

A Study Comparing Comfort and Conformity of Gender Expression among Individuals of Different Genders across Generations

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ABSTRACT

Despite the tendency of contemporary culture to portray gender non-conforming individuals as a recent phenomenon, history shows that gender is dynamic, changing and capable of undermining social norms and their stigmatizing ways. Psychological gender affirmation is an internal sense of self-valuation, comfort with gender identity, and satisfaction of how one presents and how that presentation interacts with societal and cultural stereotypes about gender. Recent research by Smith et al. (2022) revealed a nuanced understanding of gender expression, emphasizing its dynamic nature across generations. Their study illuminated the evolving landscape of societal perceptions and expectations surrounding gender roles. These findings provide a valuable foundation for exploring the multi-faceted dimensions of gender expression in the present study. The study measures behavioural and affective components of comfort-discomfort with conformity-nonconformity in gender expression, analysing factors like discomfort with non-conformity, resentful conformity, active-physical comfort conformity, and comfort with gender conforming appearance. The study is conducted across two generations- Gen Y (born between 1981 and 1996) and Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012) and makes a comparison of the nature of gender expression among males and females of Generation Y and male, female and genderfluid individuals of Generation Z. The sample population for this study comprises 60 individuals, evenly divided between Generation Y and Generation Z. Within the Gen Z group, there are 10 males, 10 females, and 10 individuals identifying as genderfluid whereas the Gen Y cohort consists of 15 males and 15 females. The subjects are of an age group ranging from 18 to 45 years of age. The Comfort and Conformity of Gender Expression Scale (CAGES) developed by Katherine Spencer (2007) has been used to conduct this study. Tests of mean difference will be carried out using SPSS-20. The results of the study will be discussed in the full-length paper. The findings of this study hold practical implications for cultivating environments that honour individual comfort in gender expression. This insight is crucial for promoting psychological gender affirmation, and fostering a societal landscape where individuals of all genders feel empowered to authentically express themselves, transcending historical stereotypes and societal norms.

Keywords: *Gender Identity, Gender Expression, Conformity, Appearance, Gender Norms*

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"Identity is never a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality." (Bhabha 1994:51)

Personal identity, as conceptualized by Erik Erikson (1968), is the continuous process of self-discovery and self-definition throughout an individual's lifespan. It is the continually evolving "ego identity," a product of integrating experiences, values, and beliefs that establishes a sense of self-sameness and uniqueness, guiding an individual's psychosocial development throughout life. From the moment we are born, we are socialized into an inherently gendered society. Along with the gradual development of our social and cultural identities, we also develop, refine and learn to 'do' gender through internalizing gender norms and roles as we interact with key agents of socialization, such as our family, social networks and other social institutions (John et al. 2017). Thus, our unique and dynamic gender identity is constituted, which reflects an individual's deeply felt sense of being male, female, both, neither, or somewhere along the gender spectrum. Traditionally, societies have enforced rigid expectations regarding gender expression, dictating clothing choices, behaviours, and mannerisms associated with masculinity and femininity. However, recent decades have witnessed a growing acceptance of diverse gender identities and expressions, often deviating from these established norms. This paper delves into the evolving landscape of gender expression, specifically focusing on the comfort and conformity individuals experience in expressing their gender identity, keeping in mind the dynamic nature of gender across multiple timescales.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Understanding the dynamics of gender expression across generations is crucial for unravelling the intricate tapestry of gender identity. Jean Twenge's seminal study (Twenge, 2017) shed light on the evolving landscape of gender expression, particularly among younger generations. Twenge observed a significant departure from traditional gender norms among millennials and Generation Z, suggesting a greater fluidity in gender expression and a propensity towards non-conformity. Such findings underscore the importance of investigating intergenerational differences in gender expression to grasp the nuances of contemporary gender identities. Further research by Williams et al. (2019) delved into the relationship between gender identity and mental health outcomes across different age cohorts. Their study revealed that individuals who expressed their gender in non-conforming ways faced increased risks of psychological distress, especially among older generations where adherence to traditional gender roles remained more entrenched. This highlights the complex interplay between generational attitudes towards gender expression and its impact on well-being.

