

## Tourism souvenir tattoos, between perception and significance. Case study: Bucharest's population

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**Abstract:** Tattoos have always represented forms of cultural manifestation specific to signature groups (either ethnic or others). As a visual representation, they often transmit information about cultural characteristics through symbols. In different periods, over time, society has frequently perceived tattoos as controversial due to their association with people who showed antisocial behaviour and/or were usually part of the lower/poor social classes. Today, modern societies see tattooing as an art form, and the creativity and ingenuity shown by tattoo artists produce genuine cultural and aesthetic currents, each with its characteristics and manifestations. Romanian society has recently seen a significant emergence of artistic representations of tattoos due to a change in the perception of new generations regarding seeing and having tattoos. Tourism souvenir tattoos represent a relatively recent practice, and they have grown in scope and implementation in recent decades due to a more liberal perception of tattoos in general as well as an increase in tourists' mobility. In this context, this study explores the role of tattoos as tourism souvenirs, highlighting their significance and emotional impact on tourists. This research aims to contribute to understanding the complexity of the relationship between personal identity and travel experiences through tattoos using an interdisciplinary approach. The study's objectives include identifying why tourists choose tattoos as souvenirs and analysing their perception and emotional response to tattoos' symbolism. The study's results prove that there is a strong correlation between getting souvenir tattoos and an emotional response from tourists who intend to maintain an emotional connection with the place they visited, have a reminder of the state of mind they were in during the visit and especially emphasise that the destination has had a positive impact on them. The tattoo acquired after a tourism experience represented a form of storytelling that aims to evoke pleasant experiences, strong memories, or unforgettable places. The chosen symbolism is often closely related to the traveller's personality, beliefs, or passions, and its visual representation is very personal.

**Key Words:** *Tattoo, souvenir, perception, visual representation, Bucharest, Romania*

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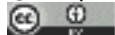
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## Introduction

The phenomenon of tattoos was initially prevalent within tribal groups; they displayed different visual representations with a cultural connotation meant to reference beliefs, customs, or symbols, the mark of the group of belonging. They had a sacred value while also being aesthetic, as they decorated the body like any other ornament. In modern society, tattooed people have been associated with problematic social categories, namely convicts, sailors, motorcyclists, and members of particular gangs, the negative perception being dominant precisely for this reason (Patterson, 2017; Walzer & Sanjurjo, 2016). Although the prevalence of tattoos has risen sharply in the past decade (Broussard & Harton, 2018; Ozanne, Tews & Mattila, 2019), the perception of tattooed people tends to remain negative, the presence of tattoos continuing to imply negative attributes associated with the character of the owner like promiscuity (Wohlrab et al., 2009), or level of competence and sociability (Seiter & Hatch, 2005).

At least 12% of EU inhabitants have body tattoos, with the 18-35 age group probably seeing percentages twice as high (European Chemicals Agency, 2020).

Thousands of dangerous chemicals found in tattoo inks have been restricted in the EU under the Regulation on the Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH) starting in 2022 to protect European citizens (European Commission, 2022). These restrictions target substances that cause cancer or genetic mutations, those that are toxic to reproduction, as well as those that irritate and sensitise the skin. The goal was not to ban tattooing but to increase the safety of colours used in tattoos (European Chemicals Agency, 2020). Despite their potential dangers, there was no legislation explicitly regulating the content of tattoo inks before Regulation No. 586/2022 at the EU level, with only some Member States having similar national laws (Belgium, France, Germany, Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden) (Eurofins, 2018).

The legislation controlling tattooing varies from country to country regarding the age at which people can get tattoos. In many countries, there is no special legislation (e.g. Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Poland). Ireland, for example, has no specific legislation on this subject, but tattoos are allowed from the age of 16, and it is also allowed from the age of 14 with parental consent. In countries where such legislation exists these mainly relate to the minimum age of customers (e.g. Austria, Belgium, Holland, Croatia, Finland, Portugal, Spain, Norway, Switzerland, Greece, with parental consent between the ages of 16-18; Germany and France - from the age of 16, provided that they do not get tattoos of fascist symbols; Russia - legal age, 18, provided they do not show extremist tattoos in public) (Ink Happened, 2024).

