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Embodied Queerness: Exploring Cultural Dimensions of Asian Queer Body

Narratives, A Literature Review

Capstone Thesis

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Abstract

The author explores the Asian queer narrative by investing in related articles and literature on body art in this capstone thesis. In the thesis, body art is identified as a way of self-expression that serves as a creative outlet for play, artistic expression, and advocacy. The concept of body modifications, such as tattoos or piercings, can be viewed as acts of resistance to challenging societal norms. In a larger scope, it can also include changing body shape, such as fitness and cosmetic surgery (Pitts, 2000). People engage in body modification practices to express themselves to the world, show creativity, and cooperate with their ideas of society (Lu & Hu, 2021; Pitts, 2000; Weiler et al., 2021). However, the interpretation of body modifications within the queer community is far from straightforward, given the diverse motivations and contexts shaping individual choices (Klesse, 2007). This complexity is particularly pronounced when examining queer cultures in Asian countries, where research simplifies the idea of “a culture of Western versus Eastern” and fails to capture the intricate dynamics at play (Lu & Hu, 2021; Henley & Porath, 2021). According to Liu (2021), these Western versus Eastern binary opposition approaches overlook crucial factors, such as class, origin, race, and power dynamics inherent in Asian societies. Thus, a more comprehensive understanding of queer body expression in Asia necessitates a holistic consideration of these multifaceted influences.

Keywords: Body modification, Queer Asian, Mental health care, Body art, Embodiment

This author identifies as an Asian Taiwanese queer currently living in the United States as an international student.

Embodied Queerness: Exploring Cultural Dimensions of Asian Queer Body Narratives

Introduction

Body art involves various forms of body modification or style choices, such as piercing, hairstyle, tattoo, earlobe stretching, scarification, binding, or makeup to emphasize identities, which serves as a form of personal expression, cultural practice, and identity assertion. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) community, similar to other marginalized groups, is diverse, encompassing individuals with various identities and experiences across characteristics such as race, income, culture, and more (Chhabra & Kapadia, 2023). The general topic of this literature review discusses the intricate interplay between body experiences, identity, and societal influences within the Asian queer community. The term “queer” in this article serves as an umbrella term for those within the LGBTQ+ community and also many other aspects of sexual and gender identities, including someone with “an attitude” of self-expression that may not align with the general public. The purpose of this paper is based on the curiosity of these five questions: What is queer Asian body image look like? Can we find identity in our bodies? Why queer Asian is important? How do cultural norms and values within Asian societies shape queer body narratives and experiences of embodiment? What does therapeutic body art look like?

The central focus of this capstone thesis involves integrating insights from mental health, sociology, and art therapy literature to explore the distinctive Asian queer narrative and understand the dynamics between body image and mental health. The author collected and examined various aspects from the personal level to the social level and then back to mental health for the Asian LGBTQ+ community. The topic covered the

impact of social events (Quathamer & Joy, 2022) and historical context on individuals' body experiences, including the concept of "*zhongxing*" (gender in between) (Lu & Hu, 2021), and the Asian cultural considerations regarding queer mental health, such as shame and family values. Some researchers have also discussed the correlation between body modifications and the expression of uniqueness, challenging societal norms, and the transformative role of creativity and collaborative art-making in reshaping body image perceptions and affirming LGBTQ+ identity (Bonnick, 2021; Ball & Elsner, 2019). As the demand for mental health services grows, there is an increasing need to cater to individuals from diverse backgrounds, each requiring unique considerations in their treatment, such as cultural considerations and sensitivity. According to American Psychological Association's Multicultural Guidelines:

Psychologists aspire to recognize and understand that as cultural beings, they hold attitudes and beliefs that can influence their perceptions of and interactions with others as well as their clinical and empirical conceptualizations. As such, psychologists strive to move beyond conceptualizations rooted in categorical assumptions, biases, and/or formulations based on limited knowledge about individuals and communities. (2017, p.4)

Therefore, the author seeks to gather the information and evaluate the current studies to provide a voice to the queer study, aiming to comprehend the influence of cultural norms and values within Asian societies on queer body narratives and experiences of embodiment.

The perception and representation of the Asian queer community can vary and intersect by cultural content, historical context, or race. The author believes that reclaiming the

narrative phenomenology of the Asian queer community can not only foster more diverse perspectives and tap into the healing power of the community but also helps other minorities who are underrepresented feel included in the community. Furthermore, delving deeper into the narrative surrounding the Asian queer body could potentially foster greater awareness in the mental health field. Conclusively, the author aimed to use this literature review to delve into the intricate interplay between body experiences, identity, and societal influences within the Asian queer community, which could shed light on the transformative potential of body art in affirming LGBTQ+ identity while navigating cultural values and expectations. Moreover, by focusing on furnishing mental health professionals with nuanced understandings in sociology, thereby empowering them to develop culturally sensitive interventions, this author sought to investigate tailored needs of mental health care for the Asian queer community.

Methods

The evaluative process involved in the review of the article allowed a profound understanding of how societal events reverberate within the queer community and enabled readers to explore how political factors and societal values shape the Asian queer narrative and identify specific changes necessary for healing within this community. Through this paper, the goal was to uncover the multifaceted challenges, prevailing circumstances, and specific needs within the queer community, ultimately delving into the complexities of their identity within the broader context of Asian society. The method aligned with the intent to explore in extant literature whether body art, as a way of self-performance, was a way for Asian queers to embrace joy and embark on resilience that could expand the process of healing.

