



Students Perceptions Towards Professors with Visible Tattoos

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Abstract

Body art, like tattoos, has become a mainstream culture in the 21st century. Getting a tattoo is highly personal and can vary widely from one individual to another. It may be self-expression, symbolism, aesthetics, cultural and religious traditions. However, visible tattoos may still cause stigma among other professionals, such as teachers. How a student perceives a teacher impacts how he responds to that teacher. Thus, this study explores students' perceptions towards professors with visible tattoos. A quantitative descriptive survey research design was applied in this study. It adapted Duncan's (2023) Perception of Tattoos and Piercings in Higher Education questionnaire. The participants are 38 randomly selected FEU Manila students in the School Year 2023-2024. Data gathering was through Google Forms, where participants voluntarily participated. The results show statements 1, 3, 11, 12, 18, and 20 are interpreted as Disagree while the remaining statements are interpreted as Strongly Disagree. This suggests that students show positive views toward professionals with visible tattoos and that it disputes any form of discrimination against them. The researcher recommends looking into other professionals with tattoos to provide a newer perspective on the dilemma.

Keywords: *education, body modification, professionalism, freedom of expression, Philippines*

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1. Introduction

Freedom of expression in a workplace is the ability to engage in self-expression without the threat of discrimination. We have come a long way in the art of expression. Gone are the days when employees adhered to restrictive dress codes and grooming policies. Employees can now enjoy the liberty to style themselves as long as it does not violate any rights. Despite such a positive shift, younger professionals are still baffled by an emerging dilemma – visible tattoos and whether they are unprofessional.

Tattoos in the workplace have become a subject of debate in recent years. While some companies bluntly dictate no visible tattoos, others do not mind at all. In modern workplaces, like in Western countries, acceptance of tattoos is growing. A survey by the Pew Research Center found that 8 out of 10 American adults say society has become

more accepting of people with tattoos. In fact, 32% of the US population has a tattoo, with 22% having more than one (Schaeffer & Dinesh, 2023). As progressive as it may seem, tattoos still carry a stigma within certain professional spheres, such as academia, for tattoos challenge the very notion of professionalism.

Traditionally, academia has been associated with professionalism. Merriam-Webster defines professionalism as “*the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person.*” Whereas the professional identity of teachers is said to be “*not a fixed or static construct, but changes over time through personal and professional experiences and, at the same time, varies between individuals and cultures*” (Suarez & McGrath, 2022). That being said, teachers should be the champions of inclusion. Instead, they are trapped in the conservative paradigm they have been in since the 1950s, perceived to be *clean* and deprived of showing their uniqueness. The general public puts teachers in high regard. That pressure has created an unrealistic image of what a teacher should be like (Burkman, 2018). However, this should not be the case, as it is important to recognize that teachers, like any other professional, have the right to express themselves.

How a teacher looks is important in building his credibility. Teachers with visible tattoos may still serve as role models, demonstrating to students the value of embracing one’s individuality while maintaining professionalism. By proudly displaying their tattoos, teachers demonstrate that appearances do not dictate intelligence, competence, or dedication to their profession. Such action actually creates a more inclusive learning environment where students feel accepted for who they are, regardless of their appearance. Even with this argument, teachers with visible body art are often stereotyped, especially in the Philippines. Although becoming more liberated thanks to the adaptation of mixed cultures, the country still has a traditional Asian mindset regarding body arts in general. Body arts like tattoos and even piercings are often frowned upon as they give the impression of delinquency and rebellion rather than creativity.

A study by Duncan (2023) entitled *Perception of Tattoos and Piercing in Higher Education* identifies the insights of faculty and staff to professionals with body modifications at Rowan University. The findings reveal positive views towards professionals with visible tattoos and piercings, and further dispute discriminatory practices. While it is believed that the perception of co-professionals is essential to building a professional identity, students’ perceptions should also be explored as it may give a more meaningful argument. Students’ perceptions of teachers’ professionalism are crucial in shaping the learning experience. In fact, teachers should actively seek student feedback and strive to embody professionalism in their interactions and practices. Thus,

this study explores those perceptions to add to the growing discussion. Specifically, it determines the perceptions of students towards professors with visible tattoos.

2. Method

The descriptive survey method was adopted in this study. This research design is used to describe characteristics, behaviors, or attitudes of a specific population using survey questionnaires, interviews, or observations. The researcher adapted Duncan’s (2023) Perception of Tattoos and Piercings in Higher Education questionnaire; a five-point Likert scale as seen in Table 1, that aims to measure participants’ opinions regarding professionals with body modifications. The researcher narrowed the original 42 statements down to 20 to suit the objectives of this study further.

Table 1.

| Verbal Interpretation | Likert-scale | Interval |
|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|
| Strongly Agree | 1 | 1.00 – 1.80 |
| Agree | 2 | 1.81 – 2.60 |
| Neutral | 3 | 2.61 – 3.40 |
| Disagree | 4 | 3.41 – 4.20 |
| Strongly Disagree | 5 | 4.21 – 5.00 |

The participants of this study are 38 randomly selected first year college students at Far Eastern University (FEU) – Manila, Philippines during the School Year 2023-2024. The researcher informed the participants about the goals, purpose, and benefits of this study. The process of gathering, handling, and disposing of all data collected was also discussed. The goal was to reach a mutual agreement between the researcher and the participants. Once reached, participants signed a consent form to utilize the collected data legally.

