What dimensions are more common in young adults' descriptions of masculinity, femininity and non-binary?

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Abstract

Understanding the perceptions of young adults‘ on gender is very pertinent, since gender is one of the most fundamental social categories, and one of the firsts that becomes available in our mind. The aim of this study was to find out which dimensions are more common in young adults' descriptions of masculinity, femininity and non-binary individuals. It was hypothesised that for masculinity and femininity personality would be the most common dimensions, just like Helgeson (1994) found in her study. However, for non-binary individuals, it was hypothesised that appearance would be the most common dimension. Helgeson's (1994) study was replicated by also conducting a qualitative study. Thus, we also asked participants (N= 98), with ages ranging from 18 to 35, via an online questionnaire to describe one stimulus person (masculine male, feminine male, feminine female, feminine male and non- binary individual) of their choice. And then we conducted a qualitative analysis to inspect participants' descriptions. We found that appearance was the most common dimension for masculinity (e.g. Muscular and short hair) and femininity (e.g. wears make up and concerned with appearance), but personality was the most common dimension for non-binary individuals (e.g strong convictions and struggles with gender identity). Therefore, we can deduce that the gender norms regarding masculinity and femininity are still closely tied to the physical appearance, perpetuating existing stereotypes. Regarding non-binary individuals, the findings suggest that young adults are aware of the struggles of these individuals.

Key words: Masculinity, Femininity, Non- binary individuals, Gender, Dimensions, Young Adults

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Introduction

Gender is a fundamental social category (Kachel et al., 2016). It is one of the first that becomes available in our minds and it is also one of the first distinctions that children learn to recognise (Kachel et al., 2016). Gender is defined by people's ideas and perceptions of gender roles and expectations, making it a social construct (Phillips, 2005). It is also influenced by culture and by history as well (Sullivan et al., 2022), unlike sex, which refers to biological categories based on reproductive organs- male and female (Wood & Eagly, 2015). Masculinity, femininity, and more recently non-binary individuals- dimensions of gender- are internalized unconsciously, shaping our daily life, by influencing our behavior and attitudes towards men, women and non-binary individuals (Visser, 2002). These dimensions also play a crucial role in the formation of self-concept, since gender provides a foundation from where individuals derive part of their identity, within a culture (Wood and Eagly, 2015).

Based on the body of research that exists on gender, key dimensions commonly associated with masculinity and femininity have been found (Parent et al., 2020). Results show that an emphasis on sexuality, avoidance of femininity, self- reliance, social dominance and restricted emotional expression are commonly used to describe masculinity (Parent et al., 2020). In contrast, the importance of relationships, specifically sexual purity or fidelity and a focus on physical appearance and conformity to traditional standards of femininity are commonly used to describe femininity (Parent et al, 2020). These findings suggest that men are viewed as more agentic, emphasising traits such as self-assertion and independence, while women are viewed as more communal, embodying traits such as caring, sensitive, compassionate (Woody and Eagly, 2015). This distinction

perpetuates the influence of gender stereotypes in shaping societal expectations of men and women.

The concept of gender is heavily based on gender stereotypes, which can lead to gender biases (Swim, 1993). Hogg and Vaughan (2022) define stereotypes as a widely shared and simplified evaluative image of a social group and its members. For instance, in her study, Swim (1993) found that in more ambiguous situations people tend to rely on gender stereotypes to "fill in the gaps", using them as cognitive shortcuts, which is how gender stereotypes give rise to gender biases. For example, in a job interview for a managerial position, if the employer does not have enough information about the experiences, qualifications and skills of the candidate, the employer might rely on gender stereotypes and think that men are better leaders, therefore favor the male candidate. These biases are present in many different aspects of society, such as economy, ideologies of family and politics (Visser, 2002), and they reinforce expectations about masculinity, femininity and non-binary individuals. Analysing how the dimensions and prototypes of femininity, masculinity and non- binary individuals have changed since the last time these concepts were studied (which was in Helgeson's (1994) study), will allow us to understand how people perceive gender nowadays, and how this perception has changed compared to thirty years ago.

