

# THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA ON HOW TATTOOED PEOPLE ARE PERCEIVED IN TODAY SOCIETY

Valentina-Violeta LEFF<sup>1</sup>, Adrian OTOVESCU<sup>2</sup>, Claudiu COMAN<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PH.D Student, Doctoral School of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Craiova (Romania),

Email: [valentina\\_draga@yahoo.com](mailto:valentina_draga@yahoo.com)

<sup>2</sup>Associate Prof. PhD, University of Craiova (Romania), Email: [adiotovescu@yahoo.com](mailto:adiotovescu@yahoo.com)

<sup>3</sup>Professor PhD., Transilvania University of Braşov Romania)

Email: [claudiu.coman@unitbv.ro](mailto:claudiu.coman@unitbv.ro)

**Abstract:** *The media plays a key role in conveying information and shaping public opinion, dramatically influencing people's understanding of social phenomena. In other words, the information conveyed through the media leads individuals to form a more or less positive image of the reality around them. The practice of tattooing is also a subject, even a controversial one, in the formation of an opinion, perception or image among the population through information appearing in the media. Through this contradictory information, tattooed people are both rejected and approved by society, depending on the level of education, social status, age and background of those who access the information. This paper aims to trace the conceptual divide that is formed within society by media reports on tattooed people. The media is critical of ordinary people who have tattoos through negative portrayals of them but, at the same time, it plays a key role in the spread of tattoos when it highlights the lives and tattooed bodies of famous people such as artists, actors or athletes whom young people admire. This objective will be pursued by means of a micro-survey in Dolj County, using as research methods: content analysis (to obtain data related to the information transmitted by the media about tattooed people and the reactions of people online), a questionnaire-based sociological survey (to capture what is the current perception of the population about tattooing and implicitly tattooed people but also to obtain data on the environment from which people get their information, trust in the different media channels, the type of news they have seen on the subject) as well as an interview-based sociological survey (to find out what the social experiences of tattooed people are after they have had a tattoo, how society's perception of various aspects of their social life is reflected: interpersonal relationships, social image, workplace, etc.). As far as the expected results are concerned, given that in Romania negative opinions about the practice of tattooing and tattooed people predominate, it is expected that the results of the research will also point in the same direction.*

**Keywords:** *media, media influence, tattooed people, social stigma*

## 1. Introduction

There is no doubt that people are connected to their environment through the act of perception, which is the central element of knowledge and communication. Perceptual configurations process at a primary level the information provided by objects, events or messages to which we direct our attention. It is easy to infer from this that mass media not only inform but also determine certain attitudes among the population, helping to shape opinions on a particular issue. In this context, the concept of image can be understood as "clearly, a reflection, a representation" (Coman, 2018: 5) that arises from the assimilation of information transmitted via communication channels.

Thanks to the evolution of technology, people can now retrieve their information not only from offline (TV, radio, print media) but also from online (websites, social media platforms, blogs, podcasts, etc.). It is an undeniable advantage that digital technology has revolutionized access to information, but it should not be overlooked that it has also created the framework for misinformation and manipulation of information. Moreover, given the way messages are

delivered, the variety of communication channels and the professionalism of journalists, trust becomes a fundamental element underlying the power of the media to influence people's perceptions.

Inevitably, tattooed people have at least one unpleasant social experience caused by the simple fact that they have a tattoo. How many of these experiences are influenced by the way the media presents and conveys information about tattoo practice and tattooed people in terms of morality, deviance and nonconformity?

Thus, we are dealing with two categories of individuals: those who disapprove of tattooing and associate it with socially undesirable and deviant people, and those who accept it as an artistic practice expressing individuality, as a creative act requiring courage and assumption.

Visual identity plays an important part in any aspects of life. Thus, in the process of differentiation, brands gain competitive advantage through their logo, slogan and symbols (Coman, Bularca and Otovescu 2021) and so individuals can also use symbols such as tattoos to express their identity and uniqueness.

Unfortunately, more and more people who have banked on the media's positive redefinition of tattoos have decided to get tattoos, only to realize later that there is still an ingrained social stigma attached to tattoos: "While the tattooed person enjoys the positive attention from their peers generated by the tattoo, most of these people feel embarrassed by the negative reactions they receive from others (...) People with tattoos often feel they should cover their body markings in public or risk being socially rejected". (Fisher 2002: 101).