Firstly, to gain a deeper insight into the transformative potential of the arts within the community, I focused on understanding the current culture in the Asian queer community. This exploration aimed to unveil ongoing issues, dynamics, and strengths, assess present circumstances, and pinpoint specific voices within both worldwide and Asian queer communities. The author used relevant research topic on literature resources from the Lesley Library and the National Central Library to collect qualitative, quantitative, and art-based research, including resources such as academic journals, books, and conference papers from 1990 to 2023. One limitation of this research may be that some of the research was more than ten years old from the current time period of 2024. Moreover, the reviews were of English and Mandarin resources due to language limitations. As part of this ongoing literature review exploration, the author engaged in reflective artistic endeavors while monitoring the progress of the capstone thesis. The reflections, drawn from subjective experiences throughout the research process, were curated into a dedicated comic in the appendix section. This artistic representation served as a dynamic medium to encapsulate the evolving narrative of the research journey.

Literature Review

History of Body Art

Body modification has been a cultural practice since early human history, with traditions like earlobe elongation among Eastern North American Indian cultures and foot-binding in China from the 10th century until 1949 (Britannica, 2024; Smith, 2024) serving as historical examples. Across various cultures and periods, certain forms of body modification, such as piercings or tattoos, have been stigmatized and seen as acts of rebellion (Benson, 2000). In Japan, tattoos have been associated with the *yakuza*, the

Japanese mafia, or criminal gangs, while in Nazi concentration camps, individuals identifying as gay were compelled to wear a pink triangle patch (National Galleries, 2022).

Body modification can also serve as a means of expressing identity and advocating for causes. Lee (2020) offers various examples of people who use hair as a symbol to represent identities in the articles. Lee (2020) illustrates the significance of hair during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). Within traditional Confucian ideology, hair was considered a precious gift from parents, and therefore, men meticulously maintained long hair into adulthood. Such maintenance was seen as a symbol of their piety and social status until the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Concurrently, during the 1960s in the United States, economic recession ensued due to the Vietnam War and the anti-war movement. During the 60's, the British rock band, the Beatles, were known for their anti-war sentiments, as such their long hairstyles became emblematic of a rebellious stance against war (Lee, 2020). Ultimately, growing hair can signify specific cultural values and contribute to societal ideologies, yet it also remains a matter of personal choice (Lee, 2020).

As Pitts (2000) supported that queer body modification opens the complexities of agency within body practices based on radical feminist theory, queer theory, and gender theory. Pitts (2000) interviewed gay, lesbian, and transgender (trans) communities in the United States who have either new or traditional modifications. Through the analysis of narratives collected from six body modifiers, the article portrayed body modification as an act infused with agency, wherein individuals create bodies that challenge societal norms, increase visibility, affirm identities, or exist as a spiritual transformation symbol.

For example, one of the body modifiers used corsetry piercing and related clothing to create a sense of affirming performance; another body modifier used body marking to affirm the sense of safe space for sexual and body identities. These modifications not only emphasized the symbolic significance of the body as a medium of public identity but also served as a means of resistance against dominant culture (heteronormative). From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, body modifiers navigate and negotiate these power dynamics, engaging with symbols embedded in historical systems of representation, which highlights that “identity practices are influenced by the political needs and lived constraints of subjects” (Pitts, 2000, p. 446). In conclusion, this research emphasizes the intersectionality of identity practices, shaped by both political exigencies and individual constraints (Pitts, 2000). In other words, body modification is a way of practicing joy, which can be playful and creative in the process but also reflects the political need to suggest identifications.

As mentioned earlier, body modification can be utilized as a tool of cultural expression and resistance, challenging societal norms and sometimes serving as a form of social control or discrimination (Lee, 2020). Beyond traditional piercings or tattoos, body modification extends to various forms of expression. These modifications can also serve as a means for individuals to convey their identities, find personal satisfaction, and establish unique styles or self-representations (Pitts, 2000). Accordingly, exploring the motivations behind these body modifications can provide valuable insights into the complex interplay between identity, societal norms, and personal well-being within the queer community.

Bodies in the Community

How do cultural norms and values within Asian societies shape queer body narratives and experiences of embodiment? It is a question that all clinicians in the mental health field should consider when working with clients, whether sharing the same ethnicity and culture or not. The reason is that understanding the current theoretical orientations can help uncover how social events and societal standards shape experiences. Learning how these cultural insights align with evidence-based mental health practices can also lead to a more comprehensive and culturally sensitive approach to client care.