The gender stereotypes (widely shared and simplified evaluative image of a social group and its members (Hogg and Vaughan, 2022)), mentioned above, had consequences and still have (Manzi et al., 2024). Historically, men were considered the "breadwinners" of the household, while women were assigned to the role of "housewives" (Visser, 2002). In many cultural contexts, society was a patriarchy where women were objectified (Kaschak, 2024). Society was organised in such a way that men would work in offices and factories, earning an income, while women, who barely had the right for an education, would stay home taking care of the house and the children (Kaschak, 2024). This happened because stereotypically men are more competitive and aggressive, while women are

more oriented towards relationships and children (Visser, 2002). Nowadays, these stereotypes lead to discrimination in the workplace and in job fields dominated by men (Manzi et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, there has been progress in society. Our view on gender has evolved alongside it, mainly due to feminist movements around the globe that have led to substantial changes in women's lives by challenging gender ideologies that exist in our society (Parent et al, 2020). The cultural shifts that we are witnessing in language, also suggest that new generations have a more progressive view on gender identities (Ward and Lucas, 2024), for instance, terms such as non-binary identities have become more recognised, and there is an increasingly awareness of these individuals who do not identify completely with neither men or women, and encompasses identities such as gender fluid, gender neutral/a-gender and bigender (McCarty and Burt, 2024).

Despite the progress (E.g. feminist movements, recognition of non- binary individuals, among others) non-binary people still face many challenges, due to the dominance of the gender binary system (Ward and Lucas, 2024). For instance, in the UK many non-binary individuals are still unfairly diagnosed as mentally ill in clinical practices (Ward and Lucas, 2024). Research also suggests that non-binary individuals are perceived as less competent, less mentally well, and that their gender identity is less valid (McCarty and Burt, 2024). This lack of gender recognition and intentional misgendering contributes to feelings of exclusion and shame for non- binaries (Levitt et al., 2024; McCarty and Burt, 2024). Non- binary individuals face ongoing challenges in achieving acceptance and equality, since the hostility that they face impacts significantly their mental- health and well- being (Ward and Lucas, 2024).

It is crucial to study how young adults perceive gender today, since young adults are possibly the ones responsible for the societal changes, namely feminist movements and the recognition of non- binary individuals. However, a gap in research about gender is that non- binary individuals are underrepresented in current gender studies, since the main focus are usually cis-gender individuals (Weißflog and Grigoryan, 2024). Therefore, the current study aims at closing this gap and at

exploring which dimensions are more common in young adults' descriptions of masculinity, femininity and non- binary individuals.

In this research we will replicate Helgeson's (1994) study, which aimed at determining the prototypes and dimensions of masculinity and femininity among college students and their parents. Several tests were developed to try to measure these concepts (both the dimensions and the prototypes), such as The Bem Sex- Role Inventory (BSRI) and the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) (Helgeson, 1994). However, many tests and scales are now considered outdated since they fail to account for new concepts such as non- binary identities (Kachel et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the majority of these earlier approaches viewed masculinity and femininity as unidimensional constructs of gender Helgeson (1994). However, Helgeson (1994) and later researchers argued that it is important to consider a multidimensional approach to capture the complex nature of gender. Helgeson (1994) found three key dimensions: physical appearance, interests and personality traits. By replicating Helgeson's (1994) study with a contemporary sample, this study aims at evaluating how well these dimensions apply to today's young adults and how they accommodate non- binary perspectives.

Helgeson (1994) found that physical traits did not dominate the descriptions for the stimulus persons. Instead personality traits were the most prominent. However, for masculine females the opposite happened, meaning that physical characteristics rather than personality ones dominated the descriptions. Based on Helgeson's (1994) findings, we can expect to find in our study:

H1: The dimensions found for masculinity will be the same as the ones found for femininity.

H2: Personality traits will be the most common dimension for masculinity and femininity.

H3: For non-binary individuals, physical appearance will be the most common dimension.

