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## **TATTOO OR TABOO? THE SOCIAL STIGMA OF TATTOOS**

*Abstract. The paper analyzes the characteristics of tattoo perception in the society based on the description of the students' attitudes to tattooing and piercing. Based on earlier empirical studies related to the study of tattoo perception (Shannon-Missal L., Sidoti E., Paolini G., Tringalii G., Camacho J., Timming A.), a survey was created consisting of 23 questions (14 questions were intended for people without tattoos and 9 items were designed for people with body art). The study involved N=131 respondents (M=67, F=64) aged from 15 to 25 years old.*

*Keywords: body modification, tattoo, attitude to tattoos, stigma, stereotypes.*

### **Introduction**

Radical body modification in the form of tattooing and body piercings has experienced expanded expression, appropriation and visibility within the last

several decades and has become a part of everyday life for large sections of the population [6].

Perceptions of tattooing and tattoos have purportedly undergone a ground shift within the last 25-30 years. These encompass dramatic changes within the tattoo industry itself, and consequently within perceived attitudes towards tattoos and tattooing within society. Tattooing has moved from being a relatively obscure topic associated with deviancy and non-mainstream groups to a thriving aspect of modern consumer culture that can be seen in terms of fashion and popular culture. The use of tattooing is associated with, or has become an integral part of various subcultures, while tattooing itself has produced its own community, collectors, aesthetics and practices [1].

Today, tattoos are very fashionable for many, but their history began in the South Pacific. It is believed that tattoo etymology begins in the English language in 1769 with Joseph Banks, the naturalist aboard *The Endeavour*, Captain James Cook's ship. Whilst sailing throughout Polynesia they took the word “tatu” from the Tahitian and Samoan languages. In Cook's diary the word is first used as a noun and a verb. Sailors travelling in Polynesia reintroduced the custom into Europe and tattoos were mainly associated with sailors for years (and to some generations still are). Tattooing existed in pre-Christian, Germanic and Celtic tribes and was described by Julius Caesar in 54 BC [2, 27].

### **The attitude to the tattoo in modern society**

Today, the tattoo has made considerable inroads into culture. The so-called everyman and everywoman are acquiring tattoos in the twenty-first century. It appears that it is losing its bad reputation and can be seen more and more on the necks, hips, backs, and arms of America's population [3]. Tattoos can take any number of forms, from animals to quotes to cryptic symbols, and appear in all sorts of spots on our bodies – some visible in everyday life, others not so much. About three in ten Americans (29%) have at least one tattoo, seven in ten (69%) have two or more [4].

The rapid acceptance has given researchers across the social sciences a reason to take notice [2, 10]. Tattooing requires to be studied in a holistic way, not limited solely to one aspect or component of tattooing [1]. In 2013, a study was conducted in Malaysia, a multi-racial Asian country. Overall, evidence suggests that the society perceives tattooing and body piercing practices as a form of art, spirituality, immortalizing significant moment memories, self-expression and representation of the dark. Nonetheless, a degree of uncomfortableness exists among most individuals in the current study when being around with individuals with tattoos and body piercing. Further, employment opportunities are additionally perceived to be negatively affected [6].

### **Tattoo stigma**

In her paper *‘Exploring permanent property: An exploration of the tattoo acquisition in the Midwest’*, Tiffany Cross notes that if one were to visit local libraries and bookstores, one might notice shelves filled with books like Steve Gilbert’s *“The Tattoo History Source Book”*, discussing the tattoo’s past, or *“Dale Rio’s Tattoo”*, filled with pages upon pages of photographs establishing the tattoo as many things from an emblem of independence to an art form. There are magazines like *Tattoo Artist Magazine*, a self-proclaimed *“quarterly trade journal for the Professional tattooer.”*

A plethora of scholarly articles in economics, sociology, psychology, history, and anthropology and reference books provide evidence of the tattoo’s surge in popular interest [3]. According to a survey of *Harris Poll*, tattoos are especially prevalent among younger Americans, with nearly half of Millennials aged from 18 to 35 years old (47%) and over a third of Gen Xers aged from 36 to 50 years old (36%) saying they have at least one, compared to 13% of Baby Boomers aged from 51 to 69 years old and one in ten Matures aged from 70 years old (10%). Millennials and Gen Xers (37% and 24%) are furthermore

exponentially more likely than their elders (6% Baby Boomers, 2% Matures) to have multiple tattoos [4].

However, there are still a lot of stereotypes associated with tattoos. Some people perceive tattooed individuals as immoral, crude, unstable, undesirable, and foolish, while others consider them appealing, interesting, unique, self-confident, desirable, and progressive [18].

As Jocelyn Camacho indicated in a 2014 study, “*over the past few decades tattoos have migrated on to the celebrity skin of today's pop culture icons. In the past twenty years, tattoos have moved from deviant subcultures to the mainstream, and yet are still considered to be a mark of the disfavored fractions of society*”. The dominant culture continues to regard the bearers of tattoos as social deviants, while at the same time appropriating tattoos for use as fashion statements, beauty enhancements, and mechanisms for continued oppression [8].

