

Self-presentation of the Veterinarian: Does it Affect Clients' Perception in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

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Abstract

Parallel with professional skills, verbal and non-verbal communication should be mastered by veterinarians in order to improve the quality of the “veterinarian-owner-patient” relationship. Non-verbal communication implies facial expressions and attitude, but professional’s attire can be an influencing factor as well. The effect that veterinarian self-presentation has on clients’ perceptions of veterinarians was not investigated previously in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H). Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine the perception of animal owners from B&H regarding veterinarians’ verbal and nonverbal communication skills, presentation on social media and professional attire. The questionnaire was compiled in Google form and consisted of an introduction and 13 questions followed by an explanation. A total of 648 clients participated in the survey between February and April 2023. Obtained data were processed in Microsoft Excel using descriptive statistics. Results of our survey indicate that veterinarians’ attire, along with verbal communication, plays a significant role in gaining trust and comfort from animal owners in B&H. Given that it is currently not present, we recommend inclusion of verbal and non-verbal communication skills as a mandatory subject or module in the undergraduate study curriculum of veterinary medicine in B&H.

KEYWORDS

Curriculum, Non-verbal communication, Verbal communication

INTRODUCTION

Medical patients’ trust is considered a very important mediator of the overall medical outcome. In veterinary medicine, the evaluation of competence by the owner is difficult mostly because they gain trust indirectly from demonstrated knowledge or skills. Therefore, it is considered that in addition to verbal communication, the veterinarians’ attire, as part of non-verbal communication along with facial expression and attitude, can significantly influence gaining trust and comfort (Coe *et al.*, 2020). According to Hippocrates, it is known that professionals should “be clean in person, well-dressed, and anointed with sweet-smelling unguents” (Jones, 1923). In Western countries since long ago there is a tendency to remove the “doctor-patient” barrier in human medicine by dressing casually (Farraj and Baron, 1991; Menahem and Shvartzman, 1998; Douse *et al.*, 2004), while in many other countries the emphasis is still placed to a white coat or surgical gown usage (Al-Ghobain *et al.*, 2012; Basheikh *et al.*, 2020). The “veterinarian-owner-patient” relationship is a critical point, may be even more than the “doctor-patient” relationship in the human medicine concept (Bentley *et al.*, 2020). According to some studies, although many clients stated that they did not have a preference for the attire in terms of gaining trust in expertise, still 25% of respondents agreed that they associated the veterinarian’s opinion with its dress code (Sugerman-McGiffin *et al.*, 2018). In some cases, 70% of respondents stated that it is not necessary for a veterinarian to wear a white coat while the offered image

of a person with a white coat or surgical scrub was preferred in surveys (Robb *et al.*, 2019; Coe *et al.*, 2020). In human medicine, it is considered that formal and casual dressing are two conflicting factors that influence the acceptance of doctors. There is an opinion that formal attire increases the doctor’s authority but decreases the connection with the patient, while casual attire has the opposite effect. However, such conclusions require additional investigations (Brase and Richmond, 2004). Even though a certain degree of preference for the white coat as a dress code in the medical profession is still present, the occurrence of White Coat Syndrome stands out as an important phenomenon in human medicine (Nuredini *et al.*, 2020). Studies in veterinary medicine conducted on cats, dogs and horses have shown that animals also show signs of stress in the clinical environment connecting it with the White Coat Hypertension phenomenon (Belew *et al.*, 1999; Marino *et al.*, 2011; Lorello *et al.*, 2018). It is well recognized that noise affects patients in human medicine, where more than 50% of noise comes from conversation (Allaouchiche *et al.*, 2002). It is known that noise in human medicine increases stress levels activating stress hormones and affecting drug metabolism (Hsu *et al.*, 2010; Padmakumar *et al.*, 2013). In veterinary medicine, even though it is well known that noise is a common stimulus for unpredictable reactions in patients, it is still little known how the acoustic environment affects them specifically (Stellato *et al.*, 2019). The goal of our research was to examine the perception of animal owners from Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) regarding veterinarians’ self-presentation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Ethics statement

The participants were informed in the survey introduction that their anonymous completion of the questionnaire would be considered as their informed consent to participate in the study.

