

INTRODUCTION

The Pharmacy Office of Experiential Education had a professional appearance and dress code that we assumed student pharmacists were following while on experiential training. While facilitating skills lab, faculty noticed several students exhibited body modifications that were in violation of the code that we assumed meant they weren't following while on experiential training. After discussion, we were concerned if our code was outdated and unreasonable, so decided to gather opinions from students regarding their perceptions of professional appearance and dress codes for student pharmacists and pharmacists.

Objective: To examine student pharmacists' perceptions regarding professional appearance and potential impact on education and employment.

METHODS

Pharmacy students from each professional year (P1-P4) were asked to complete a voluntary online 54-item survey. The survey focused on student pharmacists' perceptions of professional appearance, including how appearance may impact first-impression perceptions of knowledge, approachability, trustworthiness, caring, and confidence. Most questions utilized Likert-scale responses with one open-ended item asking students to provide thoughts on professional appearance for pharmacy professionals. Responses were analyzed descriptively with frequencies and percentages. The open-ended question was analyzed through a thematic analysis process with four researchers utilizing individual open coding and category formation, followed by group discussion to identify consensus themes.

RESULTS

372 students (85%) completed the survey.

Table 1. Demographics of Student Respondents

Students (N = 372)						
n (%)						
Grade Level	P1: 81 (21.8)	P2: 108 (29.0)	P3: 128 (34.4)	P4: 55 (14.8)		
Gender	Female: 264 (71.0)	Male: 105 (28.2)	Nonbinary: 1 (0.3)	Prefer not to answer: 2 (0.5)		
Pathway	Campus: 129 (34.7)	Distance: 233 (62.6)	Phoenix: 10 (2.7)			
Age (years)	Mean: 29.2	Median: 27	Range: 20-54	Campus Mean: 25.3	Distance Mean: 31.4	Phoenix Mean: 29.9
Race	White: 237 (63.7)	Hispanic: 58 (15.6)	Native Am or AK: 25 (6.7)	Black: 25 (6.7)	Multi-racial: 16 (4.3)	Others: 11 (2.9)
U.S. Region	Midwest: 197 (53.1)	West: 81 (21.8)	South: 65 (17.5)	Northeast: 20 (5.4)	Other: 20 (2.2)	
Body Modification	None/NA: 239 (64.4)	Nonvisible tattoo(s): 98 (26.4)	Visible tattoo(s): 56 (15.1)	Visible non-ear Piercings: 22 (5.9)	Unkempt head or facial hair: 4 (1.1)	Unnatural hair color: 1 (0.3)
Employment Setting	Community (chain): 117 (31.5)	Not working: 76 (20.4)	Hospital: 70 (18.8)	Multiple settings: 43 (11.6)	Community (independent): 40 (10.8)	Others: 23 (6.9)

Table 2. Survey Responses: Qualitative Themes & Dress Code Violations

Question	Responses
Please share your overall thoughts regarding a dress code that addresses professional appearance for pharmacy professionals and whether you think visible tattoos, ear gauges, facial or neck piercings, unkempt hair or unkempt facial hair, and/or unnatural hair color are considered appropriate in the professional pharmacy practice setting:	Six themes were identified from open-ended responses: 1) Personal beliefs vs. professional perceptions 2) Appearance doesn't represent professionalism 3) Generational differences in defining professionalism 4) Threshold for tattoos, piercings, and unnatural hair color 5) Personal hygiene is different from personal expression or cultural norms 6) Standards are important for maintaining professionalism.
Dress Code Violations	Of those students currently working/volunteering: • 263 (89.8%) indicated their work site has a professional appearance dress code policy. • Most respondents indicated always adhering to the dress code policy (n=258, 92.1%). • Only three respondents (1.0%) noted that their supervisor needed to reinforce the policy with them due to noncompliance. • Very few respondents (n=8, 2.9%) believed the dress code policy is too strict. Regarding dress code violations in non-work settings: • Four respondents (1.1%) indicated that a preceptor needed to reinforce the policy with them at an IPPE or APPE site because of noncompliance. • Only one respondent (0.3%) reported being reprimanded by another healthcare professional for not complying with the dress code policy at an IPPE or APPE site. • Only one respondent (0.3%) indicated having been notified by Office of Experiential Education that they were not in compliance. • No respondents indicated being sent home from an IPPE or APPE for not complying with the dress code policy. Overall, eight respondents (2.2%) had ever been in violation of any policies for appearance or clothing for an IPPE, APPE, or work during pharmacy school.