Methods Section

Design and Participants:

The current research is a qualitative research design aimed at investigating the most common dimensions in young adult's descriptions of masculinity, femininity and non-binary individuals. We recruited participants using a convenience sample. Of the 193 participants, 95 participants were discarded from the analysis because some of these participants did not provide a description of a person, others chose not to share their age (which is very relevant for this study, since we aimed at studying young adults, with ages ranging from 18 to 35 years), and others did not confirm the re-affirm question. Therefore, the data of 98 participants was used. As we can see on table 1, among these 98 participants, the majority were Dutch (66.3%), followed by Slovakians (16.3%), and then Germans (9.2%). The age range ran from 18 years old to 35 years old, with the majority (60.2%) being between 21 to 25 years. Of the 98 participants, 32 identified as a male, 60 as female, two as non- binary and two did not specify which gender they identified with.

Table 1

Demographics of Research Participants

Characteristics	*N*	*%*
Age		
18-20	24	25.5%
21-25	59	60.2%
26-30	9	9.2%
31-35	6	6.1%
Sex at birth		
Male	34	34.7%
Female	62	63.3%
Other	1	1.0%
Current sex		
Male	32	32.7%
Female	60	61.7%

Non-binary	2	2.0%
Other	2	2.0%
Nationality		
Dutch	65	66.3%
Slovakan	16	16.3%
German	9	9.2%
Portuguese	2	2.0%
Other	4	4%

Note: Table with characteristics of the participants

Variables: Age, sex at birth, current gender and nationality

Materials

For this research question the dimensions present in the descriptions of masculinity, femininity and non-binary individuals by the participants were examined. All the 98 participants were asked to describe one of the following types: ‘masculine male‘ ,’masculine female‘ ,’feminine male,’ ‘feminine female’ and ‘non-binary’.

To measure the construct of dimensions, the descriptions of the stimulus persons provided by each participant were categorised in six main themes: Appearance (physical attributes), personality (personality traits), interests (hobbies), biology (which chromosomes each stimulus person has) social expectations and challenges (facing social expectations and challenges), and no different from others (there is no difference between this stimulus person and the remaining stimulus persons).

Masculinity was measured by combining the descriptions of masculine males and masculine females. Femininity was measured by combining the descriptions of feminine females and feminine males and finally non- binary individuals were measured through the participants’ descriptions of non-binary individuals. The research question was answered by combining the different features

from the masculinity category, femininity category and non-binary category into different dimensions and then by examining which dimensions were used more frequently by the participants to describe the categories.

Procedure:

Recruitment was facilitated through members of the Bachelor thesis group, who shared the study via WhatsApp with family members, friends, colleagues from work and other students from the same bachelor (Psychology). An invitation text in English was disseminated, introducing the subject of the research, outlining the procedure, and providing an estimated time investment of approximately 7 minutes, depending on how many questions the person wants to answer. The participants were directed to an online survey hosted on the Qualtrics platform. Upon accessing the survey, participants were first presented with information about the purpose of the study, details on data security, and the intended use of their responses. They were then asked to provide informed consent before proceeding further.

In the first part of the questionnaire the participants were asked to answer open and closed questions about some demographics: age, education level, nationality and current occupation. In the second part they were asked to choose one of the following five people to describe: ‘masculine male‘ ,’masculine female‘ ,’feminine male‘ ,’feminine female’ and ‘non-binary’. After they chose, they were asked the following: ‘Can you describe this person? Consider how this person looks, what the person thinks about, how the person behaves- whatever comes to mind and seems relevant. After answering one of the questions, participants were given the option to describe another individual. This process continued until they indicated no desire to provide further descriptions. In the last section the participants were asked about their sex at birth, their current gender, and if their high school paid attention to sexual orientation and gender diversity. Lastly, the participants were

asked to reaffirm their consent. By completing the questionnaire, participants had the chance to win a €25 gift card. This was given by the supervisor of the study, who chose a participant at random.

Ethics:

The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences at the University of Groningen (EC-BSS) before the data collection, with the research number PSY-2425-S-0084. The participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were asked to provide informed consent at the beginning and re-affirm the consent at the end of the study. The collected data was treated confidentially and will be stored for the duration of 10 years. Participants could ask any question by contacting the supervisor, Ethics Committee and University of Groningen Data Protection Officer, whose contacts were provided at the beginning of the study.

Data Analysis

For the data analysis, the responses of the participants were divided by the student researchers. Each researcher was responsible for analysing roughly a quarter of the overall responses. Each student had a partner with whom they could discuss the coding of the descriptions. For a first analysis, each researcher coded the descriptions of the participants that they were responsible for.

