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Research Paper

The Study of the Professional Attire of Dentists From Dentistry Students and Patients' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Background and Objectives: Dentists' professional attire affects patients' perceptions of clinical competence and the quality of medical services. Given the cultural norms and attire requirements in Iran, it is necessary to evaluate professional attire patterns in a manner consistent with health standards and patient expectations. This study aimed to examine the role and impact of dentists' professional attire on patients' satisfaction, with an emphasis on Iranian-Islamic culture.

Methods: The present study was conducted as a non-interventional and mixed-method study. The statistical population consisted of 170 students of the Faculty of Dentistry in Qom City, Iran and 89 patients and visitors. The distribution of samples for both groups was simple random, and the data collection tool was a researcher-made questionnaire. Data were collected in two quantitative and qualitative ways. In the qualitative method, the explanatory indicators of the subject were collected using the Delphi method and based on a field survey. The data were analyzed using statistical tests and inferential analyses with SPSS software, version 26.

Results: The professional attire of dentists has an impact on the level of "patient satisfaction" and a strong correlation is observed between these two variables (P=0.000). Also, the effect of the professional attire of dentists on the level of satisfaction of patients and clients has a significant difference (P=0.005) according to cultural characteristics.

Conclusion: Dentists' professional attire has affected patient satisfaction, and the formal attire has created the highest satisfaction. This study shows the necessity of developing attire standards that are consistent with Iranian-Islamic cultural norms.

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Introduction

According to findings from previous studies [1–3], individuals' clothing significantly influences others' judgments about them and, like other aspects of physical appearance, has notable social implications. This phenomenon is also evident in medical settings, where appearance and attire constitute an essential component of interpersonal communication [1]. In a study conducted by Sulaiman et al. in 2021, it was reported that patients paid particular attention to dentists' appearance, behavior, and professional skills, and these factors played a major role in shaping patients' overall perceptions of dentists [4].

In the formation of the doctor–patient relationship, the first encounter—whether verbal or nonverbal—holds particular importance, and in this context, the physician's appearance plays a critical role [5]. Appropriate professional attire can enhance satisfaction, create a positive impression, and increase self-confidence, thereby improving an individual's character and social standing. Given the importance of appearance in professional interactions, many occupations, particularly those in the medical field, emphasize the concept of professional appearance. In healthcare settings, the appearance of physicians and dentists may influence both their relationships with patients and the perceived quality of healthcare outcomes. The physical appearance of healthcare providers is vital in forming first impressions and establishing rapport, and it may increase patients' willingness to disclose personal information [6]. Previous studies have also indicated that even anxious children and adolescents tend to prefer dentists who wear specific types of attire, such as child-friendly clothing with cartoon patterns [7]. Overall, physicians' attire has a direct impact on the development of effective therapeutic relationships between doctors and patients [8].

Moreover, numerous studies conducted in Iran and other countries have sought to identify the optimal characteristics of professional attire in healthcare environments [9, 10]. The findings indicate that physicians' appearance is considered important by patients across all age groups [10]. Therefore, professional attire, as a fundamental component of physicians' appearance, plays a significant role in maintaining hygiene and safeguarding the health of both healthcare personnel and patients. It also contributes to improved performance and fosters trust and comfort within medical environments. Accordingly, attire regulations within the medical profession have often been shaped by the results of scientific research [8, 9].

Over the years, the white coat has become a symbol of the medical profession [9]. In the late nineteenth century, physicians adopted the white coat as their professional attire, representing scientific credibility, purity, cleanliness, and a strong commitment to protecting patients' health [11]. Medicine is a profession inherently associated with noble humanitarian goals. Therefore, individuals within this field are required to act in a manner characterized by compassionate service, spiritual fulfillment, and the advancement of human dignity. Although cultural differences exist among various societies, the importance of physicians' appearance in conveying a professional image, as well as the role of ethical excellence in strengthening professional credibility, has consistently been emphasized throughout the history of medicine [12].