According to the Romania legislation, respectively Order no. 1648/2024, on the Approval of the Hygiene Norms for Beauty Salons and Tattoo, Piercing and Dermal Implant Salons, specialised salons are not allowed to perform cosmetic and artistic tattooing procedures on persons under 18 years of age (Ministry of Health, 2024). Simultaneously, the aforementioned regulation delineates explicit guidelines governing the operation of tattoo salons, encompassing not only the structured environment in which procedures involving the invasive introduction of specialised pigments into the dermal layer of the skin are conducted but also the requirement for appropriately qualified personnel in accordance with the legislation on the classification of occupations in Romania (Legislative portal, 2011; 2024). The primary problem of this ministerial order is its potential impact on the expression of artistic movements among young people, particularly given

that the law prohibits tattooing individuals under the age of 18, even with parental consent.

However, nowadays, tattoos have become a generalised behaviour, being accepted as a form of artistic expression, adopted by all social categories as self-expression that no longer requires or signifies membership to a particular social group. Cultural hedonism often leads to forms of aesthetic manifestation that refer to symbols from the past of different cultures, so we can no longer consider tattoos to be an expression completely detached from tribal manifestations (Maffesoli, 2001). The prevailing fashion trends that focus on an ongoing interest in body aesthetics, which define beauty through the lens of skin ornamentation via tattoos, have significantly influenced the perception of tattooing. Beauty ideals have changed for both sexes over time, so alternative philosophies of beauty that involve permanent skin painting have appeared; as such, the tattoo becomes almost a jewel-like accessory. Initially, tattoos represented a highly masculinised tattoo subculture; in today's modern societies, women are gaining the right to aesthetic-artistic expression on this level as well, the negative perception of this practice being significantly diminished (Thompson, 2018). Thus, with the emergence of social media, the positive promotion of tattoos, even their globalisation, was facilitated, and the visibility of tattoo artists and their works was widely disseminated including within thematic festivals (Le Breton, 2002; Hart, 2008). The tattoo is often located on the border between the search for personal identity and the mainstream trend, between the reflection of the personal aesthetic look and the social de-stigmatisation (Walzer, 2015).

The specialised literature analyses the motivation underlying the decision to purchase tattoos, referring to complex aspects such as identity, politics and sexuality (Finke, 1995), individualism and spirituality (DeMello, 2000) or narcissism and the development of self-esteem (Lobstädt, 2011; Turner, 2012). The motivation underlying the choice of tattoos can vary greatly. For certain people, skin decoration is based on aesthetic reasons (e.g. beautification, covering scars and skin imperfections). In contrast, for others, the symbolism, the affiliation to a specific group, and the connection with a particular subject represent fundamental premises of that choice. Memorial tattoos represent a separate category where the motivation and symbolism relate to significant people who have passed away, the purpose being to commemorate or extend post-mortem identities (Bonsu & Russell, 2003; Steadman, Medway & Banister, 2023). Using decorative tattooing as a form of scar camouflage or decoration represents a somewhat limited approach based on an emotional motivation: transforming or erasing memories of unfortunate events (Moulton, 2022).

Currently, one of the essential reasons for determining the choice of tattoos relates to travel; thus, souvenir tattoos are requested more and more often. These are tattoos that tourists choose to do either at the visited destination or on their return. They are permanent souvenirs that evoke a place of memory; they talk about personal experiences at the destination, offering others a narrative about the places visited (Wilkins, 2013). Travel tattoos represent a particular type of skinscape, and the images and words presented show the connection to a certain place, time, and/or experience during travel (Nassenstein & Rüscher, 2019; Peck, 2015). Tourists purchase souvenirs for a variety of reasons: to satisfy their psychological or social needs, as evidence of their trip (Kim & Chen, 2019), symbolic reminders (Swanson & Timothy, 2012), as an expression of identity (Dresker, 2021), as a search for personal authenticity (Soukhathammavong & Park, 2019) or source of meanings in the transmission of individual and social identity (Bond & Falk, 2013; Lynn et al., 2017). The generalisation of the tattooing practice,

as a result of its promotion, including by public figures, artists, actors, and politicians, encouraged the appearance of tourism tattoos, a new niche market in the tourism industry (Desantis, 2017; Sasso, 2019). Tattoo enthusiasts can choose to travel to specific destinations where famous artists can tattoo them; thus, the travel place is less significant, and the prevailing element is the tattooed person self-representation seen or reinterpreted by the tattoo artist (Andrew, 2017; Kuhn, 2011; Millington, 2017).

