

# Gender Presentation and Membership Bias in Greek Organizations

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**ABSTRACT:** The study objective was to explore the possibility of discrimination and bias based on perceived gender presentation. In this study, subjects were female and male undergraduate students of both Greek and non-Greek affiliations at a university in the Southeastern United States. Subjects were asked to rate the probability of extending group membership to others based on perceived visual gender appearance. In the pilot study, 150 University of Central Florida students were polled to assess three categories of visual gender presentation in pictures: average gender presentation (typical female or male), extreme gender presentation (extremely feminine or extremely masculine) and non-traditional gender presentation (masculine females or effeminate males). Three pictures of each gender presentation category were then chosen for the final study. In both studies, The Crowne-Marlowe (1964) Social Desirability Scale (CMDS) was administered. Results indicated no difference in the ratings between Greek and non-Greek participants. However, the results did show a statistically significant bias against individuals of average and non-traditional gender presentation versus individuals who represented extreme gender presentation. Hence, subjects were more likely to extend membership to individuals who appeared to be extremely feminine or extremely masculine. There was also a statistically significant bias favoring average over non-traditional gender presentation individuals. Additionally, social desirability bias played a significant role in how subjects made their selection. The study not only shows significant relationships between gender presentation and discrimination, but also provides evidence that male students prefer hyper-masculine males and female students prefer hyper-feminine females.

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## MEMBERSHIP BIAS

In recent years, research has shown an increase in tolerance of minority groups. However, many non-traditional gendered persons (masculine females or effeminate males) continue to suffer from discrimination in social settings where hostile attitudes may have a serious negative impact on their lives. Some effort has been made to study attitudes on non-traditional gendered persons in high school and college, but little attention has been given to the issue of non-traditional gendered persons in relation to fraternities and sororities (e.g., Lottes & Kuriloff, 1994; Rhoads, 1995; Yeung & Stomblor, 2000). This is a fruitful area of research as the selection process for potential members of Greek organizations can be rigorous and certain standards may need to be met in order to qualify for membership. Thus, appearance or presentation of self may be an integral part of meeting the qualifications for selection. This study was designed to investigate whether there is bias in the selection of members into fraternities and sororities based on gender presentation.

Research concerning bias against non-traditional gendered persons among fraternities and/or sororities has thus far yielded mixed results (Lottes & Kuriloff, 1994; Rhoads, 1995; Rey & Gibson, 1997; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002). Studies such as Lottes & Kuriloff (1994) show no correlation between bias and Greek affiliation while Rhoads's (1995) case study clearly indicates otherwise. Rhoads cites conversations with fraternity members who reveal that a non-traditional gendered person is not welcome if he is effeminate.

A homogeneous form of discrimination by members of a fraternity or sorority is quite possible. In researching attitudes toward gays and lesbians, Herek (1994) found correlations between hostility towards homosexuals and groups that maintain traditional gender roles:

Greater hostility is predicted by acceptance of traditional gender roles, high religiosity, or membership in a conservative or fundamentalist denomination, political conservatism, and lack of interpersonal contact. In addition, heterosexuals with negative attitudes may be more likely to perceive that their friends agree with their attitude. (Herek, 1994)

The implication of this passage is important when examining fraternities and sororities because the influence of just a few members toward non-traditional gendered persons could affect the rest of their fellow members' judgment. This assertion is supported by research in the field of fraternities that shows consistent homogeneous thinking among fraternity members (Hughes & Winston, 1987).

Part of this research focused on physical non-conformity. Likewise, physical features and physical attractiveness can play a role in the judgment of potential members for fraternities and sororities. This research examined the gender-typed nature of presentation as a form of conformity/non-conformity.

This study predicted that, compared to Non-Greeks, fraternity and sorority members would show bias against non-traditional gendered students based on physical appearance. In other words, masculine-looking women would be excluded from sorority membership and feminine-looking men would be excluded from fraternity membership. This prediction is in agreement with the case studies mentioned above that depict Greek organizations as being discriminatory against homosexuals (Rhoads, 1995; Yeung & Stomblor, 2000).

## METHOD

### Subjects

Subjects for this study were 202 college students consisting of 102 females (50 Greek, 52 non-Greek) and 100 males (50 Greek, 50 non-Greek). In the pilot study, the students were offered extra credit for an undergraduate math course if they participated. In the main study, the students volunteered to complete the survey without the promise of anything in return.

