

Recognition of Gender Fluidity Expressed through Attire by Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT

This study replicates Brett Lunceford's (2010) exploration of clothing and gender performance, focusing on undergraduate students in Chandigarh, India. Forty participants engaged in a classroom activity where they dressed according to their gender identity and reflected on peer perceptions. Data were collected through journals, peer rankings, and discussions, analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Findings revealed that students expressed gender fluidity through attire, with androgynous clothing provoking both resistance and acceptance. While self-perceived confidence in gender expression was high, peer perceptions showed weak or no correlation. Statistical tests confirmed no significant association between clothing type and perceived gender expression in Group 1, but Group 2 showed a significant association after collapsing categories. The study highlights fashion's role as a communicative tool for negotiating identity, destabilizing binaries, and encouraging inclusivity in Indian contexts.

Keywords: Gender Performance, Fashion, Androgyny, Socialisation, Indian Culture, Peer Perception

INTRODUCTION

Fashion

Men and women tend to wear specific styles, colours, fabrics, and articles of clothing. These choices are not based on essential requirements for our bodies but rather on socially constructed norms of gender. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued that "social reality itself is constructed through everyday practices and fashion exemplifies this by reinforcing gender norms". These ideas are taken for granted because, gender is performed through actions and choices that conform to societal expectations, and clothing is one of the most visible expressions of these performances.

Farren and Hutchison (2004) contend that "fashion is not about the capacity to affect or observe the physical world directly, but about the visual communicative ability of garments". Wolf (1991, p. 12) critiques how "beauty myths perpetuate inequality, a dynamic also visible in fashion's reinforcement of gendered hierarchies". Clothing

is a visual language with a different terminology, possibly alike music or poetry. Beyond mere protection against the elements, clothing is a form of self-expression, signalling individual style and societal status. Fashion, far from simply a subject of outfits, helps a person to find one's place within the broader tapestry of society. Fashion is unbiased and intertwined with social constructs, predominantly gender. Fashion can be viewed as a component of the social mechanisms perpetuating hierarchy and status in a profoundly unequal society. Hence proved, fashion is not neutral but a socially constructed performance that both reflects and reinforces gender norms.

Gender

Gender is shaped by societal influences and exists on a spectrum. Gender associated with traditional categories like male and female can be defined as the communal provision, which is highly deep-rooted in communal expectations. Although seemingly mundane,

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clothing choices are deeply influenced by societal norms governing what it means to present oneself as masculine, feminine, androgynous. In particular, androgynous clothing relates to specific fit styles: within cultural contexts, oversized, boxy and relaxed silhouettes are deliberately chosen to blur the body's outline, softening conventional markers of femininity or masculinity and making fit itself a cultural tool for negotiating identity. This highlights how fit itself becomes a cultural tool for negotiating identity and disrupting binary expectations. Cultural and societal norms always trouble each gender with dress codes. The way individuals dress, plays a crucial role in their performance of gender. Societal-held gender notions and their performance are difficult to break. "One continually performs gender and the norms by which he or she performs gender are continually reinforced through such institutions and practices as education, law, and gender stereotypes in clothing and toys. This echoes Drennan's (2022) findings in classrooms, where "literacy practices and dress codes continually reinforce binary expectations, showing that performance of gender is embedded across social institutions." When we wear clothes, we exhibit a specific appearance of self. Gender performance is a kind of drag performance and imitating gender implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself as well as its contingency" (Lunceford, 2010, 63-64). Walker (2015) famously noted, "You are born naked, and the rest is drag, underscoring the performative nature of gender". However, practically, the attire is an integral element of the performance that shapes and influences the roles of the performer. The concept of 'performing gender' suggests that gender identity is a sequence of actions and presentations and not a preset element that aligns with societal expectations.

In essence, fashion becomes a potent tool in the arsenal of socialisation of gender - a mechanism through which individuals either secure acceptance in society or find themselves on the fringes, challenging established norms and expectations.

Review of Literature

Berger and Luckmann's (1966) classic text on the social construction of reality provides a theoretical foundation for understanding fashion as a cultural mechanism. They argue that everyday practices create and sustain social reality, and clothing is one of the most taken-for-granted markers of identity. Their framework

has been widely applied in fashion studies to explain how attire becomes embedded in social norms and reinforces gender categories.