The perception of one's tattoos is closely related to the motivation for getting one, showing a high degree of satisfaction. Thus, the individuals who belong to a subculture choose to represent it visually to convey who they are and what beliefs and values they have inherited. Those who purchase souvenir-type tattoos usually want to be reminded of the places and experiences they lived. Those who have chosen to carry with them a missing person for memorial purposes often want to commemorate immortality symbolically, and those who want to erase past traumas aspire to a rebirth. All these represent categories that will ignore the negativity or the social costs associated with having or publicly displaying tattoos.

In this context, the present research aims to contribute to understanding the complexity of the relationship between personal identity and travel experiences through tattoos using an interdisciplinary approach.

The study's objectives were aimed at a) identifying the reasons behind tourists choosing tattoos as souvenirs and b) analysing their perception and emotional response to the symbolism of souvenir tattoos.

## **Methodology**

Tattoos as tourist souvenirs represent a socio-cultural phenomenon with minimal coverage in the scientific literature, although travellers' preferences for such purchases show a growing trend. The research methodology was primarily based on field activity, and there were no statistical databases or relevant studies regarding the representation of souvenir tattoos. The field investigation was completed in two stages. The first stage, which was carried out between July 1 and August 20, 2024, involved using a semi-structured interview addressed to tattoo artists, aiming to understand the phenomenon from an exogenous perspective. Thus, four interviews were conducted with open questions, including the emergence of demand for souvenir tattoos, the motivation presented by travellers regarding their choice of tattoo, the artist's involvement in building the message that the traveller wants to convey, personal opinion regarding the change in legislation related to tattoos. The second stage once again involved using the interview guide technique and was conducted between August 15-30, 2024, using a stratified sampling, targeting people who decided to purchase a souvenir tattoo due to a trip. The funnel interview technique, comprising 20 questions, was used. The first three questions covered general aspects relating to the respondent profile (age, gender and level of education) to identify the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (Tab. 1). In comparison, the following 17 questions addressed various topics such as the motivation that was the basis for choosing the tattoo, the destination visited before the tattoo, the symbolism of the tattoo, the connection between the tattoo and the travel experience the eventual story behind it, the personal meaning of the tattoo, the experience of getting tattooed and how the tattoo itself determined personal changes, the reactions of their closest friends or relatives or others to seeing the tattoo, the desire to purchase other souvenir tattoos in the future, and their first reaction to the sight of it. Twelve respondents participated in completing the interview guide. The

interviews were conducted face-to-face to improve the truthfulness and accuracy of the information gathered.

Table 1. Respondents profile—socio-demographic indicators (percentages).

Age		Educational status		Gender	
No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
25–35 years	17	Secondary	0	Male	50
36–45 years	33	High-school	17	Female	50
over 46 years	50	University	83		

Source: Analysis Results 2023

Interview data were processed using thematic analysis to identify patterns within the information provided by the interview guides (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis allowed the identification of common threads in a set of textual data; therefore, the analytical process involved the following phases: (a) familiarisation with the data, (b) defining and naming some principal codes concerning the objectives of the study, (c) coding with the previously established key categories, (d) the actual analysis.

Coding and quality analysis were done using Nvivo 12, which allowed content analysis by extracting relevant statements, understanding the established themes, tagging and labelling the contents, coding and finally interpreting the data (Welsh, 2002).

This study shows that the souvenir tattoo phenomenon can be a significant domain of study due to its continuously growing presence fueled by the expanding tourism market and opportunities for travelling.