In Iran, the issue of professional attire carries distinct cultural and social dimensions. On the one hand, Iran possesses a distinguished history in the field of medical sciences; on the other hand, Iranian–Islamic culture articulates specific principles and norms regarding dress in formal and public settings. Therefore, aligning international standards of professional attire with the cultural values and expectations of Iranian society—particularly within healthcare environments—constitutes an important and practical necessity. In this context, examining the attitudes of patients and dental students toward dentists' professional attire may help address existing gaps in the national research literature and provide clearer direction for healthcare and educational policy-making.

Given the importance of dentists' appearance in shaping patient trust and satisfaction, and considering the need to harmonize dress patterns with Iranian–Islamic cultural values, the present study was designed and conducted to investigate the role and impact of different patterns of dentists' professional attire on patient satisfaction. This study aimed to provide a clear understanding of the expectations of patients and dental students, thereby offering a foundation for the development or revision of professional attire guidelines in dental educational and clinical settings.

Methods

This study was conducted using an inductive approach. A mixedmethod research design was employed, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods simultaneously. To identify the key components related to the research topic, 14 initial indicators were extracted based on theoretical and documentary studies. These indicators were subsequently evaluated through expert judgment using

the Delphi method. After two rounds of Delphi implementation, seven final indicators were identified as the core explanatory variables of the study. These indicators formed the basis of the field survey, and the data collection instrument (questionnaire) was designed accordingly.

The required data for this study were collected from two statistical populations: (1) Patients and visitors of the Faculty of Dentistry in Qom City, Iran, and (2) dental students of the same institution. Due to the characteristics and requirements of each group, two separate sampling procedures were employed. For the first group, given the unknown population size and variance, Cochran's formula was used to determine a sample size of 170 participants. For the second group, another Cochran formula was applied, resulting in a sample size of 89 students. In both groups, sampling was conducted using a simple random sampling method, and a researcher designed questionnaire served as the data collection tool.

To assess the validity of the instrument, content validity procedures were applied using the expert opinions of epidemiology and cultural studies specialists. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, yielding a value of 0.83, indicating acceptable reliability.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In the qualitative phase, the explanatory indicators of the study were first identified through the Delphi method and subsequently served as the basis for the field survey. In the quantitative phase, the collected data were analyzed using statistical tests and inferential analyses through SPSS software, version 26.

The research questionnaire consisted of four sections: Demographic information (age, gender, and education), items related to dentists' attire and clinical equipment (mask, eyewear, gloves, white coat, and name badge), images of male and female dentists presented in four different attire styles, and items assessing professional behavior. Participants were asked to indicate their preferences regarding the attire models based on criteria, such as hygiene and cleanliness, neatness and grooming, color, perceived professional competence, trust-building, preservation of professional dignity, and overall patient satisfaction. The attires under consideration were evaluated across four distinct styles, as follows:

1. Professional formal

For male dentists, this style included a long white coat with closed buttons, formal trousers, and formal men's shoes. For female dentists, it included a long white coat with closed buttons, a maghnaeh (a form of head covering commonly used in clinical settings in Iran), formal trousers, and formal women's shoes.

2. Professional casual

For male dentists, this style consisted of a long white coat worn with open buttons, a dark Tshirt underneath the coat, jeans, and men's sport shoes. For female dentists, it included a long white coat with open buttons, a long dark blouse worn under the coat, a scarf or headscarf, jeans, and women's sport shoes.

3. Business dress

For male dentists, this style included dark formal trousers, a light-colored men's shirt, and formal men's shoes. For female dentists, it consisted of a long dark manteau (coat), formal trousers, a maghnaeh, and formal women's shoes.

4. Casual

For male dentists, this style consisted of a dark Tshirt, jeans, and men's sport shoes. For female dentists, it included a light-colored open-front long manteau, a light blouse, a scarf or headscarf, jeans, and women's high-heeled shoes.

Results

The participants in this study consisted of 133 females (51.4%) and 126 males (48.6%). In terms of age distribution, 33 participants (37.5%) were in the 18–25 age group, 35 participants (39.8%) were between 25 and 40 years old, 20 participants (22.4%) were in the 41–60 age group, and 1 participant (1.2%) was over 60 years of age. Regarding educational level, 34 respondents (38.6%) had a high school diploma or lower level of education, 38 participants (42.1%) had a bachelor's degree, 12 participants (13.1%) had a master's degree, and 5 participants (5.4%) had a doctoral degree.