After the coding of the descriptions was completed, the data was compiled in a shared code book, where all the researchers could collaborate on together, and at the same time.

Secondly, the codes that had very similar meanings were merged into prototypical features. The aim was to use mainly the same prototypical features that Helgeson (1994) used. The codes that could not be merged together into these prototypical features, were grouped into a new sub theme called “others”. Some of this codes could not be merged because they did not correspond to a description, or because they were too ambiguous (e.g., “Andrew Tate” for masculine male, “always has the TV on” for masculine female, “ rich parents” for feminine females, “thinks about men” for

feminine males, or “was bored during covid crisis” for non- binary individuals). After discarding these codes, the remaining ones, summed up to a total of 984 codes (masculine male had 369 codes; masculine female had 121 codes; feminine female had 277 codes; feminine male had 124; non-binary had 93).

Once all the codes were grouped in prototypical features, these features were reduced to the top 20 most mentioned features per stimulus person, the features that were mentioned only one or two times were discarded. However, this was not possible to do for all features, for example, for non-binary people some features that were mentioned only two times made it to the top 20 most mentioned features, since there were not many participants that chose to describe this stimulus person. These features were also intended to be fit into three main dimensions: Appearance, personality and interests, just like Helgeson (1994) did. The final prototypical features were fit into six main dimensions, by combining similar features and discarding the ones that were mentioned less than two times, or the ones that the coders could not reach a decision as to where they belonged. There were some doubts among the researchers regarding which features belonged in each dimension, and which features could be grouped together. However, with further meetings and discussions supervised and mediated by the mentor an agreement was reached.

Results

The aim of this study was to understand which dimensions are more common in the descriptions of young adults of masculinity, femininity, and non-binary individuals. Fifty-four participants chose to describe masculine male, 25 participants chose to describe masculine female, 39 participants chose to describe feminine female, 20 participants chose to describe masculine female, and 20 participants chose to describe non- binary individuals. Descriptions of masculine males prevailed. After this reduction and categorisation, there was a remaining of three dimensions across all stimulus people, which were appearance, personality and interests, and two additional dimensions for feminine females and feminine males, which were social expectations and

challenges and biology, and one additional dimension for non- binary people, which was “no different from others”.

It was expected that for masculinity personality would dominate descriptions, which would be in line with Helgeson’s (1994) findings. As it is shown in table 2, only the dimensions, appearance, personality and interests were mentioned. Within appearance, eight different features emerged: muscular, which was mentioned 25 times, casual clothing, which was mentioned 19 times, short hair, which was mentioned 18 times, facial hair, mentioned 13 times, long, mentioned 13 times, dark, mentioned eight times, strong facial features, mentioned eight times, and big, which was mentioned seven times. Within personality, seven different features were mentioned: confident, which was mentioned 22 times, caring, which was mentioned 14 times, strong convictions, which was mentioned 12 times, dominant, which was mentioned nine times, not emotional, which was mentioned eight times, does not talk about feelings, which was mentioned eight times, and arrogant, which was mentioned seven times.. Finally, within interests, five different features were mentioned: likes sports, which was mentioned 10 times, goes out with women, which was mentioned 10 times, fitness, which was mentioned nine times, cars and motorcycles, which was mentioned seven times, and avoidance of femininity, which was mentioned seven times. Compared to Helgeson’s (1994) study, new features emerged, which were: Strong body features, which falls into appearance, and not emotional, and does not talk about feelings, which fall both into personality. Appearance dominated the descriptions with a total of 98 codes. Personality was also mentioned very frequently, with a total of 80 codes and finally, interests, which had only 43 codes. Thus, our expectations were not met.

Table 2

Masculinity

Dimensions	Prototypical features	Number of mentions

A	Muscular	25
P	Self-confident	22
A	Casual dress	19
A	Short hair	18
P	Caring	14
A	Hairy face	13
A	Tall	13
P	Strong convictions	12
I	Likes sports	10
I	Responsible	10
A	Strong	10
I	Dating women	10
P	Dominant	9
I	Fitness	9
P	Not emotional	8
P	Does not talk about feelings	8
A	Dark/hair/eyes/clothes	8
A	Strong body features	8
I	Cars and motorcycles	7
P	Arrogant	7
I	Avoidance of femininity	7
A	Big	7

*Note.*This table contains the 22 most frequently mentioned features for masculinity. “Codebook”, 2025. Retrieved from Google Docs. [a]A: Appearance, P: Personality, I: Interests.

