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# How Does a Personal Trainer's Appearance Impact How Potential Clients Perceive Them?

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HOW DOES A PERSONAL TRAINER'S APPEARANCE IMPACT HOW POTENTIAL  
CLIENTS PERCEIVE THEM?

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Master's Project

Submitted to the School of Human Movement, Sport, and Leisure Studies  
Bowling Green State University

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## **Introduction**

### Statement of the Problem

Personal training is a part of the fitness industry that requires skill, expertise, and compassion. Potential clients need to understand that personal trainers are well educated and experienced in the realm of fitness. Personal trainers are knowledgeable in the areas of “anatomy and physiology, physical activity, fitness programming for people of all ages and abilities, exercise science, health promotion, behavior change and motivation, and the effects of prescription drugs on the body” (Torry, 2009, pg. 1). Potential clients should find value in hiring a personal trainer since these topics can be foreign topics to non-fitness professionals.

Personal trainers are reliable resources when it comes to understanding weight training and cardiorespiratory training techniques. Oftentimes, people are unaware of how to exercise, how to execute proper and safe form, and how to create and implement a work out program in order to lose or maintain a healthy weight. Potential clients understand that fitness will play a positive role in his or her lives, but without the proper training, it can be difficult to achieve success. Clients often seek a personal trainer because of his or her inability to achieve particular fitness/physical goals, as well as to seek motivation while in an exercise program.

It is essential that personal trainers understand compassion towards others. It is evident that:

Physical attractiveness is a powerful social variable in contemporary society.

Physically attractive individuals have been shown to have several advantages over less physically attractive individuals, including more socially desirable personalities, more total happiness, and more successful lives. (Anderson, et al, 2004, pg. 255)

By understanding the demand placed on appearance, trainers can help to enhance client's overall body image and self-respect.

#### Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

By studying the perceptions that potential clients have of personal trainers, it can help to improve the fitness industry. Personal trainers can better understand how to market themselves by understanding how they are perceived by society. Since physical appearance is a critical aspect of fitness, it is crucial for trainers to decipher the best methods to showcase their skillsets to potential clients. It is imperative that trainers understand the impact physical appearance has on society. Oftentimes, clients focus on the outward aspect of personal training and fitness rather than the internal benefits of exercise. With the assistance of personal trainers in efforts to focus internally rather than externally, society may become healthier both mentally and physically.

In addition, increasing the public's knowledge of the health benefits associated with exercise may be a motivator to help people get into a gym or recreation center. Switching the focus from a personal trainer's outward appearance to the trainer's certifications, education, and experience may assist in helping trainers obtain new clients. While the physical appearance of the trainer tends to be the main focus of potential clients, it is up to the trainers to market themselves in multiple avenues. Similarly,

personal trainers should also practice what they preach. While physical appearance is essential in the fitness industry, personal trainers should strive to exemplify healthy behaviors consisting of consuming balanced meals, exercising regularly, and prioritizing mental health.

*Research Question:*

1. How does the appearance of personal trainers affect the perceptions of potential clients?

### Research Design

This is a qualitative study that examined anonymous surveys from 20 BGSU Student Recreation Center members. This study utilized an Exploratory Design to lay the groundwork for future research, since there were few earlier studies to rely upon in order to predict an outcome. The survey consisted of semi-structured questions—with both closed and open-ended questions. The researcher maintained an unbiased mentality to ensure that the opinions of all participants were accurately represented.

### Significance of the Problem

A large part of a personal trainer's responsibility is to help clients become accountable for his or her health. Personal trainers must possess the necessary certifications, education, and experience to properly assist clients of all ages and fitness levels. By improving the perceptions that potential clients have of personal trainers, it may help to switch the focus from appearance to the skillset each trainer possesses. This study is significant because it will help personal trainers understand how potential clients perceive them. This in turn may enhance a personal trainer's workload in terms of how many clients desire to train with them, as well as utilize a fitness facility. With an

increased workload and high-trafficked facilities, there is more money being earned by the personal trainer as well as the fitness facility as a whole. While education, certifications, and experience are pivotal aspects of being a successful personal trainer, if a trainer does not look the part, potential clients may be weary to trust that trainer with the betterment of his or her fitness and health plan.

This study will help personal trainers understand how to be more marketable. Whether a trainer should improve his or her physical appearance, showcase his or her education, certifications, and experience more, or even if a particular gym may not be a good fit for that trainer, are all important observations to make when looking for employment initially or looking to further one's workload at a current place of employment. If trainers do not understand how others perceive them, it may be more difficult to obtain new clients through successful marketing efforts. With the tremendous recent growth in personal training, it is crucial that potential clients' perceptions are taken into account so that qualified fitness professionals may expand and enhance their careers effectively and efficiently.

