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The Meaning of Tattoo and Lesbian Couples: A Phenomenology Study

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Background: Lesbian phenomenon is considered as a deviant behavior and not accordant with the religion norms by most people. This is further exacerbated by the presence of tattoos on lesbians. The description of tattoos are not just a picture attached to any part of their body, each image showing the characters of a lesbian with each label, either as butch, femme or as andro. This study aimed to analyze the meaning of the tattoo on the lesbian couple. **Methods:** This study used a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. The subjects were lesbian couple who live in the district of Jember, which is made up of lesbian labeled as femme and lesbian labeled as butch and had a relationship as GF (Girl Friend) or in the term of the heterosexual as a lover. The primary data was collected in two ways, participant observation of subjects that was conducted by blending directly with members of the lesbian community and depth interviews. **Results:** The results showed that lesbian couple who had a relationship as GF for 6 years, began their relationship at the time when DV (22 years old) asked help AY (22 years old) to draw a tattoo on his arm. The subject decision to keep drawing a tattoo on their body is more as a symbol of intimate interpersonal relationships. **Conclusion:** The selection of a lock and key picture illustrates the meaning of their tattoo as a form of intimate relationship between them as a lesbian couple.

Keywords: Phenomenology Study, Lesbian Couple, Tattoo.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Swara Srikandi Indonesia (Association of Lesbian and Gay Indonesia), sexual orientation is one of the four components of sexuality which consists of emotional appeal, romantic, sexual and affection in person in a specific gender. Three components of sexuality are biological sex, gender identity (the psychological sense of men and women) and the role of gender (the cultural norms for feminine and masculine behavior).¹ Sexual orientation is different from sexual behavior because it relates to feelings and self-concept. However, someone can show their sexual orientation in their behaviors. There are three types of sexual orientation that exist today, i.e., Heterosexual is a sexual activity which sexual partners come from the opposite sex. Then bisexuality is a sexual activity which sexual partners come from the opposite sex and the same sex, and homosexuality is a sexual activity which sexual partners come from the same sex. Homosexual men are called gay, and homosexual women are called lesbian.²

Sexual deviance is defined as sexual impropriety (sexual perversion) including sexual behaviors or fantasies aimed to get an orgasm through sexual relations outside of heterosexual intercourse. Sexual deviance behavior is a heterosexual relationship which is generally compulsive and persistent. Therefore, sexual dysfunction and deviant sexual intercourse is one aspect of a personality disorder and is a neurotic disease.³ In other words, gay

group and 'Men Love Sex with Men' (MSM) and lesbians are included in the sexual perversion group.

Lesbian phenomenon is considered as a deviant behavior and not in accordance with the norms of religion by most people, therefore the lesbian community is positioned as the marginalized. The majority of Indonesian society still considers lesbians as sexual perversion which is not generally applicable and not accepted by society.⁴

In the lesbian community, there are three labels that represent the function of each party in sexual relations, namely Butch, Femme and Andro. For lesbians who act as butch, they will usually dressed like men, dressed commonly used by male and supported with a short haircut like men. They also often adorn his body with tattoos on their hands or feet. For lesbians who act as femme, they look like women in general, they do not even look different with other heterosexual women. They usually appear more elegant, wearing women's clothing such as skirts, shorts/trousers for women.⁵ For lesbians who act as andro, their appearance usually changes, according to the situation and the role they want to act within the lesbian community. Sometime they can dressed in casual sporty like men, but they also often appear feminine and dressed like women. Not only regarding appearance, dress, and behavior, but the responsibility was also just like a man in a heterosexual life. The description of tattoos are not just a picture attached to any part of their body, each

image showing the characters of a lesbian with each label. For a butch having tattoos indicate the nature of their ferocity just like men, but for more femme, it is for their sensuality, their eroticism will be stronger that is read as a vulgarism discourse.

Not only that, the number of tattoos carved on their bodies with images and the use of different color is to symbolize the state of their economy, since par for each image and the use of ink is different in every detail, the drawing of tattoos is priced accordingly to the image scale and the ink used, the price will be higher if the scale of the picture is wider and the complexity of drawing is more difficult, then injected besides using green base ink is also added with other color inks such as red, yellow, or blue, and the price will be lower if the image scale is smaller with a level of complexity that is not too hard, and only injected with only green baseline.⁵

