

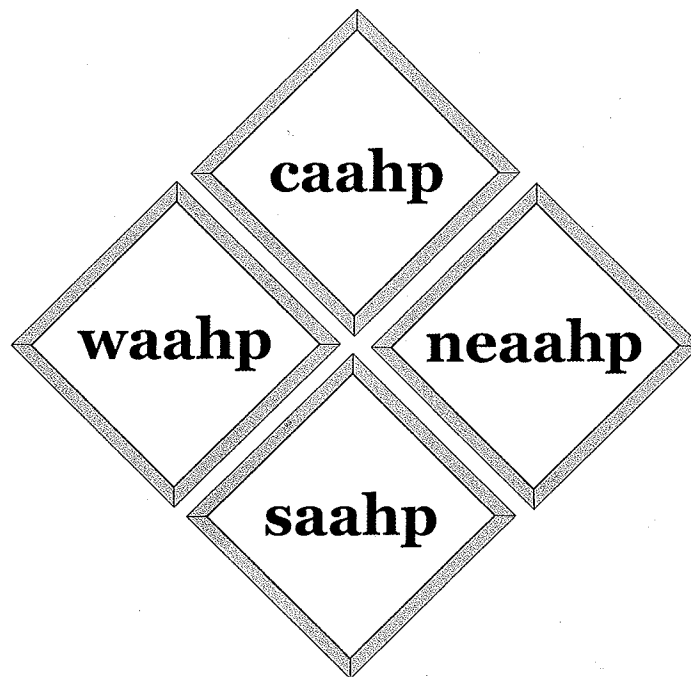
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## ■ Medical School Interview Attire- Common Knowledge or Urban Legend?

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### Abstract:

*Applicants offered an interview for medical school experience a significant amount of stress shopping for and selecting the appropriate clothing for interview day. Conventional wisdom suggests that a business suit is the most appropriate choice and that other choices may actually be detrimental to the applicant's overall impression on interview day. We tested this theory by sending a survey to all of the medical school admissions directors in the United States, Canada and the off-shore schools in the Caribbean. While a business suit is still highly regarded, other statistically significant positively viewed choices are available to applicants. The flexibility involved with the other choices could decrease the financial burden of interview day as well as add to the applicants own sense of comfort. Footwear and hosiery selection, as well as accessories and jewelry choices, resulted surprising significantly positive and negative results. The choices for appropriate interview attire may not be as narrowly defined as suggested by "common knowledge"; at the same time, there are most definitely some positive and negative choices.*

### Introduction

In the spring of 2012 the HLTHPROF list serve supported a lively thread on exactly what applicants should wear for medical school interviews. It became clear that while there were many ideas concerning appropriate attire no one had ever directly asked the question to medical school admissions officers as a group.

In the summer of 2012 we sent a survey to every allopathic and osteopathic medical school admissions office in the United States and Canada, as well as the off-shore schools. The survey asked about preferences for clothing, footwear, jewelry, and other issues for both male and female applicants. Seventy-eight medical schools both allopathic and osteopathic responded to the survey. There were no differences between the

responses based upon type of degree awarded.

Analysis of the responses both supports and refutes the common wisdom concerning interview attire. The data also suggest there may be some regional differences in the way attire is viewed. The results also raise some concerns about holistic review since the interviewees' attire does appear to influence the interviewers' impression of the candidate

### Study Methods

Using Survey Monkey online program, 192 invitations were sent to medical school admissions offices asking for responses to 59 questions. A total of 78 medical schools responded for a 32.8 percent response rate. A total of 90 individual responses were collected.

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We used a Likert scale of 1-5 with 1 representing a strong negative influence, 2 representing a slight negative influence, 3 being neutral, 4 representing a slight positive influence, and 5 representing a strong positive influence. IBM SPSS Statistics 20 software was used for statistical analysis. The univariate test of the mean was used to analyze the responses to individual questions with 3 (neutral) being designated as the null

hypothesis. To analyze differences between regions, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used to compare differences between the Northeast, Southeast and Midwest regions. Analysis of the other regions was not undertaken due to low response numbers. Both MD and DO programs were included in the survey. MD programs represented 84.3 percent of the responses while DO programs represented 15.7 percent of the responses.

