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Tattoo as an object of sociological interest: Some functional features in the contemporary society*

I.V. Trotsuk^{1,2}, V.A. Voronina¹

¹RUDN University,
Miklukho-Maklaya St., 6, Moscow, 117198, Russia

²National Research University Higher School of Economics,
Myasnitskaya St., 20, Moscow, 101000, Russia

(e-mail: irina.trotsuk@yandex.ru; lera.rezanova.98@mail.ru)

Abstract. Even with the most “naked” eye it is difficult not to notice the growing prevalence of tattoos in the Russian society (beyond any generational, gender, professional or social boundaries), which makes tattooing an important object of sociological analysis and requires identifying its subject field, since tattooing is such an ancient social phenomenon that it has long been the focus of interdisciplinary research (historical, anthropological, philosophical, art-historical, cultural studies, etc.). The article outlines this subject field as consisting of several thematic blocks. First, these are reasons for the popularization of tattooing in the social history of recent centuries: the results of the colonial era; interest in other cultures; “labeling” of subcultures; expansion of the listed “niche” reasons beyond certain social/professional groups and subcultures (mass distribution of tattoos in the contemporary consumer culture). Second, the conceptual foundations of the sociological study of the functional-symbolic features of tattooing: the “critical theory”; theories of subcultures; identity theories; gender approach within identity research; sociological theories of the body. Undoubtedly, the specificity of the sociological analysis of tattooing is the focus on its functions in a given social context, which today is set by the mass consumer culture of the information society and, in part, by various subcultural and “elite”-reference groups. Third, the possibility of empirical study of tattooing outside the social-anthropological (historical-visual or semiotic-symbolic) field — in the perspective of highlighting existing/sustainable social representations about tattooing. Sociologists have two main methodological tools:

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mass representative surveys and semi-formalized (expert in the broad sense of the word) interviews. The article presents the results of the all-Russian survey conducted by WCIOM in 2019 and of the small online survey supplemented by semi-structured interviews, which showed a clearly expressed trend of social ‘normalization’ of tattooing in the Russian society as mainly a widespread and a generally neutrally perceived method of (aesthetic and decorative) self-expression.

Key words: tattoo; sociological analysis; mass culture; subculture; tattoo functions; self-expression; social-cultural context; survey; interview; social normalization; social representations

In recent years, tattooing has become increasingly popular in the Russian society [see, e.g.: 1; 56], while remaining outside the scope of sociological analysis [see, e.g.: 12; 24]. Judging by the number of people with tattoos around us, one can say that both a very young person and an adult with a certain social status would make a tattoo, which clearly indicates functional expansion of tattooing mainly in the artistic rather than in the utilitarian perspective. Certainly, there are ongoing human body transformation “experiments” throughout social history [see, e.g.: 35] in the interests of our varied participation in social life. In the course of socialization, our appearance inevitably changes, adapting to the norms of social-cultural reality, following the standards imposed by our social circle/environment and reference groups. Moreover, in recent decades, industries of body modification [see, e.g.: 22] and body practices [see, e.g.: 14] have rapidly developed: the consumer society provides increasingly more technological opportunities for transforming the body, including with tattooing.

There are different reasons for the popularization of tattooing in social history: results of the colonial era (for example, sailors brought “savages” with tattoos to show to the enlightened public for entertainment) [17. P. 53–58]; interest in other cultures (popularization of the Japanese-style tattoos among the Russian aristocracy [17. P. 58–65]); “labeling” of subcultures (especially among popular musicians and bikers [17. P. 77]); and since the 1980s, an expansion of the above-mentioned “niche” reasons beyond specific social/professional groups and subcultures. The mass spread of tattooing in the contemporary consumer society does not allow to reduce its functions to social “labeling”, tribal affiliation or magical ritual. Today we consider various psychological, historical, cultural

and sociological aspects of tattooing as more or less free from its previous unambiguous interpretations in specific communities/societies and cultures (positive or negative). Having undergone many transformations, tattoos are assessed differently and often contradictory in each society — from works of art to a way of self-expression and even a marker of immorality, i.e., the current perception of tattooing combines its numerous meanings (a marker of age, an indicator of status, a talisman, a decoration, etc.).

