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Young Adults’ Perceptions of Non-Gender Conformity Across Occupations

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Introduction

People whose appearance deviates from their biological sex, reflecting a non-binary identity, are perceived more negatively (Moultann & Adams-Price, 1997). Consequently, such individuals are at higher risk for depression, being misgendered, and feeling unsafe (Day et al., 2018; Goldibert et al., 2018; Prunas et al., 2016). These negative experiences extend to the workplace (Tebbe & Allen, 2019; Yavorsky, 2016). Thus, many nonconforming individuals hide their identities and experience further discomfort (Newheiser, Barreto, & Tiemersma, 2017).

We examined young adults’ perceptions of a man, varying his appearance and labeling him with different occupations. We hypothesized that the man would be perceived most negatively when dressed gender-discordantly and described as a doctor.

Methodology

Participants:
Participants were 116 adults with a mean age of 19.90 (SD = 5.20). The majority were women (76%), Caucasian (53%), and heterosexual (71%).

Materials:
Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: a picture of a man labeled as either a doctor or barista and the same man wearing make-up labeled as a doctor or barista.

We examined how participants viewed the pictures using a 2(masculine vs. non-gendered) X 2 (barista vs. doctor) MANOVA. There were no significant interactions. Thus, we examined main effects. When comparing the masculine to the non-gendered picture, the non-gendered individual was rated higher for feminine traits [F(1, 115) = 22.76, p < .001], feminine behavior [F(1, 115) = 17.89, p < .001], and masculine behavior, [F(1, 115) = 6.01, p = .02]. There was no difference for masculine traits. The non-gendered individual was rated higher for trustworthiness at their job, [F(1, 115) = 4.32, p = .04], being a good team member, [F(1, 115) = 8.04, p = .005], being careful, [F(1, 115) = 10.48, p = .002], and providing capable service. [F(1, 115) = 7.21, p = .008].

Occupation Comparisons

We compared Caucasians and African Americans using an independent t-test. Compared to African American participants, Caucasian participants had more trust that the depicted individual could do the job [t(105) = 2.37, p = .02]. Although both groups valued transgender individuals, Caucasians had higher scores [t(105) = 2.10, p = .04].

Conclusion

Our hypothesis was not supported as conformity and occupation did not interact. We also found that the stated occupation was minimally influential in driving perceptions; the doctor was viewed as having more feminine behavior, which might reflect the fact that doctors help people, which is considered stereotypically feminine.

The appearance of gender non-conformity drove perceptions more than did the race, gender, self-esteem, and social needs of the viewer. The non-gender conforming individual was seen as having masculine and feminine behaviors, which matched the masculinity and femininity in his appearance. Adults also viewed the gender-discordant individual as more capable at his job, regardless of whether he was a doctor or barista. Adults may have seen the flexibility in appearance as a sign that he would be a flexible, open-minded colleague, or perhaps our participants, who were generally positive toward transgender individuals, were showing support for a person they believed to be transgender (although we did not provide that label).

These findings add to our limited, but growing, understanding of the experience of non-binary individuals.