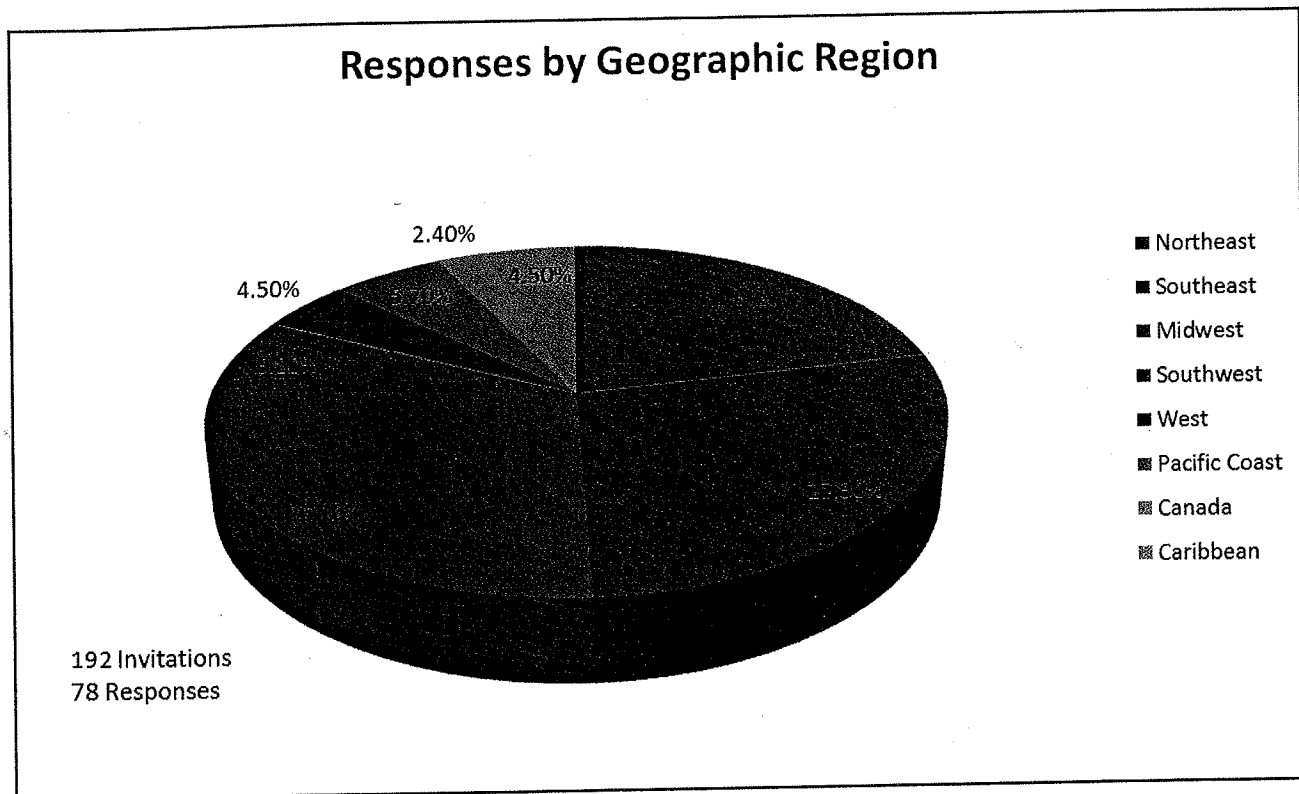


Figure 1. Self-reported distribution of the geographic region of the respondents based upon the total number of responses.

### Geographic Locations Surveyed

Each respondent self-designated their geographic region. The Southeast had the highest percentage of total respondents at 27.3 percent, followed by the Midwest at 26.1 percent and the Northeast at 21.6 percent. The lowest response rate was from Canada at 2.4 percent, followed by the west and Caribbean at 4.5 percent.

### Men's Attire

Traditional attire (Diepenbrock, 2013, Reeves, 2009, Krannich, 2003, Landy, 2007) for men proved to be the best option for interviews based on our survey responses. A suit (4.52  $p \leq 0.0009$ ) is favored over a blazer, khakis, shirt and tie (3.79  $p \leq .009$ ). However,

the disparity between a suit or a blazer-with-khakis outfit was not statistically significant. Consistent with traditional interview attire advice, white and blue colored shirts both had a significant positive influences (3.72  $p \leq 0.0009$ ) on interviewers. Survey results for bright colored shirts which typically are not recommended (Reeves, 2009), indicated a slight positive influence which was not statistically different from neutral. Dark shirts on the other hand did elicit a significant slightly positive response 3.4  $p \leq 0.0009$ . Conventional wisdom typically suggests that facial hair is acceptable for men during interviews as long as it is clean and neatly trimmed (Landy, 2007, Reeves, 2009). Responses to our survey indicate a significant slightly negative influence for men with facial hair during interviews, mean response 2.9  $p \leq 0.032$ .