The researcher conducted the survey using Google Forms. Participation was entirely voluntary, and their identity would remain anonymous. Participants answered the questionnaire in their free time and the comfort of their homes. The collected data was then analyzed, and the results were tallied and presented in tables. The researcher interpreted and provided conclusions and recommendations solely based on the study’s findings.

3. Results

Table 2.

| | Weighted Mean | Verbal Interpretation |
|--|---------------|-----------------------|
| 1. I'd prefer a professor without visible tattoos over someone with them | 3.82 | Disagree |

| | | |
|--|------|-------------------|
| 2. Visible tattoos can affect someone's credibility | 4.39 | Strongly Disagree |
| 3. Tattoos are unattractive | 4.18 | Disagree |
| 4. I think the display of tattoos in the university is unprofessional | 4.32 | Strongly Disagree |
| 5. I think that professors with tattoos are attention seekers | 4.53 | Strongly Disagree |
| 6. I would hesitate to approach a professor with visible tattoos | 4.42 | Strongly Disagree |
| 7. Regardless of their qualifications, professors should not be hired if they have visible tattoos | 4.55 | Strongly Disagree |
| 8. Professors with visible tattoos do not leave positive first impressions | 4.34 | Strongly Disagree |
| 9. Professors with visible tattoos cannot appear professional at the same time | 4.29 | Strongly Disagree |
| 10. Professors with visible tattoos should be required to cover or remove them | 4.21 | Strongly Disagree |
| 11. Professors should not display their tattoos | 4.16 | Disagree |
| 12. Visible tattoos are taboo | 4.16 | Disagree |
| 13. I am uncomfortable having a professor with visible tattoos | 4.47 | Strongly Disagree |
| 14. I would not want someone with visible tattoo representing my university | 4.37 | Strongly Disagree |
| 15. I have a personal prejudice against a professor with tattoos | 4.55 | Strongly Disagree |
| 16. Professors with tattoos jeopardize their careers | 4.34 | Strongly Disagree |
| 17. Professors with tattoos are socially abnormal | 4.53 | Strongly Disagree |
| 18. I would mind if a professor with visible tattoos represents my university | 4.18 | Disagree |
| 19. Having a professor with visible tattoos would not be well received in my university | 4.26 | Strongly Disagree |
| 20. I would not want a qualified professor with visible tattoos | 3.39 | Disagree |

Table 2 shows the result of the perceptions of FEU - Manila students to professors with visible tattoos during the School Year 2023-2024. Statements 1, 3, 11, 12, 18 and 20 are interpreted as Disagree while the remaining statements are interpreted as Strongly Disagree. Statements 7 and 15 got the highest ranking with 4.55 weighted mean interpreted as Strongly Disagree, while Statement 20 got the lowest ranking with 3.39

weighted mean interpreted as Disagree. This suggests that students show positive views toward professionals with visible tattoos.

4. Discussion

There is no hiding the fact that tattoos have become popular in recent years. More and more men and women get tattoos for various reasons. This increase may imply that perceptions of individuals with tattoos are changing and that the public is becoming more accepting. According to Summers (2023), the shift is because high-profile individuals such as celebrities and athletes proudly flaunt their tattoos, proving the power of influence.

In academia, teachers wield a significant influence over their students. While appearance is just one aspect of a teacher's overall influence, it is a part of teachers' broader responsibility in shaping their students' academic development. Teachers can contribute to a positive learning environment where students thrive by presenting themselves professionally. But what does a professional should look like? Regardless, the result of this study supports the idea that students see appearance unconventionally.

The findings reveal that students did not perceive the professor with a tattoo differently than those without one. The presence of tattoos did not significantly impact students' perceptions of the professor. It also suggests that students may not attach any particular positive or negative significance to a teacher having a tattoo. Students are more focused on other factors, such as the teacher's teaching style and communication skills, rather than their physical appearance. Thus, students are more likely to care about the quality of teaching and their relationships with their teachers than whether or not their teachers have tattoos.

5. Conclusions

This study aims to determine the perception of students towards professors with visible tattoos. The results reveal that students, more specifically in this context, college students, are more accepting of connecting to professors with visible body art like tattoos. Students in the 21st century are more open-minded. Many of them may see teachers with tattoos as relatable and modern. They may appreciate the teachers' individuality and see it as a form of self-expression. It might sometimes lead to positive interactions as body arts intrigue students. In conclusion, regardless of these personal views, many students will ultimately respect a teacher based on their teaching abilities. If a teacher demonstrates competence and dedication to their students, the presence of tattoos may become a non-issue for most students.

The study of body art and professionalism is under-researched. To improve the study further, the researcher recommends exploring other professionals with tattoos, such as

those in the hospitality industry and medical institutions. It would provide a newer perspective on the continuous dilemma of whether tattoos and even piercings affect a professional's credibility and attractiveness.

Acknowledgements

The researcher would like to thank his partner, Russell Glen Santos, for the love and support.

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