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Manda Sexton
Kennesaw State University, asexto16@kennesaw.edu

Samantha Reardon

Jennifer Carter
jcart215@kennesaw.edu

Matthew Foley

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The Inked Experience: Professionalism and Body Modifications in Libraries

By Manda Sexton, Samantha Reardon, Jennifer Carter, and Matthew Foley

Several librarians gathered at the lunch table on an average Wednesday. The conversation drifted to an earlier meeting in which one staff member delivered a new software instruction. “But did you see all her tattoos?” one librarian noted, curiously. “Isn’t it funny how that has become acceptable over such a short amount of time?” The table, however, was divided on this statement. Are visible tattoos considered professional in American culture?

The existence of tattoos, piercings, and dyed hair have become more and more commonplace in modern, Western society. While the Pew Research Institute reported 23% of Americans had at least one tattoo in 2010 (Pew Research Center, 2010), that number had almost doubled to 44% by 2019 (Statista, 2019). The acceptance of a tattooed, pierced, or otherwise body-modified individual within the customer service fields has been of great controversy. For example, Marie Ozanne, Michael Tews, and Anna Mattila’s article, “Are tattoos still a taboo?” (2019) looked closely at the impact of customer perceptions regarding tattoos within the workplace, particularly restaurant servers.

Despite the relatively healthy amount of literature regarding customer service-oriented fields, research involving libraries has been historically underrepresented. To grow this body of research, our research team set out to examine the perception of the professionalism of body modifications, particularly visible tattoos, facial piercings—aside from ears—and hair dyed an unnatural color, among those who work in the different types of libraries. We

initially divided our research participants into three user groups: library users, library practitioners, and library administrators. After investigating the perceptions of the individual groups, we then looked toward the relationship between the role of the participant and their acceptance of the professionalism of these body modifications, dividing the groups of practitioners and administrators by their affiliated groups, including academic, public, special, government, and other libraries. To this extent, we will dive deeper not only into the general sense of body modification acceptance of professional librarianship, but also the reasons people may feel body modifications may be appropriate or inappropriate given the many circumstances.

Literature Review

Tattoos in the Workplace

While the process of tattooing has been around for centuries and in nearly every human culture, the amount of professional literature on tattoos has been limited—though steadily growing—since the 1980s and 90s in Western-focused scholarly conversations. Some of the first instances of the scholarly conversation regarding tattoos and the workplace included psychologists, medical doctors, and sociologists discussing the effects prison tattoos could have on the future employment of the ex-prisoner. The researchers focused their time on creating coping methodologies and possible removal techniques as it was an understood—and unsaid—“truth” that tattoos would be considered a problem in the workplace

(Ferguson-Rayport, et al., 1955; Newman, 1982; Anderson, 1992; Armstrong & Gabriel, 1993).

The idea of tattoos and piercings being a natural antithesis to success in the workplace began to be challenged around the mid-1990s, most notably in the healthcare fields. Bekhor, Bekhor, and Gandrabur (1995) questioned employers' attitudes toward tattooed employees. Their study asked employers (n=308) whether they would favor an untattooed potential employee over a tattooed one. With some fluctuation depending on the industry, the study confirmed the hiring bias against those with visible tattoos, though not to the degree the discussion of the article may have intended. In fact, four of their eight industries concluded hiring managers would not favor an untattooed individual over a tattooed one. Those industries that did, however, weighted the findings towards the unacceptance of tattooed potential employees due to their extreme differences in answers. Though the study did find potential hiring bias, it also demonstrated a change in the hiring landscape during the 90s era.

