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Aligning With the Advantaged Gender Group: How Perceived Gender Inequality Shapes Women's Intended Gender Expression

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Abstract

Gender inequality remains a global issue. However, less is known about how women respond to perceived gender inequality, particularly how they intend to express their gender. In Study 1 (*N* = 198), female participants imagined living in a fictional country with either higher or lower gender inequality. Participants reported intentions to express their gender in more masculine ways under higher versus lower perceived gender inequality. Study 2 (*N* = 293) extended this finding by testing whether women intended to express greater masculinity specifically or whether they more broadly aligned their gender expression with characteristics stereotypically associated with the advantaged gender group. We introduced a condition in which women held the advantaged position, alongside a male-advantaged inequality condition and a control condition with no explicit gender inequality. We found that women intended to express greater masculinity when men were advantaged, relative to the other conditions, and greater femininity when women were advantaged, relative to the other conditions. Our findings suggest that women intend to align their gender expression more closely with characteristics stereotypically associated with the socially advantaged group when they perceive gender inequality. This shift may reflect an attempt to symbolically move toward the socially advantaged group.

Introduction

Gender is a social category that categorizes people into different groups, most commonly women and men (Biernat & Deaux, 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Each group is stereotypically associated with distinct sets of traits, patterns of behavior, and styles of self-presentation (Brownmiller, 2013; Hsu et al., 2021; Kachel et al., 2016; Spence & Buckner, 1995). Women are stereotypically associated with femininity, which refers to a cluster of traits and behaviors that emphasize concern for interpersonal harmony, emotional openness, and appearance-related self-presentation (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Spence & Buckner, 1995; Wood & Eagly, 2015). In contrast, men are stereotypically associated with masculinity, which refers to a cluster of traits related to autonomy and instrumental competence, proactive and assertive behavioral patterns, and a more function-driven style of self-presentation (Hsu et al., 2021; Spence & Buckner, 1995).

Due to the stereotypic association of women with femininity and men with masculinity, people express gender through outward displays of these characteristics (Spence & Buckner, 1995; Wood & Eagly, 2015). For example, feminine gender expression includes wearing long hair, choosing decorative clothing, speaking in gentler or more accommodating ways, and engaging in less physically aggressive forms of recreation (Brownmiller, 2013; Hall, 1985; Hively & El-Alayli, 2014; Kachel et al., 2016; Ridgeway, 2011; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In contrast, masculine gender expressions include wearing short hair, selecting conventionally male-typed clothing, adopting a more assertive and dominant communicative style, and participating in competitive sports or physically demanding recreational activities (Ellemers, 2018; Helgeson, 1994; Kachel et al., 2016; Ridgeway, 2011; Unger, 1979).

Importantly, individuals differ in the extent to which they intend to express femininity and masculinity, and this variation is shaped by both individual and contextual factors (Aleshire, 2016; Anderson, 2020; Diamond, 2020). At the individual level, one important factor is gender identity (Aleshire, 2016). People tend to express their gender in ways that align with the traits, behaviors, and self-presentation styles stereotypically associated with the gender group they identify with (Aleshire, 2016). Another factor is sexual orientation: sexual minority women may express greater masculinity, whereas sexual minority men may express greater femininity (Aleshire, 2016; Anderson, 2020; Diamond, 2020).

Individual choice is, however, always embedded within wider social, cultural, and structural conditions. One particularly pervasive and important structural condition is gender inequality, which reflects the unequal distribution of power, resources, opportunities, and rights between women and men within a society (Dastidar, 2018; Ridgeway, 2011). Objective gender inequality can shape people's social environments, while some psychological effects of inequality may emerge only when people become aware of and perceive such inequality (Jetten & Peters, 2019; Klebl & Jetten, 2024). One such psychological consequence may be changes in how people intend to express their gender. However, whether and how perceived gender inequality shapes people's intended gender expression remains unclear.

Perceived gender inequality may influence how people intend to express their gender because it makes them aware of the different social positions of men and women. Specifically, men are often seen as having a social advantage, while women are often seen as being in a less advantaged position (Ridgeway, 2011; Ridgeway et al., 1985). Recognizing these differences in social position can shape perceptions of relative group status, that is, perceptions of which group holds greater social value, power, and prestige (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Because men occupy an advantaged position and women occupy a disadvantaged position, men are generally regarded as the higher-status group and women as the lower-status group (Berger et al., 1998; Ridgeway, 2011). Given women's lower-status position as a group, they anticipate greater devaluation, disadvantage, and unfair treatment on the basis of their group membership (Branscombe et al., 1999). In response, women may engage in an individual mobility strategy by distancing themselves from the disadvantaged ingroup and moving toward the higher-status outgroup (Jetten et al., 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987; van Veelen et al., 2020). In the gender domain, this distancing and movement toward the higher-status group may be reflected in increased masculine gender expression (van Veelen et al., 2020). Accordingly, it is possible that, under higher versus lower perceived gender inequality, women may intend to express their gender in more masculine ways.

Previous research has not directly examined whether women intend to express their gender in more masculine ways when they perceive higher rather than lower levels of gender inequality. However, related research offers some support for this idea. Most of this work has focused on specific groups of women, such as women leaders or women working in male-dominated organizations. For example, in gender-unequal organizations, female leaders who anticipate devaluation due to their gender may distance themselves from other women and present themselves as distinct from them (van Veelen et al., 2020).

These female leaders also tend to present themselves in more masculine ways, emphasizing assertive, competitive traits (Derks et al., 2011, 2016). This idea is also supported by qualitative studies investigating how women shape their gender expression in gender-imbalanced environments and male-dominated industries such as construction, engineering, and manufacturing (Ely, 1995; Hatmaker, 2013; Kragt & Day, 2015; Norberg & Johansson, 2021). For instance, in the construction industry, which remains highly masculine due to its cultural emphasis on toughness, physical strength, and risk-taking, women often strive to adjust their gender expression to fit in, for example, by dressing less femininely or working hard to be seen as "one of the guys" (Norberg & Johansson, 2021). Similar patterns emerge across other male-dominated industries: women often strategically present themselves in more masculine ways by participating in male-dominated social activities or wearing loose-fitting, gender-neutral clothing, while simultaneously avoiding feminine gender expressions (Denissen, 2010; Dozier, 2017; Mavin & Yusupova, 2023; Meister et al., 2017).

Beyond shaping women's own intended gender expression, higher, compared with lower, perceived gender inequality may also shape how women evaluate and what they prefer in others' gender expression. This is because when gender inequality is perceived as high rather than low, men are seen as the higher-status group. As a result, masculinity is viewed as having greater status and value than femininity (Berger et al., 1998; Ridgeway, 2011; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Consequently, under these conditions, women may be more likely to value and prefer more masculine expressions in others. Although direct evidence remains limited, this remains a theoretically plausible possibility (Brooks et al., 2011; Moreno-Bella et al., 2019).

