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Piercings in Queer Culture

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Piercings in Queer Culture

Piercings have been popular in queer cultures for longer than I have been alive, and have been an important part of my life for about as long as I have known I am queer. As soon as I started interacting with other queer people in my life more and became a part of the community, I noticed that piercings were very common to see in queer groups and loved them at first sight. The freedom to express oneself in whatever way makes you feel most comfortable in your own body is something that I heavily appreciate the existence of, and that is what I see piercings doing for people.

Gender affirmation is a big reason piercings intertwine with queer culture, which will generally be most noticeable in transgender communities, but can apply to cisgender individuals as well. For cis women, a pair of nipple piercings or a clitoral hood piercing might make her feel connected to her womanhood, and give her another way to express an appreciation for the body she has. For a transgender person, nipple piercings may give the pierced person a reason to find beauty in the breasts, or lack thereof, that they have, leading to less discomfort and dysphoria around that part of their body. Another important consideration is that nipple piercings can be a challenge for someone who intends to get top surgery, due to the nipples being removed and reattached during the procedure.



Unusual piercings by [Nadja Robot](#); used under [CC BY-NC 2.0](#)

For a transgender person, however, the reason for the piercings may get more in depth in terms of functionality. A transgender woman with a penis might get a prince albert piercing, “a piercing that enters at the base of the head, about the space where the head connects to the shaft. It exits into the urethra, and typically jewelry sits outside the urethral opening” (Loheide, “Prince Albert 101”). This piercing can alter the function of the penis slightly. As the jewelry goes through the urethra, it can cause troubles with urinating while standing, making the urine leak and drip onto places it was not intended to go. This may make the pierced person sit down to urinate, so as to avoid the leakage. This functional need to sit while urinating emulates the traditional way that a woman would be positioned for the same activity, therefore providing gender affirmation. In a similar vein, there is a modern myth that the Prince Albert piercing was named such because Prince Albert himself would use the piercing in ring form to tie down his penis and decrease the bulge in his pants. This could be a very interesting way for a transgender woman to tuck her penis and give the illusion of a flatter surface with certain clothes.

In a similar context, transgender men may seek out paired labia piercings at a larger gauge. Large gauge piercings are piercings that have been done to have a bigger hole, fitting larger diameter and heavier jewelry. The weight of the jewelry in that area of the body, and the need to adjust it somewhat often, emulates the experience of having testicles to be aware of. In “HRT Experiences in Piercings,” having experienced these piercings himself, Tyler relays that “They are the most annoying, difficult, in the way piercings. I have to be aware of how I place my legs when I sit, of how my underwear hangs, of them getting tangled and pinched and caught. I’m often adjusting them to sit correctly, and when they snag its unpleasant- and I couldn’t be happier!” While this may not sound like a particularly pleasant experience, it is something similar to what a man with testicles would experience in their day to day life, something that can help a trans man feel more himself in his own body. The big things like pronouns and presentation are important, but those small details about one’s existence can make such a huge difference in how they feel about themselves.

Having such a small inconvenience added to your daily life via a piercing that impacts the function of your genitals may seem pointless, or even odd to want, but it is similar to that of a person born with the genitals that match their concept of self. When bottom surgery is such an invasive, expensive, and intense procedure to go through, it is not easily accessible to the general public. Most commonly, it is either unaffordable, or if they do have the money, they can't afford to take the time off of work for the healing process. Regardless of the reason, if bottom surgery is not an active option for a trans person, a piercing is a much more affordable and just generally more accessible way to gain comfort and a reinstated sense of self.