These mixed messages from the media have contributed to the contradictory situation of middle-class individuals who use tattoos to express and form their identity while keeping their existence secret from the general public.

In this sense, this paper aims to trace how information conveyed in the media affects people's perceptions of tattooing, leading to the formation of positive or negative opinions and the adoption of attitudes of acceptance or rejection of tattooed individuals.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1 The influence of media on people's perception of reality*

In post-communism Romania, with the liberalization of the press and the recovery of the freedom of expression, the media institutions have shown an extraordinary ability to report and present events with effects on population, thus producing opinions and attitudes in all social spheres. One of these effects is that society forms its perception and opinion based on the information presented by the media (Sadaf, 2011) Hence its importance in influencing the dynamics of social and political events, and being also called the fourth power in the state.

The function of the media is to inform, educate and entertain, but quite frequently it misinforms, manipulates and has a tabloid appearance according to different socio-political interests. All the more so as the media becomes an important institution in so far as it not only forms beliefs but also has the capacity to distort them. Moreover, sometimes the media can produce conflicts between different social groups and the result of this action is social instability (Sadaf, 2011).

Mass media, or "the classical forms of mass communication, refers to social institutions engaged in the production and distribution of knowledge and distinguished by: the use of advanced techniques for the mass production and distribution of messages [...] to very large audiences that are unknown to the communicator and free to take up or reject his messages." (Coman, 2007: 26). In other words, the media, through the information it provides, plays a considerable role in building the image of a social category (tattooed people in this case) and can influence, positively or negatively, the public's perception of that category.

By following the information, events, messages and comments transmitted through television, newspapers, radio or online social media platforms, when people are in the position

of interacting with individuals who have tattoos, they already have an image, a perception, formed in their mind, which is not always in line with reality, and which will positively or negatively influence their interaction.

Thus, perception, according to Longman's dictionary, is "the way you think about something and your idea of what that thing is like" (Longman, 2006: 1131) and exposure to selective content conveyed by the media can affect and influence how people view and relate to a social category, tattooed people in this case.

According to West & Lynn, 2010 "selective exposure is a method of reducing dissonance by seeking information that is consistent with current beliefs and practices." In the context of the present work, it is to be investigated whether people who have previously been exposed to negative information about people who get tattoos will tend to select from the new information those that fit their beliefs and ignore those that conflict with their opinion.

The media influences society deliberately - as a result of a pre-arranged strategy or by accident - and the effects of this influence are felt both at the individual or group level and at the level of society as a whole. It can affect the human personality from several perspectives: the cognitive dimension (changing the image of the world), the affective dimension (creating or modifying attitudes and feelings) or the behavioral dimension (changes in the way individuals act and social mobilization phenomena).

Bearing in mind that not all situations presented in the media can be fully verified by the public at large, we can infer that the element on which the media relies is the trust of the public in the sources supplying the information. Trust thus becomes the fundamental element that gives the media the power to influence people's perceptions. The more people trust a particular media channel, the more likely they are to perceive the reported information as true.

Translated into other terms, people's trust in print or audio-visual media, including digital platforms, may represent "individuals' willingness to be vulnerable to content provided through mass media channels based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory way" (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen and Steindl, 2018: 5).

## *2.2. Society's perception of tattooing under the influence of the media*

Discovered by 18th century explorers, tattooing was a procedure used since before the Christian era to designate the social status of members of a tribe. The etymology of the word comes from Polynesian, the original word being *tatau* which translates as mark. Although in modern times it is no longer necessary to show social status by a body mark, more and more people are deciding to get a tattoo. Studies show that modern individuals get tattoos to express their identity or aspects of their personality or to tell a story about themselves in an artistic way. Tattooing has thus become a way of physically expressing an emotion.

Although the practice of tattooing has become increasingly common in recent years among individuals of different social statuses, education, age, ethnicity or gender, it remains a stigmatized practice in mainstream society. Long considered a hallmark of social deviance, tattooing has undergone a drastic redefinition in recent decades. No longer the preserve of bikers, punks and thugs, tattooing is increasingly practiced and appropriated by middle-class, mainstream individuals (DeMello 1995; Irwin 2001).