With some relevant exceptions (Miller, et.al., 2009; Swanger, 2006; Dean, 2010), the study of visible body modifications in the workplace or employment slowed in the scholarly field until a revival in the mid-2010s. By this point in Western history, authors began to question the previously understated discrimination against those with tattoos and other body modifications. Flanagan and Lewis (2018) explored this shift. With a healthy sample of participants (n=446), the researchers sought the opinions of tattooed professionals in the four industries of food service, education, medical, and professional athletics, as well as two employee workplace categories, coworkers and supervisors. Their study found:

Many industries are becoming much more tolerant, and expectations for what is taboo in certain roles are changing ... Visible tattoos are becoming more common in the workplace than ever

before; attitudes are shifting, stigmas are changing and acceptance of differences in the workplace dynamics and what is deemed workplace norms are being established. (p. 102)

Some of the latest literature has begun to look less at the overall acceptance of tattoos, piercings, and dyed hair, and focus on times in which one may be more appropriate over another. For instance, Tews and Stafford (2020) found that the employees with "dark" tattoo content—such as threatening in nature—received less favorable treatment than their fellow tattooed employees. Likewise, tattoo number was related to increased perceived discrimination. However, strangely, the tattoo number was also related to increased annual earnings, signaling a possible benefit despite the perceived discrimination. Though the history of tattoos and other body modifications in the workplace has a long list of scholarly literature, studies of the librarianship industry have been few and far between.

A Nod to the Librarian Stereotype & Professionalism

In 2007, Paula Seeger asked those of us in the profession, "How Should Libraries Regulate Tattoos, Piercing and Other Creative Body Expressions?" Though this article premiered over ten years ago, it marks a change in attitudes possessed by librarians and the changing stereotype the general public may face. As librarians have changed from the bun-headed, bespectacled "Marian" type to a more edgy librarian celebrated in blogs across the interwebs—the Anarchist Librarian, the Belly Dancing Librarian, and the Tattooed Librarian being a few examples—we cannot help but ask ourselves why the library profession is so interested in its own image.

This sentiment shines brightly in Deirdre Dupre's 2009 blog post entitled, "The Perception of Image and Status in the Library Profession." Dupre's research centers on the

many unsuccessful and self-belittling ways librarians consistently obsess over their professional image. This opinion is seen more consistently in academia, where librarians often struggle with their status of faculty versus staff, leading to professional anxiety over less than satisfactory status and a preoccupation with the professional image much more than the users' perceptions of library personnel warrants.

Since Dupre's blog post in 2009, librarian researchers produced ample literature surrounding the librarian stereotype and professionalism for library students, library paraprofessionals, and librarians to investigate (Pagowsky & Rigby, 2014; Pagowsky & DeFrain, 2014; Jennings, 2016; Seminelli, 2016; Garcia & Barbour, 2018; Klein & Lenart, 2020). Lately, the trend of the professional librarian stereotype continues into a new persona McClellan and Beggan (2019) called the "Ironic Librarian," which they defined as a "contradiction between wanting to be helpful and yet perceived as being unapproachable" (p. 254). Their study held a semistructured interview of 26 librarians about their experiences at a reference desk. They found that librarian participants described other librarians as possessing traits that could contribute to being perceived as authoritarian and, in turn, difficult to approach for assistance (similar to the findings of Pagowsky and Rigby, 2014). In addressing possible strategies to appear more approachable, the tattooed librarian persona inevitably came up in the discussions:

In a conversation with nonlibrarian friends, [participant] noted that one of his friends compared the more modern image of librarians with 'hipsters.' [Participant] said that his friend described the traits of 'vintage fashion, tattooed, [with] bangs' as a 'new archetype' for librarians.' (p. 266)

While the tattooed librarian stereotype was mentioned in the study, the authors never addressed whether tattoos on a librarian would

improve approachability or impede approachability. Indeed, the many different librarian personas mentioned throughout the study are glossed over completely in favor of strategies to become more approachable as individual librarians.