### Design

The study employed a 2 X 2 factorial design, with group affiliation (Greek or non-Greek) and sex of the participant (male or female) as between factor variables.

### Materials

#### *Selection intentions measure*

In measuring gender presentation bias for hypothetical selection of members into fraternities and sororities, a four-point scale was used for judging the pictures: 1 (no, definitely not select the student for membership); 2 (probably not select the student for membership); 3 (probably would select the student for membership) and 4 (yes, definitely would select the student for membership). This scale was used to rate 18 pictures. Specifically, women and men each rated nine of their same-sex counterparts

(men were responding to pictures of men, women were responding to pictures of women). Both sets of pictures displayed three different images of each gender presentation: average gender presentation (typical female or male), extreme gender presentation (extremely feminine or extremely masculine), and non-traditional gender presentation (masculine females or effeminate males).

#### *The Crowne-Marlowe (1964) Social Desirability Scale (CMDS)*

In both studies, the Crowne-Marlowe (1964) Social Desirability Scale (CMDS) was administered. This scale was used to assess the subjects' social desirability bias (i.e., their desire to agree with what is considered socially normal). The scale was comprised of 13 true or false statements in which subjects decided how the statements pertained to them. A score of 6.5 or above indicates a high likelihood of answering questions in a socially desirable manner, 6.4 or below indicates low likelihood of social conformity. For example, if a subject had a high likelihood of answering questions in a socially desirable manner, they were less likely to make truthful responses when rating the pictures.

### Procedure

#### Pilot Study

This project was reviewed and approved by the UCF Institutional Review Board (IRB). A pilot study was done to determine which pictures would be included in each sex's set of nine. In the pilot study, the students were offered extra credit for an undergraduate math course if they participated. Each student was given a consent form to sign at the beginning of each survey. A total of 150 college students was asked to rate a series of 40 photographs containing both male and female participants, using a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (very feminine) to 7 (very-masculine). The subjects also completed the Crowne-Marlowe (1964) Social Desirability Scale (CMDS), C-Form-M. Three pictures from each gender presentation category and sex (nine males, nine females) were chosen by the researchers based on overall results of the pilot study. The results were calculated by obtaining a mean score on the seven-point Femininity/Masculinity Scale for each individual picture. The pictures chosen for the final study were statistically proven, by mean results, to be the most representative of their gender presentation

category. These pictures were then incorporated into the main survey in three categories of gender presentation: average gender presentation (typical female or male), extreme gender presentation (extremely feminine or extremely masculine), and non-traditional gender presentation (masculine females or effeminate males).

### Main Study

Two-hundred-and-two other college students volunteered to complete the survey at an unmarked table outside the student union on the campus. Subjects in the study were all college students ranging in class standing: freshmen 27.2%, sophomores 22.8%, juniors 21.8% and seniors 25.3%. Male subjects accounted for 49% (n=93) with a mean age of 21 years, and females accounted for 51% (n=96) with a mean age of 20 years. Thirteen subjects were dropped because they did not complete their surveys. Each student was given a consent form to sign at the beginning of each survey. The survey asked subjects to rate nine same-sex photographs on the hypothetical selection for membership into a fraternity or sorority. In measuring gender presentation bias for hypothetical selection of members into fraternities and sororities, a four-point scale was used for judging the pictures: 1 (no, definitely not select the student for membership); 2 (probably not select the student for membership); 3 (probably would select the student for membership); and 4 (yes, definitely would select the student for membership). The survey also included the Crowne-Marlowe (1964) Social Desirability Scale (CMDS), C-Form-M. After completion of the survey, subjects were given a debriefing form explaining the study and they were offered a chance to ask any questions concerning the study. The study was conducted on campus during late mornings (11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.) and in mid-afternoons (2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.) on weekdays.