Study design

The study was conducted between February and April 2023. The questionnaire was available to participants through social media where they were contacted directly or over a survey link shared in animal lovers' closed groups intended for people from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The questionnaire was compiled in Google form and consisted of an introduction and 13 questions followed by an explanation. The survey was focused on the most common situation to which animal owners are exposed. The introduction of the questionnaire explained how the survey is important to contribute to the veterinary profession in our country, and it is reserved only for animal owners from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Participants were informed in the survey introduction that anonymous completion of the questionnaire constitutes informed consent to participate. The questionnaire was divided into four sections. In the first section, respondents were asked about basic demographic information including approximate age, sex, and education level. The second section of the questionnaire focused on which animal species the respondent owns and how regularly they visit veterinarians. The respondents could choose between dog, cat, rodent, rabbit, parrot, and horse because these are the most common animal species, and this was the only question with the possibility of multiple choice. In continuation of the same part, regular or irregular checking was offered with an explanation of absolute responsibility toward their pets. The third section of the questionnaire consisted of four questions regarding veterinarian attire. They were asked if the attire affects their perception of a veterinarian, how their pet reacts to the person with the white coat, and to look at six images of veterinarians wearing six different outfits. The outfits offered were (1) casual outfits (shirt and jeans), (2) casual outfits with a long white coat, (3) surgical scrub, (4) surgical scrub with a long white coat, (5) surgical scrub with dirt, (6) surgical gown with gloves, face mask, and surgical cap. In the last section, respondents were asked about veterinarians' verbal presentations and presentations on social media. They were asked how they or their pets react if the veterinarian is too loud around them or if the veterinarian uses the mobile phone for private purposes. In the end, they also were asked how professionally they see photos of veterinarians doing surgery with no surgical cap, face mask, or gown, and how comfortable they are when they see a published photo of the animal during the surgery. In order to finish the survey, it was required to answer all questions.

Statistical analysis

Data were imported from the Google form questionnaire in Microsoft Excel® automatically. All data were sorted automatically and examined manually. The response for each question was entered separately in the next sheet and expressed as a total number and percentage. The responses for question with multiple choices were additionally separated and analyzed individually. Descriptive statistics were used to obtain the results of our survey.

RESULTS

A total of 648 clients participated in the survey during the aforementioned period. Respondents represented animal owners from B&H, whereas a majority were females, between 26 and 34 years old, with a university degree (Table 1). Dogs were most popular among pets and many of the respondents visited veterinarians regularly (Table 2). Even though the difference between answers regarding the effect of professional attire on the owners' perception was minor, many respondents preferred surgical scrubs (Fig. 1). The majority of respondents did not notice pet discomfort associated with the white-coat phenomenon. On the other hand, animal or owner discomfort was obvious if the veterinarian was loud. All responses from the last section are presented in Table 3. Our study did not include preference toward male and female veterinarians.

Table 1. Demographic data collected by 647 respondents in total.

Variable	N (%) of respondents
<i>Age</i>	
18-25	179 (27.62)
26-34	238 (36.73)
35-54	211 (32.56)
55-65	17 (2.62)
More than 65	3 (0.46)
<i>Sex</i>	
Male	108 (16.67)
Female	538 (83.02)
Non-binary	2 (0.31)
<i>Educational level</i>	
No education	0 (0.00)
Primary school	4 (0.62)
High school	207 (31.94)
Vocational school	81 (12.50)
University degree	304 (46.91)
Academic degree	52 (8.02)

Table 2 Popularity of animal species as pets among respondents, and responsibility of the owner's toward their pet health.

Variable	N (%) of animals
<i>Pets</i>	
Dog	244 (37.65)
Cat	167 (25.77)
Rodent	8 (1.23)
Rabbit	24 (3.70)
Birds	6 (0.93)
Horse	8 (1.23)
Multiple	191 (29.47)
<i>Type of visitation</i>	
Regular visitation	470 (72.53)
Irregular visitation	178 (27.47)

In addition, survey results were separated by gender. Regarding pet popularity owned alone, in comparison with female (35.87%) and non-binary respondents (0.00%), male respondents mostly owned dogs (47.22%). Contrary to this finding, rabbits were preferred by female respondents (3.90%) while cats were preferred by non-binary respondents (50%). Furthermore, female (73.79%) and non-binary (100%) respondents chose regular

Table 3. General effect of the veterinarian’s presentation on the animal or animal’s owner, in person or on social media.