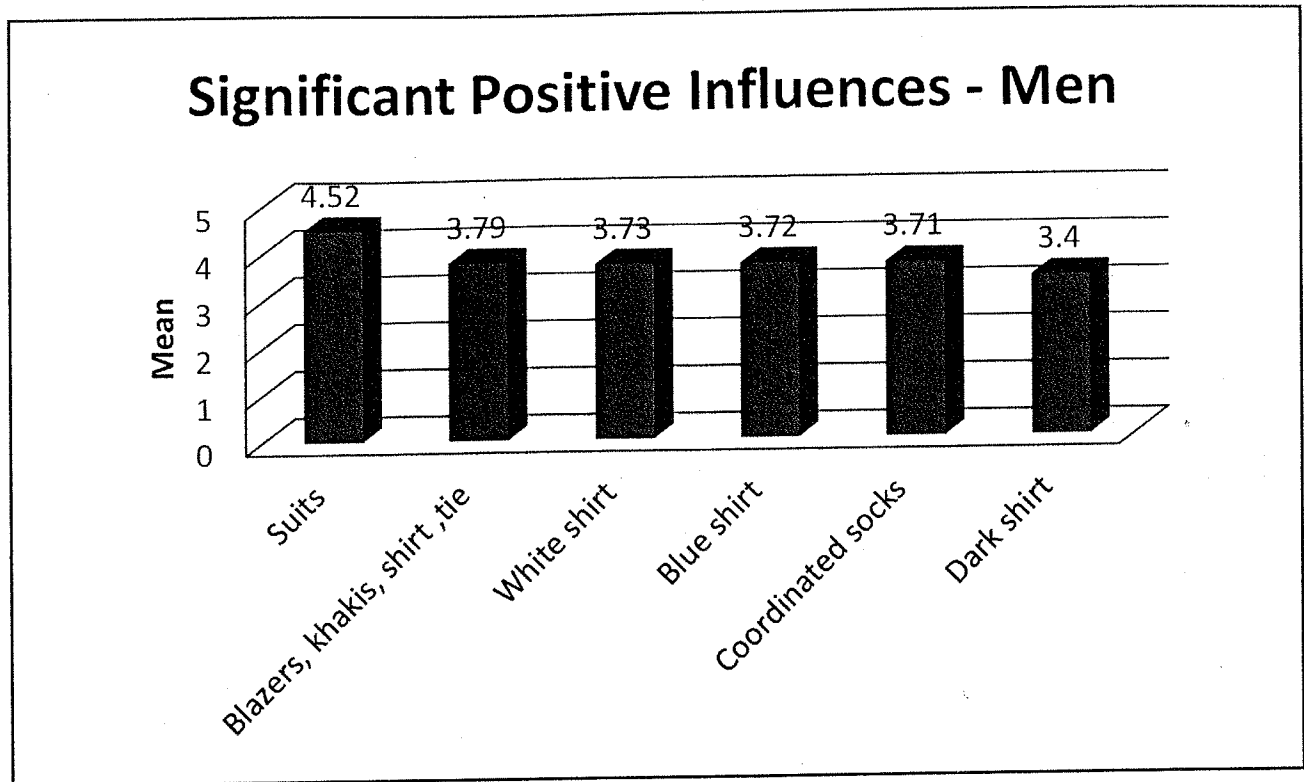


Figure 2. Mean response values for attire items which proved to be significantly different from neutral (3.0). All values were significant at a minimum of  $p \leq 0.0009$ .