The hypothesis was originally developed to investigate the acceptance rate of non-traditional gendered students. However, the investigation may suffer from limitations. The effect that social desirability had on subjects' answers is one major problem. The subjects showed a mild trend of social desirability or social bias in answering questions on the survey in the final study (not the pilot study). This suggests that the subjects choose answers to agree with what is considered the social norm in the selection of hypothetical candidates for membership to a Greek organization. Additionally, Greeks have some basis for making their judgments (i.e., they are more familiar with what types of persons are likely to be admitted/rejected) but non-Greeks are asked to select without

such experience. This differential familiarity may affect responses. In addition, the researchers did not obtain some demographic background information on the participants, such as religion, socio-economic status, race, etc. However, there are data on the class standing and age of the participant. Furthermore, the researchers did not control for all the variables that individuals in the pictures possess, any of which may be a basis for prejudice. For example, if a subject had to rate someone in one of the pictures that they are prejudiced against based on race, their answer may not be truly based on judgment of gender presentation. We cannot tell from the data shown precisely which characteristics generate variable ratings. Minor problems include distance between subjects when completing the survey and the subjects' available time to complete the survey (in a hurry vs. had available time). Some solutions that could have alleviated these problems were providing a more controlled setting and administering the survey with specified distance from others (i.e. one foot, two feet, etc.). As a note, facial attractiveness was not overlooked as being a problem. It was to come across as a factor in the subjects' decisions in rating facial gender appearance to members of their own sex. Many of the social behaviors and traits inferred from facial attractiveness are also elements of gender role stereotypes (Friedman & Zebrowitz, 1992).

## RESULTS

To examine how gender stereotyping and appearance affected the decision of membership into a sorority or fraternity, a repeated measures analysis of covariance with social desirability as the covariate was conducted. The two between-subject variables were sex (male, female) and membership in a Greek organization (member, non-member). The within-subject variable was gender presentation (extreme, average, non-traditional). The analyses indicated no significant membership effect; however, there was a significant effect for sex ( $F(df1, df2) = 7.621, p = .006$ ). The difference can be seen in the following means: ([average] males  $x = 2.7249$ , female  $x = 2.3950$ , [extreme] males  $x = 2.9725$ , females  $x = 2.9793$  and [non-traditional] males  $x = 2.6552$ , females  $x = 2.2445$ ). There was also a within-subject effect of gender presentation ( $F = 26.631, p = .000$ ). Our original hypothesis, which stated there would be differences between how Greeks and non-Greeks selected hypothetical members, was not supported. However, all subjects selected those who were of extreme gender presentation more than both the average and non-traditional gender presentation (extreme  $x = 2.979$ ,

average  $x = 2.557$ , opposite  $x = 2.446$ ). Moreover, there was a significant difference between selection of the average and non-traditional gender presentation (average  $x = 2.557$  and non-traditional  $x = 2.446$ ). The results also revealed a significant interaction effect of gender presentation by sex difference ( $F = 11.77, P = .000$ ) (e.g., males were more tolerant towards the non-traditional and average gender roles than females). This difference can be seen in the following means: ([average] males  $x = 2.728$ , female  $x = 2.392$ , [extreme] males  $x = 2.973$ , females  $x = 2.978$  and [non-traditional] males  $x = 2.651$ , females  $x = 2.242$ ). Finally, social desirability had a between-subject effect ( $F = 4.294, p = .040$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The study has shown significant relationships between gender presentation stereotypes and discrimination based on appearance. The findings are in accordance with past research (Rhoads, 1995; Yeung & Stomblor, 2000). The experimental research project's general purpose is to show that significant discriminatory views against non-traditional gendered persons exist in fraternity and sorority organizations (i.e. Greek organizations). It was the view of the researchers that there was bias by Greek organization members at the University in the Southeastern United States. The result showed that there is bias by Greek and non-Greek students toward gender presentation appearance. Furthermore, there was no statistically significant difference between Greek student subjects and non-Greek student subjects in the degree of bias. Although the original hypothesis was rejected, it is clear that bias based on gender-presentation exists on campus. Both Greeks and non-Greeks discriminated mainly against non-traditional gender presentation. The data showed the subjects preferred the extreme gender presentation category (extremely feminine or extremely masculine). There was bias against those of average gender presentation (typical female or male) and non-traditional gender presentation (masculine females or effeminate males) with average gender presentation persons being more acceptable than those in the non-traditional gender presentation category. Both men and women rated extreme gender presentation almost the same; however, males were more tolerant towards the non-traditional and average gender roles than females. Thus, females were less favorable across the board, except for the extreme gender presentation category, and were more likely to prefer membership from the extreme models.

