

# Body Image: Body Modification Practices

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**Abstract**—The modern approaches towards body modification are analyzed in the article. The human body can be defined as a lifelong project which specifications may be changed depending of the image formed through the process of socialization. This process is supported by the specially created industry with broad range of professionals. The sociological research was conducted in Yekaterinburg (Russia) in 2018 in order to identify the main body modification practices. 32 professionals whose activities are related to body modification industry were interviewed by using special questionnaire. There were fitness trainers (n=5), psychologists (n=5), designers (n=6), tattoo masters (n=3), cosmetologists (n=4), surgeons (n=4), nutritionists (n=3), neurologists (n=2) among respondents. The study revealed the demand for athletic body capable of participating actively in modern society. The leading methods to create such a body are regular sport activities and a balanced diet. These methods are not only actively used by different groups of the population, but also are the most affordable and safe. The younger generation decorates their bodies with tattoos, while the middle-aged and older adults use anti-aging cosmetic procedures. The safety of these practices depends on both the quality of materials and the qualifications of professionals. Plastic surgery is considered the most risky practices. Fear or pain during body manipulations, laziness and unwillingness to make efforts, as well as financial difficulties, act as barriers to the body modifications.

**Keywords**—body, body image, corporeality, body modification practices

## I. INTRODUCTION

The sociology of the body is one of the promising, actively developing branches of sociological knowledge. Since the end of the XXth century a noticeable “turn to the body” has occurred in social studies and humanities [1]. In sociological conceptualization the body has become the carrier of sociocultural requirements imposed by modern society. According to German researcher H. Joas, the body appears as a schema that is the result of intersubjective

constitution in the process of socialization and development of an individual [2].

Modern culture provides diverse methods to design the desired body. The actual body is considered as the basis for further changes, which can be achieved by doing sports, following special diets, using cosmetics and surgery. At the same time, there are prevailing trends which set certain parameters for body design among men and women. Different societies and cultures form their own image of the ideal body adopted as a socially approved model. Body image does change in certain contexts [3].

Meeting such trends may increase the career prospects, as well as may help to find a spouse and to raise a social status of an individual. For example, men with V-shaped torso and six-pack of abs are highly demanded among women, while long-legged women with blonde hair are in demand in the modeling business.

A whole industry has emerged and has been functioning, aimed at improving the human body. The development of biotechnology, genetic engineering, and neurosurgery causes the growth in the number of various types of body modifications that contribute to the implementation of individual corporeality projects.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Human body is a physical object given by nature, which is transformed into a social body in the process of growing up, socialization and the adoption of certain sociocultural norms by an individual. The body is an unfinished phenomenon which is transformed throughout one’s life [4]. For an individual his or her body is a set of ideas about it, displaying the principle of incompleteness [5]. Body modifications are seen as the consequence of deep social changes in the conditions of liquid modernity [6]. The actual body disappears [7], being replaced by the body modified in accordance with an image of an ideal body and its functional purposes.

An individual appeals to socially-approved practices in his or her desire to achieve the perfect body: sports and physical activities [8,9], a balanced diet [10]. At the same time, both men and women also embrace body

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modifications associated with health risk [11,12]: tattoos, scarification, piercing. These practices are focused on reducing the gap between the ideal body image and its real, given by nature, physical object.

An individual forms his or her conception of a body image since early childhood. First of all, parents set some standards about an ideal body image. In adolescence, the desire to construct the ideal body may lead some teenagers to practices harmful for their health. The practice of decorating the body through mechanical body modification (tattoos, etc.) is common among youth [13,14]. At the same time, the social environment plays a significant role in process of setting different body images and as a result in socialization. Thus, the need for having tattoos in the certain reference group is set by informal social norms and identity with the group can be determined by the presence of certain symbols / signs on the body in the form of a tattoo. The difference between the actual body of an individual and the ideal body image within the certain reference group causes a feeling of dissatisfaction, forms an inferiority complex, which negative impact on a person can persist for a long time.