These librarian researchers concluded that the mere presence of a librarian stereotype, no matter to which you profess, is damning to the profession as a whole. This is most loudly expressed by Jennings (2016) who called for an end to our obsession with our own stereotypes in order to remain professionals. This controversial paper, however, spurred response from many in the profession in the defense of the stereotype. A group of librarians from many academic institutions wrote a scathing reader's response published in *College & Undergraduate Libraries* in 2016 (DeFrain, et al.). In this letter, DeFrain, et al. claimed Jennings "oversimplifies and dismisses a rich and important body of research regarding occupational stereotyping and its effect on inclusion and diversity within the library profession" (para. 1). To them, our jobs as librarians extend beyond that of a lifeless body at a reference desk that should "smile more," but expands to busy and intellectual professionals with lives, creativity, and diversity far beyond the stereotype.

Engagement and Policies

Discussions about tattoos, specifically in the field of librarianship, have been vastly underrepresented in the scholarly discussion of body art and employment. Perhaps ahead of its time, Seeger's (2007) research stressed the need for user-driven policy creation or changes regarding dress code, tattoos, and other body modifications. Undergraduate students who were polled actually responded favorably to the idea of library staff bearing tattoos and acknowledged them as a more relatable cultural mirror. As a natural progression, Seeger sought similar acceptance from fellow library practitioners. According to Seeger, "if the patron doesn't mind seeing a tattoo or pink

hair, why should a colleague?" (para. 15). Yet, unsurprisingly, the younger library staff who were polled equated tattoos with a more progressive, "hip" environment, while those library workers over the age of 50 or who had worked in the library for 15-plus years "were significantly more likely to argue that tattoos should not be seen and were damaging to the professional image of the library" (para. 13).

Tattoos, and other body modifications, have now surpassed mere acceptance in librarianship and transitioned into a celebrated culture of self-expression and, in some cases, patron engagement. Morehart (2018) examined a collection of public libraries who used tattoos as a form of patron outreach. A team of library staff made book recommendations based on the artwork and text of patron tattoos. Similarly, Ballengee, et al. (2019) wrote about a tattoo design competition held by Texas State University's Alkek Library to increase student engagement. While researchers can debate the importance of the librarian stereotype or the growing need to stop the constant analysis of our own image, we decided to focus our study on simply asking library users, practitioners, and administrators their opinions of the professionalism of the librarians who choose to partake in body modifications.

Methodology

Participants

After reviewing the literature and discussing the parameters, we decided to allow anyone in the United States over the age of 18 to participate in the study. After Institutional Review Board approval, the survey questionnaire went live in January of 2020 and stayed open for four weeks.

We advertised the study through various sources, including library LISTSERVs, social media platforms such as Facebook and Reddit, and by word of mouth. We were particularly interested in hearing from library

administrators; thus, we chose to post to LISTSERVs to boost visibility by these library personnel. By the close of the survey on February 14, 2020, the study had 863 partial and completed survey responses.

We grouped the participants into three categories for study: library users, those who make use of library services; library practitioners, including faculty and staff who work in libraries; and finally, library administrators, those who are typically in charge of making hiring decisions, dress code regulations, and other decisions that may affect library employee livelihood or advancement. As the survey questions did not influence or build upon each other, we coded partially completed surveys based only on the answers that participants completed.

Survey Questionnaire

The survey questionnaire created and distributed in the Qualtrics application included three branched logical paths based on the user group of the participant. After a few initial demographic questions typical of surveys, the questionnaire requested a few extra demographic questions. These questions included "Do you have any tattoos?"; "Are you considering getting any tattoos in the future?"; "In the last three (3) years, have you dyed your hair an unnatural color, such as green, blue, or purple?"; and other questions which prompted participants to identify their initial experiences with tattoos, unnaturally dyed hair, and facial piercings.

