invariably describe tattooing as cultural deviance. Few social scientific studies portray tattooing as either rational or pre-social (Atkinson, 2003a; DeMello, 2000; Copes and Forsyth, 1993; Irwin, 2000; Michael, 2004). The historic roles of tattoos as symbolic elements of dress and tattoos as fashion (Tasha, 2011). In the contemporary cultural world, social changes addresses the transformation of human behaviors such as attitudes and beliefs (Krznaric, 2007; Tasha, 2011).

While tattooing widely respected in Western cultures (DeMello, 2000), it considerably less appreciable in Asian region. Most of the youngsters decorating their body with multiple characters and letters due to the modern fashion factor. Fashion changes constantly as trends go in and out of style. Through analysis of fashion changes between 1920 and 1985 (identified as the modern era) (Tasha, 2011). Some researchers sought to develop a predictive model for fashion change. Some studies found the conclusion as the fashion change was influenced by the economy, government and demographic emerged. Tattooing became the factor of fashion in late twenties. The western fashion behaviors intrude into Asian culture.

When analyzing popular culture and the acceptance of behaviors in that culture, the idea of whether the behaviors are accepted or not is based upon society's collective reactions to the behaviors (Sanders, 1990). Perception towards tattooing and piercing fashion is vary among different communities. Fenigstein et al. (1975) discussed that people's self-awareness is used as a tool and goal for displaying themselves in certain ways, or to defend themselves from negative reactions. Some popular cultures do not accept the tattooing and piercing as they consider those as deviant behaviors. Tattooing indicated immaturity among "at-risk youth" and is correlated with other forms of self-harm such as physical aggressiveness, promiscuity, substance abuse and suicide (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Korn, 1996; Roberts and Ryan, 2002; Atkinson, 2004).

Most of the researches related to tattooing and piercing have been conducted among developed nations such as United States, Canada and European countries (Laurence et al., 2005; Atkinson, 2004; Tasha, 2011). But consider it to the Asian countries the concept was less considered and yet to study. Therefore this study bound to a limitation and conducted in a urbanized area of Sri Lanka where still culture, norms, values and rituals exist. Even though tattooing and piercing have been accepted as a modern fashion and art work, some cultures still consider the tattooed people as marginalized.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research mainly engaged in primary qualitative data. Though quantitative data was collected to lend insight into the research questions and to support the qualitative data. Proper sampling system need to be selected to provide sufficient data to explore the research questions. Therefore, questionnaire survey was selected using purposeful convenience sampling. Participants included Kotahena East and West Tamil residents. Totally 100 participants were selected to complete the questionnaire. The participants did not have to have a tattoo to complete the survey. Therefore the survey have been included the participants with different age groups (Required to be in between 16 - 60), gender and status. The survey consist series of questions with three parts. The first part of the survey included personal questions for the identification of the family set up. The following portion of the survey contained questions that generated qualitative and quantitative data. And the final part of the survey was to be completed by the participants with tattoos (Tasha, 2011). Open-ended questions were asked from the tattooed and pierced participants.

Further, field interviews conducted in a variety of settings such as private companies, coffee shops, local restaurants, tattoo studios and shops. Through interviews and taking photos the participants identities have been protected. The interview strategy adopted in this research closely followed the prescriptions for open-ended interviewing (Lofland, 1995; Prus, 1996, Atkinson, 2004).

Moreover, secondary data were collected from books related to the Tamil norms and values, published and unpublished resources, conference proceedings, internet sources and local authorities such as Divisional Secretariat and Grama Niladhari divisions. The collected data have been tabulated and analyzed through Excel spreadsheet software, SPSS and MS word. As well as for the mapping analysis Arc GIS 10.3 was used.
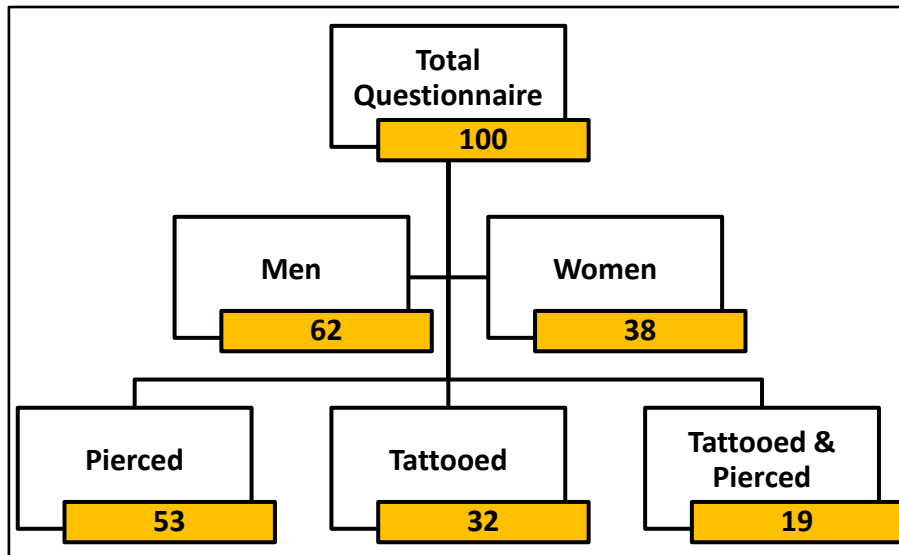
4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

