Structural variations on the surface of metallic products at laser marking

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Laser marking of products and details is used more and more wide in different production areas, because it has undisputable advantages in comparison with other marking methods. Action of laser beam on the surface of marking product is the principal feature of laser marking. It is accompanied with local heating of this surface and its partial melting together with material evaporation from the surface contact point. Influence of laser impulse action on efficiency of marking on the surface of machine-building details is examined in this work. The samples of 08Kh18N10 steel were used as material. Marking was conducted by the system "MiniMarker 2-20A4", QR code was used as a marker. The marking parameters were optimized via the method of experimental design. The optimal marking procedure for getting maximal contrast of QR code was calculated and experimentally confirmed. Steel surface roughness was analyzed using profilograms. Contrasting effect and roughness of code were determined and relationship between these parameters was revealed. Contrast effect of marking increases with elevation of roughness. However, roughness has less input in increase of contrast effect comparing with colour hue of the surface of an information block and substrate. The link between surface roughness and contrast effect of marking is shown. Possibility of contrast effect assessment of QR code using profilometer is suggested.

Key words: laser marking, experimental design, QR code, surface properties, contrast effect, roughness, profilometer. *DOI:* 10.17580/cisisr.2021.02.18

Introduction

There are many various methods for marking application. For example, labels which are glued on package or directly on products, can be manufactured by printing. The labels which have the form of carrier are often molten to mark plastic products [1, 2]. However, such methods are not reliable, because applied marking is rubbing and damaging during product operation and can be replaced easily. Therefore, use of direct marking methods is required, when information is located just on the surface of finished product.

Embossing and stamping can be mentioned as such direct methods, but they are just out-of-date. Electrochemical marking is also considered as direct method, but the most demanded and up-to-date technique is now various engraving, e. g. laser engraving [3, 4]. Efficiency of laser engraving use is determined by its workability, by high marking speed of products, by contactless operation, by stability and reliability of image, by suitability of apprehension and by possibility of control for legality of products using created electronic data bases [5, 6].

Action of laser emission on variation of the state of marking product is the main mechanism of laser marking. When laser emission effects on different materials (both metallic and non-metallic), local heating appears; partial melting and evaporation of material from the surface contact point [7]. If we move laser beam along the sample surface, we get any visible image presented by signs, pictures, letters and figures [8, 9]. This research used QR codes as the image applied during marking; they are widely used for marking the finished products.

Processing surface has optical properties which are typical for the concrete material. So, laser effect on product surface leads to partial absorption of laser emission through definite depth of material and partial reflection [10]. Thereby there is definite relationship between absorbing and reflecting capacities of material and its optical properties.

To increase absorption coefficient and to decrease reflection coefficient, so-called substrate is applied by laser to the place of future marking. Thereby, dull surface of product is formed together with substrate, what provides better code scanning in comparison with lustrous metallic surface [11, 12]. Surface relief also has the effect on scanning capacity.

The aim of this research was reveal of the relationship between laser marking parameters and contrasting effect of applied image, as well as influence of surface roughness of contrast effect of marking.

Methods and materials

In this research the image was applied on flat samples of cold-rolled sheet with thickness 1.5 mm and surface roughness (Ra) 0.112 μ m using fiber laser "MiniMarker 2-20A4" [13, 14]. Stainless steel 08Kh18N10 (chemical composition according to the GOST 5632-2014) was the material for pilot samples. QR code containing a little more than 300 signs of typescript text, with code dimensions 35×35 mm, was selected as the image for marking. Marking process was conducted via several passes to form two elements (substrate and code itself). To create the image which absolutely

provides efficient QR code scanning, it is necessary to get this image with maximal contrast effect [15–17]; it is determined by correct selection of laser marking parameters. Thereby optimal parameters of marking application by laser device using experimental design method were determined in this work [18, 19]. Contrast effect as a response function during experimental design was evaluated by the parameters of RGB additive model within Photoshop CC program; in this case the variation range was started from absolutely black colour (marked as 0) to absolutely white colour (marked as 255).

Optimization of laser marking parameters was conducted using fractional factorial experiment of 2^{7-3} kind with duplication in the central view [20].