Tattoos in Indonesia is no longer limited to the interaction between tattoo artists and the client in the practice of tattooing, but this body art has come out into public areas. According to Olong,⁶ large cities communities that experience the phenomenon of tattoo will get something called “effect repetitions,” is patterns of irregularities and influence that occur continuously and repeatedly allowed to proceed until the people around and the people who deal with it will be accustomed, and within each community will form the ability to adapt to such deviations.⁶ Tattoos have become a phenomenon that is preferred by most of the general population, including women. If people began to accept the existence of a man who has a tattoo (for example on the thugs or a motorcycle gang), but it is different with women who have tattoos. Research results of Tapaningtyas⁷ mention that society’s view tattooed women were negative 55.45%, positive 12.22%, and neutral 32.33%. Most people think negatively (fierce, creepy, thugs, naughty girls, wild) to a woman who tattoos her body.⁷ This is in line with the research of Armstrong et al.⁸ which states that tattooed women get more negative comments and stigma issues in public, workplace, or school than tattooed men.⁸ This study aimed to analyze the meaning of the tattoo on a lesbian couple living in the district of Jember.

2. METHOD

This study used a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. A qualitative study is a study that the findings are not obtained through statistical procedures or other forms of count, for example, study on the life, history, and behavior, as well as the role of organizations, social movements or reciprocal relationship.⁹ Phenomenological approach, want to see what happened to the humans from the first person perspective, that is from people who experienced it. The focus of phenomenology is not a particular experience, but the structure from conscious experience, which is an objective reality that manifests itself in the subjective experience of individuals. Phenomenology focuses on the subjective meaning of objective reality in the consciousness of people who live their daily life activities.¹⁰

The subject is taken by purposive technic, which is selected at subjects with inclusion criteria as follows:

- (1) They were lesbian couple;
- (2) lived in the district of Jember;
- (3) which is made up of a lesbian labeled as femme and a lesbian who labeled as butch;
- (4) had a relationship as GF (Girl Friend) or in the term of the heterosexual as a lover more than in one year;

- (5) Communicate with Indonesian,
- (6) Understand the topic empirically, and
- (7) Available as a research subject with full fill the informed consent.

Methodological reasons why choosing a lesbian couple from the community directly as a study subject were due to several considerations. First, referring to the phenomenon of lesbians that are still very covered on society, especially in the district of Jember which is known as the city of santri, but there is another side with the existence of lesbian community, when they sometimes dressed just like women in general, but they have different sexual orientation from the others. Second, it is very interesting to study about what the meaning of the tattoo on lesbian couples, as a specific expression related to the rejection of the community or the expression of love as on heterosexual couple. Moreover, the third is the demand of the lesbian couples to have a dual role considering the existence of them that caused much controversy and rejection in society, but on the other hand, they want to show their identity as a lover.

There were two types of data, primary and secondary data. The primary data was collected by doing a Participant Observer and a depth interviews. The observations were done by observing subjects and blending directly with members of the lesbian community. The next step was in-depth interviews. First researchers were doing *getting in*, in the form of adaptation of researchers in order to be well received by the subjects. Researchers should create a non-formal or kinship situation. Thus, researchers can build trust in order to avoid having distance between researcher and the study subjects. Usually, when doing the *getting-in*, researchers frequently visited the home (boarding) or basecamp and often met or interacted to follow their activities. Because of the frequent visits to the residence and meet or interact with the study subjects, it was easier for researchers to obtain the required data.

The phenomenological approach uses a data processing and analysis technique called Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The focus of IPA technique is how does one appreciate the experience, or in other words more on the meaning of the facts in their experience: a focus on life. Researchers did not enter this research process with a hypothesis of previous research, although they would have more general questions gained.¹⁰ The next step was data analysis. *Thematic analysis* is the most important analysis approaches used in IPA technique. The principle is the analysis focused on the understanding of the participant’s world and then focus full time on the transcripts (and listening to recorded conversations) in order to identify the main themes. The analysis began with a single case and continued in subsequent stages.¹⁰

3. RESULTS

3.1. Chronology of Tattooing

Based on the results of the study showed that subjects were lesbian lovers who have a relationship as GF (Girl Friend) since six years ago. GF is a term among the lesbian community that describes a relationship of lovers who are serious and committed to each other for a serious relationship and faithful to each other as in the case of heterosexual lovers (between men and women). In the lesbian community, there is Butch label who serve as men in sexual relationships and femme who serve as women. Lesbian couples in this study was GF couples with initials AY as a butch

and DV as a femme. If described physically, AY looks tomboy, dressed like a men such as jeans and dark T-shirts, while DV dressed properly just like a beautiful woman, with long hair and smooth white skin, the dress and behavior tend to be feminine, almost no difference with normal heterosexual oriented women (sexually attracted to the opposite sex).