Contrary to earlier assumptions of linear progress towards gender equality, studies such as those by Birkett et al. (2015) have emphasized the persistence of disparities in gender expression across generations. Their findings suggest that while younger cohorts may exhibit greater acceptance of diverse gender identities, older generations continue to grapple with entrenched gender norms, resulting in intergenerational tensions and discrepancies in comfort levels with gender expression.

Moreover, the role of societal context in shaping gender expression cannot be overstated. Research by Jones and Hillier (2018) underscored the influence of cultural factors on the negotiation of gender identities across generations. They highlighted how shifts in societal attitudes towards gender diversity have facilitated greater freedom of expression for younger

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generations, while older cohorts may still face barriers rooted in historical norms and prejudices. Thus, an exploration of intergenerational differences in gender expression reveals a dynamic interplay between societal changes, individual identities, and generational attitudes.

METHODOLOGY

Aims & Objectives:

1. To study the differences in comfort and conformity of gender expression between individuals of Generation Y and Generation Z.
2. To assess gender differences in comfort and conformity of gender expression among individuals of Generation Y.
3. To assess gender differences in comfort and conformity of gender expression among individuals of Generation Z.

Hypothesis:

- H_0 There is no difference between individuals of Generation Y and Generation Z with respect to comfort and conformity of gender expression.
- $H_{0.1}$ There is no difference between individuals of Generation Y and Generation Z with respect to Discomfort with Nonconformity (DWN)
- $H_{0.2}$ There is no difference between individuals of Generation Y and Generation Z with respect to Resentful Conformity (RC).
- $H_{0.3}$ There is no difference between individuals of Generation Y and Generation Z with respect to Active-Physical Comfort Conformity (APCC).
- $H_{0.4}$ There is no difference between individuals of Generation Y and Generation Z with respect to Comfort with Conformity-Appearance (CCA).

Quasi-Independent Variables: Generation (Y and Z))

Dependent Variables: CAGES measured in terms of-

1. Discomfort with Nonconformity (DWN)
2. Resentful Conformity (RC)
3. Active-Physical Comfort Conformity (APCC)
4. Comfort with Conformity-Appearance (CCA)

Research Design

The research design implemented was quasi-experimental between groups research design.

Sample:

Sampling procedure

Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, was used to seek participants who belonged to a particular age group as discussed in the participant section.

Participants

A total of 71 participants between the ages of 18-45 years with representation from females (N=29), males (N=27) and non-binary individuals (N=8) were taken for the study. The sample includes young adults who are in college as well as adults currently working.

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Data collection

The participants were given a link to fill a Google form with an informed consent, sociodemographic details, and the following questionnaire:

1. Comfort and Conformity of Gender Expression Scale (CAGES) (Katherine Spencer, 2007) was used to measure one's level of comfort towards gender conformity and gender nonconformity across different domains (Spencer, n.d.). It had 24 items and 4 sub-scales that measure discomfort with nonconformity, resentful conformity, active-physical comfort conformity and comfort with conformity-appearance. A 5-point Likert scale response scale anchored by a low score of 1 ('Strongly Disagree') and a high score of 5 ('Strongly Agree') was provided to the participants.

The reliability coefficient for the final total CAGES was .85, and the individual subscales were as follows; Factor 1, $\alpha = .88$, Factor 2, $\alpha = .84$, Factor 3, $\alpha = .80$, and Factor 4, $\alpha = .86$.

The participants were briefed about the study and their rights as participants following which they were assured of confidentiality. The researcher was available for assistance while answering the form.

Data Analysis

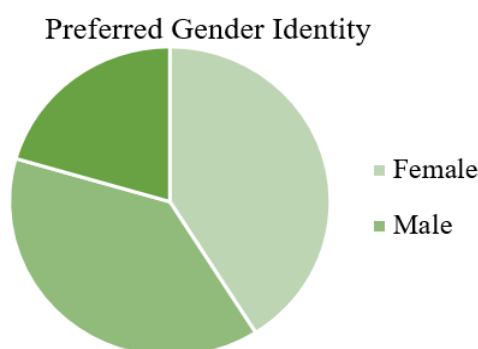
The data collected was scored and analysed using IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Normality testing was carried out. Based on normality of the data, Student's t-test and Mann-Whitney U test statistics were calculated.

RESULTS

The data was scored and subjected to statistical analysis using SPSS version 20 and the following results were obtained.