For femininity it was also expected that personality would dominate descriptions, which would also be in line with Helgeson’s (1994) findings. As it is shown in table 3, six of the seven dimensions that emerged (appearance, personality, interests, social expectations and challenges and biology) found were allude to. Eleven features regarding appearance emerged: wears makeup,

which was mentioned 25 times, long hair, which was mentioned 15 times, wears a dress, which was mentioned 13 times, well dressed, which was mentioned 13 times as well, well- groomed, mentioned 13 times, small, also mentioned 13 times, accessories/ jewelry, mentioned 10 times, soft features, which was mentioned seven times, manicured nails, which was mentioned six times, wears traditionally feminine colours, which was mentioned five times and wears winter clothes, which was also mentioned five times; We also found eight features regarding personality: caring, which was mentioned 23 times, social, which was mentioned 16 times, emotional, which was mentioned 17 times, kind, which was mentioned 15 times, tender, which was mentioned 8 times, charming, which was mentioned 7 times, traditional, which was also mentioned seven times and friendly, which was mentioned six times; one feature was related to interests: concerned with appearance (mentioned 24 times); one feature regarded social expectations and challenges: confronted with social expectations (mentioned 10) and one to biology: XX chromosomes (mentioned 5 times). Appearance was the most common dimension in the descriptions of femininity, followed by personality. These dimensions were the most prominent, just like in masculinity. Appearance had 125 codes, personality had a total of 99 codes, interests had a total of 24 codes, social expectations and challenges had a total of 10 codes and biology had a total of five codes. Hence, the expectations were not met. Additionally, in line with masculinity, new features also emerged for femininity such as accessory and jewelry, soft features, traditionally feminine clothes, winter clothes, which all fall into appearance and kind, tender, charming and traditional, which fall into personality.

Table 3

Femininity

Dimensions	Prototypical features	Number of mentions
A	Wears make-up	25
I	Concerned with appearance	24
P	Caring	23

P	Social	18
P	Emotional	17
A	Long hair	15
P	Kind	15
A	Wears dresses	13
A	Well- dressed	13
A	Well- groomed	13
A	Small	10
A	Accessories/ Jewelry	10
S	Faces Social Expectations	10
P	Tender	8
P	Charming	7
A	Soft features	7
P	Traditional	7
P	Friendly	6
A	Nails done	6
A	Traditional feminine clothes	5
A	Winter Clothes	5
B	XX- Chromosomes	5

Note. This table contains the 22 most frequently mentioned features for femininity

“Codebook”, 2025. Retrieved from Google Docs.

A: Appearance, P: Personality, I: Interests, S: Social Expectations and Challenges, B: Biology

It was also expected that the dimensions found for femininity and for masculinity would be the same. However, that happened to a certain extent. For both femininity and masculinity, the dimensions of personality, appearance, and interests emerged. Moreover, appearance was the most frequently mentioned for both. However, as it was previously mentioned, for femininity, two additional dimensions emerged that were not present in masculinity, which were social expectations and challenges and biology

For non- binary, it was expected that appearance would dominate descriptions. Since in Helgeson's (1994) study, non- binary individuals were not included, in the present study the aim was to try to group the features that the participants used into the three main dimensions discovered by Helgeson (1994). However, as it is shown on table 4, one more dimension emerged: no difference from others. The results found were nine features that could fit in the dimension appearance: gender neutral appearance (mentioned five times), uniquely dressed (mentioned five times), colorful hair (mentioned four times), funky jewelry (mentioned four times), casual dressing (mentioned three times), short hair (mentioned two times), tattoos (mentioned two times), wears gender neutral clothes (mentioned two times), wears makeup (mentioned two times). Four features ended up belonging to the dimension personality: strong convictions (mentioned 18 times), struggles with gender identity (mentioned 12 times), likes attention (mentioned four times) empathetic (mentioned three times); two features are a part of interests: is not concerned with appearance (mentioned two times), rainbows (mentioned two times) and one feature belongs to the dimension no different from others: no difference from others (mentioned four times). Personality was the most frequent dimension, with a total of 37 codes while appearance had only 29 codes, interests had four codes and no difference from others had four codes as well. Therefore, our expectations were not met. Furthermore, since Helgeson (1994) did not include non-binary individuals in her study, most features that emerged for this stimulus person were new. However, some features were the same as the ones in the original study, such as short hair (mentioned two times), casual dressing (mentioned three times), and wears makeup (mentioned two times), which all fall into appearance