As shown in Table 1, there are differences between the perspectives of dental students and patients regarding the attire of male dentists.

Table 1. Participants' perspectives on male dentists' attire

Dentists' Attire		Students (%)	Patients (%)
Shirt	Longsleeved	30	51
	Shortsleeved	22	14.6
	No preference	48.5	30.3
Trousers	Formal fabric trousers	16	37.5
	Jeans or cotton trousers	27.7	19.3
	Ripped/distressed trousers	0	0
	No preference	56.4	24.3
Collar style	Open/relaxed collar	14.3	9.1
	Closed collar without tie	14.3	52
	Closed collar with tie	28.4	11.5
	No preference	43	34.6
Shoes	Formal/leather shoes	73.3	25.7
	Sandals	0	9.5
	Sport/athletic shoes	0	2.7
	No preference	26.7	62.2

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Also, according to Table 2, respondents' preferences regarding female dentists' attire differed in several aspects.

According to Table 3, attire pattern 1 received the highest level of preference among both groups.

Test of the relationship between "attire pattern" and "patient satisfaction"

To assess the relationship between the variables "attire pattern" and "level of patient satisfaction", a patient satisfaction score was first calculated for each participant based on the relevant responses in the questionnaire. Specifically, a score ranging from 1 to 100 was computed for each respondent based on four indicators: Enhanced perception of the dentist's professional competence, increased patient trust, preservation of the dentist's dignity and professional status, and overall patient satisfaction. Participants were then divided into four independent groups according to the attire pattern they selected among the four evaluated patterns. The differences in the mean satisfaction scores between these groups were subsequently examined using analysis of variance (ANOVA).

As shown in Table 4, a statistically significant difference was observed among the four attirepattern groups with respect to patient satisfaction. This indicates that individuals, depending on the attire pattern they prefer, hold different perspectives regarding the concept of patient satisfaction. In other words, the construct of patient satisfaction does not have an identical meaning across these groups, and the prioritization and relative weighting of the indicators explaining this variable differ among them. It should be noted that this test only indicates the significance of differences among the examined groups; however, to determine which specific groups differ from one another, posthoc tests are required.

As observed in Table 5, the fourth attirepattern group—representing the professional formal—showed a statistically significant difference compared to the other groups.

Table 2. Participants' perspectives on female dentists' attire

Dentists' Attire		Students (%)	Patients (%)
Blouse/Manteau	Longsleeved	45.5	72
	Shortsleeved	15	5.5
	No preference	39.5	22.5
Trousers	Formal fabric trousers	23	43
	Jeans or cotton trousers	28	20
	Ripped/patchwork trousers	0	0
	No preference	49	37
Shoes	High heels	8	2
	Lowheeled formal shoes	43	56
	Sport/athletic shoes	32	21
	Sandals/Slippers	0	0
	No preference	17	21
Makeup	Agree	43	26
	Disagree	18	26.5
	No preference	39	47.5

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Examining the moderating role of "culture" in the relationship between "attire pattern" and "patient satisfaction"

To examine the moderating effect of culture on the relationship between attire pattern and patient satisfaction, linear regression analysis was employed. To evaluate the influence of the moderating variable, the value of Rsquared (R^2) from the regression model summary (Table 6) was first examined. In this model, the Rsquared value is 0.705, indicating that the independent variable accounts for approximately 70% of the variance in the dependent variable.

As shown, the correlation coefficient increases from 0.798 in Model 1 (without the inclusion of the cultural variable) to 0.812 in Model 2 (with culture incorporated). Finally, as observed, the moderating variable "culture" has a P value of 0.005; since this value is less than 0.05, it can be concluded that culture exerts a significant moderating effect on the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

Table 3. Participants' views on dentists' attire patterns

Attire Pattern	Male (%)	Female (%)
Pattern 1	65.3	96
Pattern 2	8.2	2
Pattern 3	2	0
Pattern 4	24.5	2

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Table 4. Results of ANOVA for comparison of mean scores across attire pattern groups