Table 1.1 Frequency distribution of Preferred Gender Identity in Generation Z

Preferred Gender Identity	Frequency	Percentage
Female	16	41.0
Male	15	38.5
Non-Binary	8	20.5
Total	39	100

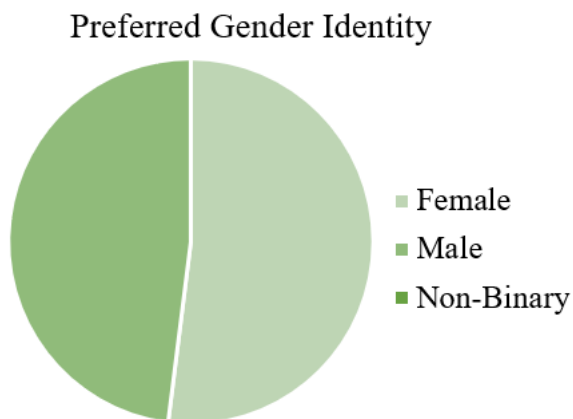


From Table 1.1 it can be seen that the highest frequency of participants from Generation Z identified as Female (N= 16).

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Table 1.2 Frequency distribution of Preferred Gender Identity in Generation Y

Preferred Gender Identity	Frequency	Percentage
Female	13	52.0
Male	12	48.0
Non-Binary	0	0
Total	25	100



From Table 1.2 it can be seen that the highest frequency of participants from Generation Y identified as Female (N= 13).

Table 1.3 Frequency distribution of Gender Assigned at Birth:

Gender Assigned at Birth	Frequency	Percentage
Female	38	59.4
Male	26	40.6
Intersex	0	0
Total	64	100

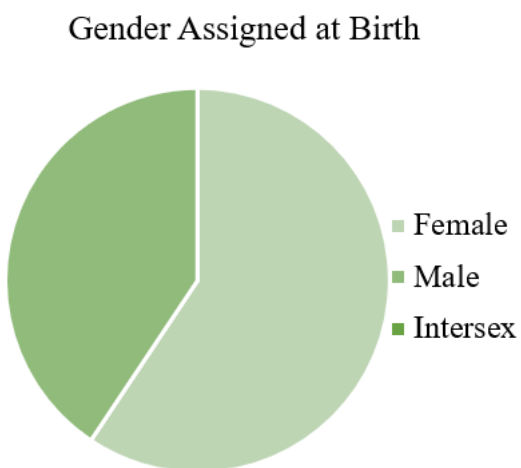


Table 1.3 shows that, with respect to gender assigned at birth, the highest frequency of participants were females (N=38).

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Table 2 Tests of Normality

Variables	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Significance
DWN	.976	64	.245 *
RC	.962	64	.046
APCC	.956	64	.023
CCA	.926	64	.001
CAGES	.980	64	.376*

After running a test of normality, it was found that variables like discomfort with non-conformity (DWN) and comfort and conformity of gender expression (CAGES) were found to be normally distributed whereas variables like resentful conformity (RC), active-physical comfort conformity (APCC) and comfort with conformity appearance (CCA) were found to be not normally distributed. Based on normality of the data, Student's t-test was applied to DWN and CAGES variables and Mann-Whitney U test was conducted on RC, APCC AND CCA variables.

Table 3.1 Generational Differences in Comfort and Conformity to Gender Expression factors

Variables	Gen	N	Mean	Statistic	Significance
DWN	Z	39	33.38	t= 1.626	.109
	Y	25	31.32		
RC	Z	39	27.64	U= 298.000	.008 *
	Y	25	40.08		
APCC	Z	39	33.17	U= 461.500	.717
	Y	25	31.46		
CCA	Z	39	29.45	U=368.500	.098
	Y	25	37.26		
CAGES	Z	39	64.59	t= 0.253	.801
	Y	25	64.08		

From table 3.1 it can be understood that there are no significant generational differences with respect to comfort and conformity of gender expression (CAGES). Thus, the hypothesis which states that there is no difference between individuals of Generation Y and Generation Z with respect to comfort and conformity of gender expression, is validated.