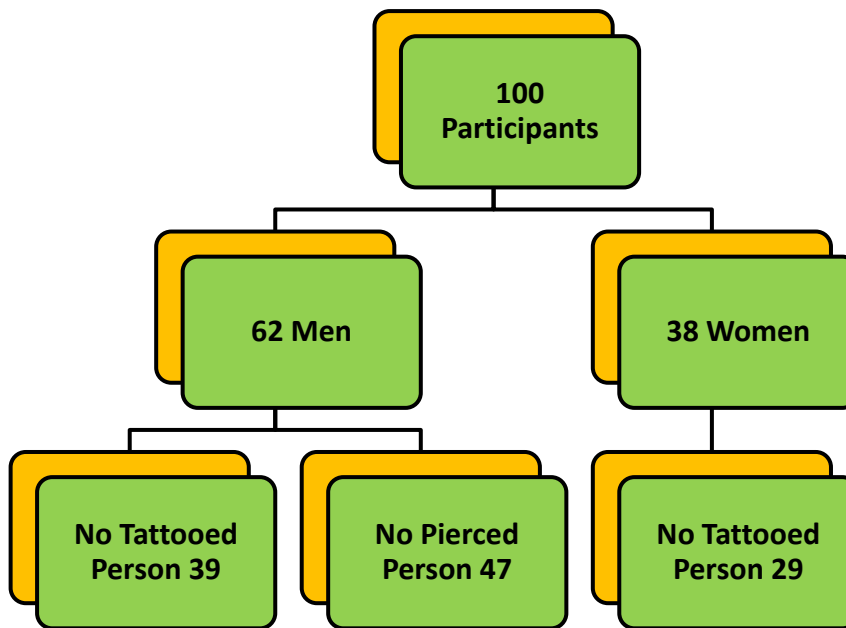**Figure 2.** Participants involved in tattooing & Piercing

Figure 3. Participants doesn't involved in tattooing & Pie

Though tattooing considered as a Deviancy and Anti-fashion phenomena, youngsters nowadays mostly involved in the tattooing and piercing as they become situated into mainstream consumption (Adams, 2009). The data from survey derived from 100 questionnaires; 38 from women and 62 from men from different age groups as mentioned earlier. Thirty-Two of the participants have tattoos; Fifty-Three of them pierced (including all the women participants); Nineteen from the total 100 participants have had both tattoos and piercing. According to the questionnaire survey, all the women (38) had pierced (Ear) and only 9 of them had at least one tattoo. 23 men out of 62 had tattoos on their body and 15 of them had piercing and 10 of them had both tattoo and piercing.

Among the 62 male participants, 39 men had no any tattoos and 47 men never pierced once in their life time. Among 38 female participants 29 of them have not had any tattoos and all of them had pierced. Most of the women been pierced their ears by their parents due to the Tamil cultural matters.

All the participants have been asked for their religion in the questionnaire to evaluate the religious involvement in tattooing and piercing. According to the questionnaire survey analysis, Hindu, Islam, Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians included in the participants. Since the study is limited with Tamils in Kotahena region, Buddhist religious people haven't been included. Below Table 1 shows that 56% of Roman Catholic at high rate getting tattoos and Hindus are in the second rate scoring 37.5%. Islam participants are prohibited from getting tattooed, therefore, there none of them having a single tattoo. While considering the piercing Hindus lead the way with 54%, including all the female participants and few male participants. In Islam only women have had piercing either ear piercing or nose piercing but no Islam man have been encountered with piercing. 28.3% of Roman Catholic have been pierced and some of them are men.