Quathamier and Joy (2022) applied queer theory and Foucauldian's concept of dominant heterosexual and cisgender subjects as the standard body image to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on LGBTQ+ body image and experiences. The method utilized in this qualitative research involved an online survey with open-ended questions with a sample of LGBTQ+ individuals ($N = 70$) in Canada. The findings revealed the importance of considering intersectionality in understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, highlighting the need for more inclusive and affirming support systems. Some trans participants mentioned losing access to gender-affirming healthcare during COVID-19, resulting in a lack of support surrounding their body image, while others reported having more time for self-reflection and experiencing resistance during lockdown. Despite different perspectives shown in the research, this clearly considers the impact of social events or historical context on individuals' body experiences by using the survey results to show that "bodies are not just their physicality, but an object in a network of social relations, inscribed with meanings from language, discourse, and power" (Quathamier & Joy, 2022, p. 403). Instead, bodies can be a place that shows

resistance and challenges dominant narratives around sexuality, gender, and body politics; furthermore, it can be a place where one reclaims one's own identity in a way that feels authentic and empowering. Future body image and mental health research can further explore several factors related to health and identity, such as considering different races and socioeconomic conditions since this study consisted primarily of White people (81%) and no mention of socioeconomic conditions. Consequently, it is evident that research on intersectionality and complex experiences within the LGBTQ+ community could benefit from encompassing not only LGBTQ+ but also more intersectional factors.

Lu and Hu (2021) utilize quantitative research methods to explore how a younger generation of Taiwanese women resist and challenge homonormative conceptions of gender and sexuality. Their methodology in the research used four experience-based open-ended questions to interview 18 to 30-year-olds ($N = 15$), who self-identify as “*zhongxing*” (gender in between), capturing their subjective experiences and expression practices. According to Lu and Hu (2021), *zhongxing*, an androgynous gender expression, describes individuals with short hair and a masculine-inclined appearance and often being labeled as masculine lesbians. However, Lu and Hu (2021) believed that *zhongxing* might be limited in describing their sexuality and preferred gender expression in the young generation even though it was an appearance choice to navigate the heteronormative environment prevalent around the lesbian community of the 1970s in Taiwan. The analysis of the study and their narratives showed that participants perceive their gender performances as subtle blends of masculine and feminine traits fluidly. Specifically, many of the participants shared that *zhongxing* describes more than exterior gender or sexuality; it allows both masculine and feminine traits to “coexist, but do not blend” (Lu

& Hu, 2021, p. 187). Their *zhongxing* expression practices challenge the stereotypes by refusing to conform to gender binaries in the modalities of dress. Instead, the *zhongxing* offers an opportunity to resist to the traditional norms and allow the member of the LGBTQ+ community to transform freely within genders. From the study, three out of fifteen participants expressed their masculine identity by intentionally wearing masculine clothing and maintaining short hair; two of them also mentioned engaging in activities like basketball and serving as caregivers in relationships to practice their *zhongxing* gender identity (Lu & Hu, 2021). *Zhongxing* is particularly seen by the younger generation as a form of gender performance and self-expression outside the cisgender heterosexual norms (Lu & Hu, 2021). This gender expression serves as a means of self-expression and belonging for individuals in the Taiwanese queer community, although the author acknowledges having only 15 participants may be limited to represent the whole community.

In an Asian-focused study, Kawamura and Rice (2009) explored how Asian body expression diverges from American norms due to the collective nature of Asian culture which prioritizes group identity over individual autonomy. This emphasis within the Asian community was reflected by a broad commitment to familial and communal honor. It was postulated that living outside of societal beauty standards could lead some individuals to experience feelings of shame and disapproval when living far away from social norms. Kawamura and Rice (2009) added that “children may thus feel pressure to maintain their physical appearance in order to project a positive image of their family” (p. 545). The case study exemplified the application of culturally sensitive cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) in addressing the intricate issues and body image concerns

prevalent in adolescent clients within diverse cultural contexts. Following a discussion on cultural differences, the study illustrates how a therapist effectively utilizes CBT techniques to uplift mood and enhance self-esteem in a teenage client (Kawamura & Rice, 2009). More specifically, after comprehensively understanding the client's dissatisfaction with her body image, where she mentioned her typical thoughts such as "disliking her eyelids, feeling overweight, and fearing that she was unattractive to others, especially men" (Kawamura & Rice, 2009, p. 554), the counselor utilizes "examining the evidence" concept in CBT to address client's fears of rejection and help her practice relaxation.

The studies (Kawamura & Rice, 2009; Lu & Hu, 2021; Quathamier & Joy, 2022) mentioned above offer insights to how societal norms, cultural contexts, and individual experiences intersect to shape body image, gender identity, and sexuality. American civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw discusses in her TED Talk (2016) how various social justice issues, such as racism and sexism, can often intersect, leading to layers of social injustice. Take the example from the video (Crenshaw, 2016), an African American woman identifying as a mother filed a lawsuit against a local car manufacturing plant for discriminatory hiring practices. However, the judge only considered the case's racial aspect, neglecting other intersections such as gender and marital status. Consequently, intersectionality is imperative to foster inclusive and culturally sensitive support to the LGBTQ+ and Asian communities. Likewise, the societal impact of factors like COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the social construction of bodies, underscoring the growing necessity for more careful and inclusive support systems (Quathamier & Joy, 2022). Furthermore, gender expression varies from culture to culture and represents an outward

expressive behavior, thus, it is a form of gender performance within broader social frameworks (Lu & Hu, 2021). This idea further affirmed how Asian queer body expression may diverge from Western norms due to the collective nature of Asian culture, emphasizing conformity to societal beauty standards and traditional roles. In mental health clinical work, Kawamura and Rice (2009) pointed out the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in the Asian community. They emphasize, when using an evidence-based approach like CBT, clinicians need to consider clients' cultural beliefs and values. As the case study mentioned in the research, family values are one of the main reasons why clients address body image concerns within this cultural context and dislike having single eyelids and feeling the pressure of being overweight than others (Kawamura & Rice, 2009).