3 levels of variation of the examined factors were selected in order to find out marking procedure which is corresponded to optimal one (**Table 1**).

Lineature means density of halftone image, number of lines per unit of image length [4, 9]. Lower indexes C and S mean code and substrate respectively.

Variation range is calculated via the formula

$$\Delta = \frac{max - min}{2},\tag{1}$$

16 experiments were conducted in this work instead of 128, it makes 1/8 of replicate from the full factorial experiment. This replicate can be obtained via replacement of three interaction effects for examined factors by the new factors X_5 , X_6 , X_7 .

Contrast effect K was calculated after measuring RGB parameters for substrate (B_S) and code (B_C) via the following formula:

$$K = \frac{B_S - B_C}{B_S}. (2)$$

Processing material is characterized by any surface relief and colour. This relief is varying during marking, as well as colour brightness; respectively, material contrast effect and scanning ability of applied bar code are also varying. As soon as the code contrast effect depends on parameter of marking surface roughness, the roughness gradient parameter was calculated in this work:

$$\Delta = R_{\text{a code}} - R_{\text{a subs}} \tag{3}$$

where R_a — is arithmetical mean deviation of evaluating shape, which determines positive values within the basic length of Z(x) ordinates. Roughness parameter of white field (i. e. substrate) and image applied on steel (QR code) were determined using profilometer in this research. The profilogram was measured from this place using Mitutoyo Surftest SJ-210 profilometer. The length of line, which is made perpendicular to lineature, was used for determination of roughness parameter.

Experimental part

21 experiments were conducted in correspondence with the plan of fractional factorial investigation, part of the results are presented on the **Fig. 1**. It can be seen that the obtained OR code images are characterized by various contrast effect, which is determined by the complex of different values of parameters of laser action on the samples surface.

| Factor | | | | Levels | | | | | |
|----------------|---------------------|------------------|------------------------------|---------|------|-------|------|---------|------|
| Variable | Title | Designa-tion | Variation range (Δ) | Minimal | | Basic | | Maximal | |
| | | | | Value | Code | Value | Code | Value | Code |
| X ₁ | Frequency | n | 20 | 60 | -1 | 80 | 0 | 100 | 1 |
| X_4 | Capacity | Р | 10 | 20 | -1 | 30 | 0 | 40 | 1 |
| X ₇ | Duration of impulse | t | 75 | 50 | -1 | 125 | 0 | 200 | 1 |
| X ₃ | Speed | V _C | 5 | 5 | -1 | 10 | 0 | 15 | 1 |
| X ₆ | Lineature | lpi _C | 15 | 20 | -1 | 35 | 0 | 50 | 1 |
| X_2 | Speed | V _s | 150 | 450 | -1 | 600 | 0 | 750 | 1 |
| X ₅ | Lineature | Lpi _s | 15 | 60 | -1 | 75 | 0 | 90 | 1 |

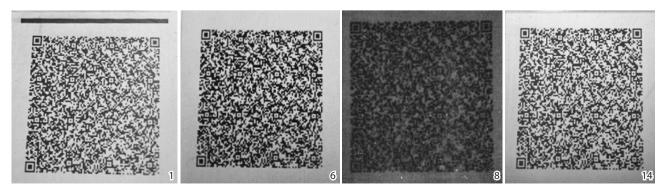


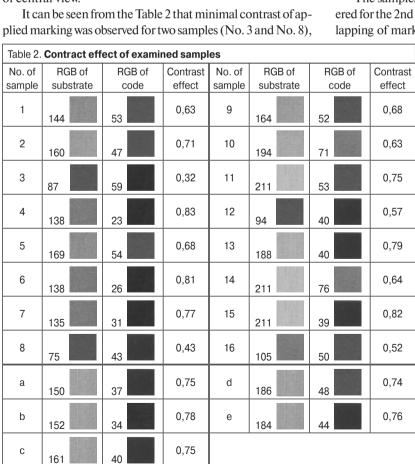
Fig. 1. Examples of samples with QR code applied according to the experimental parameters

To evaluate image expression in electronic devices, RGB additive colour model is used; it describes the method and the results of colour coding [21, 22]. Measuring of contract effect in this work was carried out by parameters of such model. Obtained results after analysis of all experimental samples were displayed in the **Table 2**.