### **Review of Literature**

The Review of Literature will discuss the main points that create depth and meaning to this study. By discussing the benefits of exercise, the significance of personal trainers, appearance in the fitness industry, and body image, readers will understand all that is encompassed in the job duties of a fitness professional. In addition, readers will understand the value that personal trainers provide their clients in relation to health and fitness goals. Readers can also gain perspective on the many demands placed on society in terms of physical appearance.

## **Benefits of Exercise**

Potential clients need to understand the benefits of exercise before they can comprehend the magnitude of knowledge a personal trainer can offer them. Exercise helps to not only improve quality of life, but also lengthen the lifespan. The American Council on Exercise (ACE) has created a list of nine essential reasons why exercise is so crucial in everybody's daily life. Cardiovascular health is the utmost critical component of exercise. ACE states that, "cardiovascular exercise forces the heart to work harder in order to supply working muscles with adequate blood and oxygen" (9 health benefits, 2014, para.1). This strengthens the heart muscle and allows the resting heart rate to decrease. This contributes to us being more capable of enjoying the aspects of everyday life such as climbing stairs or playing with our children.

Weight management is an obvious aspect as to why exercise is so critical is our daily lives. While diets can be hard to maintain, exercise allows us to burn calories and therefore decrease body fat, increase muscle mass, and increase resting metabolic rate. Bone strength is also improved through exercise. ACE concludes, "any type of weight-bearing exercise (walking, jogging, biking, strength training) places stress on the skeletal muscle. Weight-bearing exercise can be a great way to delay and possibly improve bone loss (osteoporosis)" (9 health benefits, 2014, para. 2).

Humans have two types of cholesterol, HDL (good cholesterol) and LDL (bad cholesterol). By exercising, it increases the HDL in our blood, which improves the lipid profile and decrease LDL. In addition, exercise helps to maintain a lower blood pressure.



By sustaining clean arteries, a strong hearth and circulatory function, it reduces blood pressure. Sleep is another critical aspect of health that is improved. ACE states, “according to the National Sleep Foundation’s 2013 *Sleep in America*® poll, more than three-fourths of exercisers (76 to 83 percent) say their sleep quality was very good or fairly good in the past two weeks, compared to only 56 percent of non-exercisers” (9 health benefits, 2014, para. 4). This is an example of how exercise positively affects sleep quality. Lastly, exercise helps to slow the aging process, reduce stress levels, and increase job performance in the workplace.

### **Significance of a Personal Trainer**

Personal Training is a growing industry with an increase in certified professionals each year. The growing need for emphasis in exercise and overall health is becoming apparent with the number of trainers employed annually. In 2014, there were approximately 279,100 personal trainers in the United States (Summary, 2015, pg. 1). Personal trainers are employed through health clubs, fitness or recreation centers, gyms, studios, and also through self-employment. Personal trainers are well-versed in “assessing health and fitness levels, prescribing exercise, designing physical activity programs targeted specifically to their clients’ needs, and counseling for lifestyle changes that increase physical activity” (Torry, 2009, pg. 1). Clients hire personal trainers for the desire to acquire knowledge in strength training and cardiovascular techniques. Personal trainers are taught to “collaborate, communicate confidence, and allot clients more responsibility” (Shields, C., et al., 2007, pg. 203). Essentially, personal trainers are hired to teach clients the skills and underlying knowledge of a fitness program with the end

goal that the client will eventually be able to create his or her own program without the assistance of a fitness professional.

Personal trainers are expected to undergo various forms of education and certifications to legally train clients. ACE expects that certified personal trainers “have attained a level of competency and adhere to the established standard of care. It is paramount for professionals to be aware of the latest guidelines regarding standard of care” (Legal responsibility, 2014, para. 1) Clients need to be able to hold their personal trainers accountable so that they feel comfortable and confident training with their fitness professional.

Personal trainers are required to obtain a certification before they may begin training clients. These certified professionals must demonstrate that they are able to uphold the certifying agency’s standards for safety and creating an appropriate fitness program for individuals with no physical limitations. Trainers must also understand how to provide modifications for clients with special needs, as well as when to refer to a physician for further examination or omit exercise altogether. The certifying exam cover topics such as exercise science, kinesiology, anatomy, and business topics. Proving personal trainers the knowledge of the human body allows them to create work out plans that are logical, efficient, and safe. There is a true science to creating a work out plan for a client, and certifying organizations such as ACE create outlines on topics that are crucial for personal trainers to be proficient in. Employers must “have working knowledge of the education, credentials, training and regulation available, so they can identify and hire individuals who are qualified to work with the clientele in their respective facilities or program” (Galati & Matthews, 2011, pg. 64).

While this information is prudent for employers, it is also essential that potential clients are aware of the necessary requirements for a trainer to be employed.