Because both groups showed preference for the extreme category, the study reveals an implicit for males to be hyper-masculine and females to be hyper-feminine. Furthermore, if a potential member is a male and appears hyper-masculine or is a female and appears hyper-feminine, they will have a higher likelihood of being accepted into a fraternity or sorority.

The impact that discrimination may have on non-traditional gendered persons is significant. Non-traditional gendered students could be missing the benefits provided by Greek life. Pike's (2000) study notes certain benefits of having Greek affiliation, such as increased speaking skills and higher sociability. An important benefit of Greek involvement that we feel remains unmentioned are the growth of a member's social capital. Social capital, a core concept in business, economics, organizational behavior, political science, and sociology, is defined as the advantages created by a person's location in a structure of relationships. It explains how some people gain more success in a particular setting through their superior connections to other people. There are in fact a variety of inter-related definitions of this term, which has been described as "something of a cure-all" (Portes, 1998). Furthermore, in the work of Hanifan (1920), Jacobs (1961), Loury (1977), Bourdieu (1983), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993; 1995; 1996), the theory of social capital has come into prominence. Pierre Bourdieu has been heralded by some as being the origin of contemporary usage of the term (Everingham, 2001). Bourdieu places the source of social capital, not just in social structure but in social connections. Likewise, Bourdieu (1983) distinguishes between three forms of capital: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. He defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1983). Some scholars postulate that high social capital correlates with factors such as higher access to social networks, job opportunities, and higher income. Therefore, the question arises: if non-traditional gendered students are being denied access to Greek involvement, is their social capital limited and/or stifled? This research has explored the possibility of discrimination based on perceived gender presentation.

The repeated measures analysis of covariance design may actually reflect other real-life scenarios besides Greek

membership; namely, selection bias based on appearance in various societal arenas ranging from selection in religious leadership, higher education, political terrain, the workplace, etc. More specifically, bias based on gender presentation and its effect has been the discriminatory factor studied. According to Gender Public Advocacy Coalition (GPAC), gender stereotyping refers to the act of trying to enforce individuals to conform to gender stereotypes, as well as negative expectations based on those stereotypes (GPAC, 2003). For instance, firing an aggressive female manager, or assuming female employees will be too submissive for management, are examples of gender stereotyping. Furthermore, an individual who is perceived as not fitting the social norms of masculinity for a man or femininity for a woman could possibly become targets of harassment. One such target, Anne Hopkins, the plaintiff in the Supreme Court's Hopkins v. Price Waterhouse case, sued her employer because she was fired for being too aggressive. Another example is African-American bus-driver Willie Houston, who was killed while celebrating his engagement by a man who became enraged seeing Willie holding a blind friend on one arm and his fiancée's purse on the other.

In addition to physical harm, such discriminatory actions or judgments could have serious psychological effects on the individual being discriminated against. Years of systematic discrimination and pressure could affect the nervous system and bodily functions of an individual. GPAC provides claims of the psychological damage inflicted on an individual. Children of all ages--from toddlers to teens--complain of harassment or bullying to force them to conform to gender norms. The trauma and pressure of trying to conform to gender norms can create long-term problems. A recent university study showed that adherence to strict codes of masculinity -- hardness, aggressiveness, and emotional distance -- is a leading cause in academic underachievement among teenage boys (GPAC, 2003).

## CONCLUSIONS

Although this study does not support its original hypothesis, the researchers believe the results will contribute to breaking down the barriers of discrimination based on gender role stereotyping. Likewise, a way in which this particular study could help eliminate discrimination of individuals who display non-traditional gender presentation were if the findings were used for public policy, institutional policy reforms, etc. The dependent variable measuring gender bias is obscured with significant results of

discrimination against others based on gender presentation stereotyping. The implications of unequal judgment based on extreme, average, and non-traditional gender presentation could suggest bias in the selection of candidates for membership into a fraternity or sorority. The researchers suggest the leadership of Greek organizations implement diversity and inclusiveness workshops with their members. Additionally, the results can provide broader implications on American society. Ultimately, we feel an individual's bias could lead to group discrimination, which, in turn, affects the availability of opportunities to those who do not conform to society's schema for traditional gender presentation.

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