KPSJΨ

Perceptions of Attraction: Implicit Biases in Attraction Towards Transgender Individuals

Pallavi Nair[1], Mary Langhorst, Caitlin Van Kesteren, Dennis Wang, and Emma Silversides

Abstract

Research regarding biases against the transgender community is growing in the field of psychology, with one of the focal points being attraction. This study was conducted to determine if individuals are perceived as less attractive when identified as transgender, rather than cisgender. A between-subjects experimental design was used in which a sample of university students who identified as cisgender women rated the attractiveness of the same 10 photos (5 of men and 5 of women), labelled as either "cisgender" ($n = 21$) or as "transgender" ($n = 19$). Our hypothesis was that photos labelled as transgender would receive lower ratings than the photos labelled as cisgender for both the men's and women's faces. The independent samples t-test indicated no statistically significant differences between the cisgender and transgender photos. This suggests that awareness of an individual's transgender status does not negatively influence perceptions of attractiveness, and that younger university students may be less prejudiced towards the transgender community.

Keywords: transgender, attraction, bias, discrimination, LGBTQ+

Perceptions of Attraction: Implicit Biases in Attraction
Towards Transgender Individuals

Implicit biases in attraction towards transgender individuals have major implications for the transgender community in regard to their dating lives, as well as for how they are generally perceived and treated by the world. Simply revealing that one is transgender increases the likelihood that they will be discriminated against (Mao et al., 2019). Furthermore, it may also impact judgments regarding the perceived attractiveness of an individual if it is known that they are transgender (Mao et al., 2019). Most of the research conducted on this topic focuses on implicit biases towards transgender individuals, operationalized through ratings of a particular variable, such as sexual attractiveness. The purpose of this experiment was to determine if cisgender women's perceptions of attractiveness would be influenced by knowing that their target was transgender.

One theory that may explain the negative bias against transgender individuals is sexual selection theory, which argues that humans are motivated to pass on their genes and thus require a mating choice that can fulfill this goal (Little et al., 2011). A possible explanation as to why men would rate a transgender woman lower on attractiveness could be due to their knowledge that the woman is infertile and thus, their genes will not be passed on. Similarly, women tend to gravitate towards men who exhibit masculine characteristics that indicate male fertility, especially around ovulation (Little et al., 2011). This suggests that fertility is also of importance to women when judging men's attractiveness and thus, their knowledge of a man's identity as transgender could also produce a lower rating of attractiveness (Little et al., 2011). However, based on the findings of multiple studies, we believe that another possibility could be a lack of openness towards gender fluidity that is rooted in social conservatism, as explored below in the research of Mao and colleagues (2019) and McCullough and colleagues (2019).

The 1980s researchers Freund and Blanchard (1998, as cited in Veale et al., 2008) set the steppingstones for understanding the psychological interests between transgender individuals and what sexual identities mean to them. Through the distribution of surveys to transgender individuals, it was theorized that transgender individuals tend to place more importance on their partner's physical attractiveness than their own. Since these studies, transgender individuals have become more open about their identity due to shifting social contexts (Veale et al., 2008). Freund and Blanchard's (1998, as cited in Veale et al., 2008) work,

though still valid, may be outdated as newer and more informed pieces of literature have since been published.

Though still exorbitantly discriminated against, the transgender community has made substantial advancements since the 1980s in terms of social and personal acceptance. This has given current researchers more opportunity to conduct investigations into perceptions of this community and more. Despite this, it is surprising how little research has been conducted on the topic of attraction to transgender individuals. A recent study indicated that transgender participants felt that they would be treated with more respect, receive better customer service, and experience lower levels of prejudice from others when conforming to typical gender norms (Anderson, 2020). Furthermore, participants that were perceived by others to be gay, bisexual, or transgender felt that they were at a higher risk for harassment and discrimination. Finally, participants that identified as queer stated that when they conformed to gender norms and disguised how they would typically present themselves in regard to clothing and the way in which they spoke, they felt an increased sense of privilege that only straight, cisgender individuals experience (Anderson, 2020).