## Results

### *Identifying reasons behind tourists choosing tattoos as souvenirs*

Choosing a souvenir tattoo is a process determined by several factors, but perhaps the most important is related to the destination, which is often the trigger. It should be noted that not every destination leads to getting a thematic tattoo; with only the important trips, those that decisively influence the lives of the visitors and trigger emotions are the ones that determine the purchase of such a tattoo. The word cloud emphasises Thailand, Egypt, Hawaii, India, Vietnam and Kenya as the destinations that inspired the need to purchase a souvenir tattoo. The interviewees argued that the contact with the locals, the very different cultures, and experiences lived in the respective countries had a radical impact on them, leading them to want a permanent memory, respectively, a tattoo (Figure 1).

The connection between tattoos and travel experience was noted in the case of all interviewees. Most often, the chosen tattoos refer to the trips the respondents have taken, reflecting part of the feelings generated by the contact with a new culture whose fragments are represented through the souvenir drawn on the skin.

Souvenir tattoos represent a very personal choice, considering the decision involves keeping and displaying them for a very long time and the fact that they also transmit information about the owner. The reasons cited by respondents refer to preserving a memory/a memento or purchasing a souvenir. Thus, we find that the two arguments differ radically.



Figure 1: Destination-the source of inspiration in choosing a souvenir tattoo

Source: Analysis Results 2023

Tattoos aim to preserve a memory rather than express personal experiences that are not necessarily related to the place but to the traveller's events or life. In contrast, in the case of souvenirs, tattoos strictly refer to a visual representation of the country, culture, or other aspects. In the opinion of travellers, the motivation underlying the decision to have a tattoo is justified, in the case of 58% of the interviewees, to keep a long-term memory, with just over 30% stating that they thought strictly of a souvenir (interviewees number 2, 6, 8 and 9). Interviewer number 5 was the only one who did not motivate the choice of tattoo in any way (Figure 2). Moreover, those who stated that they wanted a souvenir also chose to get tattooed at their destination, the rest imprinting their memories on their skin only upon returning to Romania.

*I wanted such a souvenir. I wanted to carry it with me all the time, female, 47 years  
The desire to have a long-term memory. The inspiration came from a passion for travel, female, 41 years.*

*I have two great passions in this life: tattoos and travel! So I looked for a way to happily combine them!, male, 54 years.*

*I think this type of behaviour represents me, I like that the destinations of the soul are put on the skin, male, 50 years.*

*Initially, I was buying souvenirs from everywhere, and I realised that the best thing would be to get souvenir-type tattoos, I have them with me all the time, and they don't take up much space, female, 29 years.*

*I had tattoos before, but no souvenirs, so in India, I decided to get one, male, 31 years.*

When discussing with tattoo artists, the motivation for requesting a souvenir tattoo is determined by the positive experiences that the traveller wants immortalised on their skin, as a permanent reminder.

*Those who want a souvenir tattoo come to the salon with very clear ideas; they know what I am going to draw for them. They tell me what the symbol means to them, and very often, they do not accept a radical change of the model they have in mind, tattoo artist, 35 years, male.*

*I have had several clients who asked me to tattoo them with texts, symbols, or gods related to their previous travels. Usually, these are people who do not choose tattoos randomly, just because they are fashionable; they have a reason that represents their aspirations, their lives, tattoo artist, 32 years, female.*

*Those who ask for travel-related tattoos were quite rare, but lately, they have started to appear more often. I like working with them; they are open people who accept suggestions and give me the opportunity to leave my personal mark, artist, 44 years, male.*

*The tourist souvenir tattoo is old in countries like Thailand, where people go specifically for this. For us, the field is at the beginning. I made two such tattoos, and I can say that I liked them, artist, 38 years, male.*

