

FREQUENCIES AND RELATIONS OF BODY PIERCING AND SEXUAL EXPERIENCE IN COLLEGE STUDENTS¹

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Summary.—This research examined the relation between having a body piercing and having engaged in premarital sexual intercourse. Data were gathered from a convenience sample of 450 college students. 72% were women; 85% were ages 18 to 22 years ($M=20.9$, $SD=4.5$), 80% were Euro-American. Women with piercings reported substantively and significantly greater frequency of sexual activity than college students without piercings. There were no significant differences in sexual experience between men with piercings and those without. These findings differ from previous research comparing the sexual activity of college students with and without tattoos.

Previous research indicated that college students with body piercings were more likely to engage in risky behavior than those who had never had piercings (Armstrong, Owen, Roberts, & Koch, 2004). Sixty-three percent of respondents with piercings in that study reported binge drinking in the previous month versus 36% of those who had no piercings. Twelve percent of those with piercings versus 5% of those without reported using illegal drugs "very often." Twenty-six percent of those with piercings reported six or more lifetime sexual partners versus 14% of those without piercings. These findings are consistent with those of other studies (Greif, Hewitt, & Armstrong, 1999; Drews, Allison, & Probst, 2000; Forbes, 2001; Burger & Finkel, 2002).

This study compares reports of student respondents with and without body piercings regarding the far more common, but still emotionally risky, experience of premarital sexual intercourse (Longmore, Manning, Giordano, & Rudolf, 2004). Previous research with the same population as the current study showed that 96.1% of tattooed men and 94.6% of tattooed women reported having experienced premarital sexual intercourse. This compares with 72% of the nontattooed men and 68% of the nontattooed women who

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reported being sexually active (Koch, Roberts, Armstrong, & Owen, 2005). These results raised the question of whether body piercings are similar markers for sexual experience. While a piercing is not necessarily a permanent adornment, obtaining one is a highly sensual experience. It was hypothesized that respondents with piercings would be more likely to report being sexually active than respondents without piercings.

METHOD

Data were gathered from undergraduates at a large, public university in the Southwest. Respondents were recruited from students enrolled in lower-level sociology courses. After appropriate Institutional Review Board approval and signed consent forms were obtained, a total of 450 individuals were surveyed. The questionnaires were distributed on exam days to maximize participation; all in attendance chose to participate. Sixty-one of the 450 total respondents did not answer one or more of the questions for this analysis, leaving a final sample of 389. Seventy-two percent of the respondents were women; 85% were ages 18 to 22 years ($M=20.9$, $SD=4.5$); 80% were Euro-American. For this study, a piercing was defined on the questionnaire as "the insertion of sharp implements to create an opening for decorative ornaments such as jewelry." The written instructions also indicated "This study does not include earlobe piercings but does include ear rim/cartilage piercings."

Respondents were asked how many piercings they had (range 0 to 5 or more) as well as where these piercings were located. Thirty-two percent of the respondents reported having a piercing at the time the data were collected. Eighty-seven percent of those with piercings were women. Fifty-three percent had one or more piercings in the high ear cartilage. Thirty-eight percent had navel piercings. Thirteen percent had tongue piercings. Nine percent had nipple or genital piercings. Some respondents had multiple piercings in multiple places.

Respondents were also asked, "At what age did you first experience premarital sexual intercourse?" They filled in a blank with their age at the time, or indicated "I have never done this." Results below are comparative percentages, representing frequency distributions which were assessed for statistical significance by chi-square.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows that 83.3% of women with piercings reported having had sexual intercourse compared to 63.3% of women without piercings. For men, 73.3% with piercings reported sexual intercourse compared to 77.7% of men without piercings. Chi-square calculations, based on the number of persons, indicate that the difference in sexual activity between respondents with and without piercings is statistically significant for women only.

TABLE 1
PERCENT RESPONDENTS REPORTING PIERCINGS AND SEXUAL ACTIVITY (N = 389)

	Men				Women			
	With Piercings		Without Piercings		With Piercings		Without Piercings	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Sexually Active	73.7	14	77.7	73	83.3	105	63.3	95
Not Sexually Active	26.3	5	22.3	21	16.7	21	36.7	55
Total	100.0	19	100.0	94	100.0	126	100.0	150
	$\chi^2 = 0.14$				$\chi^2 = 13.73^*$			

* $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

The finding of statistical significance between piercing and sexual activity for women and not for men is different from the findings of Koch, *et al.* (2005) with regard to tattoos and sex, for which positive correlations were significant for both men and women. This difference suggests that body piercings may evoke gender roles more directly than tattooing, especially with regard to emotions and sexuality. Carroll and Anderson (2002) reported body piercing was positively correlated with anger and depression among adolescent girls. Similar emotional problems were found among adolescents with early onset of sexual activity (Longmore, *et al.*, 2004). Further research should assess linkages between these parallel findings, especially as teenage girls explore gender roles.

Future research should also examine the relationship between piercing and gender roles through the marketing of body images, fashion, and jewelry (Franzoi, 2001). Sweetman (1999) suggested that body piercings were primarily fashion accessories, subject to change or reversal. Coad (2005) reported that athletic men who also wear high-fashion clothing and jewelry are likely to have their sexual orientation called into question. Gill, Harwood, and McLean (2005) reported that mens' conversations about piercing were part of negotiating masculine identities. Ballentine and Ogle (2005) and Baker (2005) reported that female sexuality is shaped by media offering consumption strategies for fixing body problems, and the portrayal of women in dominant versus submissive roles in advertisements for clothing and jewelry. More research is needed to examine behaviors and interest which link body art and sexual experience to the acceptance and expression of gender roles through body adornment.

Finally, a very small percentage of the respondents in this study—too few for meaningful statistical analysis—reported having nipple or genital piercings. Previous research shows that intimate piercings are often obtained for sexual purposes (Caliendo, Armstrong, & Roberts, 2005; Armstrong, Caliendo, & Roberts, 2006). Further research examining this type of inti-

mate behavior may clarify the extent to which individuals obtain piercings to express sexual identity or enhance sexual experience.

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Accepted July 10, 2007.