However, it is also possible that women intend to express their gender in more feminine ways under higher, compared to lower, perceived gender inequality. In addition to potentially motivating an individual mobility strategy, higher (vs. lower) perceived gender inequality also accentuates the perceived differences between men and women as two distinct social groups (Reimer et al., 2022; Turner et al., 1987). As women become aware of the greater differences between men and women as social groups, gender becomes a more salient basis for self-categorization (Turner et al., 1987; Voci, 2006). According to self-categorization theory, when a social identity becomes salient, people are more likely to self-stereotype by aligning their behavior, appearance, and interaction style with the traits and norms stereotypically associated with their group (Ellemers, 2018; Reimer et al., 2022; Turner et al., 1987). In the context of gender expression, this may mean that women become more likely to align their gender expression with femininity. Accordingly, under higher versus lower perceived gender inequality, women may instead be more likely to intend to express their gender in more feminine ways.

There is currently limited direct evidence that higher perceived gender inequality or heightened gender identity salience leads women to express greater femininity. However, prior research suggests that heightened gender identity salience can lead women to engage in behaviors that are stereotypically associated with women (Cadinu et al., 2005; Hively & El-Alayli, 2014). For example, when their gender identity is more salient, women are less likely to engage in competitive behaviors, demonstrate less assertiveness (Bowles et al., 2007), exhibit less ambition (Bursztyn et al., 2017), take fewer risks (Booth

& Nolen, 2012), and participate less often in competitive sports and competitions (Booth & Yamamura, 2018; Evaldsson, 2003; Hively & El-Alayli, 2014).

Additionally, when gender is more salient and women self-categorize as women, they may prefer others who express their gender in more feminine ways (Steffens et al., 2021; Turner et al., 1987). Although direct evidence for this possibility is limited, related research suggests that when a social identity becomes salient, people tend to evaluate others more positively when those others express traits and behaviors that are typical of the salient identity group (Hogg, 2001; Latrofa et al., 2012; Steffens et al., 2021).

As discussed, we propose that when women perceive higher levels of gender inequality compared to lower levels, they might intend to express their gender in either a more masculine or a more feminine way. These possibilities are important because shifts in women's intended gender expression carry social consequences. Women who act more masculinely are often judged as less warm or likable (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 2001). At the same time, behaving in more feminine ways may conform more closely to gender stereotypes, but it does not always confer the same level of respect or influence as behaving in more masculine ways (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Although our central focus was women's own intended gender expression, we also investigated whether perceived gender inequality shaped women's preferences for others' gender expression. This allowed us to test whether the effects of perceived gender inequality extended beyond self-expression to broader social evaluation (Mast & Hall, 2017).

The Present Study

The present research examined how different levels of perceived gender inequality shaped women's intended gender expression and their preferences for gender expression in others. Study 1 tested how higher (vs. lower) perceived gender inequality shaped women's intended gender expression, treating masculinity and femininity as opposite poles of a single continuum to identify the direction of the shift. We additionally explored whether perceived gender inequality shaped women's preferences for gender expression in others, specifically their preferences for a close coworker's gender expression and for a gendered leadership style.

Study 2 built on Study 1 by seeking to replicate the effect of perceived gender inequality on women's intended gender expression while addressing two limitations. First, Study 1 measured masculinity and femininity as opposite ends of a single continuum, although they may not always operate as direct trade-offs (Wood & Eagly, 2015). Study 2 therefore assessed how women intended to express their gender by measuring their intended levels of masculinity and femininity separately.

Second, Study 2 extended Study 1 by adding a female-advantaged inequality condition, alongside a male-advantaged inequality condition and a control condition, to examine whether women shifted specifically toward masculinity or more generally toward the gender expression associated with the advantaged group under conditions of higher perceived gender inequality. If women adjusted their gender expression

to align with the advantaged gender group, we predicted that they would intend to express their gender in more masculine ways under male-advantaged conditions than under the other conditions, and in more feminine ways under female-advantaged conditions than under the other conditions.

Study 1

The primary aim of Study 1 was to examine whether perceived gender inequality influenced how women intended to express femininity and masculinity. We proposed two possibilities. First, under higher (vs. lower) perceived gender inequality, women would intend to express their gender in more masculine ways while also preferring more masculine gender expression in others. Alternatively, under higher, compared with lower, perceived gender inequality, women would intend to express their gender in more feminine ways while preferring more feminine gender expression in others. The study was preregistered on OSF (anonymized preregistration link).

In an additional exploratory analysis, we examined whether benevolent sexism and gender identification moderated the effect of perceived gender inequality on women's intended gender expression. Benevolent sexism was included because it is associated with stronger endorsement of traditional gender norms among women (Bareket & Fiske, 2023). Thus, women higher in benevolent sexism may be especially likely to respond to perceived gender inequality in ways that reinforce feminine expression, whereas women lower in benevolent sexism may be more likely to shift toward masculine expression. Gender identification was included because stronger identification with one's gender group shapes how women respond to perceived gender inequality (Derks et al., 2016; van Veelen et al., 2020). Women with higher gender identification have been found to be less likely to adopt an individual mobility strategy and therefore less likely to increase their masculinity under higher (vs. lower) perceived gender inequality (Derks et al., 2016; van Veelen et al., 2020).

Participants

A power analysis conducted in *G*Power determined that a minimum sample size of 101 participants was required to achieve sufficient power (> 80%) to detect a medium-to-small effect size ($f^2 = 0.08$) at $\alpha = .05$. A total of 201 participants were initially recruited through Prolific using a prescreening filter targeting individuals living in the United States who identified as women. However, three participants were excluded from the final sample because they reported a gender identity that did not meet the study's eligibility criteria: one identified as a man, one as non-binary, and one selected "prefer not to say" option. The final analytic sample therefore included 198 participants who identified as women. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 55 years ($M = 36.9$, $SD = 10.7$ years; range = 18–55 years). Ethnic background was self-reported, with most participants identifying as White ($n = 106$), followed by Black ($n = 43$), Asian ($n = 25$), Hispanic/Latino ($n = 14$), Multiracial ($n = 6$), Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander ($n = 3$), and Middle Eastern ($n = 1$). No participants identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, and no one selected the "Other" option.

Procedure and Materials

In this study, we randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions. We asked them to imagine that they were citizens of an imaginary country named Nahm, which had either high or low gender inequality. To manipulate perceived gender inequality, we presented participants with a brief country profile that included three indicators: (a) the Gender Inequality Index (GII), accompanied by a bar chart showing Nahm relative to several other countries; (b) the national gender pay gap, presented as men's and women's average hourly wages; and (c) gender representation in leadership positions, presented as the proportion of men and women in leadership.