This time, AY was 22 years old, studying on 7th semester at a university in Jember. DV was 22 years old and studying on 5th semester at other universities that are different from her lover AY. If tracing from the beginning of their relationship that began six years ago, they have been in a relationship as lovers since high school on 3rd class approximately in the period of mid-teens (18 years old). At that time they were both the same school but at a different class. Moreover, they were decided to be a lover unintentionally when DV asked AY to draw a temporal tattoo on her arm. Therefore, DV's hand can link to AY's hand. This was revealed by one of the study subjects as follows:

"...At that time we were in the 3rd class of High School, in fact, we were in the same high school but on different class... and at first it was unintentionally when AY drew a tattoo on my hand. When my hands were held I felt something great... beyond when I first loved with a guy.... I was also confused.... Why it felt like this. It felt strange when I was together with AY... (DV, lesbian femme, 22 years)."

3.2. Motivation of Tattooing

Based on the results of in-depth interviews with the study subjects, it was obtained information that the two of them made a permanent tattoo on their own initiative. Despite the rejection from the family of AY and DV, but the tattoo was retained and would not be removed. It was as expressed by the subjects of the following:

"...I was scolded by mama when she found out I made a tattoo with DV. Although they only know that both of are close friends. My mama said: what would you be... women should not have a tattoo..." (AY, butch lesbian, 22 years).

From the expression of study subjects above, it can conclude that our society still considers that a person both men and women who wear tattoos is identified with negative things that are identical to criminals, naughty women, and so forth. Things that underlie the general public in Indonesia to think negatively about the tattoo can not be separated from the bad history of tattoos. In the New Order era years, 1983–1985 was known as mysterious shooting. It was an exterminating operation (performed without trial) those who are suspected of criminal acts.

3.3. The Meaning of Tattoo Pictures

The results of in-depth interviews with the study subjects showed that this lesbian couple when choosing tattoos should have a meaning, a certain philosophy, and history and not just paste an image on the body. This was revealed by the study subjects such as the following:

"...I like pictures of tattoos but not carelessly... it must mean something, so there are a story and a history..." (AY, butch lesbian, 22 years).



Fig. 1. DV tattoo (labeled as femme).

The picture of lock and key, which the key image was depicted on the left arm of AY as the butch (acting like men in sexual relations) and lock image, were given on the left arm of DV as femme (acting as a woman in sexual relations). The meaning of the image was more deeply explained by AY that the happiness of DV would be opened with the presence of AY as her lover. The tattoo pictures were also modified by writing one love on DV and one hearth on AY. This was revealed by AY upon in-depth interviews as following:

"...the Happiness of DV, she can only get it from me... that is why the key image is on me. She will never be happy if she is not with me... so the only person who can make DV happy is me..." (AY, lesbian butch, 22 years).

The selection of a lock and key picture illustrated the meaning of their tattoo picture as a form of intimate relationship of love between them as a lesbian couple. Figure 1 is the picture of their tattoo visually that is permitted by the subjects to be taken as documentation.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Chronology of Tattooing

At the age of 18 years old, teenagers are no longer in the process of self-discovery by trying all the things that make them comfortable both in terms of social and sexual orientation. Moreover, it was strengthened by the age of their relationship that has reached six years, so this could be a permanent decision for now.

Because the lesbian couple AY and DV are aged approximately 23 years, this means that the commitment as a lover was seriously run by them with all the consequences to take care

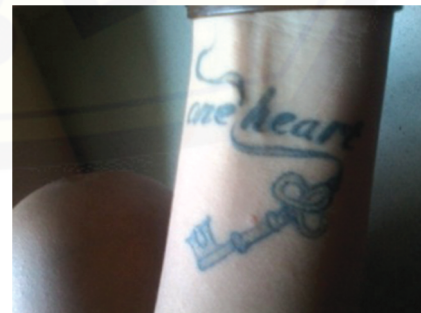


Fig. 2. AY tattoo (labeled as butch).

of each other and faithful to each other. A person who entered at the age of emerging adulthood, range of 18–25 years old, is characterized by a period with experimental and exploration activities. There are two criteria refer to adult status, namely economic independence and responsibility for the consequences of their own actions. Additionally, in young adulthood, idealism contained in the stage of formal operational is declining, which is then replaced with more realistic and pragmatic thinking.¹¹

4.2. Motivation of Tattooing

The emergence of the tattoo phenomenon as a subculture (the culture of a particular community) in society, especially among women remains a contradiction in society. Moreover, a certain religion forbids the use of tattoos. However, there is no doubt that the era of modernization brings a tremendous impact on the emergence of permissive culture among several community groups including the lesbian community.