Certifications exist “to protect the public from harm (e.g., physical, emotional, psychological, financial). Not only do certifications set a baseline level of competence, they also allow consumers to check if a potential hire meets the criteria to work in that field” (Galati & Matthews, 2011, pg. 64). While personal trainers all possess varying training philosophies and preferences, certifications and education provides resources to trainers so that they can create programs that are safe and scientifically sound to the general population.

### **Appearance in Fitness**

Appearance plays a huge role in society, particularly the fitness industry. People frequent gyms and recreation centers in hopes of obtaining a more fit, healthy physique. While the physical benefits of fitness are obviously rewarding and addictive, the health aspects of fitness are the critical components. A study conducted by Brian Focht at The Ohio State University studied about 100 college-age women with social physique anxiety.

In this study,

Participants took part in one of four 45-minute step classes. The same instructor taught all the classes, but in two of them she emphasized health over appearance, while in the other two, she emphasized appearance over health. In the classes where she emphasized health, the instructor wore a loose-fitting T-shirt and gym shorts. She also sprinkled health-oriented comments—such as ‘Work it! Let’s get fit and healthy!’—throughout the sessions. In the appearance oriented classes she

wore tight-fitting attire. Throughout these sessions she drew attention to appearance with comments such as ‘stand tall—you’ll look 5 pounds light’ or ‘work it! Let’s get your legs toned so they look good. (Keller, 2007, para. 3)

The women who participated in the health-oriented class reported feeling more engaged during the class and overall enjoyed the class more so than the women who participated in the appearance-focused class. This also correlates to the instructor’s leadership style. From this study, participants would rather train with a fitness professional who is encouraging healthy behaviors rather than physical attributes.

Another positive aspect of this study may help potential clients as well as society as a whole to view people in a less judgmental light. Rather than focusing on appearance, society can learn to focus more on the educational background, experience, and certifications obtained by a prospective personal trainer. It has been shown that:

Differences in physical attractiveness affect the social desirability judgments which people form of others. From infancy to old age, there is a strong tendency to attribute more positive qualities to those who are physically attractive relative to those who are physically unattractive. Attractiveness may be used as a cue to signal status, a “just world” and biological fitness. (Perlini A.H., et al, 2001, pg. 278)

Essentially, from merely looking at someone, society dictates whether that person is fit, economically sound, successful, and an overall good person.

In other professions, appearance is not such a critical component of judging someone’s competency. Oftentimes, “assessing the ability of other professionals to perform their respective jobs, consumers may base their opinions on education, past

experience and success rate. But as fitness professionals, we are often judged by more outward ‘credentials,’ such as weight, age, gender, race and wardrobe” (Rotwein, 2003, para. 3). Oftentimes, clients want to work with a trainer they are striving to look like. Males may not desire to work with a female trainer because they do not want to look like a female. Rather, they want to work with a fit, muscular male because they strive to appear this way. In addition, females tend to stick with female trainers since they feel more comfortable working with a female rather than a male. With the emergence of my study, hopefully society will learn to review personal trainers’ educational background, certifications, and experience rather than using appearance to judge.

### **Body Image**

Body image is an emerging topic in the fitness industry. It can be concluded that for women, “this incessant quest for a slim body can contribute to adoption of behaviors that are harmful to health, such as bulimia and anorexia...In contrast, among men the predominant ideal image is of a larger and stronger body” (Porto, et al, 2015, pg. 176). Oftentimes, how people perceive others is in relation to how they perceive themselves. Since fitness professionals are frequently known as leaders and role models in gym settings, people may view the trainers’ physique and lifestyle as an ultimate goal. Fitness professionals should strive to “model behavior that values physical ability, function and health over appearance” (Code of ethics, 2010, pg. 116). In addition, it is imperative to “demonstrate healthy behaviors and attitudes about bodies. Avoid smoking, substance abuse and unhealthy exercise and eating habits” (Code of ethics, 2010, pg. 116). In order for clients to view his or her trainer in a positive light, it is up to the trainer to embody a healthy image and ideology.

In a study conducted to examine how the appearance and actions of female fitness instructors impacted participants' interpretations of body image, most of the women "considered the instructor's appearance to be a critical aspect in perceiving his/her leadership capabilities. Some women assumed that an attractive, fit-looking instructor would be a competent leader" (Vogel, 2000, pg. 43). Participants concluded that they were "more likely to accept fitness advice from an instructor with 'an incredible body' than from an instructor who was 'a little heavier'" (Vogel, 2000, pg. 43). In essence, participants' perceptions of the instructor's ability are a direct correlation of his or her appearance.