Citizens' perceptions of tattooed people can be influenced, changed or shaped by a news story whose purpose should have been purely informative.

For example, on February 17, 2020 in the daily newspaper *Evenimentul Zilei*, a news item entitled "Tattoos and permanent make-up banned in the EU" appeared with a description clearly intended to give a negative connotation to people who resort to such practices: the European Commission has put a negative spin on ladies with permanent make-up, as well as on gentlemen with "bad boy" tattoos. Eyebrows contoured by microblading or micropigmentation, eye or lip contouring, and the usual tattoos could become history.

By labeling tattoos as being for "bad boys", and presenting them as possibly being banned in the future, the newspaper suggests that tattoos are still deviant, influencing public opinion in a negative way. On the same subject, the portals Realitatea.net and Timpul.md headlined "Tattoos and permanent make-up ILLEGAL. European Commission decision", also suggesting that these practices are deviant and to be outlawed. In fact, if the content of the news had not been distorted, it should have been purely informative about the European Commission's proposal to review a recommendation by the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) to restrict two harmful chemicals present in ink for certain tattoos and permanent make-up.

The media also tries, through a series of articles, to create a link between tattoos and cancer, inducing a state of panic among the tattooed population or those who intend to get tattooed. A scientific study carried out by the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) concluded that tattoos are not dangerous, only that some inks contain chemicals that represent a health hazard and are thus not recommended for use. But this kind of danger is present in all aspects of our lives, including processed food itself.

All these types of articles cause scaremongering and misinformation, negatively influencing public opinion and individuals attitudes towards tattooing.

Reinforcing the above, "when the media claims to address an audience, the expectations of this audience are already imagined, which most often seem not to be the real ones, but which become real precisely as a result of this communication" (Ghiță, 2007) In other words, the media transmits information by anticipation, depending on what expectations people have which, even if they are not the real ones, following the transmission of the message and the assimilation of the information, people perceive these beliefs as real and their own.

Thus, if the media conveys information or suggests correlations between tattooed people and certain deviant behavior, the population will perceive what is presented as their own thoughts and will act accordingly, socially sanctioning tattooed people. The same applies to young people who build their image of their social ideal and standard of living on information taken from the press about the lives of celebrities. They will want to have tattoos just because their idols have them, seeing tattoos here as a confirmation of a certain social status and financial power.

But things are different online. On platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter the practice of tattooing and tattooed people easily find followers or people who admire and treat tattoos as a work of art. The penetration of the tattoo industry online has allowed some great tattoo artists to become celebrities in their own right, giving them the national and even global attention they deserve.

As well, social networks allow users to send personalized messages to a target audience promoting their image, products or services. (Bularca et al., 2022).

Social networks allow people who don't have enough facts about tattoos to feel less intimidated, introducing them to a culture about which information is pretty controversial anyway, long before they ever step foot in a studio. They can access ideas, share opinions with artists or clients, and form an opinion from people who have some experience in the field.

Another incredibly powerful benefit of social media in the tattoo industry is the access it gives to underrepresented groups in the industry. Regardless of race, gender, economic status, cultural background or experience, tattoo art will always find an audience online.

## **2. Research methods and tools**

The aim of this paper is to identify how media information influences people's perception of tattooed individuals and how this perception changes people's attitudes towards tattooed people, be it in terms of interpersonal relationships, labor market insertion or social exclusion.

The research methods will be represented by content analysis as well as the questionnaire and interview-based sociological survey method. The research instruments used will be the analysis grid, the questionnaire and the interview guide.

Through content analysis, information about tattooed people and the tattooing procedure will be followed up in the online environment as well as on TV, newspapers and radio. In the online environment, social media, podcasts and blogs will be followed, in addition to information about tattooing and tattooed people, the reaction of people after receiving the message: comments, shares and likes.

The interviews will be applied to a sample of 10 people in Craiova who have had at least one tattoo. It will focus on how they feel perceived by their peers and how they are affected both socially and professionally by the way they are perceived by society.

Through a questionnaire-based survey applied to a sample of 300 people in Dolj county, the current perception of the public about tattooing and tattooed people will be followed and also the assimilation of the information already transmitted by the media. The questionnaire also aims to obtain data on the environment from which people get their information, their trust in the various media channels, and the type of news they have seen about the practice of tattooing and personal experiences with tattooed individuals.