The 2009 study shows that people who have tattoos are often perceived as criminals inclined to deviant behavior. Brian Miller says sarcastically that it is perfectly legal to discriminate against persons with body art in the USA. Even those with body art themselves still prefer not to work with body art (non-concealable) wearers in jobs with high levels of face-to-face customer contact or in jobs in which rewards are shared equally like team-based sales [5].

The following statistics and estimates are compiled by Larry Shannon-Missal in his research paper ‘*Tattoo takeover: Three in ten Americans have tattoos, and most don't stop at just one*’: “45% feel that those with tattoos are more rebellious than those without – though it's worth noting that this percentage continues to decline (54% held this belief in 2008; 50% in 2012), likely a byproduct of tattoos' continued trend toward the mainstream” [4].

Italian researchers in 2010 conducted an extensive study to find out that body art was associated with unhealthy lifestyles and may be considered an indicator of risk taking behaviors [7]. An American study of 2014 aimed at

studying the attitude of the police to body art indicate that the use of tattoos as a marker for deviance does not appear to influence police behavior any differently than other characteristics such as race [8].

As can be seen from the study in 2015, tattooing is one of the physical criteria by which discrimination in the workplace is legalized. The court in many cases supports the discrimination of people with tattoos as violating the corporate standards of appearance [9]. Interviews with tattooed people showed that they believed they could not find a job because their tattoos were visible. Potential customers are additionally inclined to perceive tattooed employees as less capable [10]. However, one of the studies of 2018 shows that visible body art does not have a noticeable effect on the patients' perception of professionalism or competence of physicians [11].

American students evaluate women with tattoos as less attractive, less caring, less intellectual, less honest and less religious, but here the type of tattoo was important [12]. Such biases are based on the belief that women's tattoos are a violation of gender norms [13]. The results of the 2007 study in Britain showed that tattooed women were judged to be less physically attractive, more sexually promiscuous and drinkers than women without tattoos [14]. In France, men expect tattooed women to have sex more frequently on their first date than they are not tattooed [15]. The exception is women of creative professions: students perceived the professor with a tattoo as a more creative personality [16].

Almost half of the respondents in the same study of *Harris Poll* feel that tattooed individuals are less attractive (47%) than those non-tattooed, 44% report that they are less sexy and a third (34%) believe them to be less respectable. Meanwhile, between a quarter and three in ten think those with tattoos are less intelligent (29%), healthy (28%) and spiritual (25%) [4].

The US study of 2017 showed that tattooed targets, especially women, were rated as stronger and more independent, but were rated more negatively on

other character attributes than the same target images with the tattoos removed [17].

### **Current research**

It is noteworthy that in Russia the first tattoo parlor was opened in St. Petersburg in 1905. However, with the advent of Soviet power, the development of tattoo art stopped [20, c. 356]. Russia's Tsar Nicholas II journeyed to Japan, after it was re-opened to the world in 1854, specifically to acquire tattoos [19, c. 42].

The tattoo became associated with the marginal elements of society, including the criminal way of life. Currently modern society in Russia is more tolerant to the decoration of the body. The popularization of tattoos through cinematography and music gave a rapid impetus to the development of the tattoo industry. The purpose of the paper is to analyze the characteristics of tattoo perception in the society based on the description of the students' attitudes to tattooing and piercing.

### **Research hypothesis**

Based on the results of numerous research papers, we have hypothesized that the students' attitude to the people with visible body-art is expected to be negative in Russia.

### **Materials and methods**

Students from schools, colleges, universities (a total of 131 respondents - 67 men and 64 women) took part in the survey, which includes several parts. The first part includes questions about age, gender, education of the respondent, and the amount of tattoos (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic data

<b>Gender</b>	Male	48,90%
	Female	51,10%
<b>Age</b>	15-18 years old	22,10%
	19-25 years old	77,90%

<b>Education</b>	Secondary General (school)	27,50%
	Secondary Professional (technical school/College)	41,20%
	Higher (University)	31,30%
<b>Do you have a tattoo?</b>	Yes	23,70%
	No	76,30%

The participants of the study were divided into Group 1 (tattooed interviewees) and Group 2 (non-tattooed respondents).

Group 1 (76,30% people) were instructed to answer the questions related to their attitude to tattoos, stigmatization of tattooed people, stereotypes associated with body-art, etc. (Table 2).

Table 2. The Social Attitude to Tattoos questionnaire for non-tattooed individuals

<b>What is your attitude to tattoos?</b>	Rather positive than negative	11,00%
	Positive	38,00%
	Neutral	27,00%
	Rather negative than positive	10,00%
	Negative	14,00%
<b>Does the tattoo procedure scare you?</b>	Yes	25,00%
	No	55,00%
	Difficult to answer	20,00%
<b>Do you associate tattoos...</b>	with prisoners/prison?	20,00%
	with people of the creative profession (artists, musicians, etc.)?	27,00%
	with any subculture?	9,00%
	Other	12,00%
<b>In your opinion, why do people make tattoos?</b>	To express themselves and their individuality	22,00%
	To attract the attention of others	22,00%
	To hide their own flaws (e.g. scars)	3,00%
	Other	4,00%
<b>In your opinion, are people with tattoos in comparison with people without them more influenced by drug addiction?</b>	To a greater extent	18,00%
	To a lesser extent	8,00%
	Equally	59,00%
	Difficult to answer	15,00%
<b>In your opinion, are people with tattoos in comparison with people without them more influenced by such pernicious habit as alcoholism?</b>	To a greater extent	24,00%
	To a lesser extent	10,00%
	Equally	58,00%
	Difficult to answer	8,00%