Variable	N (%) of respondents
<i>Does the veterinarian’s attire have an effect on your perception?</i>	
Yes, absolutely	362 (55.86)
Not at all	286 (44.14)
<i>Does the white coat disturb the animal?</i>	
Yes	230 (35.49)
No	418 (64.51)
<i>Does the loud veterinarian negatively affect animal or the owner?</i>	
Yes	580 (89.51)
No	68 (10.49)
<i>Is the phone usage in private purpose by veterinarian professional?</i>	
Very unprofessional	351 (54.17)
Unprofessional	208 (32.10)
Acceptable, I can wait	86 (13.27)
Professional	2 (0.31)
Very professional	1 (0.15)
<i>How professional they see photos of veterinarians doing surgery with no surgical cap, face mask, or gown?</i>	
Very unprofessional	419 (64.66)
Unprofessional	188 (29.01)
Acceptable	35 (5.40)
Professional	4 (0.62)
Very professional	2 (0.31)
<i>How comfortable they are when they see published photo of the animal during the surgery?</i>	
Very uncomfortable	167 (25.77)
Uncomfortable	87 (13.43)
Acceptable	249 (38.43)
Comfortable	74 (11.42)
Very comfortable	71 (10.96)

visitations with their pets as a preferred answer. Consequently, male respondents had a higher percentage of irregular visitations (34.36%) in comparison with females (26.21%). Male and female respondents preferred surgical scrub attire with the result up to 50.00% and 60.00%, respectively. All non-binary respondents preferred surgical scrubs with the white coat. Casual outfit was rated as the most unprofessional attire by 57.41%, 51.12%, and 50% male, female, and non-binary respondents, respectively. None of the respondents tolerated the loudness of the veterinary practitioner with a higher percentage of non-binary respondents (100%) then female respondents (91.08%).

DISCUSSION

Veterinary professionals in B&H are mostly focused on mixed practice (small, farm animals and horses), and only few clinics are oriented to small animals’ exclusively. Newly graduated veterinarians gain their skills in verbal and non-verbal communication mostly after they start to work. Verbal behavior was a focus of many studies in medicine. Although non-verbal communication is very important in social interaction it had been studied less frequently (Mast, 2007). According to previous results, many clients stated that they did not have a preference for the attire in terms of gaining trust in expertise, but still, 25% of respondents agreed that they associated the veterinarian’s opinion with the dress code (Sugerman-McGiffin et al., 2018). According to the results of a study by Robb et al. (2019), 70% of respondents stated that it is not necessary for a veterinarian to wear a white coat. Regardless, the image of a person with a white coat was preferred during the election. In contrast to the aforementioned study, Coe et al. (2020) states that the surgical scrub was preferred. In our research, respondents were asked if the attire affects their perception, and only 55.86% answered positively. According to an earlier study in human medicine, Brase and Richmond (2004) concluded that formal and casual dressing are two conflicting factors that influence the acceptance of a doctor’s advice. From the above, it was concluded that formal attire increases the doctor’s authority but decreases the connection with the patient, and vice versa. However, such conclusions require additional investigations (Brase and Richmond, 2004). Our results showed an important preference toward veterinarians dressed in surgical scrub (58.33%) while 52.16% of respondents stated the casual outfit is less professional. Furthermore, surgical scrub with dirt and surgical gown with cap and face mask had marked up to 30.25% and 8.95%, respectively.

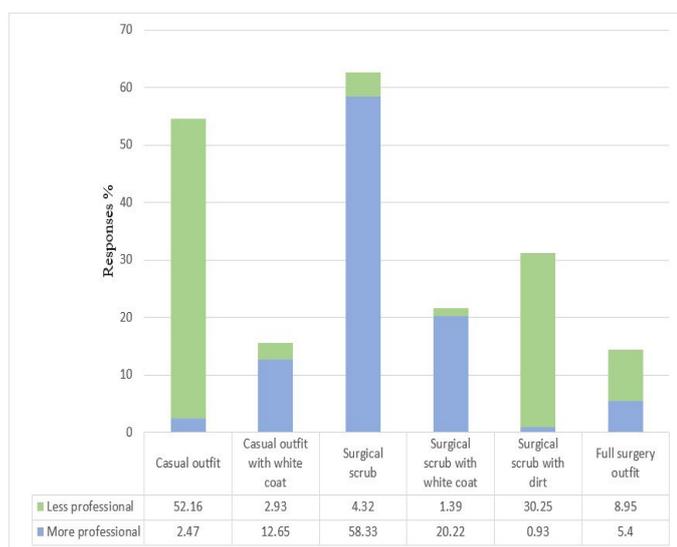


Fig. 1. Owners opinion regarding veterinarians’ attire.