Therefore, we need to outline the contextual framework for the sociological analysis of tattooing in theoretical and empirical research. As a rule, theoretical studies of functional and symbolic features of tattooing are based on one of the following approaches:

- “critical theory” of the Frankfurt School [see, e.g.: 69], primarily its ideas of subcultural escapism and protest behavior as defining the main contradiction of the contemporary society (between individual autonomy and social dictate in the world that has passed through the millstones of the cultural industry [see, e.g.: 52]), i.e., tattoos allow to realize one’s need for autonomy and controlled construction of personal identity as opposed to socially approved models;
- theories of subcultures [see, e.g.: 2; 4; 26; 57; 61] as emphasizing not deviant but social-constructivist potential of tattoos (attributes of subcultures), albeit often of a protest nature [70]; today such a protest “has turned from a group ideology into a personal philosophy” [7. P. 156];
- theories of identity [see, e.g.: 64] as a combination of social and personal modes of self-construction — tattooing contributes to the formation of identity through body marks of belonging to a certain group or one’s uniqueness);
- gender approach in the identity research [see, e.g.: 67; 72] — tattooing as a means of visual acceptance or denial of gender stereotypes of masculinity and femininity imposed by the mass culture and advertising industry;
- sociological theories of the body [see, e.g.: 13; 32] focusing on tattoos in the context of social-cultural determination of body practices [see, e.g.: 11; 12; 15; 19; 41] — corporality is an element of social communication and tattoos as one of its “languages” together with other verbal and non-verbal “languages”, the knowledge of which contributes to successful socialization, increases possibilities of social adaptation and reduces social tension [1; 16; 21; 43].

Thereby, body “is the first and most natural human instrument, or, to put it more precisely and not mention an instrument... the first and most natural technical object and at the same time a technical means” [16. P. 311], and tattooing is a type of social action: “through our attitude to the body we can express our identity, represent ourselves in the social world” [20. P. 561]. “In our consumption set, there is an object more beautiful, more precious, more vibrant than all others, more loaded with connotations than a car, an object that seems to sum up all other connotations — the body” [5. P. 89] as an element of social communication and a way to achieve different goals. “Today society makes us believe that appearance close to the standards of beauty in a specific culture is considered by representative of the other sex as sexually attractive, which increases chances of success in love relationships and in choosing the most attractive partner, thus, ensuring one’s competitiveness in starting a family” [20. P. 561]. As a result, on the one hand, we witness popularization of tattooing practices for changing one’s body (to stand out from the crowd or, on the contrary, to follow its standards); on the other hand, tattooing as a method of communication and a social-cultural phenomenon undergoes changes under the influence of new social demands and requirements which can be coercive [48], especially in such closed institutions as prisons, hospitals or the army. M. Foucault introduced the term “biopolitics” [49] for a set of political governance (control and manipulation) mechanisms for managing all life practices, including the body ones [50].

Thus, sociological analysis of tattooing focuses on its functions in a specific social context. For instance, according to F. Tönnies’ division of community/societies into traditional (*Gemeinschaft*) and modern (*Gesellschaft*) [44], tattooing shows the transformation of body practices from predominantly religious-cultural (symbolic “texts”) and even socially obligatory (“signs” of status hierarchies) in traditional communities to distinctly personal (individual preferences of aesthetic or other types) and by definition not so functional [71] in modern societies. However, tattoos always perform functions of self-decoration and social self-presentation: today not on such a scale as in traditional societies but tattoo still “label” growing up and a new social status.

In contemporary realities, the broader context of tattooing is the mass culture of the information society, while the more “localized” context is a specific subculture. One cannot help but notice the popularity of tattooing (compared to previous decades and centuries) due to changes in lifestyle, development of new forms of communication and information technologies (In particular, social networks that popularize tattoos) [6; 8; 34; 40]. However, such a mass character is ambiguously assessed in everyday and scientific discourses: it is criticized for standardization and unification (homogenization of tastes, elimination of diversity in cultural “production” and passive perception of its products, commercialization and the triumph of stereotypes) [39; 53] but praised for numerous opportunities for self-expression outside a limited elite circle [18] or taken for granted as the social-cultural dominant of our time [30]. It is the mass character that is responsible for the flourishing of tattoo culture [62]. Therefore, in recent decades, tattooing has been perceived as an integral part of the contemporary culture, a social “language with the centuries-old history [21], reflecting features of the contemporary world, not being a prerogative of younger generations, and capable of performing not only decorative but also symbolic functions.