Each group was shown images of library staff members who had modifications including dyed hair, piercings, and tattoos and was then asked to rate possible descriptive terms relating to the people in the images as it related to professionalism and approachability. From there, participants were asked a few open-

Figure 1: Those who have at least one tattoo, those who will consider one in the future

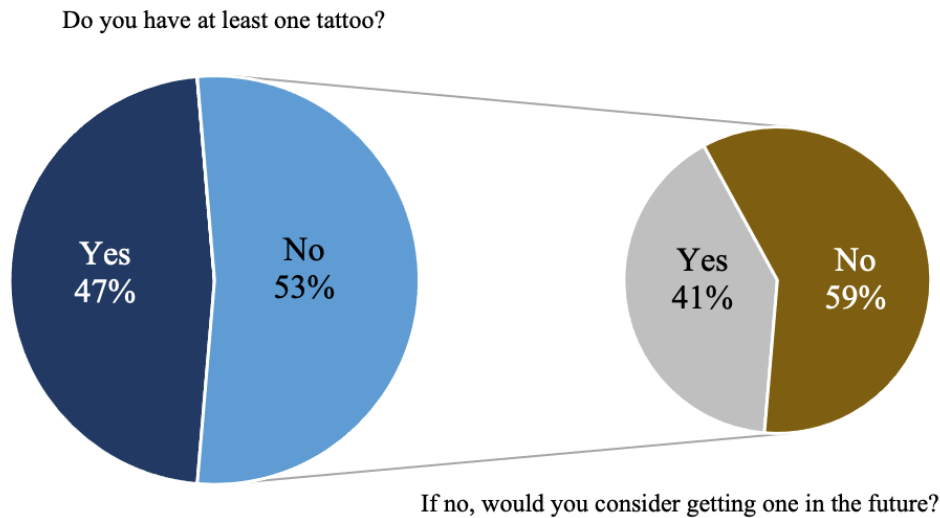


Table 1: Those who have tattoos by group

Group	Do you have a tattoo?		If yes, is it visible in regular work attire?		If no, will you consider getting one in the future?	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Library Administrator	83	86	49	34	29	57
Library Practitioner	216	246	152	63	97	149
Library User	87	98	42	45	49	49

ended questions of their opinions of those working in the library with body modifications.

Coding and Analysis

Once the surveys were gathered via the Qualtrics application, we uploaded the data into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for further analysis and breakdown. We completed a post hoc analysis of the open-ended answers provided by questionnaire participants and transformed them into simple yes/no answers

for coding purposes. While coding, we defined common terms to fit into the coding schema for each category of modification. For dyed hair, we coded for “juvenile”; for tattoos, we coded for survey participants that mentioned “offensive,” explicitly “graphic,” curse words, crime affiliation, or content that showed alliance with a hate group or ideology. Additionally, we coded for placement in the tattoo category, including mention of tattoos on the face, neck, hands, or wrists. We also coded

for potential quotes from participants for later use in published results and presentations.

Results and Discussion

Tattoos and Professionalism

Before asking participants whether they believed visible tattoos were or were not appropriate for a professional environment, we first asked whether the participants themselves had tattoos. Of those participants who answered (n=816), 47% percent stated that they currently have at least one tattoo. Fifty-three percent of participants stated that they do not currently have visible tattoos, but of those who do not have tattoos, 41% (n=430) of participants declared their consideration in getting a tattoo in the future.

When asked if visible tattoos can be viewed as professional in the workplace, participants (n=569) overwhelmingly said yes, with 93% agreeing that tattoos can now be considered professional. Things change only slightly when we examine the different user groups. Of those who said no (7% of the total), 29% of the participants were over the age of 45 years old.

Table 2: Are tattoos professional in the workplace by age group

Age Group	Yes	No
18-34	309	18
35-54	184	12
55+	36	8

Meanwhile, the most significant user group represented in the “no, I do not believe tattoos to be professional” was the library users group at 53%. While library users did make up the largest percentage of those who view tattoos as unprofessional, this does not reflect the opinion of the user group. Those library users who answered the question (n=156) had 87% agreement that tattoos can be professional and 13% disagreement on the professionalism of tattoos. One library user went so far as to say,

“Visible lack of adherence to professional appearance standards makes me question about non-visible lack of adherence on other metrics of professionalism (quality of work, detail orientation, rigor of analysis, etc).”