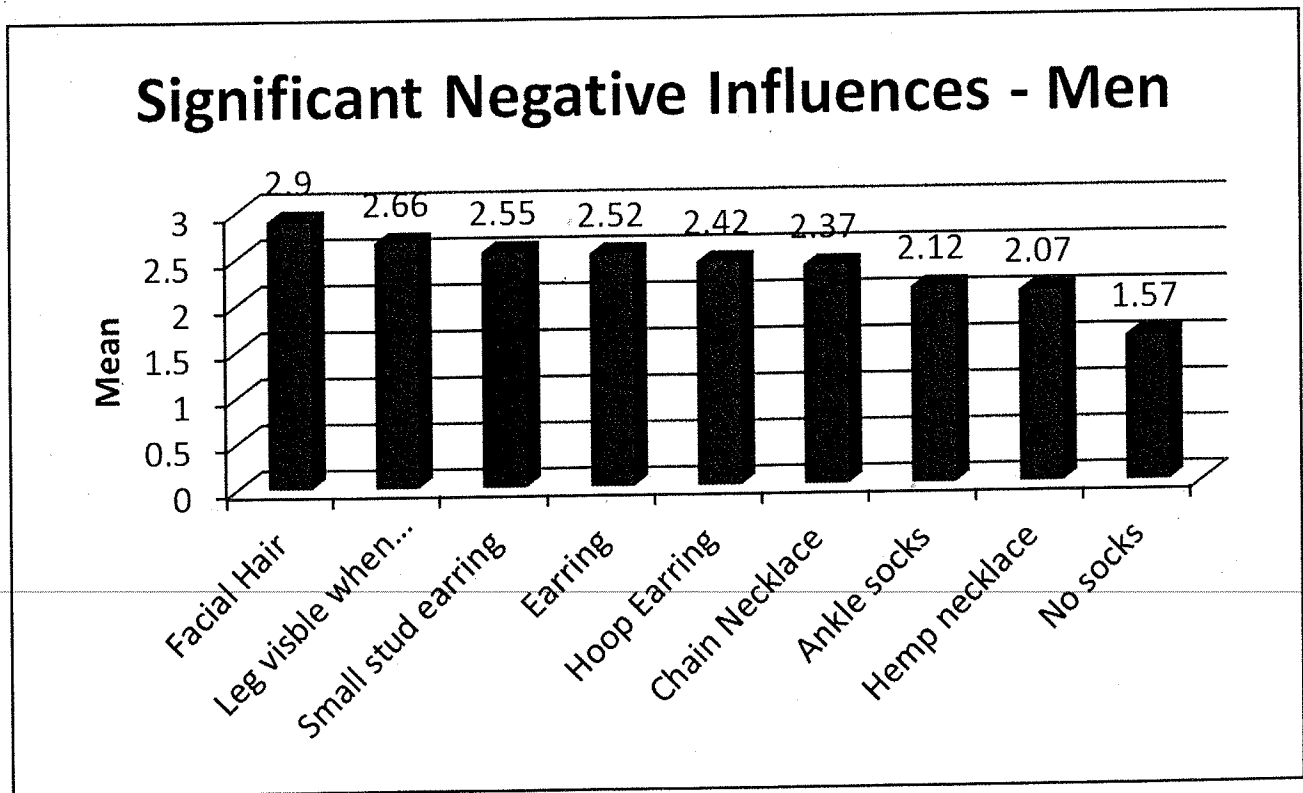
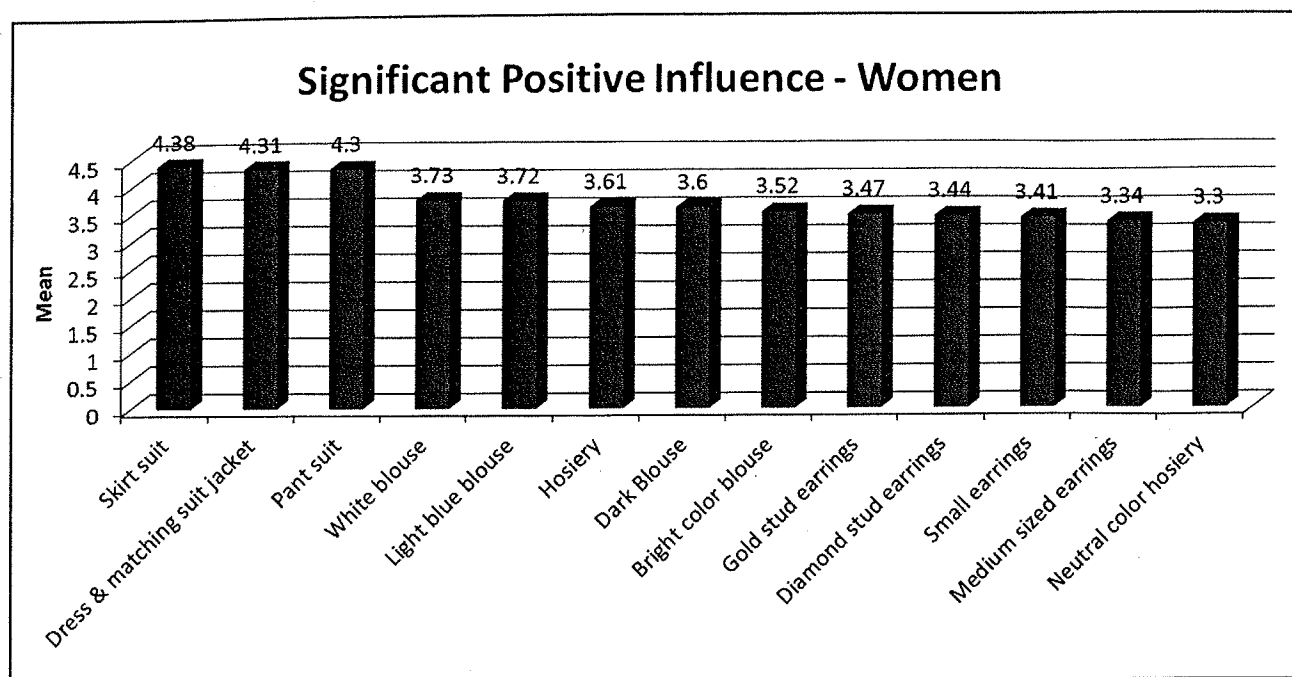