In the subcultural context, tattoo is a means of visual identification of in-group members but in an extended (compared to previous decades) sense [25; 51]. Initially the concept of subculture (and its radical protest version of counterculture) was associated with youth movements characterized by informality, anti-authoritarianism, disagreement with traditional values and lifestyles (primarily of older generations). Today this term describes a relatively stable group with interests, values, norms, behavior patterns and symbolism different from similar characteristics of the dominant culture and, thereby, contributing to both individual self-expression and group self-identification. In the youth subculture, “the visual aspect (tattoo, piercing, scarification, etc.) is the main “identifying element” for members, with which they identify themselves with the group and find others like them in the main culture” [29. P. 6–7]. Tattoos’ symbolism serves as an indicator of the special social-cultural and value-normative environment of subculture; therefore, analysis of this symbolism explains the subculture’s worldview and values, social position and well-being [23; 37; 38]. This

subcultural symbolism is not an exclusively youth phenomenon: for instance, bikers are a multi-generational masculine-oriented subculture with clear visual/body “labeling” [9; 26; 31].

In addition to the conceptual analysis of tattooing, sociologists aim at providing its operational definitions for empirical research. As in the theoretical study, in the empirical one we rely on interdisciplinary experience, primarily social-anthropological studies of tattooing in different (traditional) (sub) cultures (radically different from post-industrial societies in lifestyles), which are conducted by the method of participant observation (with some elements of visual sociology). For instance, tattoos play an important role in the prison subculture — as a means of communication for in-groups and a “mark” of belonging to this subculture. For members of the criminal subculture, tattoos reflect past and present criminal connections and acts, while for researchers they constitute a special “language” of the specific community (markers of positions in the criminal hierarchy, social-professional status in the criminal community, committed crime, term and place of serving the sentence, etc.).

Certainly, prison tattoos may contain images with other symbolic meanings — associated with mystical beliefs or personal interests. Moreover, the criminal subculture is not static, it changes over time, penetrates into broader social strata and, in turn, is influenced by mass trends, which is why some tattoos that previously symbolized certain criminal connections or membership in a criminal group either changed their meanings or acquired new (contextually dependent) interpretations. There are following types of criminal tattoos according to their content at the intersection of the prison subculture and everyday life [42. P. 76]: information-hierarchical (indicate positions in the criminal hierarchy and allow to monitor behavior of the criminal subculture’s members); personal-attitudinal (mark biographical events and personal attitudes to various social groups); symbolic-identifying (means of communication within the criminal environment and of identification of in-group members); prison (indicators of prison experience); memorable (to keep in memory important events of the past); sexual-erotic (reflect dreams about future sexual contacts and/or represent sexual identity).

Since sociological analysis of tattoos in the mass culture focuses on them as markers of social-cultural changes (In relation to the body, gender, identity, etc.), it is necessary to reveal the dominant social representations of tattooing with mass sociological surveys. One of the most illustrative surveys was conducted by the WCIOM in 2019 and showed [33] that: every tenth Russian had a tattoo (or several ones), more often men than women (18 % vs 5 %), and no one found it difficult to answer the corresponding question (i.e., it is not sensitive); the main reasons for getting a tattoo were “stupidity and youth” (30 %) and “military service” (29 %), every fifth “just wanted to get a tattoo” (19 %); people over 60 years old (59 %) more often explained their tattoo by stupidity and youth, and every third in this group got a tattoo in the army, while among the 45–59-year-olds — every second, among 35–44-year-olds — 38 %, and then this share decreases to zero in the youngest group, i.e. the “tradition” of getting tattoos in memory of military service seems to fade away. The opposite trend is observed for two other reasons to get a tattoo: 18–24-year-olds explain such an impulse by the desire to have a tattoo, 28 % — by considering it beautiful; among 25–34-year-olds this ratio changes to 40 % and 8 % respectively, i.e., personal choice has become the main reason for getting a tattoo. As a rule, Russians interpret tattoos as indicators of the desire to stand out (43 %) or tributes to fashion (41 %), less often (27 %) as markers of having been in prison (among those who have tattoos only 2 % mentioned this reason), every fifth — as body decorations, every tenth — as symbols of belonging to a certain group. Russians tend to be indifferent to people with tattoos (58 %) rather than perceive them negatively (not understanding — 15 % or judging — 12 %) or positively (understanding — 13 % or supporting — 2 %), but certainly without any difficulty in expressing one’s position.