Patient Satisfaction					
Source of Variation	**Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**P**
Between groups	8373	3	2791.1		
Within groups	1053	255	6.34	440	0.000
Total	9426	258			

Physician's Dignity and Professional Status					
Source of Variation	**Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**P**
Between groups	7370	3	2456.5		
Within groups	7329	255	44.15	55.64	0.000
Total	14698	258			

Patient Trust					
Source of Variation	**Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**P**
Between groups	3908	3	1302.6		
Within groups	17955	255	108.2	12.04	0.000
Total	21863	258			

Perceived Professional Competence of the Dentist					
Source of Variation	**Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**P**
Between groups	8601	3	430.03		
Within groups	8505	255	57.08	7.53	0.000
Total	17106	258			

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Furthermore, the strength of the relationship between the independent variable (attire pattern) and the dependent variable (patient satisfaction) was 0.798 in Model 1 (without the inclusion of culture) and 0.828 in Model 2 (with culture included), indicating the moderating role of culture in the relationship between the two variables under investigation. Additionally, as shown in Model 2 of Tables 6 and 7, the moderating variable of culture exhibits a negative moderating effect, with a coefficient of −0.059. Since the t-statistic is −3.78 and its absolute value is greater than the critical value of 1.96, the moderating effect of culture is considered statistically significant.

Discussion

This study was conducted to identify, analyze, and evaluate the impact of dentists' professional attire on the level of patient satisfaction from the perspectives of dental students and patients.

Based on Figure 1, the effect of the independent variable (professional attire) on the dependent variable (patient satisfaction level) was examined through three indicators, while patient satisfaction itself was assessed using four indicators, as described below.

Table 5. Results of LSD posthoc test for pairwise comparison of group means

Group (I)	Group (J)	Mean Difference (I–J)	SD	P
Group 4	Group 3	-1.61508	2.89606	0.578
	Group 2	1.39316	2.58533	0.591
	Group 1	-30.15771*	2.79335	0.000
Group 3	Group 4	1.61508	2.89606	0.578
	Group 2	3.00824	3.22092	0.352
	Group 1	-28.54263*	3.39016	0.000
Group 2	Group 4	-1.39316	2.58533	0.591
	Group 3	-3.00824	3.22092	0.352
	Group 1	-31.55087*	3.12888	0.000
Group 1	Group 4	30.15771*	2.79335	0.000
	Group 3	28.54263*	3.39016	0.000
	Group 2	31.55087*	3.12888	0.000

LSD: The least significant difference.

*Sgnificant.

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A noteworthy finding regarding attire patterns was that, from the respondents' perspective, attire patterns varied considerably to convey the components associated with patient satisfaction. In terms of attracting patients' satisfaction and trust, attire pattern 1, which represents the conventional attire commonly worn by physicians, was preferred by the vast majority of respondents. However, with respect to conveying a sense of professional competence or skill, this attire pattern received a lower percentage.

In this regard, one possible explanation may be the standardization of physicians' attire across different levels of professional expertise and specialization, which may prevent patients from distinguishing levels of professional competence based solely on formal professional attire and, consequently, from receiving the expected cues through such appearance.

Numerous studies have examined the potential impact of physicians' attire and appearance on the doctor–patient relationship, demonstrating that patients place considerable importance on their physicians' clothing and overall appearance. In fact, patients often regard appearance as a criterion for assessing the competence and credibility of their physicians [11]. From the patients' perspective, a physician's appearance reflects aspects of personality and professional capability, which can significantly influence patients' trust in their physician [13]. Similarly, a study conducted by Ejigu et al. (2022) concluded that, from the patients' viewpoint, physicians who wear formal professional attire are perceived as more trustworthy and more capable of providing effective care. According to this study, physicians' attire is considered one of the most important factors in conveying intelligence, surgical skill, and trustworthiness [14].

Table 6. Linear regression analysis examining the role of the variable "culture"

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.798[a]	0.705	0.715	0.665
2	0.812[b]	0.782	0.798	0.646

[a] Predictors: (Constant), Attire pattern,

[b] Predictors: (Constant), Attire pattern, Interaction term.

