

From Pink to Ink: Understanding the Decision-Making Process of Post-mastectomy Women Who Have Covered Their Scars with Decorative Tattoos

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Abstract : Breast cancer is pervasive among women, and an increasing number of women are opting for a mastectomy: a medical operation in which one or both breasts are removed with the intention of treating or averting breast cancer. However, there is an emerging population of cancer survivors in European nations that, rather than attempting to reconstruct their breasts to resemble as much as possible 'normal' breasts, have turned to dress their scars with decorative tattoos. At a practical level, this study hopes to improve the support systems of these women by possibly providing professionals in the medical field, tattoo artists, and family members of cancer survivors with a deeper understanding of their motivations and decision-making processes for choosing an alternative restorative route - such as decorative tattoos - after their mastectomy. At an intellectual level, however, this study aims to narrow a gap in the academic field concerning the relationship between mastectomies and alternative methods of healing, such as decorative tattoos, as well as to broaden the understanding regarding meaning-making and the 'normal' feminine body. Thus, by means of semi-structured interviews and a phenomenological standpoint, this research set itself the goal to understand why do women who have undergone a mastectomy choose to dress their scars with decorative tattoos instead of attempting to regain 'normalcy' through breast reconstruction or 3D areola tattoos? The results obtained from the interviews with fifteen women showed that the disillusionment with one part of the other of breast restoration techniques had led these women to find an alternative form of healing that allows them not only to close a painful chapter of their life but also to regain control over their bodies after a period of time in which agency was taking away from them. Decorative post-mastectomy tattoos allow these women to grant their bodies with new meanings and produce their own interpretation of their feminine body and identity.

Keywords : alternative femininity, decorative mastectomy tattoos, gender embodiment, social stigmatization

Conference Title : ICGPGS 2020 : International Conference on Gender Psychology and Gender Socialization

Conference Location : Copenhagen, Denmark

Conference Dates : July 15-16, 2020