We did not find more recent all-Russian surveys on tattooing, so we conducted a small online survey that does not allow for generalizations but helps to identify some trends in perceiving tattoos and general ideas about motives and reasons for getting a tattoo. 200 respondents, mostly the youth, took part in the online survey, and, to clarify its results, three semi-structured interviews were conducted — with a woman and a man with tattoos, and with an “expert” — a tattoo artist. According to the online survey results, every third

(32 %) has a tattoo, more often women (42 % vs 15 %). Among those who do not have tattoos, every tenth has most of his friends tattooed, while the majority (80 %) has only a few such friends, i.e., tattoos have become such a widespread phenomenon in the Russian society that almost every (to be precise: young) person without tattoos knows several people with tattoos. 41 % in the group without tattoos would like to get one (men more often — 45 % vs 38 %), and the main motive for tattooing (98 %) is aesthetic (decorating the body), then comes the decision to get a tattoo in memory of an important event (64 %), to emphasize one's uniqueness (37 %), not to “decorate” oneself but to hide some body “flaws” such as a scar (17 %), i.e., personal motives dominate. Those who do not have and do not want to get tattoos also explain their decision by aesthetic-decorative considerations: one may get tired of one's tattoo and regret having it done (84 %), less often respondents mentioned disinterest in this method of modifying one's body and reluctance to get a tattoo at the moment, not excluding such a possibility in the future (53 % each), i.e., personal reasons also predominate in refusing a tattoo.

The dominant personal perception of tattoos is confirmed by the most widespread associations with them: more than a third (37 %) consider tattoos as symbolic, meaningful drawings, 15 % associate them with aesthetics, beauty and art, 11 % define them as a means of self-expression and a manifestation of individuality (including within subcultures — 12 %) or, on the contrary, associates them with harm, damage to appearance and dirt (10 %). In general, respondents have a neutral attitude towards people with tattoos (64 % say that it does not matter for them whether a person has a tattoo or not) or a positive one (31 %; women more often — 37 % vs 24 %). The motives for the positive perception of the tattooed are simple — attractiveness (90 % in this group) or unusualness and courage (74 %), but it should be mentioned that all those who answered this question had positive experience of communicating with people who had tattoos, i.e., such an experience seems to eliminate any negative stereotypes regarding tattoos (if one had such stereotypes before).

As a rule, respondents get their first tattoo at the age of 18–22 years (70 %), every fifth — at the age of 14–17, apparently trying to express their individuality and adulthood in the society in which tattooing has become

extremely accessible (obviously, teens need parental permission and financial support for tattooing, and many parents agree with their child's decision). Tattooing is unambiguously perceived as a professional industry — two thirds of the tattooed got their first tattoo in a tattoo parlor, and only one in four got it at home (it is not uncommon to get one's first (and not only first) tattoo "through one's connections"). Most (82 %) respondents with tattoos want to get more tattoos in the future, considering them mainly as a means of decorating the body, every second — as a way to remember a significant event in their life (body "memory"), every fifth — as an opportunity to show one's uniqueness, to express oneself; following fashion and demonstrating membership in a subculture are the rarest reasons for tattooing (7 % and 3 %, respectively), i.e., motives for tattooing are more emotional than rational. Most respondents with tattoos consider their tattooing experience successful; every seventh encounters some misunderstanding/negativity from time to time, but *"in general everything is fine"*; none of those who got a tattoo regret it or want to get rid of it. Such a distribution of answers can be explained by the reaction of others: 43 % believe that most people do not care at all whether a person has a tattoo or not, 40 % have repeatedly received compliments about their tattoos, and only 13 % have ever encountered a negative reaction.

Thus, even a small online survey shows a clear trend toward social "normalization" of tattooing in the Russian society as a way of self-expression through body decoration. Semi-structured interviews confirmed both this trend and the "massification" of tattooing, since there is no relationship between having a tattoo and profession, hobby or marital status, age or gender, and the main reason for getting a tattoo is *"I just liked/wanted it"*, regardless of the presence or absence of people with tattoos in one's social circle/environment — some do not have such friends *"at all"*, others have *"many friends and many tattoos"*. As for the desire to assert oneself with tattooing, there are different opinions: for some, tattoo did not affect their self-perception as *"it did not depend on tattoos, they probably did not affect my self-esteem in any way"*; *"nothing has changed much, but I know people whom tattoos helped to assert themselves"*; *"I cannot say anything about self-respect or self-esteem... I haven't thought about it at all"*. The fact that no one regrets getting any