Wittlin et al. (2018) conducted five studies to determine expectations and memorability of the facial appearances of transgender individuals compared to the facial appearances of cisgender individuals. In study one, participants were told that they were going to be rating a photo of either a transgender or cisgender person and were asked to give a rating of how much they expected the person to be gender congruent. The researchers found that transgender targets were expected to be less gender congruent than cisgender targets. Study two found that participants were more likely to rate a photo of an individual lower on gender congruence if the photo was labelled as transgender than if it was labelled as cisgender. The researchers also stated that physical femininity is associated with higher ratings of attraction for women and that women are more harshly judged on attractiveness if they embody physical characteristics that are more masculine. Study one indicates that there is a stereotype that transgender individuals will appear to be less gender congruent and study two suggests that one's identity as transgender will result in one being perceived as physically less gender congruent than cisgender people. Targets labelled as transgender also tended to be perceived as less memorable than cisgender targets. Since transgender individuals are perceived as less gender congruent (even if they are not low on gender congruence), they may experience increased discrimination if their

transgender status became known (Wittlin et al., 2018). As perceived femininity increases one's attraction to women, it also follows that transgender women openly identifying as transgender (and thus, being perceived as embodying less femininity) are likely to be viewed as less attractive (Wittlin et al., 2018) and thus, issues arise for their prospective romantic relationships. Though Wittlin et al.'s research does not focus on perceived attractiveness of transgender individuals, it explores aspects such as perceptions of gender congruence and memorability that impact perceptions of attractiveness.

Mao and colleagues (2019) conducted an experiment in which participants rated the facial attractiveness of individuals in photos that were labelled either "cisgender," "transgender," or "nonbinary" on a Likert-type scale. They found that the photos labelled "transgender" received the lowest attractiveness ratings, with "cisgender" photos yielding the highest attractiveness ratings. The researchers also considered participant variables such as right-wing political beliefs, gender essentialism, homophobia, and religious fundamentalism; it was found that those high in each of these variables were especially likely to rate transgender individuals as less attractive. This study was not the only to discover that those who subscribe to right-wing political beliefs tend to dislike transgender individuals and it is proposed that this prejudice is a result of individuals experiencing threats to their identity, perhaps because they feel that those who identify as transgender go against their belief system (McCullough et al., 2019).

Along with the aforementioned variables, two other demographic variables that tend to have more prejudiced views of transgender individuals are cisgender men and heterosexual individuals (McCullough et al., 2019). Men of all sexual orientations have more unfavourable views of transgender individuals than women, which could be due to men feeling that those breaching the boundaries of their assigned gender jeopardize their masculinity (McCullough et al., 2019). Those who identify as heterosexual also have less favourable responses towards transgender individuals than those who are homosexual (McCullough et al., 2019). There are considerable issues today around the perception and treatment of the transgender community; differences in attraction ratings are likely due to discriminatory, prejudiced, and unfavourable biases towards transgender individuals' gender identity rather than their physicality. The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a difference in how a cisgender person judges a person's attractiveness based on knowing an individual's transgender identity. Based upon

the previous literature on transgender individuals, attraction, and discrimination, we hypothesized that women who identify as cisgender will find photographs of both men and women labelled "transgender" to be less attractive than identical photos labelled "cisgender."

Methods

This was a between-groups experiment in which participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups: Group one viewed and rated five photos of men and five photos of women labelled "cisgender" and group two viewed and rated the same photos with the "transgender" label. The independent variable of the experiment was the label on the photos and the dependent variable was the rating of attractiveness.