The value of having a body close to the ideal body image does not decrease, but increases among middle-aged and older adults encouraging them to use other body modification practices. On the one hand, the laws of biology inevitably lead to a weakening of the vital forces of the body and to changes in its external characteristics. On the other hand, achievements in the field of medicine have given people hope for reducing the consequences of natural factors in body transformations caused by age-related factors. The body constantly gives out our age, but when we want to prevent it, there are some techniques: to use cosmetics and certain clothes [15]. According to R. Barthes [16], the actual body can be transformed with the help of certain clothes, acquiring a value of an ideal fashionable body. Stylish clothes and right accessories can be perceived as a logical continuation of the body; anti-aging beauty procedures can effectively reduce and correct the effects of time. Modern industry is focused on different age groups, and the body image can be transformed during the one's life.

### III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The pilot sociological research was conducted in Yekaterinburg (Russia) in 2018 in order to identify the main body modification practices. We interviewed 32 professionals whose jobs are related to body modification industry. There were fitness trainers (n = 5), psychologists (n = 5), dress designers/stylists (n = 6), tattoo artists (n = 3), doctors: cosmetologists (n = 4), surgeons (n = 4), nutritionists (n = 3), neurologists (n = 2) among respondents. The respondents were defined in accordance with the idea that an individual appeals to certain professionals able to help in the process of achieving an ideal body image [17].

The main method of data collecting was a standardized

interview. We developed the special questionnaire consisted of 11 questions. The research questions were designed to solve the following research problems. Firstly, to identify the most attractive and popular body image which is relevant today. Secondly, to determine the body modification practices to achieve the certain body image. Thirdly, to reveal major barriers arising in the process of body modification. Fourthly, to find out possible consequences related to body modification practices. The average interview lasted 40 minutes.

We did interview transcripts. The data was summarized in accordance with the research problems mentioned above. We categorized the data by main themes using the thematic network method [18].

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research results showed that modern society demands from an individual, above all, an athletic body. It is relevant both for men and women. Sports and a balanced diet are the main practices to achieve it. All respondents agreed that these practices were both the most effective and the most affordable: *"You just watch videos on YouTube and do yoga practice, for example"* (female, fitness trainer). More than that, fitness trainers claimed that physical activity not only sculpted body, but it was the basis for spiritual perfection of an individual. *"For me, working on my body is not just a physical improvement; it is also a spiritual one. That is, when an individual works on him- or herself, he or she not only works with the body, but also with the soul. A strong individual is kinder ..."* (male, fitness trainer).

The research results also showed that respondents were interested in an important philosophical question referring back to the ideas of Plato and R. Descartes about the separation of the spirit (soul) from the body. There is a contradiction, which is common for modern social systems. On the one hand, practices can improve not only the physical well-being, but also spiritual one, but, on the other hand, being focused on the body image as a central issue causes spiritual degradation of an individual. Semantic searches for ideal corporeality and its modification practices may become obsessive and enslave an individual.

The psychologists during our interview emphasized that they worked primarily with the human soul, considering body practices as an attitude towards health care and acceptance of the actual body itself. *"I am a psychologist; above all I speak about the mental, but not the physical health. There are of course some fanatics with a neurotic personality organization. We can call them perfectionists, i.e. they believe that they must meet certain requirements"* (female, psychologist).

Referring to eating patterns as a body modification practices, all respondents were convinced that the majority of the population sought to balanced diet. *"Excessive thinness is not fashionable; what you need is an athletic body and clean healthy skin. This can be achieved by sports and a balanced diet"* (female, fitness trainer). At the same

time, respondents working in the beauty industry noted that eating patterns of an individual positively influenced the color and the structure of the skin, but the skin elasticity decreased with age, and the body needed special care. *“At the age of 40, a professional skin care is already required”* (female, cosmetologist). According to the respondents, the body may be modified in a particular way with the help of sports at a young age, but in the middle and older age there is a need for a professional help. It is not surprising that beauty procedures are popular primarily among women. *“If a woman looks polished, men (even if she is at the age of 40-50) pay attention to her. If a woman is not polished, they pass by”* (female, cosmetologist). At the same time, the respondents noted a growing interest in professional skin care among male population concerned with body image.