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Table 7. Linear regression analysis examining the role of the cultural variable

Models		Unstandardized Coefficients (B)		Standardized Coefficients	t	P
		B	SD	Beta		
1	Constant	11.388	2.664	—	3.567	0.000
	Attire pattern	0.772	0.061	0.798	14.650	0.000
2	Constant	11.086	2.681	—	3.124	0.000
	Attire pattern	0.802	0.068	0.828	14.022	0.000
	Interaction term (attire pattern × culture)	−0.016	0.022	−0.059	−3.780	0.005

Dependent variable: Patient satisfaction.

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As observed, respondents expressed the lowest level of trust toward business dress. This type of clothing is perceived as inconsistent with professional norms and therefore performs poorly in conveying essential components of effective doctor–patient interaction. In line with this, extensive evidence indicates that patients' trust and their willingness to follow medical instructions are strongly associated with the physician's dignity, composure, and expected level of professional neatness. Within the Iranian–Islamic cultural context, while maintaining calmness and dignity, clean attire—particularly white clothing—is explicitly emphasized. Regarding footwear preferences for dentists, both study groups most frequently selected lowheeled formal shoes for women and formal leather shoes for men, while none of the respondents chose sandals. It is noteworthy that dental students showed a greater preference for athletic/sport shoes compared to patients, a finding that is inconsistent with the results reported by Lorestani et al. [15].

It appears that this discrepancy may stem from cultural differences between Iranian society and Western contexts, which could explain the inconsistency observed in the results. In Iranian society, many individuals tend to wear sport shoes and casual clothing even in workplaces and formal settings. Medical students, as part of this broader society, are naturally influenced by these cultural patterns; therefore, their lack of awareness in this regard is unsurprising and highlights the need for proper education to address and correct such tendencies. In the study by Semnani and Shahpoori, only a small percentage of psychiatrists and psychiatry residents considered sport clothing to be an appropriate style for physicians [16]. Considering that the participants in their study are the same individuals who were medical students in earlier years, it can be inferred that, over time and through accumulated experience, the popularity of sport attire and footwear among physicians tends to decline. However, progressing through this learning curve may be accompanied by consequences—such as compromising the physician–patient relationship [13].

Regarding the observance of Islamic dress (hijab) among female dentists, a significant difference was observed between the two study groups. Most students appeared largely indifferent to this issue, whereas among patients, a majority (56%) preferred adherence to hijab in the form of wearing a maqnaeh (Islamic head cover-

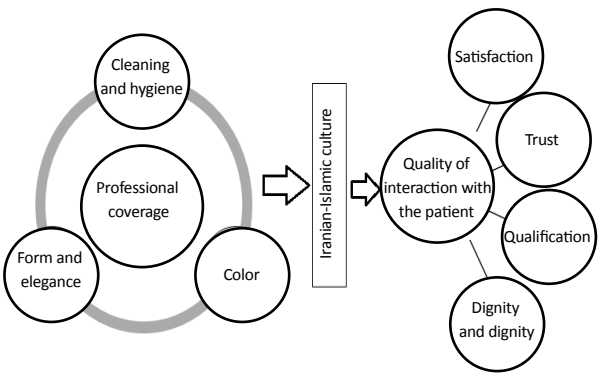

Figure 1 . Schematic model of the relationships between the study variables

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ing). This indifference among students may be attributed to several factors, including the lack of effective cultural programs and appropriate role models, as well as the limited effectiveness of dress and chastity programs, and a degree of leniency among policymakers and program implementers in this area. Findings from other studies also support this observation. For example, Haji Sadeghi (2017) examined the level of satisfaction among patients attending the Dental School of Qom University of Medical Sciences and reported that the lowest level of satisfaction was related to the clothing style and makeup of female students. This finding was also consistent with the results of Danesh Kazemi's study conducted in the religious city of Yazd, Iran [17].

As demonstrated, the professional attire of dentists influences the quality level of patient satisfaction, and a strong correlation exists between these two variables. This finding aligns with the results of several previous studies, including those by Ashraf et al. (2023), Chaiken (2022), Gherardi et al. (2009), and Blumhagen (1979) [1, 2, 3, 9]. Furthermore, the results of the present study indicated that the impact of dentists' professional attire on the quality of patient and client satisfaction varies significantly according to individuals' cultural characteristics. This significant role of cultural differences is consistent with the findings of Lorestani et al. (2010) [15].