### **3. Expected results**

Given the fact that in Romania negative opinions about tattooed people are prevalent, I expect that the results of the research regarding the perception of the public in Dolj county will also prove it to be negative.

In terms of the influence of the media on this perception of the public, I expect the results to show a negative level of influence of the presentation of information through TV news bulletins, and a positive level when it comes to social media.

As far as the results obtained by conducting the content analysis are concerned, I expect them to reveal that negative information about tattoos and tattooed people is conveyed on TV and in newspapers rather than online.

The results obtained by applying the questionnaire on the other hand, are likely to show that rural citizens and those in the over 50 age group place more trust in the information conveyed through the news (TV, radio and print media) and that information assimilated from these media negatively influences how they relate to the practice of tattooing and the experiences they might have with tattooed people, more than information reported online. In terms of urban young people, I expect that they will be more influenced and in a positive way by posts on virtual social media platforms than by information received through traditional information channels: television and print media.

### **Conclusions**

The media, through the digitization of information transmission methods, is today more than ever, not only a means of information but also of shaping public opinion and attitudes. Through the way it organizes and presents information, it influences people's perceptions of certain aspects of the world to varying degrees. This is also true for the perception of tattooed people and the practice of tattooing, and this paper will try, by means of the above-mentioned research methods, to highlight how the type of communication channels and the messages conveyed influence the opinion of the inhabitants of Dolj county.

With regard to the media and their influence on citizens, as we have seen above, an important factor is trust in the veracity of the information transmitted, in the professionalism and fairness of journalists. Thus, given the fact that in Romania, the perception of tattooed people and tattoos themselves is rather negative, the research part of the paper will look at

whether the inhabitants of Dolj county trust the information in the media, which channels they trust the most, and how, their perception can be influenced based on their level of trust.

Also, new media such as social media, blogs, podcasts, are growing and people are using them more and more as a source of information. In this sense, the paper will also look at how messages on these platforms influence people's perception of tattooed people in Dolj County. Therefore, the results that will be obtained through the proposed research may point to a new research direction, namely how the social stigmatization of tattooed people influences their quality of life, and how the media, through the information provided, can improve or worsen, in the case of tattooed people, elements such as: self-image and emotional health, social relationships and access to the labor market.

## References

1. Bularca, M. C., Nechita, F., Sargu, L., Motoi, G., Otovescu, A., and Coman, C. (2022). *Looking for the Sustainability Messages of European Universities' Social Media Communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic Sustainability*, 14(3), 1554.
2. Coman, C. (2018) *Image analysis and the influence of mass media*. Timisoara: Editura de Vest.
3. Coman, M. (2007) *Introduction to the media system*. Iași: Polirom.
4. Coman, C., Bularca, M. C., and Otovescu, A. (2021, February). *Promoting Cities as Cultural Destinations Through Events. Case Study: Aarhus European Capital of Culture*. In International Conference on Advances in Digital Science (pp. 275-286). Springer, Cham.
5. DeMello, M. (1995) "Not Just For Bikers Anymore': Popular Representations of American Tattooing." *Journal of Popular Culture* 29.3: 37-52. Print.
6. Fisher, J. (2002) "Tattooing the Body, Marking Culture." *Body & Society* 8.4: 91-107. Print.
7. Ghiță, I. (2007) The role of Romanian media in shaping public opinion - Izabella Ghiță. *Communication and Argumentation in the Public Domain*, 1(2), 241-250.
8. Hanitzsch, T., Van Dalen, A., & Steindl, N. (2018). Caught in the Nexus: A comparative and Longitudinal Analysis of the Public Trust in the Press. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(1), 3-32.
9. Irwin, K. (2001) "Legitimizing the First Tattoo: Moral Passage through Informal Action." *Symbolic Interaction* 24.1: 49- 73. Print.
10. Longman, D. (2006). *Longman Exam Dictionary*, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
11. Sadaf, A. (2011, Mai). Public perception of media role. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 1(5), 228-236.
12. West, R. and Lynn, T. (2010). *Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and application*, New York: McGraw-Hill Education.