Participants

Participants were undergraduate university students, ranging from 17 to 40 years of age ($M = 23.30$, $SD = 4.95$). Along with age, participants were asked to indicate their gender identity and sexual orientation prior to the start of the experiment. The target group for the experiment was cisgender individuals. A total of 51 participants were initially recruited for this study. Participants were then removed if they did not answer the key demographic question of gender identity ($n = 4$). Additionally, because only seven participants identified as cisgender men, we decided to exclude them and run the analyses on women only to reduce a potential confound in combining the men and women. This resulted in a final sample size of 40 women who all identified as cisgender. The group viewing and rating photos with the "cisgender" label consisted of 21 participants with 57.1% ($n = 12$) identifying as heterosexual, 14% ($n = 3$) identifying as bisexual, 9.5% ($n = 2$) identifying as homosexual, 9.5% ($n = 2$) identifying as pansexual, 4.8% ($n = 1$) identifying as asexual, and 4.8% ($n = 1$) identifying as unsure. The group viewing and rating photos with the "transgender" label consisted of 19 participants, with 68.4% ($n = 13$) identifying as heterosexual, 15.8% ($n = 3$) identifying as bisexual, 5.3% ($n = 1$) identifying as homosexual, and 10.5% ($n = 2$) identifying as pansexual.

Materials

Participants were presented with ten photos of individuals, gathered from a free photo database: My Modern Met (mymodernmet.com). Of the ten photos, five were of women and five were of men with all individuals being White to eliminate the potential confound of racial bias. The individuals in the photos were also all within their early twenties. All individuals in the chosen photos were smiling in order to hold the factor of facial expression constant. The

photos also only displayed faces and no information regarding body type was provided to eliminate potential biases induced by body type. The same ten photos were used for each group with the only alteration being the addition of either a "cisgender" label or a "transgender" label. To measure the dependent variable of attractiveness, we used a Likert-type scale from 1 (*extremely unattractive*) to 10 (*extremely attractive*).

Procedures

All data was collected anonymously online using Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com). Participants were recruited through the research pool of a small western Canadian university and were randomly assigned to groups using the Qualtrics randomization function. After providing electronic consent, participants completed the demographic questions, then were presented with the ten photos and asked to rate the perceived attractiveness of each photo. Photos were presented in the same order for both groups. Once the ratings were completed, participants were presented with a debriefing and were awarded bonus credit for eligible courses.

Results

An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted using the statistical software program Jamovi version 1.6 (The jamovi project, 2020) to compare the average attractiveness ratings between the two groups. Two analyses were conducted: (1) analysis of attractiveness ratings for photos with women's faces, and (2) analysis of attractiveness ratings for photos with men's faces. As seen in Table 1, there were no statistically significant differences between the two label conditions and thus, the results are inconsistent with our predictions. There was a small effect in the analysis of ratings for women's faces and a medium effect in the analysis of ratings for men's faces. This medium effect size suggests that there may be a difference between the two men's label groups that this study was too underpowered to detect. A two-way mixed ANOVA may have more power to detect a significant effect.

Discussion

The central goal of conducting this research was to determine if knowing an individual's transgender identity would affect a cisgender individual's judgements of that person's attractiveness. While we did not find any statistically significant differences between the two groups for the photos of men and women, the medium effect size for the men's faces suggests a possible difference, however, this suggestion requires additional research. Contrary to our

hypothesis, the results suggest that perceptions and ratings of attractiveness were not affected by the transgender and cisgender labels.

Our results differ from those of previous research that indicate one's acknowledgement of an individual as transgender induces unfavourable perceptions (Mao et al., 2019; McCullough et al., 2019). One explanation for our differing results could be the primary demographic of the participants who completed our survey. The mean age of the sample was 23 years old, indicating that most of those who completed the survey were of the younger Millennial generation. This generation has become known to be not only significantly less prejudiced against minority groups but also engage in activism aiding in the advancement of minority groups (Higdon, 2019). It is also important to note that most if not all of the participants were either (a) enrolled in a psychology program or (b) enrolled in at least one psychology class as most participants who complete psychological studies through the institution's research pool are psychology students. Considering this factor, another possibility for this finding could be due to the participants' knowledge of similar studies and topics within the field which may have induced the effect of demand characteristics (in which participants alter their responses to fit what they believe is the experiment's purpose). In fact, being a university-educated student in what is considered to be a politically liberal/left-wing discipline (Inbar & Lammers, 2012) could also be a contributing source of the non-significant results as the left-wing has been considered to be more accepting of the LGBTQ+ community, and previous research has found that those who subscribe to more right-wing philosophies are less accepting of the community (Mao et al., 2019; McCullough et al., 2019). Finally, our sample consisted of only women and previous studies have found women to be less biased against transgender individuals (Mao et al., 2019; McCullough et al., 2019).