During the interview, the respondents also paid attention to the consequences of body modification practices. According to almost all respondents, sports and a balanced diet are the less harmful practices. At the same time, one of the respondents emphasized that using pharmaceutical / chemical / medicinal products for body shaping purposes required in professional sports could be harmful to health. *“There are drugs to increase muscle mass. After a while, some negative side effects may occur, when man or a woman quit professional sports. For example, some diseases of internal organs... And instead of feelings of pleasure derived from sports, he or she loses his health”* (male, fitness trainer).

With regard to beauty procedures and tattoos, the opinions of the respondents were controversial. Cosmetologists and tattoo artists believe that these practices do not have any irreversible consequences for an individual and are used as a method to correct his or her appearance to build confidence and self-esteem, to overcome an inferiority complex. However, other respondents argued that the quality of work of both cosmetologists and tattoo artists, as well as the materials they worked with were doubtful. There are risks of bacterial infections, skin problems, allergic reactions etc. *“After tattooing, you will not be the same person anymore; even if you try to remove it, the paint may cause an allergic reaction, or tattoo artist may be under qualified. Beauty procedures are based on chemical effects and irreversibly change a person if something goes wrong”* (female, fashion designer).

Plastic surgery is recognized as the most risky among body modification practices by almost all respondents. At the same time, individuals try to take control of their future under conditions of high uncertainty through improving their appearance and increasing their life chances having plastic surgery [19]. This practice is dangerous because *“body plastic surgery is a pathology, a person, turning once to it, will always come back to improve his or her body”* (male, dental surgeon). One respondent said about the fanaticism typical for some individuals wanted to achieve a perfect body: *“There is a pretty, tall, and beautiful girl, but she’s not happy with everything. She is unhappy with her body. She has already made breasts and lips. Recently she*

*has made herself lower and upper eyelids. Now she wants to make cheekbones”* (female, cosmetologist).

According to the respondents, a significant amount of people are dissatisfied with their bodies, but only one of five persons aims to achieve the perfect body. At the same time, the perception of an ideal body image can vary among different social groups. For example, contrary to rock artist a woman who sees banking as a dream job will not apply tattoos.

The research also aimed at revealing the barriers that might arise during the body modification process. The respondents agreed that the laziness was the main obstacle. People *“want to be beautiful, but at the same time they do not want to do anything”* (female, fitness trainer).

The second obstacle is a financial wealth of an individual. Plastic surgery is considered as the most expensive practice, which significantly limits the amount of people ready to have it for their body rejuvenation. Beauty procedures and tattooing as body modification practices have become more affordable to improve one’s appearance. According to one of the respondents, an individual *“...can also use some folk remedies, like our ancestors ...”* (female, cosmetologist).

The third obstacle is the human fear. Some individuals are afraid of tattoo pain, surgery, beauty procedures. As a result many people ask stylists and fashion designers for a professional help, because according to the results of our study it is seen as the safest way to hide body flaws and highlight its advantages.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The main findings of the study lead to the following conclusions. The human body has become a lifelong project, which is under constant modifications. An individual is dissatisfied with an actual body and seeks to fulfill his own ideas of an ideal body. The whole beauty industry, which includes fitness trainers, fashion designers / stylists, tattoo artists, surgeons and cosmetologists, helps to realize these ideas. The concept of self-presentation has become closely connected with the body image in professional and private spheres, during leisure activities. The common requirement to an individual is an athletic body able to fulfil its functional purposes. The main body modification practices are regular physical activities and a balanced diet.

The presented study is the first step towards a further study regarding the body modification practices aimed at achieving an ideal body image. In this regard, it seems important to evaluate the effectiveness of various approaches towards achieving an ideal body image by various social groups, in particular, by HR departments aim to employ staff able to successfully cope with an increasing workload. Also, the attention should be paid to the study of the factors affecting the inclusion of various small and large communities into the lifelong process of changing their corporeality.

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