Table 4

Non-binary

Dimensions	Prototypical features	Number of mentions
P	Strong convictions	18

P	Struggles with gender identity	12
A	Gender neutral looks	5
A	Dresses uniquely	5
A	Colorful hair	4
A	Funky jewelry	4
P	Likes attention	4
N	No different than other	4
A	Dresses casually	3
P	Empathetic	3
A	Short hair	2
A	Tattoos	2
A	Gender neutral clothing	2
I	No concern with appearance	2
I	Rainbows	2
A	Wears make-up	2

Note. This table contains the 16 most frequently mentioned features of non- binary individuals. “Codebook”, 2025. Retrieved from Google Docs.

A: Appearance, P: Personality I: Interests, N: No different than others.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to understand which dimensions are more common in young adults’ descriptions of masculinity, femininity and non- binary individuals. Furthermore, the hypotheses were that, the dimensions found for masculinity and femininity will be the same; personality traits will be the most common dimension for masculinity and femininity and for non-binary individuals, physical appearance will be the most common dimension. However, the results did not meet the expectations for the three hypotheses.

Similar to Helgeson's (1994) study, the majority of young adults' descriptions of masculinity and femininity, fit within three main dimensions: appearance, personality and interests. However, unlike what was expected, new dimensions emerged for femininity*:* social expectations and challenges, and biology. For non- binary individuals a new dimension emerged as well: not different from others. We also found that for masculinity and femininity, most codes could fit in appearances, meaning that this dimension was the most common for masculinity and femininity, which is not in line with what was expected, followed by personality, and then interests. For non- binary individuals, personality was the most frequently mentioned dimension. This was also unexpected since it was anticipated that appearance would be the most common one.

Moreover, while some of the features that emerged were the same as the ones that Helgeson (1994) found in her study, some new features emerged in this study as well. For masculinity, the new features that emerged were: strong body features, not emotional, and does not talk about feelings. For femininity, there were more features that emerged, compared to masculinity, including: Accessory and jewelry, soft features, traditionally feminine clothes, winter clothes, kind, tender, charming and traditional.

Finally, for non- binary individuals, since this was a new stimulus person that was not in Helgeson's (1994) study, there were more new features than features that also appeared in the original study. The ones that also emerged in Helgeson's study were: short hair, casual dressing, wears makeup. The features that were mentioned the most were strong convictions and struggles with gender identity.

In line with a long history of gender studies (Ramsey, 2017), it is possible to deduce that within the domain of personality, masculinity was characterised with mainly agentic traits, such as dominant and self- confident in the current study. Additionally, just like in the present study, the features found by Visser (2002) also fit the agentic traits. The features were: career oriented and

independent. Furthermore, Parent et al., (2020) also found similar prototypes for masculinity as us. Some of those features were strong, likes sports and confident.

Additionally, research shows that women are described with mostly communal traits such as nurturing, supportive and dependent (Wood and Eagly, 2015). In the current study, femininity was still characterised with communal traits, however, these were not the majority of the descriptions. In fact, the features that were mentioned the most were: wears makeup and concerned with appearance, which could be interpreted as more superficial or materialistic descriptions, but they could also be more related to self- care, and preoccupation and pride in physical appearance, which are not inherently negative. Nevertheless, some features were also to a certain extent communal, such as kind, tender and friendly. Additionally, Visser (2002) found similar prototypes as the ones that emerged in the present study. Visser (2002) found that femininity was mostly described with the following prototypical features as well: critical of one's appearance, concerned with outward appearance and emotional. Parent et al., (2020) also found similar prototypes for femininity as us, such as, emotional, make up, kind, concerned about appearance.