Limitations

As with any study, there are limitations that should be noted. The biggest limitation of this study was the small sample size. If a larger sample had been obtained, it is possible that we may have seen statistically significant results for the photos of the men, as suggested by the medium effect size. A second limitation has to do with the composition of our sample. These results may only generalize to other young, university-educated, cisgender women. This acts as a double-edged sword as the information obtained is valuable for describing the attitudes of young women in university towards the transgender community; however, this also presents a

lack of generalizability to both cisgender men and women outside of university. While we would have liked to have included men in this study, we were unable to recruit enough men to be able to conduct analyses for this group.

Implications and Future Directions

Considering the fairly limited research on the topic of perceptions and prejudices toward transgender individuals, as well as the extremely limited research on the interaction between transgender individuals and attraction, it is essential to conduct a variety of studies (e.g., correlational, experimental, case study) to advance our understanding of not only transgender individuals, but the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. Despite younger generations appearing to be more accepting of the transgender community, transgender individuals still feel a sense of inequality and unfairness in their treatment and expect their status as a transgender individual to actively disadvantage and work against them as a result of prejudice and discrimination (Anderson, 2020). This assumption has been shown to be well-reasoned as multiple studies have found results suggesting that one's transgender status grants them lower ratings of attractiveness, perils in dating (including difficulties with finding a partner as well as violent altercations as a result of transgender status being discovered), higher risk of discrimination, and an overall unfavourable judgement which discourages those who are transgender from openly identifying as such (Mao et al., 2019; McCullough et al., 2019; Wittlin et al., 2018). The results of this study imply that the younger generation of women in university are less likely to be prejudiced against transgender individuals, particularly regarding attractiveness.

It may be of some worth to conduct research regarding perceptions of the attractiveness of transgender individuals with samples including different participant variables. The goal of this study was to gather responses from men and women enrolled university; however, men only constituted approximately 15% of the final sample. Obtaining a larger sample size with specific characteristics such as 50% women and 50% men or 50% left-wing and 50% right-wing may give more insight into the effects of different demographic variables on perceptions of transgender individuals.

Tables

Table 1

Analysis of Photo Ratings Using Independent-Samples t-*Test*

Variable	Cisgender		Transgender		*df*	*t*	*p*	Cohen's *d*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*				
Attractiveness Rating (Women)	6.09	1.79	6.71	1.71	38	-1.12	.271	-0.35
Attractiveness Rating (Men)	5.25	1.27	5.94	1.47	38	-1.59	.119	-0.50

References

Anderson, S. M. (2020). Gender matters: The perceived role of gender expression in discrimination against cisgender and transgender LGBQ individuals. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *44*(3), 323–341. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684320929354

Higdon, N. (2019). Rallying over balloting: The origins of millennial activism. *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*, *8*(1), 12–29. https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/jctp/vol8/iss1/3/

Inbar, Y., & Lammers, J. (2012). Political diversity in social and personality psychology. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *7*(5), 496–503. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691612448792

Little, A. C., Jones, B. C., & DeBruine, L. M. (2011). Facial attractiveness: Evolutionary based research. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, *366*(1571), 1638–1659. https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2010.0404

Mao, J. M., Haupert, M. L., & Smith, E. R. (2019). How gender identity and transgender status affect perceptions of attractiveness. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *10*(6), 811–822. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550618783716

McCullough, R., Dispenza, F., Chang, C. Y., & Zeligman, M. R. (2019). Correlates and predictors of anti-transgender prejudice. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, *6*(3), 359–368. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000334

The jamovi project. (2020). *jamovi* (Version 1.6) [Computer Software]. https://www.jamovi.org

Veale, J. F., Clarke, D. E. & Lomax, T. C. (2008). Sexuality of male-to-female transsexuals. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *37*, 586–597. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-007-9306-9

Wittlin, N. M., Dovidio, J. F., LaFrance, M., & Burke, S. E. (2018). About face: Memory for transgender versus cisgender targets' facial appearance. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *78*, 77–92. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2018.04.009