In general, people want to be trained by something they aspire to look like. It was found that "participants who regarded instructor appearance and body shape as exemplary of what could be achieved through aerobics made comparison between their own bodies and that of their instructor" (Vogel, 2000, pg. 44). People tend to use fitness instructors and trainers as an inspiration towards reaching an ultimate goal. A 25 year old male aspiring to appear like a bodybuilder may prefer to train with a younger personal trainer who has the physique of a body builder, just as a 50 year old women who wants to lose 30 pounds may prefer to train with an older female trainer who has maintained a healthy body fat percentage and fit physique. It has been stated "while it's not within a fitness professional's scope of practice to diagnose a body image issue, it is possible to promote a positive environment for personal training clients" (Halvorson, 2011, pg. 18). It is the responsibility of the fitness professional to promote healthy behaviors in order to maintain clients' mental and emotional happiness. People tend to prefer receiving

assistance from a fitness professional who has undergone the transformations that they one day desire to attain.

It is the responsibility of the fitness professional to help clients feel confident and comfortable in their physical and emotional transformations into a healthier lifestyle.

Fitness professionals,

Recognizing that body-conscious comments offend some participants is instrumental in establishing alternative ways to motivate participants to achieve their fitness goals. Educating participants about the diversity among fit bodies may counteract stereotypical, mainstream expectations about how an instructor is supposed to look. Resisting the assumption that all participants share common beliefs about body image and weight loss may help foster their body image satisfaction. (Vogel, 2000, pg. 44)

Essentially, it is the role of the fitness professional to help guide participants/clients towards a healthy lifestyle—which encompasses physical, mental, and emotional attributes. The personal trainer needs to help clients see that while a physical appearance may be an end-all goal for some clients, there are ways to achieve this appearance in a healthy, effective manner. In addition, it is crucial that personal trainers help clients understand that there are a multitude of benefits to fitness. Working out is not solely a means for looking good, but also to help with cardiovascular benefits, cholesterol, and more. Helping clients see the health benefits associated with fitness may assist them in improving their body image, which may help to relieve the stress of the physical components associated with exercise.

Method

The use of a qualitative design enabled me to gain insight from individuals regarding their personal opinions on the appearance of personal trainers. Using this method allowed me to interpret the opinions of each participant in an unbiased manner. The overall use of this method will help to generalize this topic and create a foundation for future studies.

### Research Design

This study employed an Exploratory Design to collect the research because there are very few earlier studies documenting this topic. The focus of this study was to gain insight so that future studies could further the established ideas and opinions of the 20 participants who participated in my study. In addition, studies utilizing the Exploratory Design method oftentimes lay the groundwork for more research questions that stem off the main topic.

*Participants:* Data was collected from 20 patrons who utilize the Bowling Green State University Student Recreation Center (BGSU SRC). Participants were of all ages—some college students while others were older community members. In addition, ten men and ten women of varying races, ethnicities, and fitness levels participated in the study.

*Data Collection:* To gather the data, I randomly asked patrons at the BGSU SRC to participate in my study. Gaining participants was challenging in that I had to find the perfect time to ask each person. I aimed to ask people as they were leaving the facility, as I did not want to interrupt their work out. By approaching participants at a more convenient time, it increased the likelihood that each person would answer my survey questions in greater detail and to the best of his or her ability.



*Data Collection Procedure:* After receiving approval from the Human Subjects Review Board, I began the data collection process. I approached patrons at the BGSU SRC Welcome Desk, which is located at the front of the facility. I confronted each person by asking if I could speak with him or her briefly. I then introduced myself, read my script, and made an effort to form a connection with each person. After reading the script and receiving permission from the person to participate in my study, I handed him or her the consent form with the attached survey questions. At this time, I gave the participant privacy by leaving the area that they were completing the survey in. Once they completed the survey, I collected it facedown and immediately placed it in a folder that was stored in a locked box inside a locked office located in the BGSU SRC. I thanked the participant for their willingness to help with my study and handed them the consent form to keep for their personal future reference.

*Trustworthiness:* By forming a brief connection with participants, it enabled us to create a trust and bond before they decided whether or not to complete the survey. In addition, I informed all participants that answers were kept confidential and anonymous. In the consent form, it states that surveys are stored in a locked box, which is inside of a locked room located in the BGSU SRC. I provided each participant a private space when completing the survey. Once the survey was completed, I immediately placed their answers turned facedown in a folder. The only people who have access to this confidential data is myself and Academic Advisor, Dr. Amanda Paule-Koba.

## Results

The researcher administered a survey to 20 anonymous participants. The survey consisted of 15 questions that encompassed a personal trainer's duties, education,

certifications, appearance, and other various topics. Participants answered all questions based on his or her personal opinions and experiences.