There is still a certain degree of preference for the white coat as a dress code in the medical profession. However, in recent years in human medicine, the occurrence of White Coat Syndrome stands out as an important phenomenon (Nuredini *et al.*, 2020). Studies in veterinary medicine conducted on cats, dogs and horses have shown that animals also show signs of stress in the clinical environment connecting it with White Coat Syndrome (Belew *et al.*, 1999; Marino *et al.*, 2011; Lorello *et al.*, 2018). It seems that animals can connect white coats or clinical settings with previous negative experiences causing the occurrence of this phenomenon (Belew *et al.*, 1999; Fanucchi and Norton, 2022). In our survey, 64.51% of respondents think their pets are not disturbed in presence of a professional wearing a white coat. This result can suggest that the animal did not have a previous negative experience, or the owner did not recognize it.

It is well known that noise affects patients in human medicine. A study conducted by Allaouchiche *et al.* (2002) showed that more than 50% of hospital noise comes from the surrounding conversation. It is also concluded that noise in human medicine increases stress levels activating stress hormones affecting drug metabolism (Hsu *et al.*, 2010; Padmakumar *et al.*, 2013). It is little known how the acoustic environment affects veterinary patients even though noise is a common stimulus for unpredictable reactions in animals (Stellato *et al.*, 2019). Blackwell *et al.* (2013) concluded that 17 - 49% of dogs have a noise aversion which can lead to fear and aggression, directly impairing animal welfare. The results of our study show even higher noise aversion, where 89.51% of respondents answered that the noisy veterinarian negatively affects them or their pet.

Considering veterinarian behavior, the use of the cell phone for private purposes during visitation (54.17%) and publishing intraoperative photos with no surgical cap, face mask, or gown (64.66%) was considered very unprofessional by the majority of respondents. In our opinion, these results suggest satisfactory owners' educational level regarding responsible ownership. This constatation can be also supported by finding that 72.53% of participants do regular routine pet check-ups. Regardless, for most of them (38.43%) watching surgical photos published on social media by their veterinarian was acceptable.

According to a study by Saunders *et al.* (2017), women tend to own pets more than others. Our survey report similar finding where female owners were over-represented (83.02%) in comparison to male (16.67%) and non-binary respondents (0.31%). Regardless of the fact the percentage of non-binary responders was very low, we still analyzed their answers separately. Our results show that in B&H dogs (37.65%) and cats (25.77%) are the most popular pets owned individually. It is important to state that our results correlate with online data published by the AVMA U.S. pet ownership report. The most common pocket pets seen in our country are rodents and rabbits and, surprisingly, they are the third most popular individual pets representing 4.93% in total. Even though, equestrian sport in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not well developed, horses as pets (1.23%) seem to be more popular than birds (0.93%). All these results are even higher if we take into consideration answers of respondents owning more than one pet. We find that female respondents also tend to own multiple pets (31.04%) in comparison to male respondents (19.44%). Nevertheless, 50.00% of non-binary respondents reported more than one animal, although this result should be interpreted with caution due to the low number of respondents within this category. Reptiles and fish are not common animal patients in our country, so these animal species were not included in our study.

CONCLUSION

The results of the present study suggest that veterinarians' attire, along with verbal communication, plays a significant role in gaining trust and comfort from animal owners in B&H. Female respondents dominate pet ownership, particularly dogs and cats. There is a preference for surgical scrubs among respondents, indicating that it is seen as more professional attire compared to

casual outfits. According to owners, the white coat does not seem to disturb most pets, although some previous studies suggest that animals can associate white coats with negative experiences. Noise in veterinary clinic can have a negative impact on both animals and their owners, causing stress and discomfort. The use of cell phones for private purposes during visitations and the publication of surgical photos without appropriate protective gear are considered unprofessional by the majority of respondents. The importance of effective communication in the veterinarian-owner-patient relationship cannot be understated, as it directly impacts trust, comfort, and overall medical outcome. The results of our study suggest a need for staff education in verbal and non-verbal communication skills in the veterinary profession in B&H. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to consider the inclusion of a subject or module dedicated to verbal and non-verbal communication skills within undergraduate curriculum of veterinary medicine in B&H.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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