

# 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 (Moultaun & Adams-Price, 1997). Consequently, such individuals are at higher risk for depression, being misgendered, and feeling unsafe (Day et al., 2018; Goldbert 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.

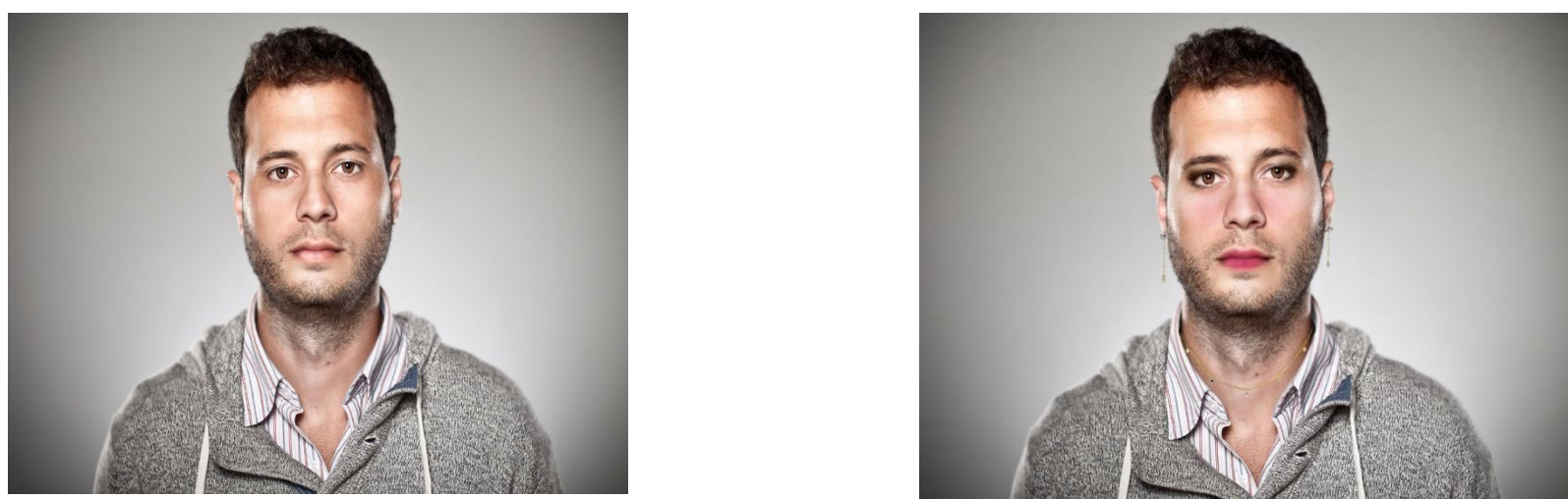
## Methodology

### 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.



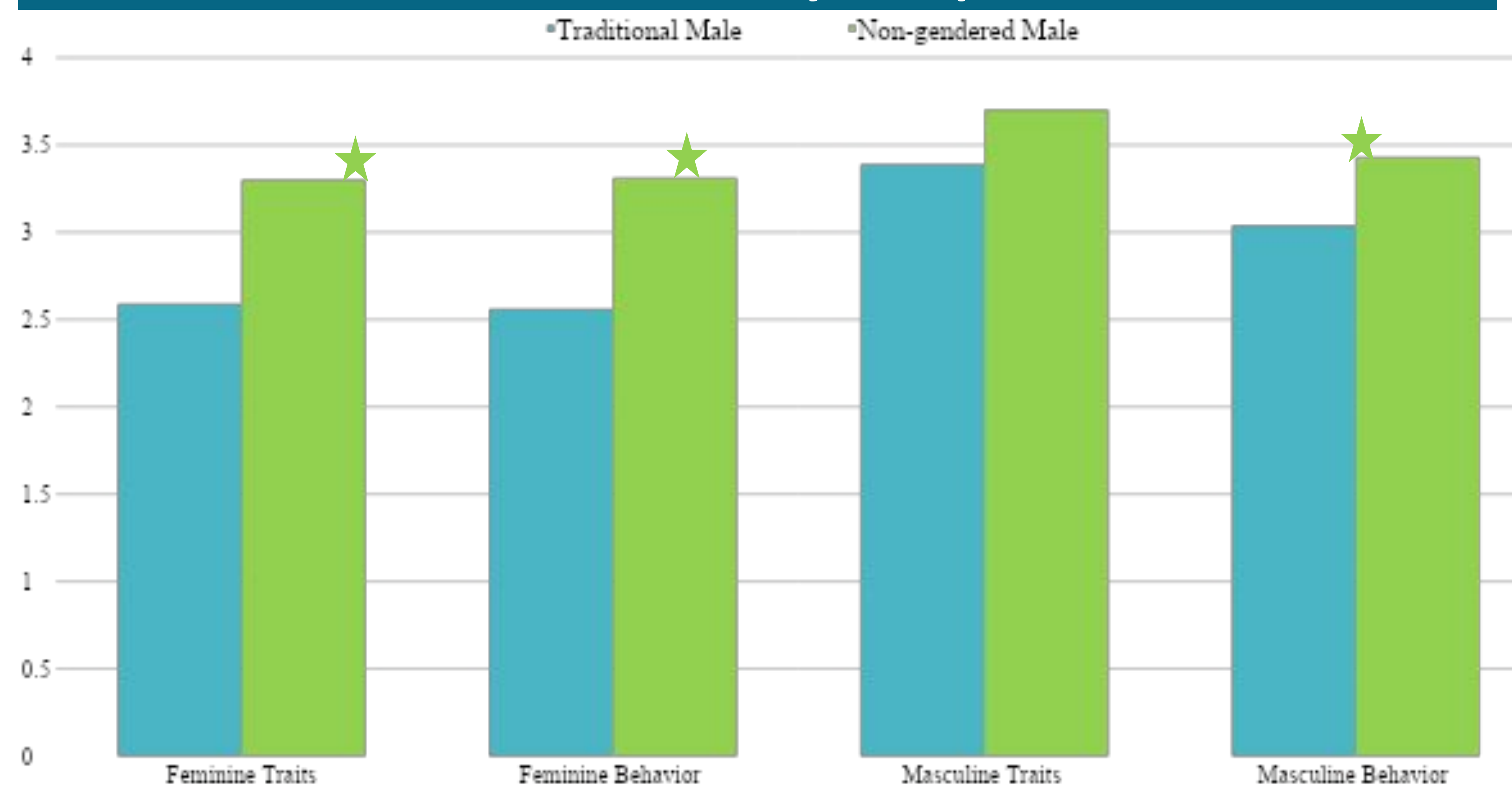
Participants rated how accurately a list of masculine and feminine traits (taken from Snel, Belk & Hawkins, 1986) matched the picture they saw. Participants also responded to scales to assess their need to belong (Leary et al., 2013), self-esteem (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001), and attitudes toward transgender individuals (Kanamori, 2017).