Mental Health History of the Queer Community

Over the past decades, the changes in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) reflected evolving perspectives towards sexuality, gender identity, and self-expression. "Homosexuality was first classified as a sexual deviation under Sociopathic Personality Disturbance" (APA, 1952, p. 38), which highlighted societies' lack of acceptance of queer individuals. In DSM-II, homosexuality was classified as a nonpsychotic mental disorder, alongside pedophilia and exhibitionism. It was later declassified as a disorder in the 1973 revised version (Bayer, 1981). DSM-III-R (APA, 1987) was the first introduction of the category of "gender identity disorder" and "atypical somatoform disorder." This reflected societies' growing awareness of gender dysphoria and emphasized how mental health conditions could cause preoccupation with so-called an

imagined defect with body image. In 2013, a significant transformation occurred from APA's decision to rename "gender identity disorder" to "gender dysphoria" (APA, 2013). This change focuses on personal experiences of subjective and physical gender incongruence rather than seeing it as solely a mental issue, which has led to the introduction of the word "gender nonconformity." In DSM 4th edition with text revision (DSM-IV-TR,; APA, 2000) it updated the terminology for gender dysphoria with a noticeable culturally sensitive language, such as "desired gender," which has evolved into "experienced gender," "cross-sex medical procedure," and, more recently, "gender-affirming medical procedure." In addition, "natal male/natal female" has shifted to "individual assigned male/female at birth." These updates reflect a commitment to language that respects diverse perspectives and choices of self-expression and focuses on subjective experiences.

Receiving medically necessary gender-affirming care often requires a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, despite its applicability to only some clients since not all of them experience dysphoria (Ducar, 2022). Bray (2015) discussed the difference between the medical classification of "gender dysphoria" and "body dysmorphic disorder" and the notion of mental distress in embodiment. One key point to consider covered was whether the criteria in the DSM would adequately support and comprehend individuals who sought to modify their bodies, without reducing the complexity of their gender identity, as the individuals' experiences may not be fully encapsulated by it (Bray, 2015). In this context, hormonal and surgical interventions in treating gender dysphoria are considered medically necessary for many clients, yet Bray argued that the current medical and mental health field did not fully understand the necessity for body modification solely

focused on gender dysphoria criteria, clarifying that the “body is always mediated by culture, history, language, and the intervention of other subjects” (p. 431). Bray (2015) further claimed that there is a need for new criteria to support those who seek to modify their bodies, and the criteria should not be fully reducible to questions of gender identity but should focus more on subject experiences. Acknowledging that human experiences are much broader than the number of criteria and systems seems necessary, and this acknowledgment may open a door for further discussion of how clinicians can really stand by clients’ experiences to provide support for well-being.

The qualitative research by Bruns et al. (2024) explored the impacts of hormone therapy (HT) on trans men, transmasculine people, trans women, transfeminine people, and some nonbinary people. It highlighted the lack of systematic guidance and data regarding changes in sexual and gender identity for trans people undergoing HT. The review focused on various aspects of sexuality, including physical changes, sexual desire, satisfaction, distress, sexual orientation, identity, and behaviors, within the context of transgender experiences. The key findings included that while HT alone does not typically change sexual orientation for most individuals, it can lead to increased body satisfaction and alter social gender signifiers, thus affecting how trans people navigate their social worlds: “Sexual acts may change, but this may be related more to shifting gender norms and body satisfaction via HT and other transition-related factors than HT alone” (Bruns et al., 2024, p. 24). The study also highlights that 70.5% of trans youth had been asked questions that led to discomfort, and invalidation experienced in transition-related care; the questions were: “Do you want to keep living as a girl? If you had to live as a girl, would you kill yourself? Do you cross-dress?” (Seburn et al., 2019, p. 14).

Bruns et al. (2024) underscores the importance of creating research spaces where trans individuals can articulate their experiences in their own words, thus fostering a deeper understanding of their sexuality. Additionally, hiring at least one clinician from the trans community can contribute to a more inclusive therapy environment for clients. Overall, Bruns et al. (2024) illuminated the necessity for future research to incorporate a sociocultural lens to comprehensively understand the impacts of hormone therapy on sexuality within the transgender community

Queer identity has become intertwined with politics. According to Ashley (2020), the term “rapid-onset gender dysphoria” (ROGD) has emerged in discussions with its highly controversial hypothesis on social contagion being the determinant to transgender youth identity. It describes a phenomenon where individuals, previously showing no signs of gender dysphoria, suddenly identify as transgender due to social influences and develop mental health issues. Ashley questioned the validity of ROGD and its potential impact on supporting gender affirmation and transition. Ashley (2020) addressed that the ROGD theory had significant flaws, as the theory suggested that supporting someone’s gender identity was harmful and exploring transgender identities should be discouraged (Rosario Sánchez et al., 2019, as cited in Ashley, 2020). Furthermore, the article questioned why late-onset gender dysphoria, a well-known issue, was not included in ROGD discussions but was instead described as a psychic epidemic. According to the DSM-5:

Late-onset gender dysphoria occurs around puberty or much later in life. Some of these individuals report having had a desire to be of the other gender in childhood that was not expressed verbally to others. Others do not recall any signs of

childhood gender dysphoria. For adolescent males with late-onset gender dysphoria, parents often report surprise because they did not see signs of gender dysphoria during childhood. Parents of natal adolescent females with the late-onset form also reported surprise, as no signs of childhood gender dysphoria were evident. (APA, 2013, pp. 455-456)

Despite potential biases in research results, Ashley (2020) further argued that exploring identities, even if transgender identity spreads widely among peers, can be a healthy process to ensure the well-being and support of individuals, regardless of the onset of their exploration of gender. Overall, Ashley's critical commentary underscored the importance of questioning the assumptions and implications of ROGD theory within the broader context of transgender healthcare. By challenging the validity and motivations behind ROGD theory, the article calls for a re-evaluation of approaches to supporting transgender youth and promoting their well-being.

Suzuki et al. (2010) investigated the psychiatric classification systems used in East Asia (Japan, Korea, China, and Taiwan). The two diagnostic classification systems mentioned in the research are the International Classification of Disease, version 10 (ICD-10; World Health Organization, 2016) and the DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000). In preparing for the new versions, efforts were made to collect the views of psychiatrists from different countries across the world. The objectives were to identify the systems in use, describe psychiatrists' views on them, analyze similarities and differences among the countries/areas, and discuss factors influencing their usage. The method of this research was collected using a standardized questionnaire for at least 100 psychiatrists per country/area. The questionnaire was developed by a New Zealand psychiatrist and

translated into Japanese, Korean, and Chinese. It sought opinions on the utilization, preference, and revision of classification systems represented by the DSM and ICD. The results showed variations in utilization, preference, and opinions on further revision of DSM and ICD systems. For example, the Chinese Society of Psychiatry in China was influenced by Russian psychiatry in the adaptation of the ICD and DSM into a third version known as the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders (CCMD-3, 2001; Chen, 2002, as cited in Suzuki et al., 2010). Japanese psychiatrists primarily use ICD, influenced by the historical ties to German psychiatry (Nakane and Nakane, 2002, as cited in Suzuki et al., 2010), whereas Korean and Taiwanese psychiatrists tend to favor the DSM due to their closer academic connections with the United States (Lee et al., 2008; Ko et al., 2005, as cited in Suzuki et al., 2010). Additionally, Suzuki et al. (2010) noted that young Japanese psychiatrists often prefer a team-based approach, highlighting the importance of communication in community-based services.

In 2020 comparative research by Suzuki et al. (2010), cultural considerations revealed that respondents in China found operational diagnoses helpful regardless of culture, whereas Japanese respondents faced challenges with foreign patients due to language barriers among the diverse population within Japan. Opinions vary on both classification systems for general practitioners, reflecting differing expectations and roles in psychiatric care across countries/areas. More specifically, general practitioners (doctors who provide primary medical care) are expected to be actively involved in diagnosing and treating mental health issues alongside psychiatrists in Taiwan. In contrast, general practitioners typically do not provide primary care for individuals with mental health issues in Japan. Consequently, there may be less emphasis on general

practitioners using the same classification system as psychiatrists in some countries. As Suzuki et al. (2010) concluded, global organizations should develop the international classification systems from ICD and DSM collaboratively to consider all the different situations and possibly bring up more mental health changes in local areas.

In summary, across decades, the DSM's evolution of reclassification on homosexuality from Sociopathic Personality Disturbance (APA, 1952) to updated terms like "experienced gender" and "individual assigned male/female at birth," reflect language that aligns with personal experiences (APA, 2022). The changes in language use and classification have considerably progressed how people view different experiences not as a disease or issue. As many are aware, gender-affirming care encompasses healthcare services catering to individuals of all ages experiencing symptoms of gender dysphoria or distress due to a misalignment between their gender identity and sex assigned at birth. This holistic approach endorsed by The Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2023) involves mental health care, medical interventions, and social support services. Given the ethical considerations and irreversible nature of bodily changes associated with gender-affirming procedures, adherence to standards of care criteria is essential. These criteria, often deliberated upon by healthcare providers and, in some cases, parents of minors under 18-years-old, are crucial (The Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2023). However, as Bray (2015) suggested, decisions regarding body modification are profoundly personal and may not always be directly tied to one's gender or sexual identity. Consequently, the rigid application of these criteria possibly serves as a gatekeeper for individuals seeking body modifications that diverge from traditional norms.

In the current circumstances in gender studies, gender equality laws, and the human rights movement in general, with the increased anti-LGBTQ law and discrimination around the world, mental health risks, and trauma experienced in the queer community, there is a necessary need for mental health support specializing in queer community (McDermott et al., 2021). Meanwhile, there is a noticeable challenge, and the misunderstandings consistently cause extra stigma and harm to the public and the LGBTQ+ community. The ROGD theory, which has been seriously criticized by numerous researchers, including Ashley's (2020), still shows that much further progress is needed to work on the ongoing stigma in the LGBTQ+ community and even the broader community. The Asian community has several different histories and cultures, and it must be remembered that not every country uses the same standard in treatment and requires thoughtful consideration and cooperation with all voices. As mentioned before in the research of Suzuki et al. (2010), not all countries use DSM as their manual in clinical work, and even if they use DSM, it may involve many cultural considerations when meeting with clients from diverse backgrounds. On a global level, organizations should expand international classification systems collaboratively to consider all the different circumstances that meet people's needs from different backgrounds.