Wolf (1991), researcher's critique in *The Beauty Myth* examined how ideals of beauty are used to control and limit women's agency. By analyzing media and cultural practices, she argued that beauty standards perpetuate inequality and reinforce hierarchies. In the contexts of fashion, her insights are crucial for understanding how clothing and appearance can simultaneously enforce social norms and provide opportunities for resistance and redefinition.

In his study, Lunceford (2010) examined how clothing functions as a performance of gender rather than a neutral covering of the body. Conducted in a U.S. university classroom, he asked students to come to class dressed in ways that maximized their identification as feminine, masculine or androgynous and then reflect on their choices. This exercise revealed that clothing is not simply aesthetic but communicates socially constructed performance of gender, shaped by culture, race and subculture. For instance, students recognized that what counts as "masculine" or "feminine" varies across contexts and that clothing can constrain movement, signal sexuality or reinforce heteronormative expectations. Lunceford concluded that clothing is deeply tied to gender identity and expression. Lunceford also argued that clothing functions as performance of gender and carries social and political meaning. The study highlights that fashion choices both reinforces and challenges gender norms, making clothing a powerful site for negotiating identity and cultural expectations.

Entwistle and Mears (2013) investigated gendered expectations in the fashion modelling industry through interviews with 40 male and female models and observation of freelance modelling practices in the U.K. and U.S. contexts. Applying Butler's theory of gender performativity, they found that although men and women perform the same modelling work, they face distinct and unequal expectations. Two levels of work practices were identified: the precise presentation of bodies and the performance of self to appeal to clients. Their analysis revealed that male and female models negotiate gender differently, while men often are constrained by narrower definitions of masculinity and women can be expected to embody heteronormative femininity. The study concluded that gender performativity in modelling is not uniform but emerges contextually and regionally, underscoring how

fashion work practices in modelling reproduces and complicates social norms of gender.

Rivas (2014) thesis examines the interaction between gender and fashion, with a particular focus on how the apparel line Hood By Air (HBA) deconstructs established gender identities. Conducted in the U.S. academic context, the study is based on the theoretical framework of gender performativity, which draws on Judith Butler's idea that gender is acted via constant acts and decisions. The literature study is centered on the historical setting of gendered fashion, referencing significant works such as Joanne Entwistle's "Fashion and Gender" and Lurie's "The Language of Clothes," which explore how clothing serves as a form of self-expression and social communication. Rivas contends that HBA's approach to genderless fashion not only disrupts established gender boundaries, but also provides a new way of seeing the body as performative. The thesis contends that clothes may be an effective instrument for expressing personal identity and challenging cultural conventions.

Anderson (2017) examined how Black college women negotiated racial and gender performances through their presence on social media. By analyzing online posts and interactions, the study revealed that digital spaces mirror offline enactments of identity, with clothing, style and self-presentation functioning as communicative acts. The work highlights how attire and appearance are not neutral but deeply tied to social expectations, reinforcing the idea that fashion is a visible enactment of identity.

Drennan (2022) explored gender performance in an elementary school classroom, focusing on how literacy practices intersect with identity. The study showed that even routine educational activities reinforced binary expectations, with dress codes and classroom behaviors shaping how children enacted masculinity and femininity. This perspective parallels fashion research by showing that gender performance is embedded across institutions and everyday practices.

Edelsbrunner (2023) explored whether fashion serves as a medium for communication, particularly by examining a qualitative sample of Instagram creators engaged in the activist movement of #DeGenderFashion. Conducted at Malmo University, Sweden, the study analysed Instagram posts to see how creators confront prevailing gender norms through their fashion choices. The primary conclusions highlighted the impact of patriarchal structures on gender expression, with

leadership predominantly coming from male and non-binary individuals. The findings suggested that gender specificity in object design is no longer relevant, as the styles observed in the data sample frequently merged elements from various gender spectra, resulting in a novel and fluid visual identity. Gender specificity in fashion is a constructed idea, prompting the fashion industry to embrace inclusivity by accommodating a broader spectrum of body types.