In the high perceived gender inequality condition, we described Nahm as having a high GII, a large pay gap in which men earned substantially more than women, and an underrepresentation of women in leadership. In the low perceived gender inequality condition, we described Nahm as having a low GII, a minimal pay gap in which men and women earned similar hourly wages, and near-equal representation of women and men in leadership. Participants viewed these descriptions alongside the corresponding graphs for each condition.

Then, participants indicated how they intended to express their gender in the fictional country of Nahm. They first selected an avatar that best represented their preferred self-presentation along a femininity–masculinity spectrum. The avatar set varied systematically in perceived femininity, with the leftmost figure representing the highest level of femininity and each figure to the right reflecting progressively lower femininity. The avatars were generated using generative artificial intelligence (AI) to vary facial features associated with perceived femininity. This ordering was validated in a pilot study in which participants completed all pairwise comparisons among the four avatars and selected which face in each pair appeared more feminine. Paired-samples *t* tests showed that all faces differed significantly from one another; all *ps* < .001 (Fig. 1), confirming that the avatars represented distinct levels of perceived femininity.

Figure 1

The Four-Avatar Stimuli Set Used to Assess Preferred Gender Presentation

We adapted a set of items from traditional femininity and masculinity scales (Kachel et al., 2016) to assess participants' intended gender expression. Items included "I am expected to be," "I would like to be perceived as," "I would like to behave in a way that is," and "I would like to engage in activities that are" (1 = *Very Feminine*, 6 = *Very* Masculine; α = .87).

Preference for others' gender expression was assessed using two items along a femininity–masculinity spectrum. Participants indicated whether they preferred someone they worked closely with to behave more femininely or more masculinely, as well as their preferred leadership style. Items included "I would

like to have a leader with a leadership style that is…" and "I would like someone I work closely with to behave in a way that is…" (1 = *Very Feminine*, 6 = *Very Masculine; α* = .74).

Participants' benevolent sexism was assessed using six items from the Benevolent Sexism subscale of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Rollero et al., 2014; *α* = .90). We selected this subscale because our study focused on women as participants, and benevolent sexism, unlike hostile sexism, is more likely to be internalized and seen as subjectively positive by women. Sample items reflected beliefs that idealize women as pure, morally superior, or in need of male protection and financial support.

Participants' identification with women was assessed using the full four-item Identification with Women Scale (van Breen et al., 2017). Items included "I identify as a woman," "I have strong ties with other women," "Being a woman is an important part of my self-image," and "Being a woman is an important part of how I see myself" (*α* = .79).

Results

Manipulation Check

We conducted a linear regression to test whether the perceived gender inequality conditions (coded: low = 0, high = 1) influenced participants' perceptions of gender inequality. The analysis revealed a significant effect of condition, $b = 6.88$, $SE = 0.42$, $t(196) = 16.29$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [6.05, 7.72], with the model explaining 57% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = .57$). Participants in the high perceived gender inequality condition reported significantly higher perceived gender inequality than those in the low perceived gender inequality condition, indicating that the manipulation was successful.

Main Analysis

First, to examine whether perceived gender inequality influenced how female participants intended to present themselves visually through their choice of avatar in the fictional country of Nahm, we conducted a linear regression testing the effect of condition on avatar selection. Avatar choice was coded from 1 to 4, with 1 representing the most feminine avatar and 4 representing the least feminine avatar. The results showed that condition did not significantly predict avatar choice, $b = 0.17$, $SE = 0.14$, $t = 1.24$, $p = .215$, 95% CI [-0.10, 0.44], $R^2 = .008$.

To examine how perceived gender inequality influenced different dimensions of women's intended gender expression, we conducted four linear regressions. Each regression tested whether perceived gender inequality condition predicted a specific aspect of women's intended gender expression. The results showed that perceived gender inequality significantly predicted how women intended to be perceived and how they intended to behave. After correcting for multiple comparisons, both effects remained significant. Specifically, women in the high perceived gender inequality condition intended to be perceived as more masculine than women in the low perceived gender inequality condition. Similarly,

women in the high perceived gender inequality condition intended to behave in more masculine ways than women in the low perceived gender inequality condition. However, perceived gender inequality did not significantly predict how women felt they were expected to be or the kinds of activities they intended to engage in (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Each Dependent Variable

Dependent Variables	**High Gender Inequality**		**Low Gender inequality**	
	M	***SD***	***M***	***SD***
Expectation	2.34[a]	1.73	2.50 [a]	0.97
Perception*	2.63[a]	1.54	2.16[b]	1.04
Behavior*	2.67 [a]	1.45	2.25 [b]	0.87
Activity	2.99 [a]	1.37	2.80 [a]	0.86

Note: 1 = very feminine, 6 = very masculine; Within each row, means with different superscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$.

Table 2
Regression Analyses of Gender Inequality Condition (0 = Low Inequality, 1 = High Inequality) Predicting Self-Gender Expression Outcomes

Dependent variables	***b***	***SE***	**95% CI**	***p***	**FDR *p***
			LL UL		
Expectation	-0.16	0.20	-0.55 0.24	. 429	.429
Perception	0.47	0.19	0.10 0.84	.013*	.032*
Behavior	0.42	0.17	0.08 0.75	.016*	.032*
Activity	0.19	0.16	-0.14 0.51	.258	.344

Note. SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval. * p < .05.

Next, to test whether condition predicted participants' preferred gender expression in others, we conducted two additional linear regressions. One examined participants' preferred leadership style in a leader, and the other examined participants' preferred behavioral style in someone they work closely with. For preferred leadership style, condition did not significantly predict participants' preferences, $b = 0.21$, $SE = 0.19$, $t = 1.15$, $p = .252$, 95% CI [-0.15, 0.58], $R^2 = .01$. For preferred behavioral style in a close collaborator, condition also did not significantly predict participants' preferences, $b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.17$, $t = 0.05$, $p = .961$, 95% CI [-0.33, 0.34], $R^2 < .01$.

Moderation Analysis

To test whether benevolent sexism moderated the effect of perceived gender inequality condition on women's intended gender expression, we examined two dimensions of self-expression: how women intended to be perceived and how they intended to behave. The interaction between perceived gender inequality condition and benevolent sexism was not significant for either outcome. Specifically, for how women intended to be perceived, the interaction was not significant, $b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.14$, $t = 0.21$, $p = .837$, 95% CI [− 0.25, 0.31]. Likewise, for how women intended to behave, the interaction was not significant, $b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.13$, $t = 0.29$, $p = .775$, 95% CI [− 0.21, 0.29]. These findings indicate that the effect of perceived gender inequality condition on women's intended gender expression did not vary as a function of benevolent sexism.