Table 1. Tattooed and Pierced participants based on religion (Men &Women)

Religion	Tattooed	%	Pierced	%	Both	%	None	%
Hindu	12	37.5	29	54.7	13	68.4	7	46.7
Islam	-	00	8	15.1	-	-	6	40
Roman Catholic	18	56.3	15	28.3	6	31.6	2	13.3
Protestant Christians	2	6.2	1	1.9	-	-	-	-
Total n = 100	32	100%	53	100%	19	100%	15	100%

The study area contains higher demography of Hindus more than other religious people (Census report, 2012). Thus, most of the participants who completed the questionnaire were Hindu Tamils. Ear piercing considered to be a cultural acceptance for the Tamils. So, all the women who participated in the survey had piercing experience. According to the Tamil culture and norms, ears and nose are the only body parts that allowed to get pierced by the society. Though some youngsters from modern era pierced and wear jewelries on other body parts such as: Navel, tongue, eyebrows and chin.

Table 2. Age categorizing of participants for the questionnaire survey.

Category	Age range	Men	%	Women	%	Total n	Total %
Age	16-20	9	15%	5	14%	14	14%
	21-25	19	31%	7	18%	26	26%
	26-30	9	15%	10	26%	19	19%
	31-40	13	21%	7	18%	20	20%
	>41	12	19%	9	24%	21	21%
	Total	62	62%	38	38%	100	100%

Perception of tattooing and piercing culture differ from one age groups to another. Therefore, the study contains participants from different age groups from the study area. Tattooed and non-tattooed participants are encountered from different age groups. According to the analysis of data from questionnaires, the results of different perspective of tattooing and piercing from different age groups and genders shown in the Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency of responses to survey questions related to the acceptance of tattooing and piercing among different age groups.

| Survey Questions | 16-20 | | 21-25 | | 26-30 | | 31-40 | | >41 | |
| | n = 14 | | n = 26 | | n = 19 | | n = 20 | | n = 21 | |
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Do you prefer Tattooing and piercing?	9	5	16	10	5	14	5	15	7	14
Do you allow your loved ones to get tattooed or pierced?	8	6	18	8	5	14	4	16	5	16
Do you find tattoos socially acceptable in your society?	10	4	14	12	12	7	7	13	5	16
Do you find tattoos and body piercing fashionable?	12	2	12	14	12	7	9	11	5	16
Do you believe that tattooed and pierced people show deviant behaviors among peers?	2	12	5	25	6	13	10	10	7	14

The above frequencies of responses to the survey analysis display the knowledge, preferences and acceptance of tattooing and piercing. The survey conducted among different age groups to analyze the perspective and preference of tattooing and piercing. According to the Table. 3 frequency summaries, the youngster age between 16 to 20 and 21 to 25 highly showing positive response for the tattooing and piercing culture since they are obsessed with modernized and fashionable activities. At the same time elder community in between 31 to 40 and above 41 years old yet not consider the culture as acceptable.

4. 1. Ancient approach towards Tattooing and Piercing:

Greeks and Romans were known to tattoo slaves and prisoners as signs of ownership or punishment (Caplan, 1997; Tasha, 2011). During medieval period, tattoos reflected religious values; saints and other religious figured tattooed their bodies with holy images and letters (Caplan, 1997; Tasha, 2011). Social perspectives of tattooing has risen and fall over the years. However, in South Asia the renaissance of tattooing happened in the twentieth century, mostly among youngsters.

Tattooing and piercing has historically been used from different countries for various purposes and reasons:

- To specify a group of people or individuals
- To punish the low cast people
- To identify a society members
- Symbolic tattoos for voyagers
- To remark once traveled area
- To label prostitutes
- To identify the sailors, criminals and miscreants
- Used as badges of honor
- Indicators of patriotism

These identification of tattoo last until 1980's (John, 2009). The simplistic view of tattoo history was a common perception. With lots of tattoo and piercing ownership now spread across a broad spectrum of society, and adopted for varying reasons (Camphausen, 2000; Jino & Vale, 1989). But in 20th and 21st century tattooing and piercing become a fashion formula. However in the ancient perspective, different cultures and communities consumed the tattoos and piercing for diverse reasons all around the world. Most of

Figure 4. Ear Piercing of Men and Women in Tamil Culture

the youngsters being influenced by the musicians, band singers, actors/actress, celebrity culture and affiliation to musically based subcultures (Atkinson, 2003a).