Figure 3. Attire and grooming items which significantly deviated from neutral (3.0) P values ranged from  $p \leq 0.032$  to  $p \leq 0.0009$ .



**Figure 4. Women's clothing and accessory items where the mean response was significantly more positive than neutral (3.0) All values were significant for at least  $p \leq 0.004$**

Wingtip and lace up shoes (Reeves, 2009) for men continue to be favored according to our survey results,  $3.86 p \leq 0.009$  and  $3.60 p \leq 0.0009$  respectively. Loafers also indicated a slight positive response  $3.34 p \leq 0.0009$ . Cowboy boots had a slight overall negative influence,  $2.43 p \leq 0.0009$ , except in the Southwest where results showed a strong positive influence,  $3.5$ ; however the sample size was too small for statistical analysis.

### Women's Attire

Skirt suits have traditionally been considered the most conservative and best choice for women to wear for interviews (Diepenbrock, 2013, Krannich, 2004, Landy, 2007). Our findings indicate no significant difference between a skirt suit, a dress with matching suit jacket, and a pant suit. For women, all were significantly highly positive with a score of  $4.3 p \leq 0.0009$ . Contrary to customary advice, (Reeves, 2009) a bright colored blouse also had a significant positive influence  $3.52 p \leq 0.0009$ .

Neutral colored hosiery is recommended for women interviewing in skirt suits (Krannich, 2004, Landy, 2007, Reeves, 2009) which is consistent with our findings. Our survey results also showed that dark hosiery and colored hosiery had a significant slight positive influence on interviewers,  $3.23 p \leq 0.004$  and  $3.30 p \leq 0.0009$

respectively.

Traditionally women are encouraged to wear a basic pump to an interview (Krannich, 2003) which was consistent with our findings. We also found that flats and shoes with a low heel equally acceptable  $3.60 p \leq 0.0009$  in all categories. In contrast boots both knee high and short boots contributed to significant negative influences of  $2.6$  and  $2.64$  with a minimum  $p$  value of  $p \leq 0.001$ . Shoes with three inch heels were also viewed as a significantly negative influence  $2.32 p \leq 0.009$ .

Although sheer blouses with contrastingly colored undergarments are currently a popular and trendy look, in keeping with conventional interview attire advice, (Krannich, 2003, Landy, 2007) discernible undergarments had a significant negative influence,  $1.44 p \leq 0.0009$ .

Conventional advice typically suggests that women wear small and understated earrings such as studs (Landy, 2007, Reeves, 2009). Our respondents agreed with this conventional advice but also indicated a significant positive influence for medium sized earrings  $3.34 p \leq 0.0009$ . Modest hoop earrings also received a slight positive influence.