We tested whether gender identification moderated the effect of perceived gender inequality condition on women's intended gender expression. The interaction between perceived gender inequality condition and gender identification was not significant for either outcome. For how women intended to be perceived, the interaction was not significant, $b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.23$, $t = 0.60$, $p = .546$, 95% CI [− 0.31, 0.58]. Similarly, for how women intended to behave, the interaction was not significant, $b = 0.29$, $SE = 0.21$, $t = 1.39$, $p = .168$, 95% CI [− 0.12, 0.69]. These findings indicate that the effect of perceived gender inequality condition did not vary as a function of gender identification.

Discussion

Study 1 showed that under higher (vs. lower) perceived gender inequality, women intended to express their gender in more masculine ways. Specifically, in the high perceived gender inequality condition, compared with the low perceived gender inequality condition, participants reported intentions to be perceived as more masculine and to behave in more masculine ways. These shifts align with an individual mobility strategy, whereby women attempt to move toward the advantaged group by intending to express their gender in ways that align with that group (Derks et al., 2016; van Veelen et al., 2020). Additionally, benevolent sexism and identification with women did not moderate these effects, suggesting that women showed a broadly similar response rather than one shaped by individual differences in benevolent sexism or gender identification.

However, no significant effects were found for participants' preferred self-presentation (avatar selections), perceptions of social expectations, or activity preferences. For the self-presentation measure, responses may have been influenced by attractiveness-related features of the avatar images. Over 80% of participants selected the avatar with the longest hair, suggesting limited variability in responses. Accordingly, it is possible that this measure captured attractiveness-related preferences in addition to perceived feminine gender expression. Also, we did not find significant evidence that women felt that they were expected to be more masculine or intended to engage in more masculine activities under higher (vs. lower) perceived gender inequality. These null effects may reflect differences in what the items capture. Being expected to be masculine may differ conceptually from wanting to be seen that way, and activity-based items may tap a broader and less direct aspect of gender expression than appearance- or presentation-based items.

We also did not find significant effects for preferences regarding others' gender expression. Although this null finding should be interpreted cautiously, it did not provide evidence that the effects of perceived gender inequality extend beyond women's own intended gender expression. Accordingly, Study 2 focused on women's own intended gender expression, which was the primary aim of the research.

Study 2

Study 2 extended Study 1 by addressing two limitations. In Study 1, femininity and masculinity were measured as opposite ends of a single continuum. As a result, it was unclear whether the shift observed under higher perceived gender inequality reflected women's intention to express their gender in more masculine ways, in less feminine ways, or both. These possibilities map onto two components of an individual mobility response: moving toward the advantaged group or distancing from the disadvantaged group (van Veelen et al., 2020). To address this issue, Study 2 measured femininity and masculinity separately.

Second, Study 1 showed that women intended to express greater masculinity under higher perceived gender inequality. However, this finding could be interpreted in two ways. Women may have intended specifically to express greater masculinity, or they may have intended to express characteristics associated with whichever gender group held the advantaged position. To distinguish between these explanations, Study 2 included a female-advantaged inequality condition, alongside a male-advantaged inequality condition and a control condition with no explicit gender inequality. If women adjusted their gender expression to align with the advantaged gender group, we predicted that they would intend to express their gender in more masculine ways in the male-advantaged condition than in the other conditions, and in more feminine ways in the female-advantaged condition than in the other conditions. These predictions were preregistered on OSF.

Method

Participants

We conducted a power analysis in *G*Power, which indicated that a minimum sample size of 200 participants was required to achieve sufficient power (> 80%) to detect a medium effect size ($f = 0.25$) at $\alpha = .05$. We recruited a total of 300 participants through Prolific. Seven participants were excluded because they did not identify as women: two identified as men ($n = 2$), four as nonbinary ($n = 4$), and one preferred not to disclose their gender ($n = 1$). The final analytic sample therefore comprised 293 women (M_{age} = 35.70 years, SD = 10.40 years; age range = 18–55 years), all of whom resided in the United States. In terms of ethnicity, 52.55% identified as White, 9.21% as Hispanic/Latino, 15.69% as Black, 16.72% as Asian, 3.07% as Multiracial, 0.34% as American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.34% as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, 0.68% as Middle Eastern, and 1.36% selected "Other."

Procedure and Materials

We randomly assigned participants to one of three scenario conditions and asked them to imagine living in an imaginary country named Nahm: (a) a male-advantaged inequality condition, (b) a female-advantaged inequality condition, or (c) a control condition with no explicit gender inequality. In the male-advantaged inequality condition, men earned substantially more than women and held most leadership roles. In the female-advantaged inequality condition, women earned substantially more than men and held most leadership roles. In the control condition, gender differences in pay and leadership representation were negligible. Women earned only slightly less than men, while women were slightly overrepresented in leadership, resulting in little overall gender inequality. The manipulation varied both the level of perceived gender inequality and which gender group was advantaged. Participants then reported their intended gender expression using visual and self-report measures.

To assess preferences for a more concrete form of gender self-presentation, we used a visual selection task adapted from Fleischmann et al. (2016). Unlike the more abstract measure used in Study 1, this task assessed participants' preferences for visually expressed femininity versus masculinity by asking them to choose between two standardized photographs depicting the same woman dressed in either feminine or masculine clothing. Participants indicated which image better reflected how they intended to express their gender if they were living in the imaginary country of Nahm.

We assessed participants' intentions regarding their own gender expression in the imaginary country of Nahm using an adapted version of the Traditional Masculinity and Femininity Scale (Kachel et al., 2016). Participants responded to the same set of items assessing their perceptions of others' expectations, how they intended to be perceived by others, and how they intended to behave in Nahm. Items included "I am expected to be," "I want to be perceived as," and "I want to behave in a way that is." Each item was rated on a 7-point scale ranging from "not at all masculine/feminine" to "very masculine/feminine." Internal consistency was high for the masculinity scale ($\alpha = .89$) and acceptable for the femininity scale ($\alpha = .62$).

Identification with women was included as an exploratory outcome to examine whether shifts in intended gender expression were accompanied by changes in women's identification with their gender group. We assessed participants' identification with women using the full four-item Identification with Women Scale (van Breen et al., 2017). The items were "I identify as a woman," "I have strong ties with other women," "Being a woman is an important part of my self-image," and "Being a woman is an important part of how I see myself" ($\alpha = .87$).

Results

A one-way ANOVA confirmed that the manipulation of perceived gender inequality was successful. Tukey's HSD post hoc comparisons showed that participants in both the male-advantaged inequality condition and the female-advantaged inequality condition reported significantly higher perceived gender inequality than participants in the control condition. Specifically, participants in both the male-advantaged inequality condition and the female-advantaged inequality condition reported higher

perceived gender inequality than participants in the control condition (*ps* < .001), whereas participants in the male-advantaged inequality condition and the female-advantaged inequality condition did not differ significantly (*p* = .578).