Of the library administrators who responded, only one individual stated no, that tattoos were not professional. However, the library administrator group represented our smallest sample with only 21 participants represented. As seen in Table 3, library practitioners made up the largest percentage of the population for the question with 403 respondents. Of those who responded in the practitioner group, only 4% believed tattoos to be unprofessional. One library practitioner suggested that tattoos were a benefit to their work, stating, “I work with professionals daily who have visible tattoos. In our work environment this may make them more approachable to young adults who are the primary demographic we serve.”

The library user group was specifically asked, “Do you feel as if the service you receive from an individual is better or worse if they have tattoos, unnatural hair colors, or facial piercings?” Of those who answered (n=146), 69% said their service experience would be

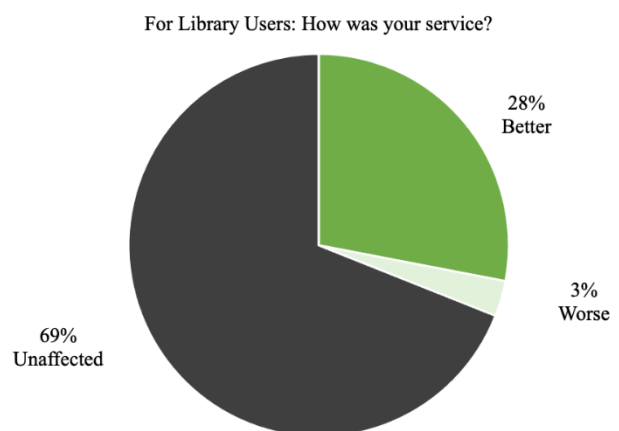


Figure 2: “Do you feel as if the service you receive from an individual is better or worse if they have tattoos, unnatural hair colors, or facial piercings?”

unaffected by the body modifications of the library personnel. Three percent of participants stated the service would be worse, while a surprising 28% said their service would be better from those with body modifications. These users claimed those with tattoos, piercings, or dyed hair were less judgmental, more open-minded, and more understanding.

Placement

After our inquiring about the participants' views of professionalism regarding tattoos, we asked about the specifics of the placement of tattoos and whether it affects their perception of professionalism. Of those participants who answered (n=684), 70% stated that placement did matter and would affect their perception of professionalism, while the other 30% stated that it would not.

While most participants did say the placement of the tattoos mattered, the reasons for their decision differed across the user groups. As seen in Table 4, the different groups noted three areas of the body which would be considered unprofessional: the face, the hands, and the entire arm ("full sleeves"). Notably, 411

Group	Yes	No	No Answer	Total
Library Administrator	19	1	1	21
Library Practitioner	376	17	10	403
Library User	136	20	29	185

Table 3: Are tattoos professional in the workplace by group

participants (60%) focused on tattoos above the collarbone or on the face and claimed those tattoos to be unprofessional. One user noted, "I associate face and neck tattoos

with violent histories even though I know that's not necessarily true nor a reflection of the person's current reality." To a lesser extent, 43 participants noted the unprofessional placement of hand and wrist tattoos, and 10 individuals mentioned the inclusion of a full sleeve as something to be avoided. Many also noted the allusion of criminality of tattoos. Twenty-nine of the participants associated a criminal past, prison, or violence associated with tattoo placement, mainly with tattoos on the face and neck. Exceptions were given for cultural or religious reasons for the tattoo. For example, one participant stated, "I would find tattoos on the face or front part of the neck distracting and not generally considered professional. If I knew the facial tattoos were for cultural or tribal reasons, then I may see them in a more professional way."

Content

Like our probe into the placement of tattoos, we also intended to discuss the actual content of the tattoos in question. Participants were

Group	Yes	No	No Answer	Face	Hands	Sleeve	Crime
Library Administrator	108	38	23	83	9	2	5
Library Practitioner	266	125	12	241	26	7	22
Library User	105	44	33	88	9	1	3

Table 4: Does the placement of the tattoo matter regarding professionalism?