The Factors towards Body Modification in Asian Society

Body modification can be seen as a glimpse of people's choices based on their culture, beliefs, and values. Bodies are not just referring to physicality but objects in a network of social relations, carrying meanings from language, discourse, and power; collective body narratives provide stories of ways of being seen and ways of reflection within society (Bonnick, 2021; Quathamier & Joy, 2022). As mentioned earlier, body

modification can be viewed as a form of performance driven by intentions such as self-expression, identity clarity, or self-empowerment (Pitts, 2000). From Butler's point of view in *Gender trouble* (2006), gender is not only present as sex assigned at birth; it is a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment of a set of societal norms, and the social audience and the actors themselves come to believe and perform in the mode of belief. Therefore, it is valuable to examine environmental factors and the correlation between body modification choices and the values prevalent in society.

Linguistic terms and cultural images affect the LGBTQ+ movement and its development, shaping perceptions and interpretations of various aspects of society. Li (2013) researched the Taiwanese gay image and its development by reviewing literature from local publications, newspapers, online blogs, and academic research. Li (2013) also interviewed nineteen gay men to represent the community's local voice. The purpose of the study was to provide information, educate the general public and LGBTQ+ community, and break stereotypes and stigma in local Taiwanese society. Since the 1990s, the Taiwanese gay community adopted the term "*tongzhi*," which means allies, to encourage ongoing advocacy for rights outside of the LGBTQ+ community. This linguistic unifier quickly gained popularity in Mandarin-speaking countries, with both media and the public embracing the term. Through linguistic adaptation and the growth of the internet, the Asian gay community has gradually emerged from underground culture.

In addition to linguistic influence, Li (2013) discussed how media and Japanese Manga culture contributed to the visibility of queer images, providing opportunities for the development of Asian queer identities. Although mainstream Western cultures still

heavily influence online resources, Japanese media has played a significant role in shaping gay body image worldwide. For example, the “bear” image popularized in the United States gay community in the 1980s was characterized by body hair. However, East Asians typically have less body hair, and the Japanese “boys’ love (BL)” culture image highlights less body hair but is based more on style and character. In Taiwan, the “bear” image incorporates more local characteristics, such as muscular gender expression and specific age standards. It develops other family-related terms to describe body image in the Taiwanese gay community, such as “*gage*” (older brother), which means the person who tends to take care of others in a relationship; many of them also pursue fitness to get a certain shape of the body to reach certain beauty standards in the community. Li’s (2013) research introduced valuable terminologies, encompassing social, historical, and cross-cultural dimensions spanning literature, news, publications, and international interactions. However, it is crucial to be aware that not all individuals within the LGBTQ+ community identify with the same labels; one may not fit neatly into a singular category like the “bear” image, and identities can vary fluidly and co-exist.

Su (2005) delved into the dynamics of body politics and visual culture within Taiwan’s lesbian community, employing queer theory and feminist perspectives. Specifically, the study focused on the embodiment of a tomboy identity, referred to as “*T*,” within Taipei’s Ximending area in Taiwan. Su (2005) analyzed how these individuals shaped their gendered bodily performances in response to societal pressures stemming from education, social class, and sexuality, impacting their expression and identity in society. Su theorized that these Ts helped construct their self-identities through dress codes, hairstyles, breast-binding, and particular mannerisms under the “*T* (more

masculine)” and “Po (more feminine)” cultures and sought recognition in society. However, their behavior was often labeled as copying males, further marginalizing them in a heteronormativity society. The rejection and reinterpretation of gender symbols reflected challenges to gender power dynamics but also exposed the impact of societal rigidity and class differences on gender roles. Ts intentionally chose masculine symbols as a personality trait on their body to fulfill the non-binary-looking imagination to resist societal expectations, such as wearing masculine clothes, growing certain hairstyles, or wearing chest binding, expressing masculinity. Since sexuality is not necessarily discernable, by doing the gender-playing, Ts also enabled them to show their sexuality to other Pos, and vice versa, and embodied a new society construction. Although these gender expressions have been criticized by some feminist perspectives, seeing Ts’ body performance as self-denial of female bodies and imitation of male behaviors, it serves not only as a way to express identities to the people in the community but also as resistance against the male gaze and becoming objects of desire.

Henley and Porath (2021) delved into the complexity of Asian body modification and draw several examples from East Asia and Southeast Asia to illustrate the cultural factors at play. The historical development of body modification in East Asia, such as tattooing and tooth blackening, has evolved into modern cosmetic surgery. The modern standard of body modification aims for natural beauty, which leaves minimal visible evidence of change. The increasing demand for cosmetic surgery in Asia prompts critical questions about its cultural significance and matter for identity. For example, cosmetic procedures like the double-eyelid operation and nose augmentation in Japan or Korea reflect a nuanced interplay between cultural ideals and individual preferences for beauty.