tattoos proves thoughtfulness rather than spontaneity of such a decision: “*I have never regretted a single tattoo*”; “*I didn’t do it in vain and, of course, I didn’t want to redo anything, I did what I wanted*”. Respondents’ observations of others in terms of attitudes to tattoos are no less diverse: “*I know people who get tattoos because it’s fashionable... they follow today’s fashion trends*”; “*there are professions not allowing tattoos*”, “*mostly women get tattoos... and today’s youth*”; but “*if your tattoo is somehow offensive... for instance, swastika in our society violates moral standards... then tattoos won’t work*” — they will cause a negative reaction. However, respondents deny that tattoos are some kind of social deviation: “*social order can be disrupted by ill-mannered people but not by tattoos*”; therefore, “*God save us from introducing sanctions against tattoos!*”.

Thus, there is an obvious trend of routinization of tattooing in the contemporary Russian society in full accordance with the stages of constructing a social phenomenon in the social-phenomenological perspective: habitualization of tattoos as a means of the body aesthetic-symbolic decoration; typification — evolution of the functional determinants of tattooing in social contexts differing in scope; institutionalization — codification of the tattoo “language” within specific subcultures, development of a commercially successful and technologically advanced tattoo industry; legitimation of tattoos as a social “norm”. Today the main motive for tattooing is self-expression: “young people are driven not so much by aesthetic preferences as by motives that reflect their personality and character, by desire to capture the results of their life search as an integral part of themselves and their lives” [55. P. 107]. Certainly, the mass culture influences tattooing by determining and changing ideals of beauty, fashion and lifestyle, which are further reflected in the choice, technology and popularity of tattoos. However, tattoos also influence the mass culture as a widespread and accessible means of self-expression and individualization for popular personalities (In sociological terms, they are significant others or reference groups): their tattoos are copied by their followers (fans) and turn into markers of (sub) cultural identity or group “labeling”, which can also happen in a protest form of the denial of norms and stereotypes of the mass culture through “iconic elements of appearance”.

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Татуировка как предмет социологического интереса: несколько функциональных особенностей в современном обществе*

И.В. Троцук^{1,2}, В.А. Воронина¹

¹Российский университет дружбы народов,
ул. Миклухо-Маклая, 6, Москва, 117198, Россия

²Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики»,
ул. Мясницкая, 20, Москва, 101000, Россия

(e-mail: irina.trotsuk@yandex.ru; lera.rezanova.98@mail.ru)

Аннотация. Даже самым «невооруженным» глазом сложно не заметить все большее распространение татуировок в российском обществе (вне каких-либо поколенческих, гендерных, профессиональных и социальных границ), что делает татуирование важным объектом социологического анализа и требует прочерчивания его предметного поля, поскольку татуировка — древний социальный феномен и давно попала в фокус междисциплинарного интереса (историков, антропологов, философов, искусствоведов, культурологов и др.). В статье тезисно обозначено данное предметное поле, которое включает в себя несколько тематических блоков. Во-первых, это причины популяризации татуирования в социальной истории последних столетий: результаты колониальной эпохи; интерес к другим культурам; «маркировка» субкультур; расширение перечисленных «нишевых» причин популярности татуировки за пределы определенных социальных/профессиональных групп и субкультур (массовое распространение тату в современном потребительской культуре). Во-вторых, концептуальные основания социологического изучения функционально-символических особенностей татуирования: «критическая теория»; концепции субкультур; модели идентичности; гендерный подход в русле исследований идентичности; социологические теории тела. Специфику социологического анализа тату определяет фокус на ее функциях в заданном социальном контексте, который задает массовая потребительская культура информационного общества и отчасти субкультурные и «элитарно»-референтные группы. В-третьих, возможности эмпирического изучения татуирования вне социально-антропологического (историко-визу-

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ального или семиотико-символического) поля — с точки зрения сложившихся социальных представлений. В распоряжении социолога есть два основных методических инструмента: массовые репрезентативные опросы и полужформализованные (экспертные в широком смысле слова) интервью. В статье представлены результаты общероссийского опроса, проведенного ВЦИОМ в 2019 году, и разведывательного онлайн-анкетирования, дополненного полужформализованными интервью и показавшего выраженную тенденцию социальной «нормализации» татуирования в российском обществе — как широко распространенного и нейтрально воспринимаемого способа (эстетико-декоративного) самовыражения.

Ключевые слова: татуировка; социологический анализ; массовая культура; субкультура; функции тату; самовыражение; социокультурный контекст; опрос; интервью; социальная нормализация; социальные представления