Young Adults' Perceptions of Non-Gender Conformity Across Occupations

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; 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. Participants were 116 adults with a mean age of 19.90 (SD = 5.20). The majority were women (76%), Caucasian (53%), and heterosexual (71%). 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). We examined perceptions using a 2 (appearance) X 2 (occupation) MANOVA. Finding no interactions, we examined main effects. Compared to the barista, the doctor was rated as having more feminine behavior [$F(1, 115) = 4.53$, $p = .04$]. Compared to the masculine 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. Compared to the masculine picture, the gender-non-conforming person was rated as being trustworthy at the job, [$F(1, 115) = 4.93$, $p = .03$], able to make fast decisions, [$F(1, 115) = 4.32$, $p = .04$], a good team member, [$F(1, 115) = 8.04$, $p = .005$], careful, [$F(1, 115) = 10.48$, $p = .002$], and capable of professional service. [$F(1, 115) = 7.21$, $p = .008$]. The more positive the attitudes toward transgender individuals: the more masculine traits participants attributed to the pictures [$r(116) = .33$, $p < .001$], and the more they believed that the depicted person was trustworthy at work [$r(116) = .38$, $p < .001$], capable of fast decisions [$r(116) = .29$, $p < .001$], a good team member [$r(116) = .33$, $p < .001$], careful [$(116) = .33$, $p < .001$], and capable of providing good professional service [$r(115) = .27$, $p = .004$]. Need to belong, self-esteem, race, and gender did not predict perceptions of the pictures. 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.