The reference QR code was printed on the paper with density 80 g/m²; printing density of the laser printer was 1200 dpi, contrast effect of such code made 83 %.

Microstructure of samples was studied in three areas of applied QR code. The boundaries between the areas of substrate application on steel, of transition from substrate to code were pictured with 5 times magnification, while the boundary of transition from substrate to code was also pictured with 20 times magnification. After examination, all samples were classified in 4 groups:

- samples without "marking substrate" boundary;
- samples with lineature of marking application 50 l/mm;
- samples with lineature of marking application 20 l/mm;
- samples with applied marking according to parameters of central view.



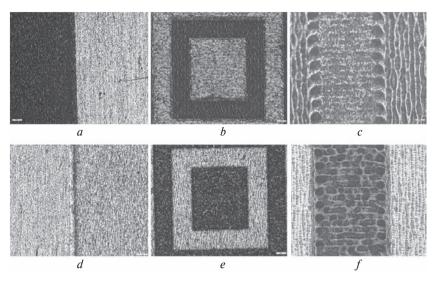


Fig. 2. Micro-relief of the samples No. 4 and No. 2 after marking application: a — sample No. 4, boundary "steel — substrate", magnification $\times 5$; b — sample No. 4, boundary "substrate — code", magnification $\times 5$; c — sample No. 4, boundary "substrate — code", magnification $\times 20$; d — sample No. 2, boundary "steel — substrate", magnification $\times 5$; e — sample No. 2, boundary "substrate — code", magnification $\times 5$; f — sample No. 2, boundary "substrate — code", magnification $\times 20$

which are related to the 1st group. Metallographic examination of the surface didn't reveal the boundary "substrate — code" for these samples. Their scanning ability is absent.

The samples Nos. 1, 2, 4, 6, 12, 13 and 15 can be considered for the 2nd group. They are characterized with slight overlapping of marking lines (**Fig. 2** a, b, c), what testifies about

incorrect selection of code application lineature. However, the samples have straight and distinct lines of substrate application (**Fig. 2** *d*, *e*, *f*). The maximal contract is observed in this group, despite overlapping of adjacent laser passes.

The samples Nos. 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 14 and 16 are classified for the 3rd group (Fig. 3). These samples have optimal value of marking application lineature. It can be concluded on the base of laser beam print image in the beginning of each laser pass. The prints of each pass have distinct boundaries and are not crossing with each other. The sample No. 14 has the most straight lines of substrate application. QR code of the samples Nos. 5, 9, 10 and 11 is scanning without delay, while the sample No. 16 can't be scanned. Microstructure of the samples with applied marking according to parameters of central view is presented on the Fig. 3 d, e, f.

All samples were subjected to laser processing according to parameters of central view. It is confirmed by laser beam print, which is the same for all 5 samples. Distinct transition lines of laser beam can be seen

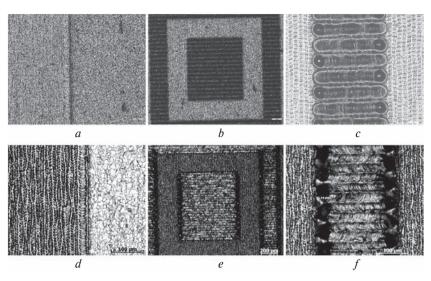


Fig. 3. Micro-relief of the samples No. 14 and No. 16 after marking application: a — boundary "steel — substrate", magnification $\times 5$; b — boundary "substrate — code", magnification $\times 5$; c — boundary "substrate — code", magnification $\times 20$; d — boundary "steel — substrate", magnification $\times 5$; e — boundary "substrate — code", magnification $\times 5$; f — boundary "substrate — code", magnification $\times 20$

on the Fig. 3*e*, what makes it possible to testify on correct lineature selection in marking process. Scanning of marking passes without any delays for all samples of this group.