According to Henley and Porath (2021), with the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, the proliferation of skin-lightening products and procedures in countries such as Thailand, India, and Korea prompted reflections on the enduring legacies of colonialism, Western cultural influence, and the construction of beauty standards. Particularly within feminist and activist circles, there's a growing awareness of the social and ethical implications of cosmetic surgery. However, the situation in Asia is more different, skin tone is more a matter of class than race. For instance, darker skin is often associated with the outdoor labor class in China, while in Japan, the white face paint worn by *geisha* serves as a reminder of the traditional association of fairness with refinement (Johansson, 1998, cited in Henley & Porath, 2021). The intersection of race, culture, and beauty standards in the context of skin-lightening practices across Thailand, India, and Korea underscores the complex dynamics shaped by historical legacies and societal perceptions. While the emergence of movements such as Black Lives Matter has brought increased awareness to issues of identity and representation, the discussions surrounding cosmetic surgery and skin tone extend beyond solely racial considerations to encompass broader socio-economic factors. Consequently, the evolution of body modification in East Asia in the future development of body culture remains uncertain and shaped by evolving concepts of identity, human rights awareness, and cultural heritage globally. Henley and Porath highlighted Giddens's quote to illustrate their point on social construction: "We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves" (Giddens, 1991, p. 75, cited in Henley & Porath, 2021). This broader understanding of identity formation invites further exploration and research into the fascinating and complex world of Asian body modification, which emphasizes that

gender is not merely assigned at birth but constructed through societal norms, shaping both perception and behavior (Butler,2006).

Jairath and Daima (2021) examined the evolution of makeup, fashion, beauty ideals, gender roles, and gender expression through the influence of pop culture and society. The paper provided different expression formats for diverse cultures. With the rise of the Internet and widespread access to media, celebrities became influential figures shaping beauty standards, leading to the normalization of makeup and fashion among people of all genders. The authors explored how pop culture challenges gender norms, with examples like The Korean Wave K-pop stars redefining masculinity and beauty through their gender-non-conforming expressions of self-identity through fashion and makeup. Jairath and Daima (2021) brought attention to this Asian phenomenon that emphasized the playful possibility of individuality and cultural expression regardless of sexuality and gender identity. Additionally, the authors highlighted some Indian companies have launched a range of beauty and grooming products specifically catered towards male customers, redefining masculinity and the identity of being a man. From this paper, makeup, and fashion, propelled by pop culture, continued to challenge and redefine societal perceptions of gender roles and expression; products such as these were no longer limited to certain gender identities or sexual identities but also allowed all people of identities to use different tools or means of expressions to explore themselves freely.

The diverse factors shaping people's values and beliefs influence their choices in body modification, such as influence in linguistic terms (Li, 2013), societal norms (Henley & Porah, 2021), or as Su (2005) noted some lesbians use certain dress codes,

hairstyles, and breast binding not only to express their preferences but also to resist oppression related to education, social class, and sexuality. However, even though Henley and Porath (2021) suggested that the preference for brighter skin color in Asia was a matter of class rather than race, it is important to recognize that certain beauty standards can be reinforced based on societal power dynamics. This requires deeper consideration and careful reflection on values.

In pop culture, Jairath and Daima (2021) illustrated how Korea, particularly through its K-pop industry, promotes gender-non-conforming expressions, albeit within the confines set by powerful record companies. Yet, this endorsement did not translate to equal rights for the queer community. Research on topics such as cultural appropriation and queer-baiting shed light on the complexities involved, emphasizing the ongoing struggle for minority communities. Many cultures, once invisible and marginalized, have gradually gained representation in pop culture, exemplified by documentaries like “*Paris is burning*” (Livingston, 1990) and the latest season of “*RuPaul’s drag race*” (Murray, 2024). Drag culture signifies a shift from invisibility to visibility, having once been underground and now garnering a broad audience.

In conclusion, the multifaceted nature of body modification, cultural influences, and societal perceptions underscores the need for an understanding and critical examination. To enhance human rights and promote representation in various roles, it is crucial not only to empathize with others but also to critically reflect on our biases and interests.

Creative Implementation of Body Art

In various societal contexts, the experience of being a sexual or gender minority often presents challenges, prompting individuals to conceal their true selves due to fear of discrimination. Historically, many queer communities developed “codes” to navigate hostile environments. Ganley’s report from (National Galleries, 2022) suggested that wearing a green carnation became a symbol of gay identity, while the peacock feather in Art Nouveau represented queer identities. Additionally, gay men utilized different handkerchief colors to signify their sexual interests (National Galleries, 2022). The author believes that these symbols do not wholly define one’s identity; being queer doesn’t have a specific appearance. Acknowledging the choice of body art is a freedom for fostering authentic self-expression and self-acceptance.

The qualitative research by Weiler et al. (2021) investigated the relationship between the need for uniqueness (NfU) and various forms of body modification, including tattoos, piercings, and extreme body modifications. The participants consisted of 312 individuals, 194 females, 117 males, and one nonbinary person, between 18 and 66 years of age, with most being single students and having completed at least 12 years of schooling. Participants rated their characteristics and behaviors on a scale ranging from agree to disagree. The findings revealed that individuals with body modifications scored higher on NfU than those without; individuals with tattoos demonstrated a social awareness aspect, considering the social component of their tattoos while being less concerned about others’ reactions. In other words, individuals with body modifications tend to have a stronger need for uniqueness, and those with piercings and extreme body modifications were aware of how others saw their tattoos but didn’t worry as much about what others thought; participants with piercings and extreme body modifications tended

to defy rules and disregard others' opinions on their modifications. Despite some limitations, the study shed light on the differences in NfU among individuals with various body modifications. Moreover, the study revealed a positive correlation, suggesting that body modifications serve as a means of self-expression and identity construction, which showed that body modifications can serve as a medium for fostering unique identities through physical appearance. From this writer's perspective, it is noteworthy that this study has no mention of race, and only one of the participants is identified as non-binary. Thus, this study's relevance to Asian queer experience may be limited.