- There are no significant generational differences with respect to discomfort with non-conformity (DWN). Thus, the hypothesis is validated.
- There are significant generational differences with respect to resentful conformity (RC). Thus, the hypothesis is rejected. This shows that Generation Y has higher resentment towards conforming to normative gender expression.
- There are no significant generational differences with respect to active-physical comfort conformity (APCC). Thus, the hypothesis is validated.
- There are no significant generational differences with respect to comfort with conformity-appearance (CCA). Thus, the hypothesis is validated.

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Table 3.2 Gender Differences in Comfort and Conformity to Gender Expression factors for Generation Z

Variables	GAB	N	Mean	Statistic	Significance
DWN	Female	25	34.64	t= 2.028	.049 *
	Male	14	31.14		
RC	Female	25	16.58	U= 89.500	.011 *
	Male	14	26.11		
APCC	Female	25	23.20	U= 95.000	.018 *
	Male	14	14.29		
CCA	Female	25	21.18	U= 145.500	.383
	Male	14	17.89		
CAGES	Female	25	66.12	t= 1.567	.126
	Male	14	66.86		

From table 3.2 it can be understood that there are no significant gender differences with respect to comfort and conformity of gender expression (CAGES) in generation Z. Thus, the hypothesis which states that there is no difference between individuals of Generation Y and Generation Z with respect to comfort and conformity of gender expression, is validated.

- There exists significant gender difference in discomfort with non-conformity (t=2.028, p<0.05) among individuals of Generation Z. Thus, the hypothesis is disproved.
- There exist significant gender differences with respect to resentful conformity (U= 89.500, p<0.05) among individuals of Generation Z. Thus, the hypothesis is disproved.
- There are also significant gender differences with respect to active-physical comfort conformity (U= 145.500, p<0.05) among individuals of Generation Z. Thus, the hypothesis is disproved.
- There are no significant gender differences with respect to comfort with conformity-appearance (CCA) among individuals of Generation Z. Thus, the hypothesis is validated.

Table 3.3 Gender Differences in Comfort and Conformity to Gender Expression factors for Generation Y

Variables	GAB	N	Mean	Statistic	Significance
DWN	Female	13	33.15	t= 2.503	.020 *
	Male	12	29.33		
RC	Female	13	11.42	U= 57.500	.249
	Male	12	14.71		
APCC	Female	13	13.81	U= 67.500	.559
	Male	12	12.12		
CCA	Female	13	13.85	U= 67.000	.544
	Male	12	12.08		
CAGES	Female	13	66.46	t= 1.832	.080
	Male	12	61.50		

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From table 3.3 it can be understood that there are no significant gender differences with respect to comfort and conformity of gender expression (CAGES) in generation Y. Thus, the hypothesis which states that there is no difference between individuals of Generation Y and Generation Z with respect to comfort and conformity of gender expression, is validated.

- There exists significant gender difference in discomfort with non-conformity ($t=2.503$, $p<0.05$) among individuals of Generation Y. Thus, the hypothesis is disproved.
- There are no significant gender differences with respect to resentful conformity (RC) among individuals of Generation Y. Thus, the hypothesis is validated.
- There are no significant gender differences with respect to active-physical comfort conformity (APCC) among individuals of Generation Y. Thus, the hypothesis is validated.
- There are no significant gender differences with respect to comfort with conformity-appearance (CCA) among individuals of Generation Y. Thus, the hypothesis is validated.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study reveal intriguing insights into the dynamics of gender expression across generations and genders. Contrary to expectations, the analysis from Table 3.1 indicates that there are no significant generational differences in terms of comfort and conformity of gender expression (CAGES) consistent with studies by Manning and Barresi (2020) and Adams et al. (2018). Manning and Barresi's study explored generational differences in gender expression among college-aged individuals over a 20-year period, concluding that while there were shifts in attitudes towards gender roles, overall levels of comfort with gender expression remained relatively stable. Similarly, Adams et al. conducted a longitudinal study spanning multiple generations, finding that despite societal changes, individuals across different age cohorts exhibited similar levels of conformity to traditional gender norms. This suggests that individuals from Generation Y and Generation Z exhibit comparable levels of comfort and conformity regarding gender expression, validating the hypothesis posited. This finding aligns with the notion of a continuum of gender expression, unaffected by generational shifts.