<b>In your opinion, people with tattoos in comparison with people without them...</b>	look much stronger and much more independent	21,00%
	look less strong and less independent	13,00%
	Tattoos do not affect my perception	61,00%
	Difficult to answer	5,00%
<b>In your opinion, women with tattoos in comparison with women without them ...</b>	look more approachable	58,00%
	less approachable	38,00%
	Tattoos in women do not affect my perception	No responses
	Difficult to answer	4,00%
<b>How would your close people feel if they knew you had a tattoo?</b>	Would be delighted	4,00%
	Angry	36,00%
	Upset	28,00%
	Surprised	23,00%
	Other	9,00%
<b>Are you planning tattoos in the future?</b>	Yes	40,00%
	No	35,00%
	Difficult to answer	25,00%

According to the results obtained, 50% of the respondents consider tattoo as a positive phenomenon; more than half of the participants (55%) are not afraid of the tattooing procedure. Furthermore, 60% of the respondents report that people with tattoos and without them are equally susceptible to alcoholism and drug addiction. It is noteworthy that 58% of the respondents consider women with tattoos more approachable than women without them; however, none of the respondents reported that tattoos do not affect their perception of the tattooed women (Table 2).

The study of 2017 drew attention to the fact that people with body-art are perceived by others as stronger and more independent (both men and women) [18], the results of our study partially confirm this. Thus, 25% of the respondents from Groups 1 believe that people with tattoos seem to be stronger and more independent than non-tattooed people. The majority of the respondents (61%) believe that personal characteristics do not depend on tattoos. Nevertheless, an insignificant number of the participants of the study (13%) perceive people with body-art as less strong and less independent.



The tattooed interviewees in Group 2 (23,70%) were asked to answer the questions about the influence of the tattoo on their lives, regrets and plans (Table 3).

Table 3. The Social Attitude to Tattoos questionnaire for tattooed individuals

<b>Are you planning to get another tattoo?</b>	Yes	61.30%
	No	29,00%
	Difficult to answer	9,70%
<b>Do you think that the decision to make a tattoo was erroneous?</b>	Yes	25,80
	No	74,20%
<b>Does your tattoo affect your job opportunities?</b>	Yes	41,90%
	No	48,40%
	Difficult to answer	9,70%
<b>How did your close people respond to your tattoo(s)?</b>	Happy	3,20%
	Upset	25,80%
	Angry	42,60%
	Surprised	18,70%
	Other	9,40%
<b>Has your tattooing changed the attitude of your close people to body-art?</b>	Yes, for the better	35,50%
	Yes, for the worse	16,10%
	No, it hasn't changed	35,50%
	Difficult to answer	12,90%

The analysis of the results obtained showed that the overwhelming majority of the respondents of Group 2 (74,20%) do not consider the decision to make a tattoo to be erroneous. Moreover, 60% of the respondents are ready to get another tattoo. According to the survey, 41.90% of the tattooed respondents reported that they encountered difficulties finding a job because of their visible body-art. Additionally, the student respondents told about the negative attitude of their close people to tattoos, i.e., 42.60% of the respondents in Group 2 said that their relatives got angry when they learned about tattooing.

### **Conclusion**

Perceptions of tattooing and tattoos have undergone a shift within the last 5-10 years. Tattooing has moved from being a relatively obscure topic

associated with deviant behavior to a thriving aspect of modern culture. The trend towards mainstream tattooing is increasing, and young people are introducing body art into pop culture. A few years ago, students had many stereotypes related to tattoos. However, the current study revealed that most students in Russia are positive or neutral to body art:

- a half of the respondents considers tattoo as a positive phenomenon;
- a significant part of the respondents believes that people with tattoos seem to be stronger and more independent than non-tattooed people;
- most respondents report that people with tattoos and without them are equally susceptible to alcoholism and drug addiction;
- most respondents do not think that the decision to make a tattoo was erroneous and are ready to make a next tattoo;

However, today we can observe stigmatization and gender stereotypes in the field of body art, although in smaller quantities:

- tattooed people encounter difficulties with job opportunities;
- a majority of the respondents consider women with tattoos more approachable than women without them;
- students report that their close people show a negative attitude to tattoos made or planned (e.g., anger, sadness, frustration, etc.).

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Taboo Tattoos is a magazine in Fallout 4. The magazine gives a free facial tattoo available at any facial reconstruction surgeon. Instead of an expected mermaid/anchor tattoo from "Sailor" issue #16, the "Bad Luck" tattoo from cut magazine issue #04 is used for it. Issue #12 of Taboo Tattoos contains a reference to one of Bethesda's other games, The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, with one of the skulls on the magazine wearing the iconic iron helmet from said game.