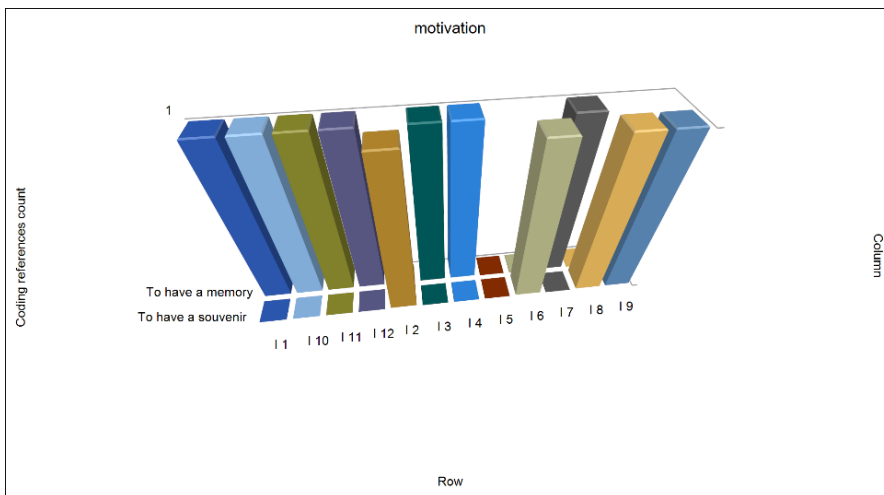


Figure 2. The motivation for choosing the souvenir tattoo

Source: Analysis Results 2023

### *Analysing the perception and the emotional response to tattoos*

The process of choosing, as well as the factors underlying the decision to purchase a souvenir tattoo, determined emotional changes, including perceptions after tattooing, which were all later amplified. Not all respondents experienced emotional changes, but over 60% of those interviewed specified that the new tattoo led to increased self-esteem, greater confidence in one's body, a feeling of pride or a positive change in general attitude (Figure 3). All respondents experienced positive feelings or reactions (enthusiasm, emotion, happiness, joy, reconciliation, excitement) after being tattooed, which shows the importance of purchasing this type of souvenir as a result of the existence of a powerful motivation. This is also why respondents expressed their desire to add other tattoos in the future and offered the recommendation to "Do it!" to those who would fancy such a purchase acquired after a trip.

	A: Emotional changes	B: The reaction after tattooing	C: Reaction of people
1 : I 1	1	1	0
2 : I 10	0	1	1
3 : I 11	0	1	1
4 : I 12	1	1	0
5 : I 2	1	1	0
6 : I 3	1	1	1
7 : I 4	1	1	1
8 : I 5	0	1	0
9 : I 6	1	1	1
10 : I 7	1	1	1
11 : I 8	1	1	0
12 : I 9	0	1	0

Figure 3. The relationship between the reactions and changes determined by the purchase of the souvenir tattoo.

Source: Matrix Coding Query

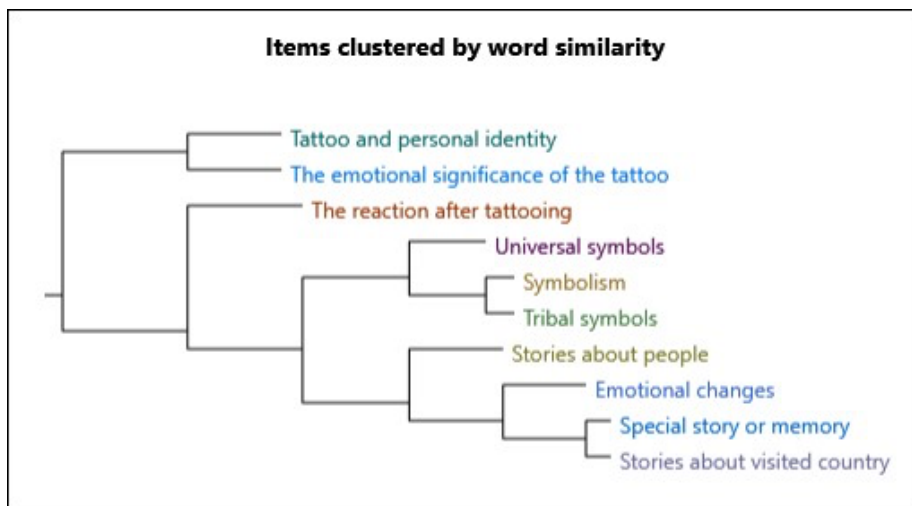


Figure 4. Perception and emotional response to tattoos

Source: Analysis Results 2023

A reaction of other people to souvenir tattoos was noted only in the case of half of the respondents, which shows the fact that the special meaning and the story of such a tattoo do not attract the attention of everyone. On the contrary, only those who have similar concerns understand the displayed symbolism or recognise the geographical or cultural area it belongs to. The people who noticed the interviewees' souvenir-type tattoos positively reacted to them, expressing their admiration and asking for details about the story behind the artistic representation and the motivation for choosing the theme. Souvenir tattoos are a form of storytelling; they often talk about a tourist experience from a highly personal perspective, evoking stories, displaying totems or writings in the language of the