In the tradition of Tamil Hindus, men have been allowed to pierce their ears (Either both or single). Women could get pierced in their both ears and nose. These were the only body parts should be pierced with ornaments. By the time passes the culture become modernized and fashioned. Both men and women getting piercing in their culturally allowed parts and forbidden parts: eyebrows, tongue, chin, navel and lips. This fashionable approach considerate as a deviant behavior among Tamil Hindus in the study area. If a child in a house get pierced in a different way, the parents get scold for. And the whole family considered to be odd among other neighbors.

According to the Tamil social perspective, the outer body is the manifestations of the inner beauty. Therefore, the people who decorate their outer body with piercing and tattooing personified as to have complexity of inner thoughts. But the tattooed and pierced people said different stories about their attempts. "I felt my body was an unattractive and I usually got bullied during my teenage at school for having a shaggy face and body. Therefore, I decide to change my appearance with some changes with piercing and tattooing. Now I have lots of friends who admire my tattoos and they love the way I look" – Interviewed participant. Moreover he explains that having a transformed body with modernized fashion is a vehicle for acquiring recognition among the modern youth groups.

The widely accepted ear piercing among Tamil culture is shown in the Figure. 4. These ways of ear piercing for both men and women has been accepted by the Tamil society and the perspective of the common people is the same for them.

Most of the people who got multiple tattooed and pierced in their body parts identified as the lowly one in the community. Since they won't be recruited for neither white color jobs or official jobs, they end up doing mere jobs on the street and start their own businesses. Few of them engaged in drug dealing, smuggling, alcohol selling and spa massage related jobs. As well as they used to consume alcohol and addictive to drugs. Therefore, whole of the tattooed and pierced people lay on the same category in the social perspective (Fig. 5).

According to the questionnaire survey among 100 participants, 32 of them are having at least a single piece of tattoo (both men and women). But, all of them are not having the same kind of tattoos. All of their tattoos have been captured and most of them have the Cross tattoo as in Fig. 6. Not only the Christians prefer to get cross tattoo but Hindus also.

Figure 5. Tattooed in multiple parts of their body

In Tamil culture representing the animal faces on tattoos considered to be strong will power and courageousness. It shows the gut and fearless attitude. Getting tattooed of god and goddess signs to be a spiritual inter connectivity. Nowadays youngsters getting tattoos for various purposes such as dream catcher fortunate purpose, loved ones names for the trust purpose, places names and dates for remembering purpose. The following image in the Fig. 7 shows multiple designs and art of tattoos of the participants.
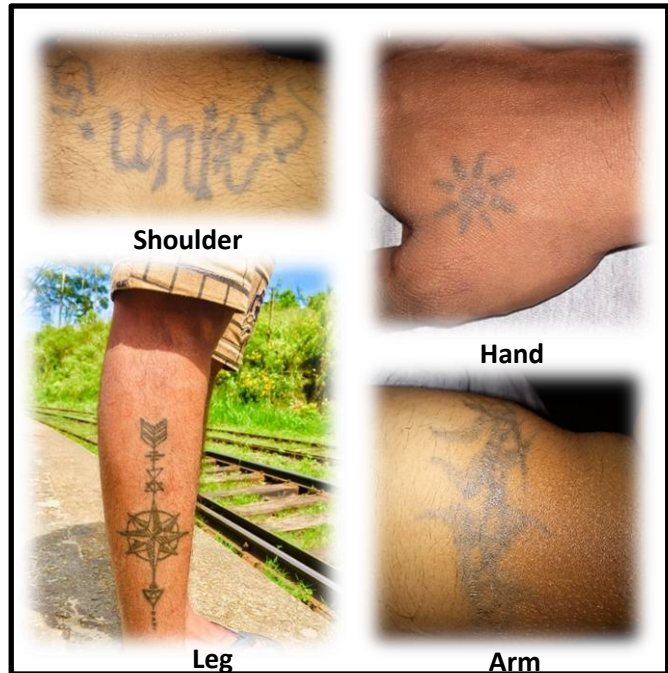
Figure 6. Cross Tattoos with different designs

Accordance with the survey, all the study area people are not natively from Kotahena. Some of them have born and brought up from various part of Sri Lanka. By their statements, its visible that they got interest and motivated to tattooing and piercing by the people who already got them. There are various reasons that motive the youngsters to get tattooed and pierced.