As a result, the equation of response function was composed on the base of all obtained data:

$$Y = 0.661 + 0.065X_1 + 0.026X_2 - 0.045X_4 - 0.015X_5 + 0.024X_6 + 0.091X_7.$$

Statistical importance of the equation coefficients was calculated according to the Student's criterion for obtained values of contrast effect. Adequacy checking of the model was conducted according to the Fisher's criterion.

To determine roughness influence, nine samples were selected — four samples from each of the 2^{nd} and 3^{rd} groups, and one sample from the 1^{st} group. The roughness parameters (R_a) of information block and substrate, as well as roughness gradient parameter (Δ), which were measured by profilometer, are presented in the **Table 3**.

| Table 3. Roughness parameters $\mathbf{R}_{\mathbf{a}}$ and roughness gradient parameters Δ | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| No. of sample | Roughness of substrate R _{a subs} , µm | Roughness of information block R _{a code} , µm | Roughness gradient Δ, μm | | | | | | |
| 2 | 0.59 | 2.89 | 2.30 | | | | | | |
| 3 | 0.57 | 0.46 | -0.11 | | | | | | |
| 4 | 0.54 | 3.00 | 2.46 | | | | | | |
| 6 | 0.55 | 4.83 | 4.28 | | | | | | |
| 9 | 0.56 | 2.21 | 1.66 | | | | | | |
| 11 | 0.53 | 3.67 | 3.14 | | | | | | |
| 14 | 0.58 | 2.00 | 1.42 | | | | | | |
| 15 | 0.57 | 8.57 | 8.00 | | | | | | |
| 16 | 0.57 | 1.32 | 0.75 | | | | | | |

The obtained profilogram of the examined sample is presented on the **Fig. 4**.

The results of examination of OR code microstructure allowed to reveal furrows which appeared after laser beam processing of the sample surface (see Fig. 2 and 3). Width of this furrow corresponds to diameter of laser spot. Formed distance between the furrows can vary depending on parameters of laser action, especially on lineature. These distances between the furrows have negative influence on the contrast effect of applied code, because appearance of intervals between laser passes increases surface reflecting capacity in comparison with its absorbing capacity [25–27]. Lineature increase leads to rise of the contrast effect. Distribution of examining distances can be also observed on profilograms, thereby investigation of distribution features for furrows using profilograms can characterize the marker scanning ability, as well as examination of surface structure after marking using microscope.

Power intensity of consequent impulses has influence on material surface relief [28, 29]. Intensity rise leads to increase of wave relief height and surface melting degree. High intensity during extremely small action time provided creation of small wave relief of steel surface for the sample No. 12. Absence of substantial roughness is confirmed by the profilogram (Fig. 5).

Increase of laser emission speed leads to strong enlargement of ledges of furrows after laser beam passing in the conditions of high emission intensities. It is caused by the fact, that molten metal part has not enough time to be distributed via the process of thermocapillary instability. Increase of furrow ledges and appearance of burrs enable rise of absorbing capacity of the code information block.

Analysis of profilograms displayed that location of roughness peaks corresponds to burrs in the area of emission flow action, thereby use of profilometer for examination of complicated surface relief after laser action of the surface is applicable.

Contrast effect parameters K and roughness gradient parameters between the information block and substrate Δ , which were obtained during the research, are presented in the **Table 4**.

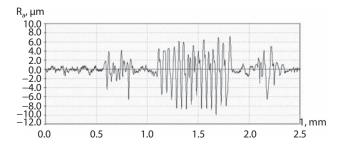


Fig. 4. Profilogram of the sample No. 4

| Table 4. Contrast effect parameters K and roughness gradient | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| parameters of code Δ | | | | | | | | |
| No. of sample | Contrast effect | Roughness R _a | | | | | | |
| No. or sample | Parameter K, % | Parameter Δ, μm | | | | | | |
| 3 | 32 | -0.11 | | | | | | |
| 16 | 52 | 0.75 | | | | | | |
| 14 | 64 | 1.42 | | | | | | |
| 9 | 68 | 1.66 | | | | | | |
| 2 | 71 | 2.30 | | | | | | |
| 11 | 75 | 2.46 | | | | | | |
| 6 | 81 | 3.14 | | | | | | |
| 15 | 82 | 4.28 | | | | | | |
| 4 | 83 | 8.00 | | | | | | |

It can be concluded on the base of the data obtained during the research, that contrast effect of the sample processed by laser is mainly connected with its roughness.