countries visited or representing authentic totems with a special meaning for the wearer.

The investigation of how tattoos can represent personal stories related to travel and tourist experiences was done through a cluster analysis, word similarity showing, first of all, a direct link between personal identity and emotional significance (Figure 4). Respondents chose the tattooed visual representation according to the emotions aroused by a given destination, often specifying that not all travel experiences turn into tattoos. In terms of the chosen symbolism, there is a preference either towards universal or tribal symbols or towards a reinterpretation of the symbolism specific to the respective country's culture through the lens of the tourist's own beliefs. Themes inspired by Egyptology (Egyptian cartouche), Asian culture (dragon), Hawaiian culture (turtle), Balinese culture (mandala), Indian (Namaste), African (Hakuna Matata) or universal culture (snake) were identified among the respondents participating in this study.

The long-term impact of souvenir-type tattoos is emotional, justified by powerful memories or memorable stories, including how tourists themselves perceive the tattoo after returning home.

## **Discussion**

The general trend in the approach to tattoos is closely related to the emergence of unique currents, the choice of models varying from one period to another. Over time, these have moved from traditional, tribal tattoos to graphic, colourful, large tattoos, and those representing loved ones or pets, up to including minimalist ones, or more recently, a combination of all to some extent. The choice of model is not always strongly argued by personal or emotional motivation, but it can be the result of a momentary influence due to the fact that there is a fashionable cure. On the other hand, the travel souvenir tattoo represents a newer global trend influenced to a lesser degree by aesthetic trends, as this choice is a very personal one, according to the results of already published studies (Nassenstein & Rüschi, 2019). So, approaching souvenir tattoos from a personal perspective was also surprising in the case of the study's results in Romania.

The changes in the Romanian legislation regarding the purchase of tattoos incur a discussion with arguments both for and against, mostly importantly, young people under 18 who would most likely get tattooed, not having the right to receive one. They currently do not have the opportunity to express themselves by displaying visual representations painted on their skin. However, this is comparable with the legislation regarding tattoos in many other European countries, where the general trend is the same, namely that young people under 18 are becoming prohibited from getting a tattoo (Ink Happened, 2024). Tattoo artists mostly agree with the change in legislation, arguing that, in general, minors are the most attracted to and easily influenced by fashion; they quickly decide to get a tattoo, while artists emphasise that purchasing a tattoo should result from a lengthy analysis process.

## **Conclusions**

The tourist souvenir tattoo has started to be present among Romanians, who travel increasingly and are eager to explore new destinations. This choice is inspired by the destinations previously visited by the interviewed respondents,

which had awakened solid feelings and experiences, which they then transferred to their skin.

The main reasons cited by the interviewed people about getting a tattoo are related to keeping a memory or purchasing a souvenir which will remain on their skin forever. After returning from their trip, most interviewees chose to get a tattoo in Romania, but there was also a category of respondents who printed their souvenir tattoos in the country of inspiration (e.g. Thailand, Vietnam, Kenya, etc.).

Usually, souvenir tattoos correlate with the personal identity of the person getting tattooed and have emotional significance. The pattern chosen considered elements of universal symbolism, but especially the ethnic or tribal one, given that the purpose was to reproduce stories about places, people or countries they had visited.

The emotional changes experienced by the interviewees after getting a souvenir tattoo were always positive; acquiring this type of souvenir increased self-esteem and resulted in feelings of joy, excitement, happiness, and reconciliation. The perception of friends or family in relation to the tattoos purchased by them was also mostly positive, arousing curiosity about the potential story they hide/tell.

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