Group	Yes	No	No Answer	Offensive	Graphic	Cursing
Library Administrator	121	19	25	77	29	12
Library Practitioner	353	37	14	188	101	45
Library User	133	19	34	57	49	28

Table 5: Does the content of the tattoo affect the perception of professionalism of an individual?

asked, “Does the content of the tattoo affect your perception of the professionalism of an individual?” Eighty-nine percent of those surveyed (n=681) stated yes, the content of the tattoo does affect the perception of professionalism in libraries. Of those who answered yes (n=606), 53% explained their aversion to content that includes offensive features, including: harassing, racist, homophobic, swastikas, Pepe, HH, and other prejudiced imagery. Thirty percent mentioned the graphic nature of the content or those with nude, obscene, vulgar, or violent imagery. Meanwhile, 14% noted the use of cursing or “bad words” in the tattoos. The breakdown of the number of participants are shown in Table 5.

Other content-related aversions included cartoons, political affiliations, and symbols not widely known. One participant explained, “I don't know sci-fi that well—so I don't know if the graphic is an homage to a favorite movie hero or if it's the ‘logo’ of an extremist/radical organization.”

Another participant stated:

Whatever the reason for the tattoo, whether vanity or identification with a cause or interest, the tattooed person is communicating something about themselves. In the professional setting our interactions are not about personal communication. We should be seen as neutral as possible when assisting others with their information/learning inquiries.

Hair Colors and Professionalism

While we addressed two common forms of body modifications including tattoos and piercings, we found it important to include another form of modification: dyed hair. For the purpose of our research, we defined dyed hair

to include hair dyed unnatural colors, such as green, purple, or blue. We first asked participants if they had dyed their hair in the past three years; of those participants who answered (n=754), 24% stated that they had dyed their hair in the past

Can an individual be perceived as professional with unnatural hair colors?

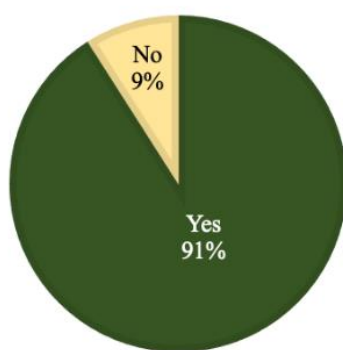


Figure 3: “Do you believe an individual can be viewed as professional with unnatural hair colors, such as green, blue, or purple?”

three years, while 76% answered that they had not. We then asked participants if they were considering dying their hair in the future; of those who answered (n=753), 41% said that they would consider dying their hair in the next three years.

In a similar fashion to our questions regarding professionalism with tattoos, we asked our participants, “Do you believe an individual can be viewed as professional with unnatural hair colors, such as green, blue, or purple?” Noted in Figure 3, of those participants who answered (n=679), 91% said yes, those with unnatural hair colors can be viewed as professional.

Those who disagreed with the professionalism of unnatural hair colors trended towards those above age 45 (36%) and library practitioners (54%). One library practitioner at an academic library noted the differences in lower-level versus management-level positions when differentiating the acceptability of unnaturally dyed hair, stating, “There are levels of professional acceptability. I think it could lower their advancement. I do not think it would be professional for a management-level job.”

Of those who stated no (n=63), 29% noted that dyed hair is a feature that makes an individual appear young, immature, or juvenile. One library administrator stated that yes, having dyed hair likely makes it more difficult for the individual with regards to the perception of others, stating, “Coloring your hair that way seems a bit adolescent to me and—although, more power to them, I guess—they’d have to prove themselves that much more in the workplace than someone else.” While most of the participants said that unnaturally dyed hair can be viewed as professional, those who disagreed noted the “look at me” attitude and the distractions it could cause during transactions.