If the contrast effect parameter is distributed ascending, then roughness gradient parameter for the samples Nos. 2, 3, 9, 14 and 16 is located in the same order.

Remaining samples have maximal parameters, both in roughness gradient and in contrast effect. The samples Nos. 4, 6 and 15 have larger contrast effect than the code applied on the white paper leaf by printer; it means assured and quick QR code scanning from these samples.

Variations of light and dark degrees or lightness and saturation (characterized by brightness) as well as colour tone are considered as the main colour parameters.

As soon as surface roughness increases, absorbing capacity of solid bodies also rises.

Visual macroanalysis displayed that colour saturation parameter is minimal for the samples No. 3 and No. 16, which are characterized by low roughness owing to small action time. Colour tone and saturation are unsatisfied in general, thereby these samples have minimal contrast effect.

Three samples Nos. 2, 5 and 9 have average contrast effect, and average roughness gradient parameter, their colour tone is brown-red.

Fig. 5. Surface relief and profilogram of the sample No. 16

Remaining samples were characterized by saturated contrast effect during average time period, owing to the part of dark colour tone, which increases with enlargement of power density. However, marking with high roughness parameters is not the most contrast. It is connected with colour tone. As soon as molten areas are located on the boundaries of information blocks, RGB parameter decreases and, respectively, contrast effect of applied marking also decreases for high RGB parameters of the code itself.

When marking the sample No. 4 at high action capacity and during average action time, material evaporation occurred with small melting. As a result, the most high part of dark colour tone was formed together with distinct boundaries of blocks and high saturation, thereby maximal scanning ability was observed.

Conclusions

Analysis of surface microstructure makes it possible to evaluate, if the marking parameters are chosen correctly or no. Distinct lines of laser emission passing display correct selection of marking lineature. Analysis of the model has shown that duration of an impulse, frequency and power of laser emission are the most important factors. At the same time, speed of code and substrate application as well as their lineature have no substantial effect on the contrast of applied image or are not so important. Interaction of speed and frequency of code and substrate application, as well as frequency and power have influence on contrast effect value.

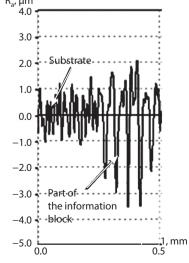
Maximal contrast of applied marking made 83 %, what corresponds to the contrast effect during printing on a white paper sheet.

The conducted analysis of surface roughness for marked steel was done using profilograms and microstructure pictures, and it showed possibility of determination of various surface characteristics and defects.

After marking, steel surface is characterized by furrow structure. Furrows of information code have width 30 μm , melting depth 60 μm and distance between furrows 10 μm

which varies depending on lineature and power density of laser emission. Height of ledges along furrow edges of information block varies from 0.5 μm (for samples with average power density and small action time) to 16 μm, due to passing of different physical processes.

Code contrast effect and roughness were determined and relationship between these two parameters was revealed; marking contrast effect increases with rise of roughness. When substrate roughness



parameter (R_a) is within the range 0.54–0.57 µm, and code roughness parameter (R_a) is more than 3 µm, the best contrast effect characteristics of applied image are observed. However, roughness has less input in the contrast effect rise in comparison with coloured tone of the information block and substrate surface.

The results of the research can be used for increase of QR code contrast effect, providing improvement of laser marking technology with saving of economical efficiency. The obtained results of determination of laser marking optimal parameters allow to exclude additional calculations, using obtained data for required tasks, to achieve maximal contrast.

The reported study was financially supported by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation, research agreement No. 075-11-2019-066 of 22.11.2019, project title "Development of high-tech production of equipment and technologies for laser coding of transported goods and their optical identification for the implementation in modern material flow management systems" (within the framework of decree of the Government of the Russian Federation, No. 218 of 09.04.2010).

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