Body for some people, become a proper medium for expression and experimentation. Not surprisingly, then raised decorations activity like Tattoo, this exploitation for most perpetrators is intended to style and a statement of rebellion. Originally people exploit the body for more specific purposes, such as for the identity of a particular culture, now body exploitation through tattooing is evolving as fashion and lifestyle.¹⁶ One of Non-Verbal communication media that is unique and interesting is the carving of the body (tattoos). TATTOO or tattoo body art continues to change the value from time to time.¹⁷

In the New Order era years, 1983–1985 was known as mysterious shooting. It was an exterminating operation (performed without trial) those who are suspected of criminal acts. Personnel who were exterminated were generally tattooed. Because of Petrus operation in years 1983–1985, tattoos changed its meaning from just an expression to a negative symbol. Tattoos users are also not entitled to be accepted as civil servants or employees of other government agencies.⁶ This shows that the government has given a bad label to tattoos and tattoos are also identified with criminals.⁶

Moreover, the process of tattooing was done by the subjects simultaneously at one of their friends among the lesbian community. The first initiatives of tattooing came from the idea of AY because AY was a girl that since the junior high school was already close to the world of music, in which AY held the position of a guitarist in a band of a school that all the personnel was male. According to AY, the habit of hanging out with the boys also played a major role in making her a tomboyish woman and sexual orientation as lesbian, including the culture of drawing on the body with tattoo art. Tattoo is a symbol of identity. Tattoos are used as a symbolic representation of how a person understand himself/herself. Also, the tattoo is a presentation of the main interests and activities. Tattoo is a representation of a hobby, work activities, and idol worshiping.¹² One of the motivations for women to do tattoo is a milieu factor (boy band) that can tolerate tattoos.¹⁴

This condition is contrary to tattooing among inmates as the study by Handoko,¹⁵ which revealed that Tattoo and tattooing activities among inmates have two main functions, personal and social function. The personal function is related to tattoos as works of art. In this limit, the tattoo serves as an expression of life experience that also serves as a reminder of certain events and the decoration of the body, as an expression of religiosity, therapy

and relaxation, talisman, sex appeal, personal safety, and to cover scars or tattoos that are considered not good. Another personal function is as income for inmates who can tattoo. The social function of the tattoo is the symbol of the group, to socialize and foster self-confidence of individuals in the group, both inside and outside the the Correctional Institution.¹⁵

4.3. The Meaning of Tattoo Pictures

Sanders¹² said that women tend to think of tattoos as a permanent body decoration. Especially it intended for personal enjoyment and comfort of an intimate relationship with the individual. The chosen Tattoo is placed on the body part that was often seen by someone who has a primary relationship with the woman.¹² On the other hand, Atkinson¹³ stated that modifying the body becomes a means of liberation in the process of reconstructing the woman's identity.¹³

In traditional societies, the tattoo is placed as a device that shows the loyalty and obedience of individuals to the rules agreed on the structure of society, therefore that its meaning is understood tattoo communally. In modern society, only individuals who are tattooed are aware of the meaning of their tattoo, therefore it is interpreted personally. However, there are also some tattooed individuals who interpret it communally (in certain groups). Sanders¹² divided the motivation of tattooed in outline, namely:

- (1) Symbolization of an interpersonal relationship. Tattoo is a symbol of friendship, love, or something relate to others.
- (2) Participation in a group. The tattoo is used to show a connection and commitment to the group.
- (3) Symbols of identity. The tattoo is used as a symbolic representation of how a person understands him/herself.
- (4) Presentation of primary interest and activity. Tattoo is a representation of a hobby, work activities, and idol worshiping.
- (5) Statements about the aesthetic beauty. Although they do not care about the meaning of self-definition or associational of the selected tattoo, tattoos users usually realize the decorative function/aesthetic design.

5. CONCLUSION

As lesbian lovers who has been in a relationship as GF (Girl Friend) for 6 years, since the age of 17 years to 23 years, the couple started their relationship as lovers when she fell in love at a time when both were involved in drawing a tattoo on one of their arms (DV asked AY to draw a tattoo on her arm). When DV hand was held by AY, DV felt differently and was more than falling in love with men. Although they were lesbian and tattooed, this still got the rejection from the family. Therefore, families consider them as friends. The decision of subjects to still draw a tattoo on their body were as a symbol of a very intimate interpersonal relationships. The selection of lock and key picture illustrates the meaning of their tattoo picture is a form of intimate relationship of love between them as a lesbian couple.

There needs to be a deeper understanding of the public to be able to understand the lesbian community from the other side, especially from lesbian couples who are tattooed. That their presence is not always identical to negative and criminal behavior, but rather to an expression or it can be a symbol of a close relationship of love. It is important so that they have a positive reception to themselves and their community therefore it will not lead to

stigma and discrimination that will bring them to risk their life and threaten the safety of their lives.

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