Kaur (2024) shed light on how fashion and gender fluidity underscores the transformative potential of fashion in challenging and redefining gender norms. Conducted at Guru Kashi University, India, the researcher used secondary data like reviewing influential fashion collections, analysing industry reports and interviews, and examining social media and other online platforms to provide perspective on gender-fluid designs. By embracing gender fluidity, the fashion industry not only reflects societal changes but also drives them, promoting a more inclusive and diverse understanding of identity. This review highlights the importance of continued research in this area to support the evolution of fashion design and its role in breaking stereotypes. The researcher also emphasized that fashion and the fashion industry are becoming increasingly inclusive in their practices and representations.

Inferences drawn from the studies

Fashion demonstrates that clothing functions as a performance of gender, shaped by gendered expectations and cultural contexts. It reveals that gender is something we do, not something we are, enacted through everyday style choices. At the same time, fashion and gender fluidity underscores the transformative potential of fashion, continually redefining gender norms and opening space for inclusivity.

As a medium for communication, clothing serves both self-expression and social communication, enabling individuals to negotiate identity while challenging stereotypes. The ongoing interaction between gender and fashion highlights style can constrain or liberate, reinforce or disrupts, depending on context. Ultimately, these insights call for the fashion industry to embrace inclusivity, recognizing fashion's power to destabilize binaries and expand possibilities for identity and representation.

Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are:

- To engage respondents in self-reflection on how their clothing choices align with or challenge societal gender expectations.
- To determine and compare how participants 'self-identified gender differed from how their group perceived their gender alignment based on their clothing.
- To examine the association between clothing type and perceived gender expression.

Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis (H_0)

- H_0 (1): There is no significant correlation between respondent's clothing choices and their self-reflection on societal gender expectations.
- H_0 (2): There is no significant correlation between self-identified gender alignment and peer perceptions of gender alignment based on clothing.
- H_0 (3): There is no significant association between clothing type and perceived gender expression.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is a blend of both qualitative and quantitative research, while essentially adopting a phenomenological research approach, implemented through focus group methods. In addition, it involves observation through intimation method. The sample consisted of forty participants. The activity was conducted in September 2024 at the University Institute of Fashion technology and Vocational Development, Chandigarh, India. Participants were informed in advance about the process to ensure their comfort and enable them to express themselves freely. The duration of this activity was two hours, and it was digitally recorded with the consent of all participants.

Selection of Respondents

The sample of 40 participants consisted of 2 Groups; each group was of 20 Participants. The two groups were distinguished primarily by their academic level: Group 1 comprised B.Sc. 3rd year students (Batch 2022-2025), while Group 2 comprised B.Sc. Honor's 1st year students (Batch 2024-2028). All participants were asked to dress in a way that represents their gender identity—masculine, feminine or androgynous—using clothing from their

existing wardrobe.

The analysis is concentrated on parameters such as self-perception, peer-perception, confidence and negotiation of gender identity through clothing choices. These parameters were used to explore how academic maturity, and social exposure may influence the way individuals perform and communicate gender through fashion.

Procedure

Following Lunceford's framework, the research took place over two stages:

- **Pre-Activity Preparation:** Respondents were instructed to come to class dressed as they believed most accurately reflected their gender identity. They also completed a journal assignment in which they reflected on the reason for choosing specific clothing and how their classmates might interpret their choices.
- **Classroom Activity:** The outfit choices were explained by the wearer in front of the class on activity day. The class then ranked each outfit on a scale of one to ten, based on how masculine, feminine, or androgynous they believed the clothing to be, with ten being entirely masculine, feminine or androgynous. If disagreements arose, respondents discussed the reasoning behind their assessments.

Data Collection

Data was collected through:

- **Journal Entries:** Participants submitted a journal entry reflecting on their clothing choices, meanings, and perceptions of gender identity.
- **Class Discussion and Ranking:** The ranking of clothing provided quantitative data on how peers perceived gender performance concerning clothing, while the subsequent discussion offered qualitative insights into the influences of social environment on gender performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Group 1: Quantitative Data Results

Mean of Self-Perceived Rating: Group 1

As shown in (Fig. 1) the mean of self-perceived rating for Group 1 was $M = 8.43$, indicating generally positive self-assessments. This suggests participants were

relatively confident in how their clothing reflected their gender identity, although confidence does not imply agreement with peer ratings.