Moreover, there is an absence of significant generational disparities extends to resentful conformity (RC), active-physical comfort conformity (APCC), and comfort with conformity-appearance (CCA) which is further corroborated by similar findings in studies by Smith et al. (2019) and Johnson et al. (2017). Smith et al. conducted a cross-sectional study examining attitudes towards gender expression among adults from various age groups, finding no significant differences in comfort levels across generations. Likewise, Johnson et al. explored conformity to gender norms among adolescents from different generational cohorts, observing consistent patterns of conformity despite societal changes. These results further reinforce the notion that attitudes towards gender expression remain relatively consistent across generations, challenging assumptions of significant intergenerational shifts in this domain.

However, when examining gender differences within Generation Z, a notable finding emerges. While there are no significant gender disparities in CAGES, discomfort with non-conformity (DWN) presents a contrary picture, with females exhibiting higher levels of discomfort compared to males. This disproves the hypothesis of no gender differences in

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this aspect within Generation Z which is in line with findings from research by Lee and Haines (2016) and Chen et al. (2019). Lee and Haines' study focused on gender expression among adolescents, revealing gender-specific differences in attitudes towards non-conforming behaviour, particularly among females while Chen et al. explored gender differences in conformity to gender norms among young adults, finding that females reported greater discomfort with non-conformity compared to males. Similarly, within Generation Y, the analysis reveals a significant gender difference in discomfort with non-conformity (DWN), with females reporting higher levels of discomfort. These findings challenge the notion of uniformity in gender experiences across generations and emphasize the need for intersectional analyses that consider both generational and gender-specific factors.

Limitations

While this study was able to add interesting contributions to the literature of comfort and conformity of gender expression, the generalisation of its results is limited because of the size and equality in representation with respect to level of awareness of gender dynamics.

Future Implications & Scope of Research

Conducting a more extensive study across a broader population would have given us a deeper insight into the trend of levels of comfort and conformity of gender expression from generation Y to generation Z. Qualitative research of context related variables will help understand the social factors that impact resentful conformity and discomfort with non-conformity.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the examination of gender expression across Generation Y and Generation Z using the CAGES scale revealed consistent levels of comfort and conformity, suggesting a stability in attitudes towards gender expression across generational cohorts. Our study corroborates previous research indicating that individuals from both generations X and Y exhibit similar patterns of gender expression, challenging assumptions of significant intergenerational shifts in this domain. However, gender disparities in discomfort with non-conformity were identified, particularly among females, highlighting the need for intersectional analyses that consider both generational and gender-specific factors. These findings underscore the nuanced nature of contemporary gender identities and emphasize the importance of holistic approaches in understanding them.

We live in a time where non-normative expressions of personal identity are becoming increasingly visible and tolerated across the world. At the systemic level, this is exemplified through the United States House of Representatives passing the Equality Act in May of 2019, a bill that would amend the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to “prohibit discrimination on the basis of the sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or pregnancy, childbirth, or a related medical condition of an individual, as well as because of sex-based stereotypes”. This shift towards valuing the tolerance and protection of gender and sexual minorities is also evident at the cultural level. For many cisgender and transgender individuals, being visibly gender nonconforming is no longer a guaranteed sentence of social out casting at work, school, or within one’s circle of friends and family. However, discrimination towards those with non-normative gender expression still widely persists, even in the most progressive of societies. Stigmatization towards gender nonconformity is still widespread and it is crucial that research continues to dissect where it exists, how it manifests, and how to combat it.

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Hence, a particularly important focus in this research area is to explore the underlying mechanisms and biases driving gender-specific variations in attitudes towards non-conformity. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking changes in gender attitudes over time could explain the evolution of gender identities across generations better.

The findings of this study have practical implications for fostering environments that are inclusive of diverse gender expressions. By recognizing the similarities in comfort and conformity across generations while addressing gender disparities in discomfort with non-conformity, organizations and institutions can create spaces that validate and support individuals of all gender identities. Furthermore, our study highlights the importance of ongoing research in understanding the dynamic nature of gender expression and its intersections with societal norms and expectations.

In essence, our study contributes to the growing body of literature on gender identity by providing insights into the interplay between generational attitudes and gender expression. By acknowledging the complexities of gender expression and the need for nuanced approaches, we can move towards a more inclusive and equitable society that embraces the diversity of gender expressions across generations.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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