Agentic traits are deemed as more important to career success, unlike communal traits (Ramsey, 2017). This belief perpetuates the idea that women are less suitable for important career roles in the workplace. Therefore, since our findings suggest that femininity is still perceived as communal and masculinity as agentic, we can conclude that traditional perceptions of gender are still present in society.

It is important to mention though that new features emerged for masculinity, such as responsible, not emotional, and strong, while other features such as intelligent, concerned with work and emotional strong emerged in Helgeson's (1994) study but not in this one, which suggests that views of masculinity are slightly drifting away from traditional ones.

Regarding femininity, new features emerged as well (e.g charming and faces social expectations), which suggests that views on femininity are also changing in society, and people are

more aware of the struggles that women face. Moreover, just like for masculinity, some features that emerged in Helgeson's (1994) study, did not emerge in this study, such as family- oriented, delicate and smiles, which suggests that femininity is starting to be less associated with the traditional views that women are more nurturing, and are expected to be good wives, good mothers and instead of a full- time job, they should be dedicated to taking care of the household (Miller et al., 1991).

This study also revealed that appearance was the most common dimension, both for femininity and masculinity. However, these findings are not in line with Helgeson's findings, which revealed that, for femininity, personality dominated the subject's descriptions. For masculinity, Helgeson (1994) found that personality dominated as well, but only for masculine males. However, other researchers found that appearance was the most common dimension used to describe gender, such as Deaux and Lewis (1984) study. Moreover, in their study, Parent et al., (2020) observed that most participants focused on physical appearance as well.

The fact that femininity was described based mostly on physical traits could hint to the fact that women are still objectified by society (Heflick et al., 2011). In Heflick's et al., (2011) study, it was found that when women are described with mainly appearance related traits, it reduces the perception of warmth, morality and competence, which are crucial for humanness, leading, therefore, to the objectification of women. However, for men, being described with psychical traits does not reduce the perceptions of warmth, morality and competence.

While masculinity and femininity were largely associated with physical traits, the perceptions of non-binary individuals followed a different pattern. Results show that personality, rather than appearance, was the most common dimension. Horowit-Hendler (2020), proposed that gender roles and the respective pronouns are still assigned by society, based on the appearance of the individual in question. Since non- binary individuals do not present themselves either as a man or as a woman, people might feel like it is rather difficult to describe them physically, relying more on personality.

However, it is important to understand which features that fit into personality were actually mentioned. The most mentioned features are strong convictions and struggles with gender identity. The fact that these two features were the most mentioned is quite intriguing since they contradict each other to a certain extent. The former feature suggests that participants perceive these individuals as certain of their gender identity and do not want to confirm with societal norms. However, the latter suggests that participants perceive non- binary individuals as struggling with which gender they identify with. However, none of the features suggest that participants perceived the ongoing struggles that non- binary individuals face in their daily life due to their gender identity (Ward and Lucas, 2024). Moreover, no features mentioned alluded to perceiving non binary individuals as less competent or mentally unwell (McCarty and Burt, 2024).

However, the fact that personality emerged as the most frequently mentioned dimension for non-binary individuals, might have been due to the fact that we only ended up with 93 codes for this stimulus person, meaning that many participants did not choose to describe non- binary individuals (this limitation will be explored later). Thus, perhaps, if we had more descriptions of this stimulus person, appearance (or even interests) could have been the most common dimension, rather than personality.

Nevertheless, the fact that personality dominated descriptions of non- binary people could be an indicator that young adults are starting to be more mindful and aware of the struggles of non-binary individuals, since the features that were mentioned more frequently were strong convictions and struggles with gender identity. Regarding the discrepancy between the number of codes for non- binary individuals, and the remaining stimulus persons, it may be due to the fact that the idea of masculine male is more available cognitively in people's minds, since they are more prominent in society, unlike non-binary individuals who are not as prominent (Levitt et al., 2024). This disparity between non binary individuals and the other stimulus persons, could also be due to the fact that participants might have felt uncomfortable or less confident describing a non- binary individual due

to fear of misrepresenting them for example, which suggests a lack of representation of these individuals both in social media or in the participants' lives.