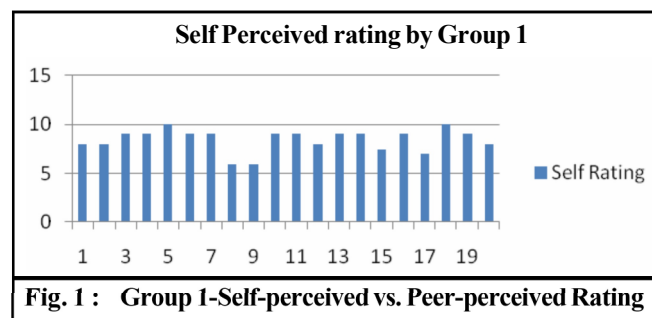


Fig. 1 : Group 1-Self-perceived vs. Peer-perceived Rating

Scatter Plot

Pearson r coefficient of correlation

For Group 1, (Fig. 2) the Pearson r coefficient of correlation between self-perceived rating and average peer-perceived rating for Group 1 was $r(18) = 0.177$, indicating a weak positive relationship. This means that higher self-ratings were slightly associated with higher peer ratings, but the effect is small and not statistically significant. Thus, Null Hypothesis $H_0(2)$ was retained.

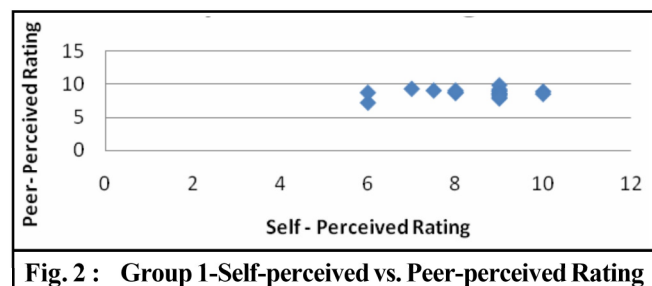


Fig. 2 : Group 1-Self-perceived vs. Peer-perceived Rating

Participants who rated their own gender expression slightly higher tended to receive somewhat higher ratings from peers, but the relationship was minimal, indicating only limited alignment between self-perception and peer perception; confidence in one's clothing choices mildly influence how others interpreted those choices.

Bar Chart

Contingency Table: Observed Frequencies

Chi-Square test (Group 1)

As shown in (Fig. 3 and Table 1), the 3x3 contingency table for Group 1 produced $\chi^2(4, N = 20) = 3.53$. This value is below the critical value for $\alpha = 0.05$, indicating $p > 0.05$; therefore, the Pearson chi-square test does not reject the null hypothesis of independence. In other words, there was no statistically significant

association between clothing type and perceived gender expression in Group 1. Thus, Null Hypothesis $H_0(3)$ was retained.

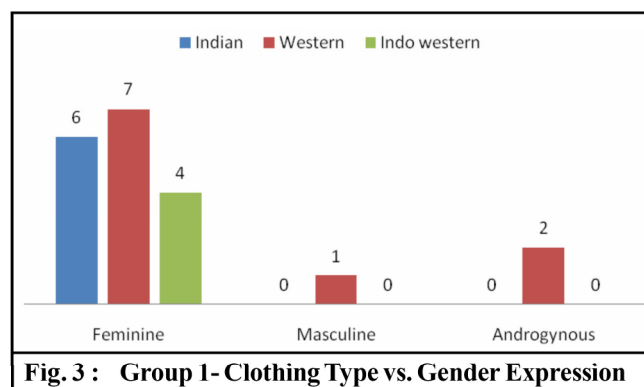


Fig. 3 : Group 1- Clothing Type vs. Gender Expression

Table 1 : Self-identified gender and Clothing type of Group 1

Clothing Type	Feminine	Masculine	Androgynous	Total
Indian	6	0	0	06
Western	7	1	2	10
Indo western	4	0	0	04
Total	17	1	2	20

Fisher's Exact Test (Group1)

To test the association between clothing type and perceived gender expression, a Fisher's Exact Test was applied to the 3x3 contingency table (Indian, Western, Indo-Western x Feminine, Masculine, Androgynous). The test yielded $p = 0.842$, indicating no statistically significant association between clothing type and perceived gender expression in Group 1. Thus, the null hypothesis $H_0(3)$ was retained, confirming that clothing type did not significantly influence peer perceptions of gender expression in this group.