Intended Gender Expression

A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of condition on participants' visual gender expression choices (see Table 3). Participants in the female-advantaged inequality condition were more likely to select the feminine-presenting image than participants in the male-advantaged inequality condition, and this difference was statistically significant (*p* = .018). Neither comparison between an experimental condition and the control condition was statistically significant (*ps* = .322 and .386, respectively).

We also assessed three dimensions of masculine gender expression using self-report items that asked how masculine participants (1) felt they were expected to be, (2) intended to be perceived by others, and (3) intended to behave. All items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all masculine) to 7 (extremely masculine). One-way ANOVAs revealed significant effects of condition on all three items (see Table 3).

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analyses of Variance in Masculine Gender Expression

Measure	**Male-Advantaged**		**Female-Advantaged**		**Control**		***F(2,290)***	***η^2***	***p***
	M	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***			
Manipulation	8.79	2.85	9.18	2.32	1.49	3.00	246.30	.63	< .001
Appearance	1.51	0.50	1.70	0.46	1.61	0.49	3.73	.03	.025
Expectation	2.89	2.13	1.57	1.30	1.59	0.96	23.31	.14	< .001
Perception	3.03	1.88	1.65	1.20	1.58	0.19	33.78	.19	< .001
Behaviors	3.27	1.90	1.79	1.17	1.85	1.03	34.04	.19	< .001

Note. Manipulation: 1 = very low inequality, 10 = very high inequality. Appearance: 1 = masculine fit, 2 = feminine outfit. Expectation, perception, and behaviors: 1 = not at all masculine, 7 = extremely masculine.

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics and omnibus ANOVA results. We conducted Tukey's HSD post hoc comparisons to identify which conditions differed. For masculine expectation, participants in the male-advantaged inequality condition reported significantly higher scores than participants in the control condition (*p* < .001) and the female-advantaged inequality condition (*p* < .001). Participants in the control condition and the female-advantaged inequality condition did not differ significantly (*p* = .994). A similar pattern emerged for masculine perception. Participants in the male-advantaged inequality condition reported significantly higher scores than participants in the control condition (*p* < .001) and the female-

advantaged inequality condition ($p < .001$), whereas participants in the control condition and the female-advantaged inequality condition did not differ significantly ($p = .934$). The same pattern was observed for masculine behavior. Participants in the male-advantaged inequality condition reported significantly higher scores than participants in the control condition ($p < .001$) and the female-advantaged inequality condition ($p < .001$). Again, participants in the control condition and the female-advantaged inequality condition did not differ significantly ($p = .958$).

This pattern is illustrated in Fig. 2

Figure 2

Masculinity Ratings Across Gender Expression Variables

Note

Error bars represent ± 1 standard error of the mean

We also assessed three dimensions of feminine gender expression using self-report items that asked how feminine participants (1) felt they were expected to be, (2) intended to be perceived by others, and (3) intended to behave. All items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all feminine) to 7 (extremely feminine). One-way ANOVAs revealed significant effects of condition on the expectation and behavior items (see Table 4).

Table 4

Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analyses of Variance in Feminine Gender Expression

Measure	**Male-Advantaged**		**Female-Advantaged**		**Control**		***F*(2,290)**	η^2	***P***
	M	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***			
Expectation	4.34	2.05	5.49	1.40	4.36	2.65	9.63	.06	< .001
Perception	4.68	2.36	5.30	1.46	5.11	2.18	2.35	.02	.073
Behavior	4.14	1.76	5.61	1.52	4.59	1.47	22.13	.13	< .001
Note: 1 = not at all feminine, 7 = extremely feminine									

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics and omnibus ANOVA results. Tukey's HSD post hoc comparisons revealed that, for feminine expectation, participants in the female-advantaged inequality condition reported significantly higher scores than participants in the control condition ($p < .001$) and the male-advantaged inequality condition ($p < .001$). Participants in the control condition and the male-advantaged inequality condition did not differ significantly ($p = .998$). In contrast, no significant pairwise differences were observed for feminine perception, as none of the comparisons reached significance (all $ps \geq .068$). For feminine behavior, the pattern paralleled that observed for feminine expectation: participants in the female-advantaged inequality condition reported significantly higher scores than

participants in the control condition ($p < .001$) and the male-advantaged inequality condition ($p < .001$), whereas participants in the control condition and the male-advantaged inequality condition did not differ significantly ($p = .114$). This pattern is further illustrated in Fig. 3.

Figure 3

Femininity Ratings Across Feminine Gender Expression

Note

Error bars represent ± 1 standard error of the mean

In an exploratory analysis, we examined identification with women. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of condition on participants' identification with women, $F(2, 290) = 39.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .22$. Tukey's HSD post hoc comparisons indicated that participants in the male-advantaged inequality condition ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.82$) reported significantly lower identification with women than participants in both the control condition ($M = 6.28$, $SD = 0.83$), $p < .001$, and the female-advantaged inequality condition ($M = 6.49$, $SD = 0.79$), $p < .001$ (see Fig. 4). No significant difference was observed between the control condition and the female-advantaged inequality condition, $p = .461$.

Figure 4

Identification with Women Across Condition

Note

Error bars represent ± 1 standard error of the mean

Discussion

The results of Study 2 replicated the core finding of Study 1 and supported the hypothesis that women in the male-advantaged inequality condition intended to express their gender in more masculine ways than women in the control condition and the female-advantaged inequality condition. Specifically, compared with women in the other two conditions, women in the male-advantaged inequality condition reported greater expectations to be masculine, stronger intentions to be perceived as more masculine, and stronger intentions to behave in more masculine ways. Participants also differed in their visual gender expression choices: the masculine-presenting image was selected more frequently in the male-advantaged inequality condition than in the female-advantaged inequality condition, although the difference between the male-advantaged inequality condition and the control condition was not statistically significant.

The results also suggest a similar but directionally opposite pattern in the female-advantaged inequality condition. When women were presented as the advantaged group, participants intended to express their

gender in more feminine ways than participants in the control condition and the male-advantaged inequality condition. Specifically, women in the female-advantaged inequality condition reported greater expectations to be feminine and stronger intentions to behave in more feminine ways than women in the other two conditions. However, the results did not provide evidence that women intended to be perceived as more feminine in the female-advantaged inequality condition than in the other two conditions. Furthermore, women in the female-advantaged inequality condition were more likely to select the feminine-presenting image than women in the male-advantaged inequality condition, although the female-advantaged inequality condition and the control condition did not differ significantly on this measure. Overall, the results of Study 2 suggest that women shifted their intended gender expression toward characteristics stereotypically associated with the socially advantaged group. The ways in which women intended to express masculinity and femininity varied depending on which gender group held the advantaged position.