Such as:

1) After the completion of schooling as a celebration.
2) To show the courage and heroism to the friends.
3) To expose the maturity.
4) To get the attention from others. Especially from colleagues.
5) Considering tattooing and piercing as an Art and showing the interest in art.
6) To relieve the stress from bad or negative experiences.
7) Believe that getting tattoos and piercing make their body stronger.
8) To show the affection towards the loving ones; mother, father, family members, lover, wife, friends.
9) To show the respect to; nation, country, sports teams, music, dance, etc.
10) To overcome from the broken relationships.
11) To avoid the diminish or negative feelings/memories.

The above mentioned reasons are some common from the participants in the study area.

Figure 7. Multiple Designs of Tattoos from participants

The tattooed youngsters receive both negative and positive responses from the society. The people who believed and recognize the tattooing as fashion continue to appreciate. On the other hand the non-tattooed and the people who believe it as a deviant behavior blame the tattooed people for their decorated appearance. According to the participant's experience they confessed the negative reactions they received from the society.

- Struggle to hide the tattoo and remove all the piercing ornaments in the working environment.
- Getting negative reactions and starring for the tattoos which appear on the hand and neck.
- Scolded by parents and family members for both piercing and tattooing.
- Unable to participate for the family gatherings and family ceremonies to avoid the naggings.

The people who do the art work of tattooing identify them-selves as body modificationists, tattoo artists and flesh artists. As they confessed, most of the youngsters prefer the professional operations in every aspects. Clients want a professional artist with a good design. Moving with them with a good heart and kind words make them to visit more. They attract the young mind with the walls inside the tattoo center fully covered by the new tattoo designs and tattooed persons. Therefore the one who come with a mind to have one tattoo might end up getting many. As well as most of the adults use words and simple tattoo designs like flowers, holy symbols, names and face of animals but, youngsters age between 16 to 25 getting large size of tattoos with new designs.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In current popular culture, increased consumption has made tattoos more widely accepted (Adams, 2009). The broad-stream renaissance of tattooing and piercing accepted in various culture. Some Tamil communities still considering the body modified persons as deviants while some of them accepting as the fashionable behavior. Adams (2009) concluded that while tattoo acceptance has increased over time, a certain degree of marginalization of tattooed people in modern society still exists. Prevalence of tattoos is increasing, association of tattoos with deviance still exists.

A lots of studies and researches about tattoos show the connection to leukemia (Blood cancer), and cancer of the lymph nodes. Therefore, the educated society think the tattooed people in the form of "Self abusive" or masochism, and tattooing is the result of low self-esteem. The people who get ear piercing or even a stud simple nose piercing are not equivalent for the social deviance. The tattooing and piercing become a fashion in the twentieth century. Most of the youngsters oppose to their parents and family members to modify their body with tattooing and piercing. Tattooed and pierced people have being ignored by the Tamil society elders even nowadays. It's obvious the permanent tattooing culture derived from the temporary body modification from Tamil Hindus who used Henna (Mehendhi or Marudhani) for decorating body parts before a celebration. The Indian philosophers believe that piercing ears and nose help in the development of intellect power of thinking and decision making abilities (Hemalatha & Sai, 2017). Those were the reasons to allow the nose and ears piercing in the ancient Tamil culture. However, nowadays only the nose piercing considered to be acceptable

in the Tamil speaking community. The one who got her nose pierced identified as a lowly mannered woman.

Contemporary tattooing and piercing practices in Sri Lanka has its empirical way of explanations. Among Tamils those behaviors are still not acceptable for typical cultural families. Most of the Christians and Tamils interested in body modification in the study area. While interpreting all the aspects through the study, the tattooing and piercing seem to be based on aesthetic motives. Since the life is all about self-satisfaction, body modification activity should be allowed for the interested people for their own healthy attitude. While arguments are still made for the acceptance of tattooing and piercing among researchers, sociologist and anthropologists, this study shed a little more portion to that argument regarding social perspective of tattooed and pierced characters. The results providing the fact that all the people are not against to the deviant culture in the Tamil community. But, some elderly Tamil folks have some diverse thoughts on those who got body modifications with tattoos and piercings. That is because of the incidents happened in the society; the tattooed and pierced personalities being charged with drug offences, murders, robberies, thug activities, alcoholic, chain smokers, rapists, etc. The communities perspective toward tattooed and pierced personalities continually being changed.

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