## Attitude Predictors

**The more positive participants' attitudes toward transgender individuals, the more they:**

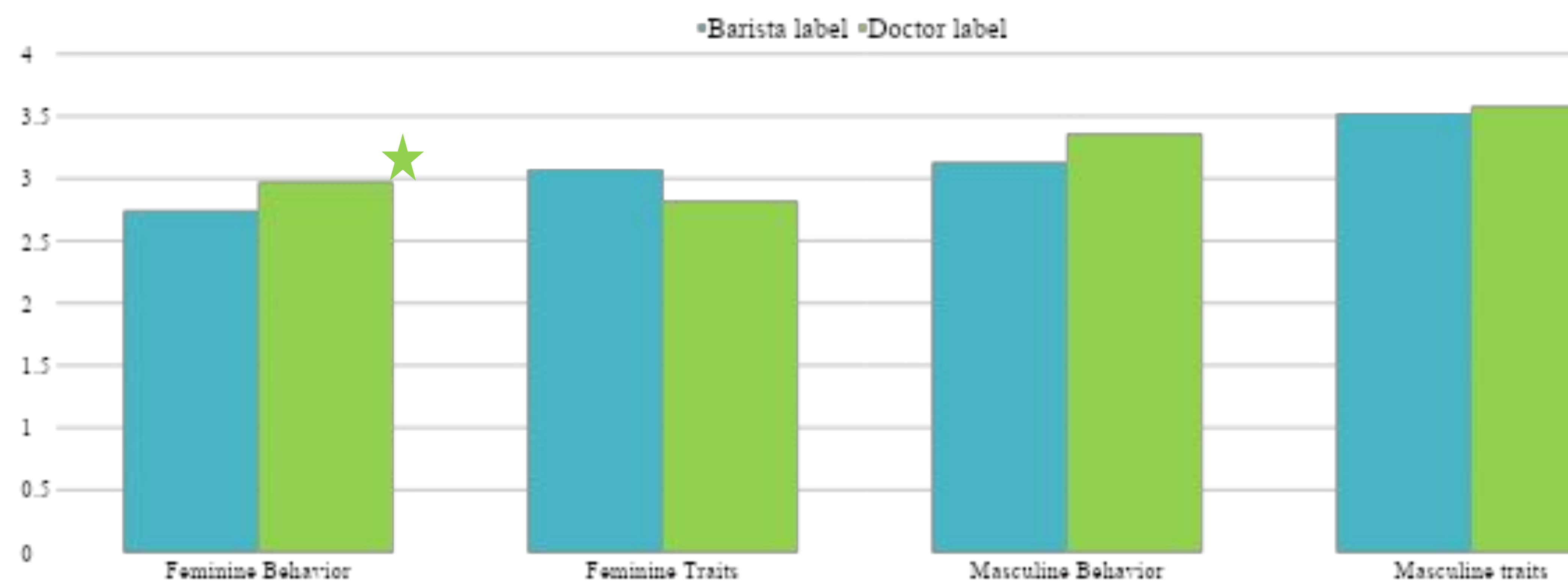
- attributed masculine traits to the person [ $r(116) = .33, p < .001$ ]
- believed that the depicted person was trustworthy at work [ $r(116) = .38, p < .001$ ]
- saw the person as capable of fast decisions [ $r(116) = .29, p < .001$ ]
- perceived the person as a good team member [ $r(116) = .33, p < .001$ ]
- saw the person as careful [ $r(116) = .33, p < .001$ ]
- perceived the person as capable of providing good professional service [ $r(115) = .27, p = .004$ ]