Accordingly, another finding of this study is the significant moderating role of "culture" in the relationship between the independent variable (dentists' attire pattern) and the dependent variable (quality of patient satisfaction). A statistically significant difference was observed between the two study groups (students and patients). In explaining this finding, it can be argued that among patients—considering the religious context of Qom City—their mental image of an appropriate attire pattern is likely shaped by specific cultural and religious criteria. In contrast, the student group, due to their more diverse cultural backgrounds, may exhibit less pronounced religious characteristics, which may account for their differing perceptions.

Although physicians regard effective communication and constructive interaction with patients as the most critical determinant of therapeutic success and an inseparable component of the treatment process, many patients and participants in the present study expressed dissatisfaction with what they perceived as physician-centered communication and insufficient attention to patients' opinions. Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the suboptimal quality of physician–patient relationships constitutes one of the most significant current challenges within the national healthcare system.

In the present study, the main limitation was that the research was conducted solely in Qom City, which limits the generalizability of the findings to the entire country, given the considerable cultural and social diversity across Iran. This highlights the necessity for conducting similar studies with broader cultural contexts and larger, more diverse study populations. Additionally, the lack of financial support from research centers and stakeholder institutions, as well as the limited willingness of participants to cooperate in completing the questionnaires and the difficulty in securing the participation of selected samples, constituted other major challenges encountered during this study.

Considering that culture, social norms, and cultural values play a crucial role in shaping interpersonal relationships and, consequently, individuals' psychological satisfaction, physicians' awareness of these values and their respect for them are essential for enhancing patient satisfaction and ultimately improving and advancing healthcare services.

It is recommended to develop skillbased and empowerment training programs aimed at enhancing dentists' understanding of cultural values, social norms, and subcultures. Additionally, modernizing dentists' professional attire designs and incorporating color diversity to visually reflect the dentist's professional competence and technical proficiency could further facilitate the effective transmission of professional credibility and trust to patients and clients.

Moreover, conducting similar studies with larger and more diverse populations is strongly advised to obtain more generalizable results and to enhance the effectiveness of evidencebased policymaking and professional guidelines in this field.

Individuals perceive the concept of patient–provider interaction differently depending on their preferred attire patterns, and the patient satisfaction does not carry the same meaning for all groups. For each group, the prioritization of the indicators that explain this variable—and the relative weight assigned to them—varies. One possible explanation for this phenomenon lies in cultural differences and value systems. Within different subcultures, values and norms occupy distinct positions and priorities within the broader cultural framework. Consequently, these differences may unconsciously influence the variable of satisfaction, which is inherently subjec-

tive and rooted in individuals' cognitive and perceptual frameworks.

Therefore, the physician–patient interaction process can be considered a systematic and multidimensional phenomenon, in which achieving desirable outcomes requires mutual understanding and coordination between physicians and patients. The scope of such interaction extends beyond a simple twoway communication and reflects a range of psychological as well as socioeconomic characteristics of individuals and the society in which they live.

Many dentists has a positive attitude toward the principle of establishing communication with patients; however, they often lack the necessary communication skills. Since effective communication requires specific competencies, conducting skillbased training workshops can help enhance this interaction and improve the overall quality of dentist–patient communication.

Conclusion

The results indicated that the type of dentists' professional attire has a significant effect on patient satisfaction, and this perception is shaped by cultural differences. Enhancing communication skills and considering attire patterns aligned with cultural preferences can improve the quality of dentist-patient interactions.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Qom University of Medical Sciences, Qom, Iran (Code: IR.MUQ.REC.1399.159).

All ethical principles of research were observed, including maintaining the confidentiality of participants' information, anonymity of questionnaires, and using data solely for the study's objectives. Participants took part in the study voluntarily after being fully informed about its objectives and providing informed consent.

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Authors' contributions

Conceptualization and supervision: Samira Hajisadeghi; Investigation and data collection: Fateme Abedini; Methodology and writing: Fateme Abedini and Samira Hajisadeghi.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interests.

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