### **Duties of a personal trainer**

Participants had a great working knowledge of the job duties of a personal trainer. The main duties that were listed consisted of helping clients learn proper form, create a workout program, assist with nutritional guidance, and provide motivation and accountability. Participant 13 stated that a personal trainer must, “know exercises and the correct positioning so I do not get injured, to understand which muscle groups each exercises will target, to help me reach my fitness goals, to be able to aid in creating my fitness goals, ability to give me guidance in eating habits/regimens, motivate me, keep up with me if working out together.” Motivation and encouragement was the leading point that most participants noted. While teaching clients safe form and effective exercise programming was listed as a main duty, participants focused on the aspect of helping clients achieve their goals through the personal trainer’s motivational skills. Participant 2 stated that personal trainers, “Create work out and sustainment regimens. Providing guidance and technique for exercises as well as daily decision making to preserve the integrity of the patrons’ efforts to live a healthy life. Motivate during sessions, encourage trainee to go above and beyond during sessions with or without the trainer.” In conclusion, all 20 participants provided a survey response that aligns with the job duties of a personal trainer.

### **Educational background**

Fourteen out of 20 participants stated that a personal trainer should possess some sort of college degree. Participants also stated that personal trainers should have extensive knowledge on “physical education, anatomy, dietetics, leadership, management, public health, kinesiology, as well as physiology and motivation.” The other six participants listed various options for self-study. Participant 14 stated, “Personal passion for exercise! College degree not required but an exercise science/kinesiology degree preferred. Certifications for different types of workouts/exercising.” This participant valued a trainer’s certifications and internal passion for fitness over earning a college degree. While some participants valued a college degree, others valued a trainer’s passion and specific certifications.

### **Level of experience**

All 20 participants concluded that a personal trainer should have some sort of experience. Some were more specific, listing that a trainer should possess 3-5 years of experience, while others felt that one or more years of experience was adequate. Participant 11 expressed that, “a personal trainer should already have been working out on their own and also have taken several classes to show how to do activities or workouts.” Two participants specifically stated the need for a personal trainer to have been exercising on their own along with working as a trainer. Participants value a trainer’s level of experience both professionally as well as in his or her own personal life.

### **Certifications/qualifications**

Eleven out of 20 participants acknowledged that a personal trainer should possess some sort of personal training certification. Nine out of 20 participants did not mention a personal training certification, but other various requirements such as a CPR/AED

certification, college degree, leadership skills, or stating that a trainer's "gotta be jacked." Participant 11 included that a trainer, "should have least a CPT from ACE or ACSM or something of that sort." ACE (American Council on Exercise) and ACSM (American College of Sports Medicine) are two note worthy certifications that are in the forefront of the fitness industry.

### **Previously had a personal trainer**

Sixteen out of 20 participants have never had a personal trainer. Participants listed financial limitations, public embarrassment, and already possessing workout knowledge as reasons why they have not purchased sessions with a trainer. Four of the 20 participants have previously worked with a trainer. All four participants stated that their trainer was fit. Participant 18 said, "My trainer was a male, late 20's, dark hair and was muscular. He had a degree in kinesiology and exercise science from the University of Miami. I finished the sessions but did not advance my goals. This was not because of the trainer, but because I decided not to continue playing a sport. I have not had a trainer since because of the cost involved." The four participants who previously had a trainer stated that they were aware their trainer possessed certification/s.

### **Personal trainer's appearance**

Nineteen out of 20 participants responded that a personal trainer should appear physically fit. Participant 11 said, "In my eyes a personal trainer should look like he/she practices what he/she preaches, meaning being fit or leaner looking or muscular." Participant 2 stated that they felt a trainer should be fit because "not all body types are healthy. This does not mean they must be a peak physical specimen. If a personal trainer is promoting a healthy life they should live one." Essentially, participants felt that trainers

should practice what they preach. If personal trainers are teaching others how to exercise and lead a healthy lifestyle, they should exemplify these attributes. Participant 18 concluded, “I don't think that a personal trainer needs to be good looking, but I think that is a stereotype associated with personal trainers. I think that personal trainers should be in shape since they are teaching others how to do the same. Its easier to take advice from someone who clearly cares about how they look when you want to look that way.” In essence, clients will be more trusting of his or her personal trainer if their trainer possesses physical proof (i.e. fit, muscular, lean, etc.).

When asked what physical qualities a personal trainer should not possess, 16 out of 20 participants responded that trainers should not be overweight or unfit. Participant 1 said that, “it reflects directly with the way they train. Obviously I want to see results and if my trainer is unable to manage their own weight, I would think that their style of working out does not work.” Surveyors perceived that if a trainer was out of shape or deemed unfit, his or her training program may be ineffective. Participant 12 stated that, “it shows that they are not committed to the values they stress to customers.” If a personal trainer cannot commit to the requirements of being fit and healthy, clients may not choose to commit either.