## Gender-Conformity Comparisons



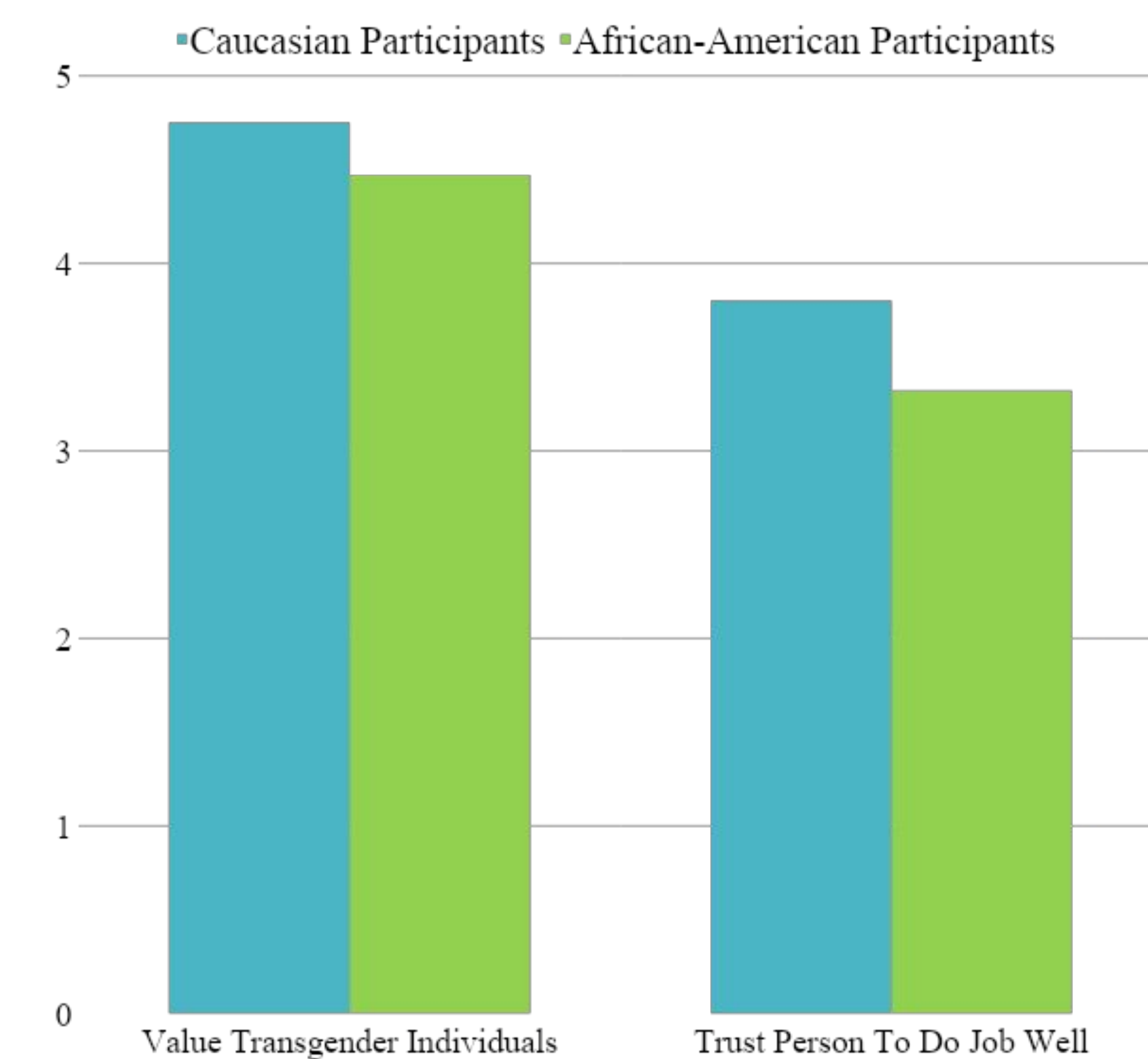
We examined how participants viewed the pictures using a 2(masculine vs. non-gendered) X 2 (barista vs. doctor) MANOVA. There were no significant interactions. Thus, we examined main effects. When comparing the masculine to the non-gendered picture, the non-gendered individual was rated higher for feminine 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, [ $F(1, 115) = 4.93, p = .03$ ], ability to make fast decisions, [ $F(1, 115) = 4.32, p = .04$ ], 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



Compared to the barista, the doctor was rated as having more feminine behavior [ $F(1, 115) = 4.53, p = .04$ ]. There were no other differences based on the picture labels.

## Racial 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.