Facial Piercings, Stretched Earlobes, and Professionalism

Facial piercings and stretched earlobes proved to be a more polarizing topic within the context of professionalism. Nearly three-fourths (72%) of the participants (n=660) stated that facial piercings could be professional. According to one library user, “an individual’s capabilities and values are neither impacted by nor discernible through body modifications, facial piercings,

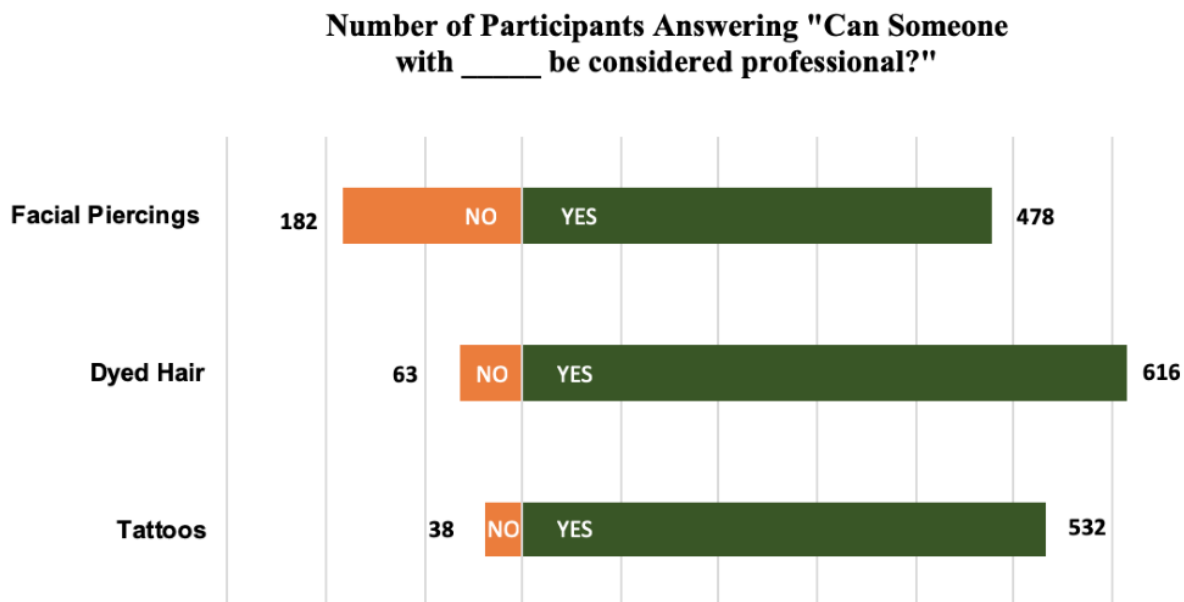


Figure 4: “Can Someone with _____ be considered professional?”

and stretched earlobes—or otherwise.” However, cases were also made by the opposition (n=182) that argued otherwise. The most prevalent reason noted by participants was the difficulty in interacting with library personnel due to the “distraction” presented by their facial piercings or stretched earlobes. One particular respondent noted that “piercings are unnatural and impede approachability.”

Policies

When we asked the library practitioner group whether they already had policies related to tattoos, dyed hair, or facial piercings, only 54 of 382 respondents knew of any policies regarding them, with 14 including no visible tattoos. We also asked this group whether they had been asked (either officially or unofficially) to change their appearance. While only 18 respondents out of 229 stated they had been asked, their stories suggested facial piercings to be the most requested body modification to be removed.

Discussion

As demonstrated, tattoos in the library are no longer the professional taboo they once were. When Seeger (2007) posed the question, “How Should Libraries Regulate Tattoos, Piercing and Other Creative Body Expressions?” our team poses the question: should we?

All three user groups, library administrators, library practitioners, and library users, upheld the professionalism of visible tattoos in the workplace. Many participants of the survey shared anecdotal evidence to support their feelings, including the professional nature of those they have worked alongside or been served by, in the case of library users. This was not to say, however, that distinct lines were not drawn on the appropriateness of certain tattoos in the library. Like Tews and Stafford (2020), our study found some disagreement with the professionalism of dark, threatening, and poorly done tattoos. Content of a harassing nature was also discouraged, including Nazi symbols, curse

words, and, in some cases, religious iconography. There was also a clear distinction in placement of tattoos, with face and neck tattoos being unfavorable in a professional environment.