In another study, Ball and Elsner (2019) suggested tattoos can enhance well-being by promoting a positive self-image and boosting participants' self-esteem, highlighting the link between body art, self-esteem, and social interactions. The study hypothesized that tattoos could enhance self-esteem among college students aged 18 to 22. The experiment involved a sample of 60 participants, 12 males and 48 females. The ethnic identity of the participants was 78.33% Caucasian, 10% African American, 1.67% Hispanic/Latino, 3.33% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% mixed, and 1.67% other ethnicities (Ball & Elsner, 2019). Participants completed a Self-Esteem Scale (SES) before getting a temporary monochromatic tattoo with a size smaller than a cell phone. After two weeks, they retook the SES and reported their satisfaction with the tattoo, giving feedback on the social interactions and how many people had seen it. The results revealed that participants' self-esteem t-test scores changed from 66.98 to 69.68 over the two weeks, which means wearing tattoos can increase their self-esteem. The visibility of tattoos did not affect the score since the tattoos could still be shared on social media or become a topic in conversation from their social interactions. This study provided valuable insights

into the connection between self-esteem, tattoos, and social interactions, which proved that tattoos could enhance self-esteem. Further research on exploring potential factors that could contribute to changes in self-esteem may enhance the study further.

Another qualitative research (Bonnick, 2021) delved into the collective body narratives within the LGBTQ+ -identified adults using an art-making approach: temporary tattoo art-making. The study grounded in various narrative explorations acknowledged the historical symbols of queer visibility. In this context, tattoos served as a nonverbal form of communication, a visual language enabling them to convey their desired messages and memories. Queerness was framed as not a negative word; instead, it was a “nature finds itself cast under the gaze of a critical microscope” (Bonnick, 2021, p. 4). The research method involved a collaborative process where six LGBTQ-identified individuals under the age of 28 years old came together to co-create a personal symbol that represented their queer identity. After wearing it on their skin, participants shared feedback from the opening questions related to their identities. One of the participants expressed that the part of the identity has developed over time due to participation in this project; another shared that doing this project helps them reflect on gender affirmation. This experiential method significantly reshapes their perceptions of body image, offering a fresh lens through which to understand the intricate relationship between identity, visibility, and self-esteem within the LGBTQ+ community and providing a way of reclaiming and affirming uniqueness in the community. The limit of the research included that the sample of participants could have been more diverse and inclusive. Furthermore, considering the participants may not have been familiar with art as a form of self-expression, the method could have been simplified or illustrated using words.

In conclusion, Weiler et al. (2021) found that body modifications were linked to self-expression and identity construction, suggesting that body modifications can help individuals develop unique identities through their physical appearance. Ball and Elsner (2019) discovered that wearing tattoos can increase self-esteem due to part of self being seen. Additionally, Bonnick's (2021) temporary tattoo art-making project on gender affirmation offers LGBTQ+ individuals a new perspective on body image, highlighting the intricate relationship between identity, visibility, and self-esteem within the community while also providing a means of reclaiming and affirming uniqueness. Even though most of the research is still limited to other art modalities, it still provides insight into how creativity can be played in the process and how body modification can be possible for improving mental health.

Discussion

From all the literature, body modification is a deeply personal choice influenced by numerous factors, including cultural norms, societal perceptions, and individual beliefs (Henley & Porath, 2021; Lee, 2020; Li, 2013; Su, 2005). Queer Asian body image varies in appearance. Many factors shape how people express themselves through their appearance, whether through tattoos, surgeries, or fashion choices. Culture inevitably plays a significant role in shaping beauty standards and gender norms, with pop culture and societal power dynamics influencing perceptions of masculinity, femininity, and beauty (Jairath & Daima, 2021). Additionally, the discussion highlighted the importance of recognizing the intersectionality of identity and the ongoing struggles for human rights within marginalized communities (Crenshaw, 2016). Understanding these complexities requires critical reflection on biases and interests and empathy toward others'

experiences. Ultimately, the multifaceted nature of body modification and its cultural influences underscores the need for nuanced understanding and critical examination in our interactions with others and society at large. Creativity, as a capacity place to explore, can grow resilience, develop self, and find meaning in our bodies, and can be a future area to develop art methods to support the embodiment of queer body narratives.

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This literature review is about my self-exploration and healing process, based on my own experience as an international student and Asian queer in the United States.

Many times, I constantly find myself both enjoying and struggling to share my experiences and teach others about my queer Asian experiences. With this, I aim to offer a piece of myself to the world, particularly in the field of mental health counseling.

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As an art therapist, I always find myself thinking more visually, so I am going to share my appreciation with an image. I am like a plant (Senecio Blue Chalk Succulent) growing up from the soil, with society and my family's support serving as my soil. My relationships and important others are like the air and wind help me grow and learn. What motivates me to grow is the joy and desire for freedom as the sun. Definitely, we all have a part of us that needs rest at night with the moon and grows by ourselves at times.

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