General Discussion

The present research provides experimental evidence that perceived gender inequality shapes women's intended gender expression. In Study 1, women in the higher (vs. lower) perceived gender inequality condition, in which men were advantaged, intended to express their gender in more masculine ways than women in the lower perceived gender inequality condition. In Study 2, women intended to express their gender in more masculine ways in the male-advantaged inequality condition than in the control condition and the female-advantaged inequality condition, whereas they intended to express their gender in more feminine ways in the female-advantaged inequality condition than in the control condition and the male-advantaged inequality condition. By contrast, we found no reliable evidence that perceived gender inequality influenced women's preferences regarding others' gender expression.

The present findings are consistent with the idea that perceived gender inequality evokes an individual mobility strategy (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). From a social identity perspective, members of disadvantaged groups are argued to pursue individual mobility toward the advantaged group when such movement is perceived as possible (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Specifically, they may seek to distance themselves from their disadvantaged group membership and gain access to the higher-status group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). In relatively fixed categories such as gender, individuals cannot easily leave one group and enter another (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). However, they can still pursue individual mobility symbolically by aligning their behavior, self-presentation, and gender expression with the characteristics associated with the advantaged group (Derks et al., 2016; van Veelen et al., 2020). The present research builds on the individual mobility account within the social identity approach by providing further evidence that individual mobility can occur symbolically (Kang et al., 2016), even when literal movement across group boundaries is constrained. Specifically, our findings show that, in the gender domain, women may symbolically pursue individual mobility by shifting their intended gender expression toward characteristics associated with the advantaged group.

Second, individual mobility can manifest in two related ways: moving away from the disadvantaged ingroup or moving toward the advantaged outgroup (van Veelen et al., 2020). Our studies show that, in the gender domain, individual mobility through gender expression may primarily operate as movement toward the advantaged group rather than movement away from the disadvantaged group. We found that women shifted their intended gender expression toward characteristics associated with the advantaged group rather than away from characteristics associated with the disadvantaged group. However, exploratory analyses suggested that such distancing may be reflected in lower ingroup identification rather than in gender expression per se.

Our findings are consistent with previous research and theorizing. For example, studies of senior women leaders have found that when gender inequality is salient within organizations, women describe and present themselves in ways that emphasize masculine characteristics as a strategy to avoid negative evaluation, marginalization, and unfavorable treatment (Derks et al., 2011, 2016). Qualitative research in male-dominated industries similarly shows that women often adopt more masculine styles of behavior and self-presentation to navigate these environments (Hatmaker, 2013; Meister et al., 2017). Some additional evidence suggests that distancing from one's disadvantaged ingroup may be reflected in attitudes or identification (Derks et al., 2016; Ely, 1995). For example, women may hold more negative attitudes toward their own group or report weaker gender identification when they are in more male-dominated organizations (Derks et al., 2016; Ellemers et al., 2004; Ely, 1995; Veldman et al., 2021). Our findings extend this work by showing that such strategies are not confined to elite or leadership samples but also emerge in broader populations when perceived gender inequality is made salient. Additionally, our findings generalize effects previously observed in more localized settings to broader, societal-level perceived gender inequality.

Beyond supporting an individual mobility account, the present findings point to a broader pattern in how women's intended gender expression shifts in response to perceived gender inequality. Specifically, women's intended gender expression may shift toward either femininity or masculinity, depending on whether women or men are socially advantaged in a given context. This perspective contributes to existing understandings of gender expression in several ways. On the one hand, much prior research has conceptualized gender expression, or closely related constructs such as masculinity and femininity, as relatively stable individual-difference dimensions or gender-role orientations (Bem, 1974; Kachel et al., 2016; Verweij et al., 2016). In this tradition, gender expression is often treated as a stable reflection of individuals' underlying identity (Aleshire, 2016). On the other hand, research on identity threat and the queen bee phenomenon shows that gendered self-presentation can shift in response to unequal social environments. However, this work has typically emphasized a single directional pattern, namely women's masculinization in male-dominated contexts (Derks et al., 2016). The present findings extend this literature by showing that such shifts are not limited to masculinization under disadvantage, but more broadly reflect alignment with the gender expression associated with the advantaged group. In this way, how women intend to express their gender can change depending on the structure of inequality.

This finding has broader social implications for how gender expression is shaped across institutional and cultural contexts. For example, in many workplaces, leadership settings, entrepreneurial domains, and competitive industries, men are often perceived as occupying the more advantaged or higher-status position (Mast & Hall, 2017; Meister et al., 2017). In such contexts, individuals may intend to express greater masculinity by presenting themselves in more assertive, agentic, and dominant ways (Dozier, 2017).

By contrast, in contexts where women are perceived as occupying the more advantaged position, such as teaching, nursing, social work, or some crisis-management settings, individuals may intend to express greater femininity (Dinhof & Willems, 2024). In these contexts, they may seek to present themselves in more communal ways and place greater emphasis on interpersonal harmony (Dinhof & Willems, 2024). Thus, perceived gender inequality within a social context can shape how people intend to express their gender.

These expressions may, in turn, influence how they are treated and valued within those contexts (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 2001).

Limitations and Future Directions

Overall, our research yielded important findings and provides a theoretically coherent account of how perceived gender inequality may shape women's intended gender expression. However, two limitations should be acknowledged. First, our operationalization of perceived structural gender inequality was limited to perceptions of economic and labor-market disparities. In the present research, we manipulated perceived gender inequality through information about the gender pay gap, women's underrepresentation in leadership, and the Gender Inequality Index. However, recent work conceptualizes gender inequality as a multidimensional phenomenon that includes not only economic and labor-market inequalities but also domestic divisions of labor, gender-based harassment, and prescriptive social expectations about women and men (Ciaffoni et al., 2025). Our manipulations therefore primarily captured perceived economic and labor-market gender inequality. Future research could examine how perceived gender inequality in other domains shapes women's intended gender expression and whether it elicits convergent or divergent responses.

Second, the ecological generalizability of our findings is limited by the study designs. In the present research, we assessed participants' intended gender expression rather than directly observing shifts in actual gender expression. This decision was based on practical considerations. It is difficult to capture gender expression behaviorally, particularly in a controlled laboratory setting, because gender expression is enacted through a wide range of subtle and context-dependent behaviors. In addition, important aspects of gender expression, such as clothing, hairstyle, and overall appearance (Aleshire, 2016), are difficult to assess realistically in laboratory settings. Directly observing such shifts in naturalistic settings would therefore be methodologically challenging. As a result, our findings are most informative about how women intend to express their gender, rather than how they would necessarily express it in real-world contexts. Future research could strengthen ecological generalizability by examining whether

similar patterns emerge in more naturalistic settings or through observable behavioral expressions of gender.