### **Personal trainer's gender**

Participants were asked their preferences regarding being trained by a male or female personal trainer. Twenty out of 20 participants said they would train with a female personal trainer. Participants 17 and 9 commented that, “gender has nothing to do with the ability to educate someone” and that “female trainers are great supporters and motivators just as males.” 20 out of 20 participants stated that they would train with a

male personal trainer. Participant 1 said that, “I would go to any personal trainer as long as they help me reach my own personal goals.” Participants concluded that female and male trainers are both equally qualified to work with clients of all different backgrounds.

### **Race or ethnicity**

When asked whether race or ethnicity would be a factor in selecting a trainer, 20 out of 20 participants said that race would not effect his or her decision. Participant 18 concluded that, “their educational background and personality would be more important than their race or ethnicity.” A personal trainer’s knowledge was the utmost priority for those surveyed; race was not a determinant.

### **Piercings or tattoos**

Nineteen out of 20 participants would train with a trainer who had piercings or tattoos. Participant 12 said, “Visible tattoos/piercings display unprofessionalism.” Participant 11 stated “I don't believe that would make them any less of a good trainer just by their appearance, although may not be professional looking.” The consensus of those surveyed was that as long as the personal trainer is knowledgeable, it is trivial whether the trainer has piercings and/or tattoos or not.

### **Attire**

Thirteen of 20 participants feel that a personal trainer needs to appear presentable, professional, and ready to be active because “presentation is vital and shows how they act on duty.” Participant 18 said that clients “want a trainer to look professional, with a uniform of some type, and workout clothes.” The other seven participants felt that as long as a trainer was knowledgeable, attire is not an important factor. Participant 4 stated it “doesn't matter what you wear to workout.”

## **Facial hair**

Twenty out of 20 participants would not be bothered by facial hair on a male. Participant 1 said, “well to be honest if this was on a trainer who was a woman, I might be pretty concerned on whether or not she was taking a testosterone booster or steroids.” Participant 13 felt that facial hair that is “too long would be a turn off. Facial hair should be well groomed otherwise they look dirty and hard to workout with such long bushy facial hair.” Overall, participants were not bothered by groomed facial hair on a male personal trainer, but clarified that facial hair on a female personal trainer would be a disturbance.

## **Discussion**

The 20 participants surveyed conveyed opinions regarding personal trainers that can be assumed as common knowledge for the general population. Their statements and generalizations are applicable to daily life and will assist personal trainers and other fitness professionals in determining how to further their career, improve their marketing strategies, and ultimately, become a more successful trainer. In addition, it may assist potential clients with their journey in seeking a fitness professional by understanding different crucial aspects during the selection process.

## **Duties of a personal trainer**

All 20 participants had a wide range and accurate depiction of the duties of a personal trainer. Participants understand that a personal trainer assists clients with proper form, motivation, accountability, creating individualized work out plans, and achieving an overall healthy lifestyle. It is essential that the public understands the job duties of a personal trainer for the simple reason that if someone needed fitness advice- they know

the type of professional to seek. In addition, it exemplifies the impact that personal trainers have made on people who need this type of service. Personal trainers are an essential aspect of health and wellness, “not only in gyms and fitness centers, but also in hospitals and health care centers, workplaces, schools, and more” (Torry, 2009, pg. 1). With the emergence of fitness in today’s society, it is crucial that potential clients are aware of which professional to seek out when looking for exercise guidance.

### **Educational background**

Although 14 out of 20 participants stated that a college degree was a necessity to work as a personal trainer, it appears as though this topic is less understood. Many people did not understand the difference between education and certifications. While many trainers have earned some sort of Exercise Science related degree, many trainers have learned through certifications, self-study, experience, and other methods. In the end, it is critical that potential clients understand the educational background of prospective trainers before selecting a trainer to train with. Clients need to understand a trainer’s thought process when creating a work out plan rather than simply trusting someone hired to train at a facility. Once a client understands a trainer’s educational background, it may create a greater trust and appreciation for the trainer’s services.

### **Level of experience**

Even though it was concluded by all 20 participants that a personal trainer should encompass some level of experience, there was no sort of pattern mentioned regarding the quantity of experience that should be required. Some participants felt that 3-5 years was necessary, while others believed that one-year was sufficient. Some participants even mentioned how a trainer should personally work out to be considered truly experienced.



This applies to trainers because it allows them to understand the perceived requirements of potential clients. A personal trainer can gain experience by shadowing veteran trainers, obtaining some sort of internship with a fitness facility, or work at a collegiate student recreation center before advancing to larger, more reputable facilities. Overall, it appeared that participants valued a personal trainer who had experience both professionally and personally.