## All Candidates

Candidates, regardless of sex, are typically discouraged from wearing multiple earrings, showing visible tattoos, and exposing multiple body piercings during interviews (Asher, 2004, Landy, 2007, Reeves, 2009). Our results showed significant strongly negative influences in each of these areas 1.81-2.32  $p \leq 0.0009$  for all, however, we noted slight but statistically significant regional differences between the northeast and Midwest. While still viewing multiple earrings negatively, the Northeast = 2.73 was slightly more tolerant than the Midwest = 2.10. The northeast = 2.27 respondents were also more tolerant of visible tattoos than the Midwest = 1.65  $p \leq 0.045$  respondents.

## Regional Differences for Women

Although women's hosiery was viewed favorably overall, we noted a number of subtle regional differences in our findings. Midwest = 3.33 respondents viewed women's hosiery slightly more favorably than in the southeast = 3.19  $p \leq 0.029$ . Both the southeast and Midwest viewed women's colored hosiery as neutral, but the Midwest, 3.55, respondents viewed women's colored hosiery as slightly more positive than the southeast 3.0 respondents,  $p \leq 0.049$ . The Midwest = 3.0 respondents viewed dark hosiery for women as neutral while southeast = 2.9 responses indicated that women's dark hosiery was viewed negatively  $p \leq 0.039$ .

Although both the northeast and southeast responded with a negative influence for women presenting during an interview with discernible undergarments, the northeast = 1.8 was slightly more tolerant than the southeast = 1.4,  $p \leq 0.017$ .

Women's boots fell more clearly into the negative category in the southeast = 2.09 while the northeast = 2.93 was more tolerant of women wearing boots during an interview,  $p \leq 0.045$ .

## Regional Differences for Men

Men wearing a white shirt = 3.73 or a blue shirt = 3.72 during an interview was viewed most favorably by all respondents regardless of location. Men wearing dark dress shirts during an interview showed a significant overall positive influence = 3.4. The Midwest viewed dark dress shirts = 3.71 during an interview more

favorably than the southeast = 3.05,  $p \leq 0.02$ .

Although men wearing earrings during an interview was viewed negatively regardless of location, the northeast = 2.8 was slightly more tolerant than the southeast = 2.52  $p \leq 0.021$ . The northeast = 2.8, was also more tolerant than the southeast = 2.57,  $p \leq 0.038$  of men wearing a stud earring or hoop earring during an interview.

For candidates wearing ethnic, cultural and/or religious clothing, our results indicate a slight overall negative trend between 2.95-2.99, but without statistical significance.

## Discussion

While the conventional wisdom on attire for medical school interviewees still serves medical school candidates well, the results of this survey indicated that in general there may be more flexibility in attire than originally perceived. In practical terms, these results suggest that students invited for medical school interviews may not need to purchase interview specific attire for which they would have few other uses. These results also raise concerns as medical schools move toward more holistic review of applicants, since attire on interview day does appear to matter. Applicants who arrive for an interview with dress and grooming which falls far outside of the conventional wisdom, in general may not make as positive impression as applicants more traditionally attired.

These results also present an interesting dilemma for both the applicant and the admissions staff. Some institutions conduct blind interviews where the interviewer does not have a file on the interviewee. If the person conducting the interview is having difficulty remembering an applicant's name they may try to associate some other characteristic with that individual. Personal communication with some admissions staff personnel indicates that at times the candidate may be initially identified in admissions meetings by an article of their attire such as the man with the green shirt or the woman with the short jacket. Candidates who are similarly attired may blend in more with the applicant pool for the day.

## Future Research

If we were to repeat this survey, we would ask responders to identify as male or female because we recognize that the responder's sex could influence how the responder judges the same or opposite sex.

**Medical School Interview Attire- Common Knowledge or Urban Legend? (continued)**

We would also ask the responders to identify by age categories to assess how age or generational expectations might influence one's responses.

Recognizing the disparity between slight and strong categorizations, we would include an expanded Likert scale to reflect moderate preferences as well.

We would provide context for small, medium, and large sizes related to earring size. For example, we would include a description that small would mean earrings the size of a pencil eraser or smaller. We would define medium or modest hoop earrings as the size of a nickel or smaller and large earrings as those that are the size of a quarter or larger.

**Conclusions**

While the conventional wisdom on attire for medical school candidates still serves medical school applicants well, the results of this survey indicated that in general there may be more flexible than originally perceived. In practical terms, these results suggest that students invited for medical school interviews may not need to purchase interview specific attire.

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