Conclusion

Gender inequality remains prevalent in contemporary societies. In this research, we examined how women responded to perceived gender inequality through their intended gender expression. Across two studies, our findings suggest that women aligned their intended gender expression with characteristics stereotypically associated with the advantaged gender group. This pattern may reflect symbolic individual mobility, whereby women move symbolically toward the advantaged group through their intended gender expression. This work offers insight into how perceived gender inequality shapes women's intended gender expression. Such shifts may have broader downstream implications because gender expression can influence how women are treated, evaluated, and perceived in social contexts.

Declarations

Data availability

All data, analysis scripts, and study materials are available on OSF via an anonymized view-only link: https://osf.io/k8tej/overview?view_only=3c1e5fb8ff3a4773a782c9fd7fce6860

Ethics Approval

The studies involving human participants were approved by the relevant institutional human research ethics committee. Identifying details have been withheld to preserve anonymity during peer review. The research was conducted in accordance with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2023).

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the studies.

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Author Contribution

S.P. contributed to the conceptualization and design of the studies, data collection, data analysis, and preparation of the original manuscript draft. J.J., M.Y., and C.K. contributed to the conceptualization of

the research, interpretation of the findings, and critical revision of the manuscript. J.J., M.Y., and C.K. supervised the project. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

All data, analysis scripts, and study materials are available on OSF via an anonymized view-only link: https://osf.io/k8tej/overview?view_only=3c1e5fb8ff3a4773a782c9fd7fce6860