### **Certifications/qualifications**

Eleven out of 20 participants noted that personal trainers should possess some sort of personal training certification, while 9 out of 20 participants did not mention requiring a personal training certification, but rather CPR/First Aid/AED and/or college degree. Most fitness facilities require that a personal trainer possess a nationally accredited certification. It is important for potential clients to understand the lengthy process personal trainers undergo to work in the fitness field. Understanding certifications and credentials is also important because some certifications are better than others and have a higher set of standardized requirements in order to legally serve as a personal trainer. A personal training certification is essential for clients to understand because “it is the foundational professional credential for working with clients one-on-one or in small groups” (Galati & Matthews, 2011, pg. 66). This helps to “ensure that the certified professional stays up to date with the latest research, guidelines and programs, so they can continue to provide safe programs for their clientele” (Galati & Matthews, 2011, pg. 66). Being aware of certifications is important for potential clients because it allows them to better understand the education and training their trainer has undergone before being hired at his or her current workplace.

### **Previously had a personal trainer**

Twenty percent of participants surveyed (n=20) previously trained with a personal trainer. Each of these participants stated that their trainer was fit. This question was impactful in the survey because it shows that personal trainers are a service that is widely used—even in a collegiate recreation setting. Many college students' finances are not as prosperous as an older client's, which shows that students are finding value in the services personal trainers provide despite the steep cost associated. In addition, it provides increased validity in this study by showing perspectives from clients who have personally interacted with one or multiple personal trainers.

### **Personal trainer's appearance**

Nineteen out of 20 participants stated that a personal trainer should appear fit. People felt that a personal trainer should embody the practices that they are telling others to live by. Participants stated that they would question the ability of the trainer if the trainer were unable to get him or herself in shape. While being physically attractive wasn't a requirement, surveyors were adamant that a trainer should be physically fit and appear to embody a healthy lifestyle. A physical attribute that participants stated a personal trainer should not possess was being unfit. People felt that a trainer's appearance was a direct reflection of how they train. It was perceived that if a trainer cannot appreciate the values of being healthy and fit, his or her clients might not learn to appreciate these values either.

This is critical for personal trainers because it helps the industry understand how the public perceives them. In the same sense that a client would be hesitant to visit a hairdresser if the hairdresser had a horrible haircut is the same principle for a personal

trainer. Participants perceived a trainer as incapable if his or her body type was anything but fit. In fact, some participants “admitted the appearance of an instructor either discredited or legitimized the quality of his/her instruction” (Vogel, 2000, p. 43). For trainers who are currently employed, or for future prospective trainers, an understanding of physical expectations is crucial in order for them to reach success in their careers. If fitness professionals are not willing to abide by the physical expectations that society has placed on them, then they should be warned to potentially seek a different line of work. Even though being physically fit is not a requirement set by workplaces, these trainers may face difficulties obtaining clients if clients view them as incapable or unfit to do their job.

### **Personal trainer’s gender**

All participants stated that gender was not a factor in selecting a trainer. Participants felt that as long as the trainer had the ability to help him or her reach their goals, gender was trivial. It was perceived that both males and females are equally as capable of helping clients reach their goals. This is essential for the fitness industry to understand because oftentimes in other workplaces, men are viewed as superior over females. Helping female trainers understand the perceptions of potential clients allows them to understand how to market themselves. It may also help fitness facilities understand the worth of their employees by increasing the likelihood that trainers of different genders and backgrounds be hired for various positions.

### **Race or ethnicity**

All participants concluded that race and ethnicity did not play a factor in the trainer selection process. Most participants stated that educational background and

experience was the utmost priority and that race did not make a difference to them. This can help personal trainers of all races/ethnicities feel more confident that potential clients are not judging based on race or ethnicity.

### **Piercings or tattoos**

Nineteen out of 20 participants would train with a trainer who had piercings or tattoos, while one participant felt uncomfortable and stated that this displayed unprofessionalism. Personal trainers may want to be weary of showing their piercings/tattoos in the workplace for this very reason. If they are training clients who view this as unprofessional, it may hinder clients from wanting to work with them. Trainers could prevent this from happening by covering up tattoos with long sleeve shirts/pants or taking out facial piercings while at work.

### **Attire**

Most participants want a personal trainer to be training in workout gear that is appealing and professional. With 13 out of 20 participants desiring a trainer that looks presentable, it is critical that personal trainers understand what appropriate attire entails when training clients. Clients want their trainer to be dressed in active wear so they can demonstrate exercises and move without restriction. Oftentimes, fitness facilities set clothing requirements for their trainers to abide by, but for trainers who do freelance training, they need to be aware of how they are perceived in relation to attire. Wearing baggy, revealing, and dirty clothing may come off as unprofessional to many clients. Trainers' attire should consist of active wear that is form fitting, appropriate, clean, and provides the trainer with the ability to be agile.

### **Facial hair**

Overall, every participant in this study would not be bothered by a trainer who had facial hair, although two participants specified that facial hair should be groomed. For pertinence to male personal trainers, it would be up to these individuals to decide what is deemed as work-appropriate. Though some trainers choose to shave on a regular basis in order to keep their facial hair orderly, other trainers like having more of a scruffy appearance. It is up to the discretion of the personal trainer to decide how to style their facial hair—unless there are requirements set forth by the workplace.