Table 3. Survey Responses: Perceptions of First Impressions*

First Impressions	Students			Healthcare Providers			Patients		
	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Professionalism Impressions									
Visible tattoo(s):	37%	50%	13%	57%	35%	8%	63%	30%	7%
Ear gauges:	67%	26%	7%	77%	18%	5%	77%	19%	4%
Face, tongue, neck, eye, or lip piercings:	70%	24%	7%	77%	18%	5%	77%	19%	4%
Unkempt head or facial hair:	81%	16%	3%	85%	13%	2%	83%	15%	2%
Unnatural hair color:	48%	44%	9%	69%	26%	5%	69%	26%	5%
Knowledge Impressions									
Visible tattoo(s):	13%	69%	18%	37%	53%	10%	54%	37%	10%
Ear gauges:	31%	57%	13%	54%	37%	9%	67%	27%	6%
Face, tongue, neck, eye, or lip piercings:	29%	58%	13%	55%	37%	8%	69%	24%	7%
Unkempt head or facial hair:	36%	52%	11%	63%	32%	5%	72%	24%	5%
Unnatural hair color:	21%	65%	14%	48%	43%	9%	58%	34%	7%
Approachability Impressions									
Visible tattoo(s):	22%	44%	34%	43%	44%	13%	55%	35%	11%
Ear gauges:	39%	39%	22%	60%	34%	7%	68%	25%	7%
Face, tongue, neck, eye, or lip piercings:	42%	36%	22%	61%	32%	8%	70%	23%	7%
Unkempt head or facial hair:	47%	35%	18%	64%	30%	6%	71%	23%	6%
Unnatural hair color:	25%	44%	31%	49%	40%	11%	57%	32%	11%
Trustworthiness Impressions									
Visible tattoo(s):	17%	58%	26%	39%	48%	14%	52%	38%	10%
Ear gauges:	30%	51%	19%	52%	39%	9%	63%	31%	6%
Face, tongue, neck, eye, or lip piercings:	29%	51%	21%	55%	36%	10%	66%	27%	7%
Unkempt head or facial hair:	36%	48%	17%	60%	34%	6%	67%	28%	5%
Unnatural hair color:	20%	57%	23%	45%	44%	11%	55%	37%	8%
Caring Impressions									
Visible tattoo(s):	14%	61%	25%	34%	53%	13%	44%	46%	10%
Ear gauges:	26%	54%	20%	46%	44%	10%	56%	36%	9%
Face, tongue, neck, eye, or lip piercings:	27%	54%	20%	47%	43%	10%	58%	34%	8%
Unkempt head or facial hair:	38%	47%	15%	56%	37%	8%	62%	32%	7%
Unnatural hair color:	17%	60%	23%	39%	50%	12%	46%	43%	11%
Confidence Impressions									
Visible tattoo(s):	10%	49%	41%	24%	49%	28%	34%	45%	21%
Ear gauges:	20%	49%	32%	34%	45%	22%	44%	41%	16%
Face, tongue, neck, eye, or lip piercings:	21%	48%	31%	36%	42%	22%	47%	38%	16%
Unkempt head or facial hair:	41%	43%	17%	59%	32%	9%	56%	34%	9%
Unnatural hair color:	17%	48%	35%	32%	45%	24%	40%	43%	17%
Reliability Impressions									
Visible tattoo(s):	15%	62%	23%	38%	50%	13%	47%	43%	10%
Ear gauges:	29%	54%	17%	51%	40%	9%	59%	35%	7%
Face, tongue, neck, eye, or lip piercings:	29%	54%	17%	54%	39%	8%	63%	31%	7%
Unkempt head or facial hair:	48%	39%	13%	65%	30%	5%	68%	27%	5%
Unnatural hair color:	21%	59%	20%	43%	46%	11%	53%	39%	9%