For Group 1, all three null hypotheses $H_0(1)$, $H_0(2)$ and $H_0(3)$ were retained.

Group 2: Quantitative Data Results

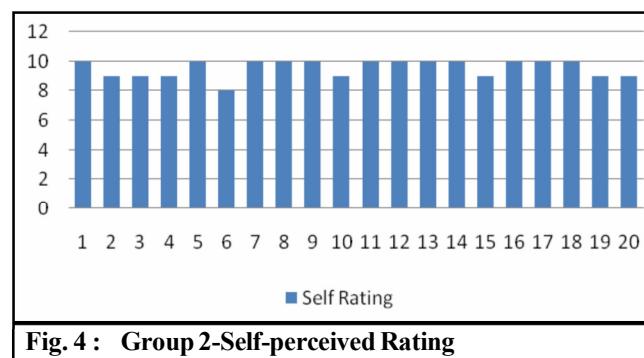


Fig. 4 : Group 2-Self-perceived Rating

Mean of Self-Perceived Rating: Group 2

As shown in (Fig. 4), the mean of self-perceived ratings calculated for Group 2 was $M = 9.55$, indicating very positive self-assessments. Participants appeared confident in their own gender expression, but this self-confidence does not necessarily align with peer perceptions.

Scatter Plot

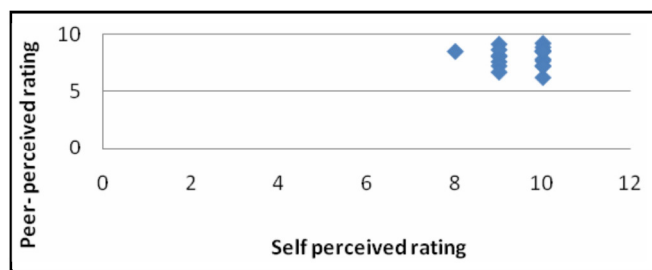


Fig. 5 : Group 2-Self-perceived vs. Peer-perceived Rating

Pearson r coefficient of correlation

For Group 2, as shown in (Fig. 5), the Pearson r coefficient of correlation between self-perceived ratings and average peer-perceived ratings for Group 2 was approximately -0.01311 , as shown in indicating a very weak negative correlation (essentially no linear relationship). This suggests that participant's self-perception and peer-perception of clothing-based gender expression were largely independent; participant's confidence in their choices did not necessarily align with how others interpreted those choices. Thus, Null Hypothesis $H_0(2)$ was retained.

Chi-Square Test

To examine the association between clothing type and perceived gender expression, a Chi-Square test was applied.

Bar Chart

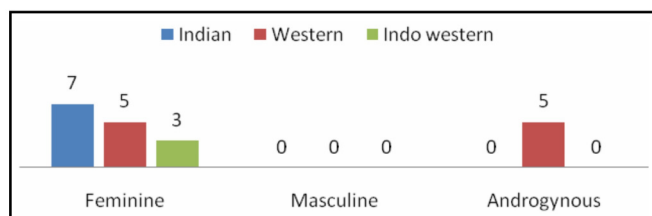


Fig. 6 : Group 2- Clothing Type vs. Gender Expression

Contingency Table: Observed frequencies
Chi- Square test (Group 2)

Table 2 : Self-identified gender and Clothing type of Group 2

Clothing Type	Feminine	Masculine	Androgynous	Total
Indian	7	0	0	07
Western	5	0	5	10
Indo western	3	0	0	03
Total	15	0	05	20

To examine the association between clothing type and perceived gender expression, a chi-square test was first attempted on the original 3×3 contingency table. As shown in (Fig. 6 and Table 2), the original 3×3 contingency table for Group 2 contained a column with zero counts and several expected cell frequencies below 5, violating Pearson chi-square assumptions. To reduce empty cells, perceived gender was collapsed into Feminine versus Non-Feminine (Masculine+ Androgynous), yielding the 3×2 table as shown in (Table 3).