Some limitations in this study were the fact that, despite having, initially, a large sample (n= 193), many responses were not suitable to be analysed. Hence, we ended up with roughly half of the participants (n=98). Therefore, after cleaning the data, we ended up with a rather small sample. Furthermore, since this study was optional, and participants knew they would not be evaluated, perhaps they did not feel the need to put much effort into the descriptions**.** Additionally, the discrepancy found regarding the frequency of codes across the stimulus persons (masculine males had 369 codes, however non- binary people only had 93 codes) makes it more difficult to draw equal conclusions across all five stimulus persons and those conclusions might be inaccurate.

Moreover, the majority of participants were from The Netherlands, from Germany, and from Slovakia, hence the sample was more confined to northern and eastern Europe. Thus, we cannot generalise our findings to the population outside Europe, especially since non-binary individuals are starting to get more recognised across some cultures, and this recognition keeps increasing (Levitt et al., 2024).

Additionally, many features that made into the top 20 most mentioned features tables for the five stimulus people, were only mentioned two or three times. This was due to the small sample. It is possible to observe this, especially in table 3, where the bottom 16 features were only mentioned three or two times. Furthermore, some features that made into the top 20 tables were actually only mentioned by one participant. For example, regarding femininity, one of the features was winter clothes, which was mentioned five times, however, this was only one participant enumerating several pieces of winter clothing.

Based on the current limitations, future research could focus on factors that affect perceptions of gender. For example, perhaps in other cultures, findings will differ. Future research can, thus, focus on how different cultures (collective cultures versus individual cultures) perceive masculinity,

femininity and non-binary individuals. Differences between western countries and eastern countries might also give rise to interesting findings. Even within Europe there might be a difference between northern and southern countries. A similar study to the current one could be conducted. However, during data analysis, the codes could be grouped according to which culture, for example, the participants are from. Thereafter, an in-depth comparison can be made.

It would also be relevant to study the gender perceptions of older and younger generations. Thus, future research can also focus on different age cohorts. For example, to conduct this study the codes should be grouped according to the age cohorts of the participants as well and thereafter compare the results across the different generations. Future research could also focus on how the gender perceptions change over time among the same participants. To conduct this study, a longitudinal study would be the most ideal.

Nevertheless, this study had several strengths as well. It was conducted with the joint effort of six researchers. Hence every step of the data analyses was thoroughly discussed among all members, enhancing the inter-rater reliability of the study. Furthermore, the questionnaire was composed by open questions, this means that, while some participants did not put enough effort into answering the questions, the ones that did, could explore more freely their own conceptions of masculinity, femininity and non-binary individuals, which are already such complex and subjective concepts, allowing us to have more diverse answers, securing a richer data. Additionally, conducting this study with a qualitative approach allowed both the participants to express more authentically their views on gender, and the researchers to make a more reflective and deep interpretation of the findings. Additionally, this study included non- binary individuals as well, unlike several other articles that studied gender, gaining more insights into the perceptions of non-binary (Weißflog and Grigoryan, 2024).

The purpose of this research was to understand which dimensions are more common in descriptions of young adults, of masculinity, femininity and non- binary individuals. Appearance

was the most common dimension for masculinity and femininity, while personality was the most common dimension for non- binary individuals. Additionally, we also found that people are aware of the gender identity struggles that non- binary individuals go through. These findings suggest that gender norms regarding masculinity and femininity are still rooted in physical presentation, which possibly reinforces existing stereotypes. Thus, it is important to bring attention to this tendency, so that policymakers, influencers, educators and teachers can promote a more balanced perception of gender. For example, policymakers can integrate this knowledge into reforming some educational materials, such as school textbooks (History, Literature, among others) which can be updated to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes. Influencers can focus on more personality- based portrayals, rather appearance-based ones. This way masculinity and femininity can be perceived in a more authentic way. Educators and teachers can also promote more discussions about gender to bring more awareness to this topic and encourage healthy discussions about this matter, as well as foster more gender-neutral language and facilities. Understanding how young adults view gender can help us reduce existing stereotypes and maximize the efficiency of educational programs, public conversations and even mental health support systems.

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