* **Bolded percentages** are most common responses by students regarding the body modification and their perceived affect on its first impression. Negative means "not" or "less", and Positive means "is" or "more".

Table 4. Survey Responses: Beliefs Regarding Hiring & Advancement

Question	Responses: n (%)
Do you believe a pharmacist intern who currently has visible tattoos, ear gauges, facial or neck piercings, unkempt hair or unkempt facial hair, and/or unnatural hair color will encounter future hiring issues as a licensed pharmacist?	Strongly Agree or Agree: 258 (72.7%) Strongly Disagree or Disagree: 97 (27.3%)
Do you believe a pharmacist intern who currently has visible tattoos, ear gauges, facial or neck piercings, unkempt hair or unkempt facial hair, and/or unnatural hair color will encounter any career advancement issues as a licensed pharmacist?	Strongly Agree or Agree: 219 (61.7%) Strongly Disagree or Disagree: 136 (38.3%)

DISCUSSION

1. Based on the qualitative question responses (Table 2), there are varying opinions from students regarding body modifications. There was a dichotomy between those that think they are unprofessional and inappropriate and those that think the older generations are out-of-touch and need to understand that 'you can't and shouldn't judge a book by its cover.'

2. Overall, students perceive other students to be more neutral and less negative about body modifications than health care professionals and patients.

3. Visible tattoo(s): Students think...

- Students will consider visible tattoos as neutral most often regarding first impressions, and secondarily positive except for professionalism.
- Healthcare professionals will be neutral, except for professionalism, where they think it would make a negative impression.
- Patients will perceive visible tattoos as negative for all impressions except caring and confidence, where they think it will be neutral.

4. Ear gauges: Students think...

- Students will consider ear gauges as neutral most often regarding first impressions, except for professionalism and approachability, which were negative.
- Healthcare professionals will be negative, except for confidence, where they think it would be neutral.
- Patients will perceive ear gauges as negative across all areas.

5. Facial & neck piercings: Students think...

- Students will either perceive facial and neck piercings as neutral or negative.
- Healthcare professionals will view them as negative for all impressions, except for caring, which is neutral.
- Patients will overwhelmingly be negative about these piercings.

6. Unkempt head/facial hair: Students think...

- Students will either perceive unkempt head or facial hair as neutral or negative.
- Healthcare professionals and patients will have negative first impressions across all areas.
- Qualitative comments indicated negative perceptions about unkempt head or facial hair as unhygienic and poor self-care.

7. Unnatural hair color: Students think...

- Students will consider unnatural hair color as neutral most often regarding first impressions, except for professionalism which is negative.
- Healthcare professionals will be negative or neutral and that patients will mostly be negative regarding unnatural hair color, except for the confidence impression.

8. Analysis of students with a body modification to those without:

- Students with a body modification generally had more positive perceptions of students/pharmacists with body modifications compared to students without a body modification. The exception to this was unkempt hair or unkempt facial hair in which the two groups were similar across all analyses.

9. Sample size is too small to compare across geographic regions. Other comparisons will be analyzed and published.

10. Students believe that body modifications will cause hiring issues and career advancement issues for licensed pharmacists (Table 4).



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IMPLICATIONS

In society, there is a trend toward less conservative appearances. The professional appearance of health care professionals has traditionally remained conservative, but in recent years conservative appearance has been tested by the desire for personal expression. Student perceptions regarding what is considered professional varies and is important for pharmacy schools to understand as we guide them and their professional development.