Table 3 : Self-identified gender and Clothing type of Group 2 (Collapsing masculine and androgynous)

Clothing Type	Feminine	Non-Feminine	Total
Indian	7	0	07
Western	5	5	10
Indo western	3	0	03
Total	15	05	20

Hence, Null Hypothesis $H_0(1)$ was retained, confirming that respondent's clothing choices did not significantly correlate with their self-perception of gender expression.

Fisher's Exact Test (Group2, collapsed 3×2)

A Fisher's Exact Test on the collapsed 3×2 table as shown in (Table 3) produced $p = 0.039$, which is below the conventional $\alpha = 0.05$ threshold. This result suggests a statistically significant association between clothing type and perceived gender expression in Group 2.

Therefore, the null hypothesis $H_0(3)$ was rejected for Group 2, indicating that clothing type may influence peer perceptions of gender expression in this group.

For Group 2, $H_0(1)$ and $H_0(2)$ were retained, while $H_0(3)$ was rejected.

Comparing the two groups shows that both reported positive self-perception, with Group 2 higher (mean = 9.55) than group 1 (mean = 8.43). Neither group demonstrated meaningful linear alignment between self-ratings and peer-ratings ($H_0(2)$ retained in both groups). However, they diverge on the role of clothing type: Group

1 showed no association between clothing type and peer-perceived gender expression) Fisher's $p = 0.842$; H_0 (3) retained), whereas Group 2 showed a statistically significant association after collapsing spare categories (Fisher's $p = 0.039$; H_0 (3) rejected). This contrast may reflect sample composition, low cell counts in the original contingency tables or contextual differences in peer judgments; therefore, the Group 2 finding should be interpreted cautiously and prioritized for replication with a larger, more balanced sample.

Qualitative analysis

In the classroom, respondents who adopted androgynous styles most often relied on oversized or relaxed fits to blur silhouettes, illustrating how fit operated as a practical tool for negotiating gender in this sample.

Respondents embraced the assignment and thus dressed in perceived gendered ways. They explained their clothing choices based on aesthetic appeal and practical performance.

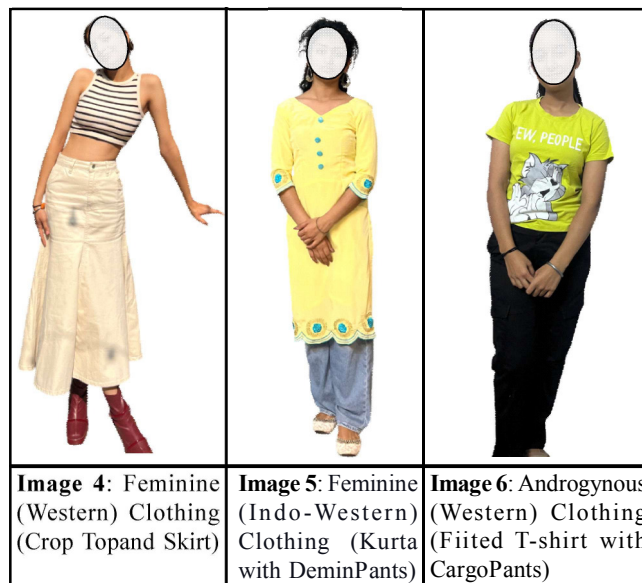


Respondents who adopted androgynous styles often relied on oversized, boxy or relaxed fits to blur the silhouettes, illustrating how fit operated as a practical tool for negotiating gender in this sample.

In Group I, there were twenty female participants. Of twenty participants, 17 wore clothing that was truly feminine clothing, 1 wore male clothes, as shown in and 2 wore androgynous wear (Table 1). Of twenty participants, 6 dressed in Indian wear, (2 wore saree, 2

wore Punjabi suits, 4 wore Indo-Western), and 10 wore Western clothing. (Table 1)

In Group II, there were 20 female participants. Of twenty participants, 15 wore feminine clothing, none wore male clothing, and 5 wore androgynous clothing (Table 2). Further, out of twenty participants, 7 wore a traditional Indian wear (particularly 4 wore Punjabi suits, and 2 wore palazzo suits, 3 wore Indo-Western), and 10 wore Western clothing (Table 2).