Another way that piercings exist with queer culture is with the "Gay Ear." Back when it was much less safe to be openly gay, it was often seen that people would use codes to signal to one another that they were gay. This is easily seen in the use of hanky code, in which different colored handkerchiefs in specific pant pockets would symbolize queerness and an interest in specific kinks, during the 80s. Of course, that was an inherently sexual signaling system, whereas the gay ear existed as a family friendly version. "Born from these codes is a phrase few now remember as familiar, 'Left is right and right is wrong' ('wrong' here meaning gay)" (Loheide and Dellaquilla, "Point 89"). That phrase, in a time where the piercing community was building itself up greatly and gaining in popularity, led to a large population coming to an understanding that a singular piercing in the right earlobe reflected people's identity as gay.

As the code gained popularity and became widespread, however, it ended up being too well known and compromised the safety of those who had it. Though the spread of information was inconsistent, and at some point few could agree on which ear was the gay ear. With such conflicting yet widespread information, many people with one ear pierced went and got their other ear pierced so as not to seem suspicious and end up being outed as gay to the general public when they are not ready to be, while others were unafraid and donned their single lobe piercing with pride.

The queer community also has many ties to the kink community, as seen with the aforementioned hanky code. Piercer of 11 years, Lynn Loheide, shares that "Early body piercing has been permanently shaped by LGBTQIA kink spaces, in particular the leather bdsm and bear scene." There is a portion of the kink community, especially within BDSM, that involves play piercings, which can be permanent or temporary piercings intended for entertainment or kink use. Some examples of play piercings are the use of piercings to use for suspension in the air, to lace through a series of hoops like a corset, to enforce chastity, and more. Suspension, in particular, can be described as almost meditative. For some, meditation on its own can be far too understimulating, and adding this extra element of an unchanging sensation to focus on, through the piercings they are hanging from, can help them get into that calm state. Piercings are such a wonderful way to express oneself, get an emotional release, or just straight up sexual pleasure, whichever suits the needs of the person receiving them. According to Palmer Haasch and Canela Lopezin in their "Kink at Pride" article, though there has been ongoing discourse regarding whether kink should be allowed at pride events, the kink community has been actively participating in queer events since the 1950s. During the Stonewall Riot, referred to in the queer community as the first Pride; transgender people, leather daddies, and BDSM enjoyers were a majority of those who fought back against discriminatory actions of the police. These communities have been, and continue to be, integral to the development of each other.

The way that the queer, kink, and piercing communities intersect has led to discrimination towards individuals, as well. Most notably in the medical community, doctors have been more interested in

removing piercings from a patient's body than they are in providing timely care, or even just being flat out unwilling to provide care. In his article, Henry Ferguson recounts that "Several of the staff had wanted to leave a badly injured patient to die on a trolley in the corridor because they were sure that as he was pierced and a motor cyclist he must be a gay sadomasochist and therefore likely to have AIDS. It was only the intervention of the surgeon that saved the patient's life. It was mine." This specific example of medical neglect is less likely outside of the AIDS epidemic, but personal biases like those creep into the medical field regularly at the cost of patient health as well as many other fields. For example, within the community of people with chronic illnesses, it's known that patients have to go to doctors appointments dressed a certain way for the best chance at being taken seriously. Simple forms of expression like having piercings, colored hair or alternative fashion sense (things common in queer and kink spaces) can encourage the inherent biases of a doctor and lead to lower quality medical care. If someone looks alternative, grunge, or disheveled, they may be labeled as drug seeking upon first impressions, but if they look too nice and dressed up they may be seen as not struggling enough to need help. In addition to that, it is common knowledge that it is much less likely for a person with multiple piercings to be able to get a job, despite those piercings having no substantial impact on their ability to complete their work. With piercings being such a strong and prevalent part of the queer community and other cultures, it feels as though this discrimination against piercings has more to do with the specific communities that have them rather than the piercings themselves.

Overall, piercings have such a large history, with so much meaning behind many of the possible piercing types. Whether it is through the lens of gender affirmation, the expresison of kink, or discrimination in important fields, piercings play a huge role in daily life and the treatment of people in society. These have all been a huge part of my life, being part of the queer, trans, and kink communities while having my own deep love for piercings.



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(Featured image from [Wikimedia Commons](#))

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