### **Overview**

In essence, “if you’re not attracting the clientele you want to train or the numbers you need to succeed in business, it may have nothing to do with your skill level and everything to do with your appearance” (Rotwein, 2003, para 2). Personal trainers are oftentimes forced to face the challenge of obtaining clients through physical appearance. Clients may not take the time to investigate a trainer’s educational background, certifications, or level of experience. Rather, potential clients predict a trainer’s skill level based on appearance. It can be concluded “the fitness industry is unlike most other professions when it comes to the importance placed on outward appearance” (Rotwein, 2003, para 2).

In a study conducted, it was found that trainers reported that once clients began their training sessions, there was an increase “in efficacy in their client, client responsibility, and collaboration, and a decrease in reliance on the personal trainer over time” (Shields, Jung, & Brawley, 2007, pg. 203). Essentially, trainers provide useful services to their clients, and it is critical that potential clients are aware of the benefits of working with a certified fitness professional.

This study provides direction to clients when it comes to selecting a personal trainer. It teaches potential clients that asking a personal trainer about his or her level of experience, certifications, and educational background are valuable information—rather than focusing on outward appearance. Whether a trainer is physically attractive or not, clients must be aware of what training a personal trainer has undergone to be considered a qualified, trustworthy fitness professional. This study is also helpful to fitness professionals. Between improving marketing efforts, understanding basic methods to operating a facility, and techniques for effective communication, this study serves as a liaison between potential clients and fitness professionals. A personal trainer may benefit from learning how a client views a trainer’s facial hair, attire, and/or body type. This will help trainers realize what clients may potentially desire—as well as what facilities that employ personal trainers may require.

### Conclusion

Overall, the significance of this study relies on the perceptions that potential clients have of personal trainers. After conducting this study, it is apparent that people view fitness professionals in a critical light and demand higher standards in regards to physical appearance in comparison to many other professions. Personal trainers are expected to look the part: fit physique, groomed facial hair (for males), appropriate attire, and overall professionalism. Aside from meeting physical expectations, trainers are also supposed to be experts in the field of fitness and health.

### *Implications*

Understanding the perceptions of potential clients will help trainers improve marketing techniques, as well as enhance communication efforts. For trainers, helping

potential clients understand educational background, certifications, and level of experience will better assist a client's knowledge in regards to trainer selection. Enhancing clients' opinions regarding a trainer's qualifications will increase the success level and overall marketability for fitness professionals. This study will serve as an educational tool for both fitness professionals and potential clients.

#### *Future Research Directions*

This study helps to lay the groundwork for future studies. Studying particular marketing techniques would be beneficial and could improve the fitness industry. Now that trainers understand how clients view a trainer on a first-impression basis, trainers now need to delve deeper into effective marketing techniques that increase the likelihood of a client seeking further information about a trainer. While personal training is a science that involves anatomy, physiology, and biomechanics, it is also a business-related concept. Learning marketing and other business techniques will help trainers and fitness facilities operate a successful business.

Gauging society's demand for physical perfection is another avenue that could be further studied due to the completion of this study. For example, doctors are highly respected regardless of weight and physical appearance. In contrast, trainers are less respected when physical attributes are not deemed as "acceptable." It would be valuable to study why an overweight doctor is more reputable than an overweight trainer, for example. Studying body image and other topics in regards to appearance could help society better shape its mentality when it comes to appearance. Helping society form an appreciation for all body types and fitness levels may in turn lower the judgments and preconceived notions in the fitness industry.

Utilizing this study may be beneficial not only for personal trainers, but for fitness facilities. When creating policies and rules for employees, utilizing the opinions of the 20 participants surveyed in this study could be useful. It may help employers design a dress code, establish a set standard for consultations, and marketing efforts. An employer may design a t-shirt that is mandatory for all trainers to wear that is deemed as appropriate and professional. A consultation is when a client and trainer meet to get to know each other, take baseline measurements, and discuss goals to create a workout plan. To help ease a client's initial nerves, an employer may mandate that all trainers disclose certifications, level of experience, and educational background during this consultation to help the client trust the trainer for more than simply appearance. To summarize, utilizing the information found in this study can help both personal trainers and fitness facilities create methods and techniques that enhance perceptions that potential clients have of trainers.

### *Limitations*

Few limitations were experienced in this study. Financial status of college-aged students is a limitation because personal trainers are expensive—therefore most of the participants had not previously worked with a trainer. In addition, surveying in a Student Recreation Center mostly targets college-aged students; therefore opinions from older participants were slim. Some of the participants provided answers on the survey that were very brief. I would have preferred some more clarify and specificity on some answers, but overall I was provided with valuable feedback.





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