In both the groups, participants who identified as feminine predominantly chose Western wear, while a smaller number selected traditional attire. For instance, some wore Western wear dresses, jewellery and high heels, with outfits that accentuated feminine features such as cleavage or buttocks. Others expressed femininity through suits such as kameez, salwar, palazzo or churidar pajami) though very few adopted for a fully traditional Punjabi Suit. Regardless of whether they dressed w in western or Indian styles, women presenting in feminine manner were universally declared as entirely feminine by their classmates.

The mean of self-perceived rating indicates that participants in both groups had a generally positive view of their gender expression, with Group 1 averaging 8.43 and Group 2 averaging 9.55. This suggests that while both groups expressed confidence in their clothing choices, Group 2 participants reported slightly stronger self-assessments.

However, Self-perceived and peer-perceived rating showed almost no linear connection in either group. For

Group 1, the Pearson correlation ($r = 0.177$) suggested a weak positive relationship, while for Group 2 the correlation was essentially zero ($r = -0.013$). These results confirm that confidence in one's clothing choices did not strongly influence how peers interpreted those choices, leading to retention of H0 (2) in both groups.

These fit choices help explain the ambiguity in peer ratings: relaxed, boxy silhouettes intentionally obscure gendered cues, producing varied interpretations among classmates.

Chi-Square and Fisher's tests further revealed differences between the groups. For Group 1, there was no significant association between clothing type and perceived gender expression (Fisher's $p = 0.842$), so H0 (3) was retained. For Group 2, the original contingency table was challenging due to sparse cells, but after collapsing categories Fisher's Exact Test yielded $p = 0.039$, leading to rejection of H0 (3). This suggests that in Group 2, clothing type may have influenced peer perception of gender expression, though this finding should be interpreted cautiously given the small sample size.

The qualitative data provided essential context for these statistical outcomes. Respondents explained their clothing choices in terms of aesthetic appeal, cultural norms and practical performance. Those who dressed in feminine style-whether Western dresses, jewellery and heels or Indian suits such as kameez, salwar or churidar pajami- were consistently perceived as feminine by their classmates. This universal peer recognition helps explain why self-perception scores were high even when peer agreements was weak.

Importantly, differences between the groups emerged in the alignment between clothing and self-perception. Group 1 participants, being more advanced academically, tended to show stronger confidence and clearer negotiation of gender identity through clothing. Group 2 participants demonstrated greater variability, with less alignment between clothing and self-perception. This distinction highlights how academic maturity, and social exposure may influence the way individuals perform and communicate gender through fashion.

Taken together, the findings emphasize that clothing functions as both a site of conformity and resistance. Quantitative results show limited statistical associations, while qualitative narratives reveal how cultural scripts and personal identity shape gender performance. This dual evidence underscores the complexity of gender expression and points to a broader shift toward

acceptance of gender fluidity and inclusivity in fashion.

Delimitations

The sample of ($N = 40$) and several small, expected cell counts limit the reliability of large-sample inferential tests. Further studies can use larger, more diverse samples and these findings could be tested with greater statistical power and robustness.

Additionally, this study could ascertain demographic parameters such as age, socio-economic background and regional diversity. These missed variables may influence how gender expression is performed and perceived, leaving room for further exploration into how demographic profiles intersect with clothing choices and gender identity.

Conclusion

In this exploratory classroom study, participants generally rated their own gender expression positively, but self-ratings and peer-ratings showed little alignment overall. The findings underscore that gender expression is complex and not merely dependent on clothing styles alone.

The Qualitative insights reveal that feminine dressing styles were consistently recognized by peers as feminine, while androgynous choices elicited more varied responses. Combined with the weak correlations between self-perceptions and peer perception, this underscores the subjective nature of gender interpretation and the influence of cultural scripts.

Overall, the study demonstrates that clothing operates as both a site of confidence and negotiation, shaped by academic maturity and social exposure. More broadly, fashion emerges as a dynamic medium for expressing identity, challenging established norms and fostering inclusivity and gender fluidity.

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