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Figures



Figure 1

The Four-Avatar Stimuli Set Used to Assess Preferred Gender Presentation

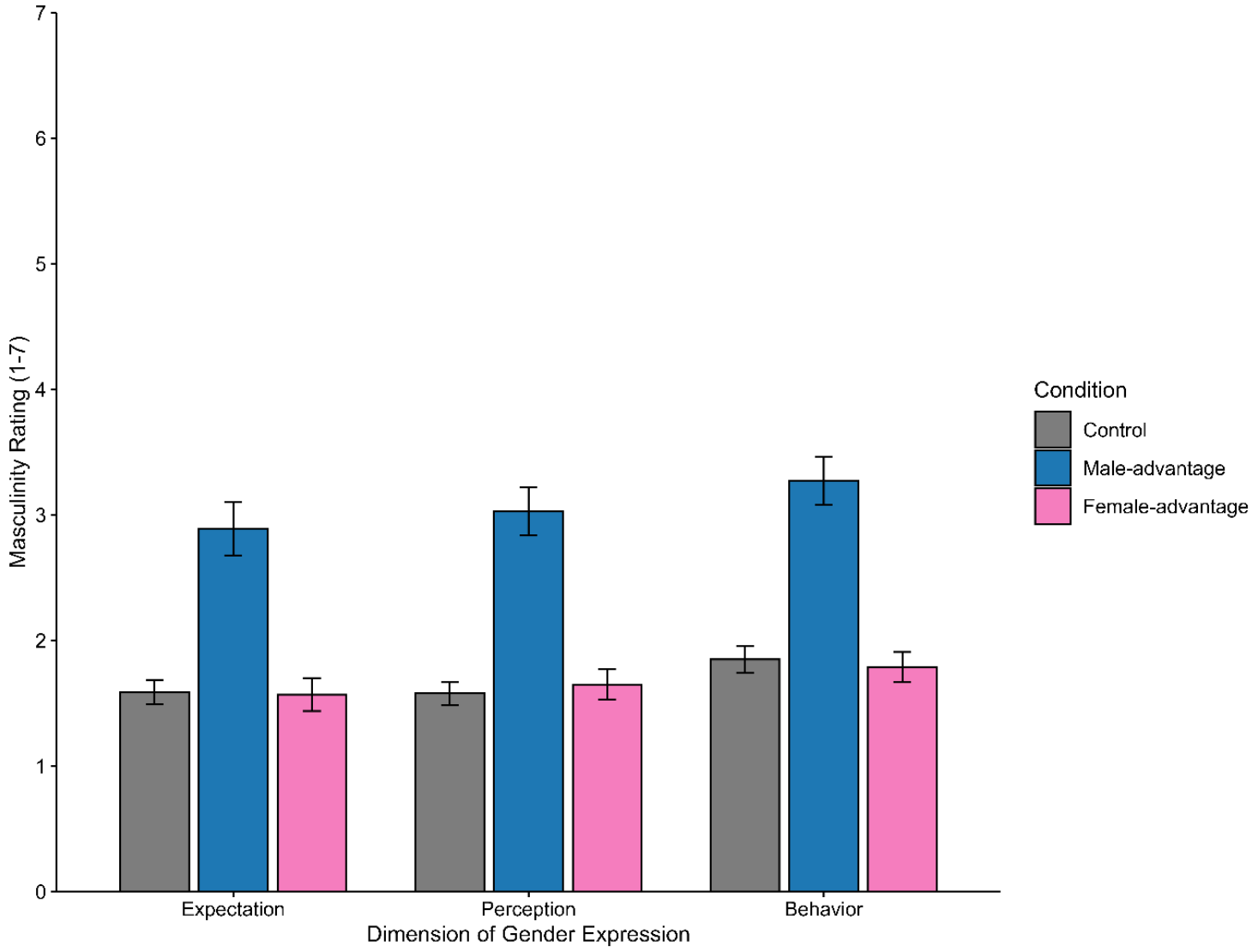


Figure 2

Masculinity Ratings Across Gender Expression Variables

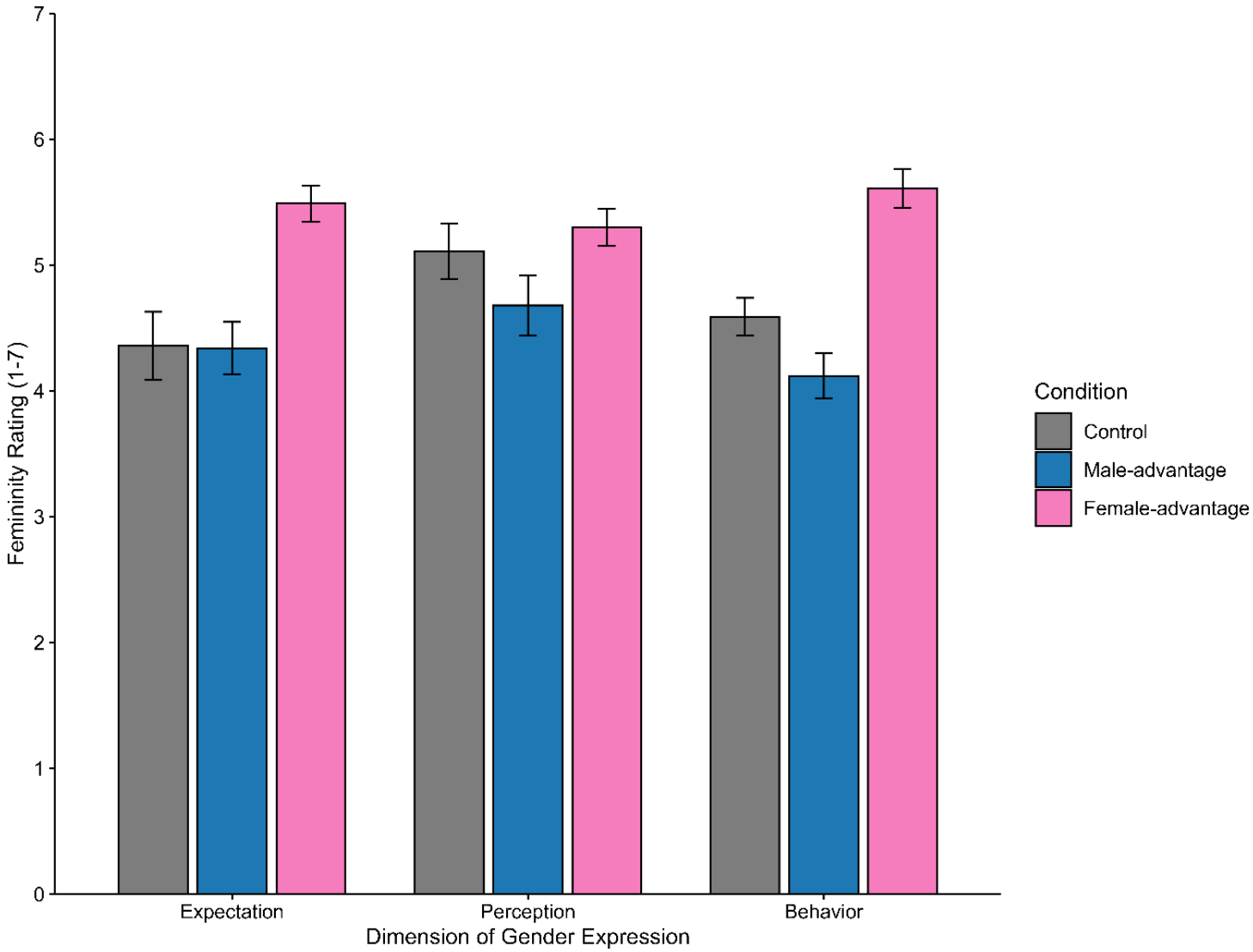


Figure 3

Femininity Ratings Across Feminine Gender Expression

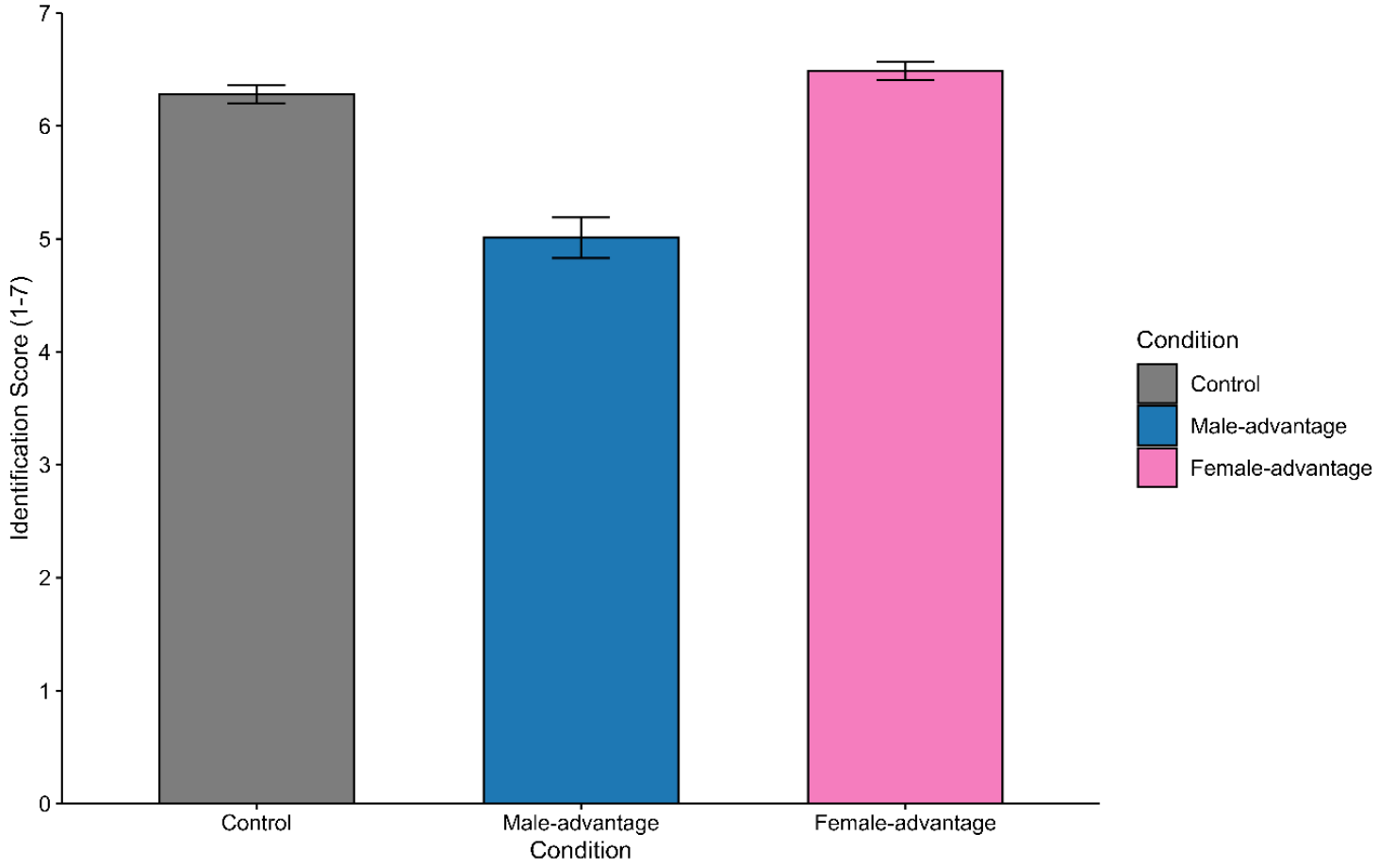


Figure 4

Identification with Women Across Condition