Practitioners and patrons were widely supportive of unnaturally dyed hair colors on library employees in general. As Pappas (2014) stated, employees use tattoos, as well as, in our instance, hair color or facial piercings, as a mode of self-expression donned to liberate the self from one’s position in a service role.

Respondents who reported that unnatural hair color was unprofessional were typically working in libraries as administrators. Of this group, many mentioned that the professional working in the library with an unnaturally dyed hairstyle would be a lower-level staff member or a student worker; no respondents mentioned that this professional would be a dean, for example. A common refrain among these respondents was that they saw it as an impossibility that the library professional with unnaturally dyed hair was a fellow administrator.

There are few, if any, other studies examining the relationship between unnaturally dyed hair colors, such as blue, green, and purple, and professionalism in the workplace. Because of this limitation, it is difficult for us to compare our findings to existing literature; however, this is a clear area of need for research for any field such as libraries, academic institutions, or other professional settings that can further examine attitudes toward individuals with dyed hair and prevailing stereotypes and limitations that may be placed inadvertently because of a person’s outward appearance in the workplace.

Barriers and Challenges

We faced challenges representing a greater scope in potential attitudes toward body modifications of library employees during this study. For example, in the age demographic,

respondents were largely under the age of 50. This could be due in part to the marketing of our survey through social media and email. Our aim was to examine attitudes from a wider range of groups, and the lack of respondents over 50 did not allow us to greater understand the insights of this demographic. A future growth to the study could target the library user group over the age of 50 through the inclusion of paper surveys and active public library participation.

We also garnered fewer respondents in the library administrator category. If part of our goal is to understand and gauge interest in the policy creation surrounding workplace regulation of visible tattoos and other body modifications, it would benefit our work to understand the perspectives of those who likely will have a hand in approving the existence—or lack thereof—of such policies. Researchers interested in this topic could select to distribute the survey using different methods and may have better results from the demographics our study did not adequately reach.

Some of those who viewed stretched earlobes and facial piercings as professional also noted the importance of the cultural significance of those body modifications. Due to the limitations of this study and our Western perspective, we were unable to dive too deep into the cultural significance of body modifications. We implore others to build on our research internationally and add other cultures' attitudes towards body modifications to the scholarly communication.

Takeaways

As noted in the introduction, the number of adults with tattoos has more than doubled in the last ten years, with nearly half of the United States population sporting at least one tattoo. As the library field continues to shift and grow,

more and more new library science graduates and hires will be a part of this growing demographic. Though there has been clear discussion since the early 1990s about how tattoos should be handled and regulated by administrative policy, little to no regard has been placed on how most of the population feels about the professionalism of tattoos within a library context. Though some individuals may feel tattoos, dyed hair, and facial piercings are still unprofessional in the library environment, those individuals are in the minority. Within the context of a library workspace, the overly abundant use of policy creation and monitoring of the worker's attire and professional presence does not necessarily condemn the presence of tattoos. There is, however, ample feedback on adjusting current workplace attire policies to limit the content and placement of tattoos for library employees.

Likewise, the need to police hair color and facial piercings may no longer be necessary. However, those with dyed hair should note the perception of unprofessionalism by their peers and users if they do not maintain the color or allow fading to occur. Similarly, those with dyed hair should note a slight, but significant perception of immaturity which may impact promotion within library administration.

Manda Sexton is Assessment & User Experience Librarian/Librarian Assistant Professor at Kennesaw State University

Samantha Reardon is MLIS Student at Valdosta State University

Jennifer Carter is Research & Instructional Services Assistant at Kennesaw State University

Matthew Foley is Law Librarian at Cobb County Superior Court Law Library

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