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Creative Gender Expression Performativity As a Coping Mechanism for Minority Stress

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Abstract

Creative Gender Expression Performativity may be a coping mechanism for dealing with minority stress in sexual and gender minority populations. The current study suggests the creation of a new scale that measures effortful presentation rather than directional presentation. Rather than examining whether someone identifies as masculine or feminine – the proposed model would instead look at how much effort an individual is putting into their gender expression. In this mixed methods study, participants (N = 187) completed a survey based on gender expression, minority stress, and mental health, while 10 participants completed a qualitative post-survey interview via email. Multiple regressions were performed to examine the relationships between gender expression and negative health outcomes. Tests performed examined relationships amongst factors such as positive gender expression outlook, gender congruence, and self-esteem; and outcomes including depression, anxiety, and anticipated discrimination. Multiple regression analyses revealed that positive perceptions of gender expression acted as a buffer to anticipated discrimination. TGNC individuals experienced lower self-esteem and higher depression levels than cisgender individuals. Qualitative themes uncovered motives behind gender expression, such as coping with minority stress.

Introduction

The Human Rights Campaign (2019) defines gender expression as, “External appearance of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, haircut or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine”. While gender expression may seem like an easy concept, it is much harder to measure accurately. LGBT individuals often score differently on these measures than their cisgender peers, which may be due to higher fluidity of identity. The current study proposes examining gender expression as something performed effortfully rather than innate for queer individuals. Further, little research has been done on the importance of gender expression in minority stress models of LGBT populations. The present study will attempt to remedy that by looking at gender expression theory throughout history and performing a mixed methods study based around minority stress and gender expression dynamics. The study aims to have a working model of creative gender expression performativity as well as a better framework of the role this measure could play in minority stress models.

Gender Philosophy and the Conception of Gender Performativity

The two main theories of gender expression as an effortful act are “Doing Gender” and “Gender Performativity.” Published in the late 80’s, the theories have many common themes beyond the time period in which they were created, as both focus on the idea of gender as an activity that is actively performed (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1988). While they share many similarities, it is essential to differentiate the two based on their core concepts to better understand the role of gender performativity in society.

Doing Gender provides a sociological framework for gender as an act that is enacted daily (West & Zimmerman, 1987). The researchers state that viewing gender as an act shifts

focus from an individual's identity to the outer workings of gender in a society. Furthermore, individuals choose to reflect or express their gender and expect similar presentations from those around them. From the moment a person is assigned a gender at birth, there are expectations for how the individual should exist in the world, and to survive, the individual performs what they have been socialized to see as socially acceptable. There are also a set of rituals that individuals are expected to perform based on their gender. The traditional courting process and the more modern dating are examples of rituals with a set code, with men expected to embody "chivalry," and women never allowed to deny a man's favor (West & Zimmerman, 1987). People are inspired by what they are taught to romanticize as the codes of gender expression. Through these codes, we affirm ourselves as well as form our conceptions of others.

A year later, Judith Butler (1988) would begin to conceptualize the theory of Gender Performativity from the perspective of gender philosophy. Butler presents the world as a stage in which we are all given roles we must perform. Our characters are then interpreted and assigned gender by others from our movements, interests, style, and other minor details. Butler suggests that gender identity only exists as a result of the performance and idealization of a social construct; in accordance, gender cannot exist without the presentation of what is expected. Individuals are expected to embody idealized cultural forms of their gender identity that have been formed by history. Gender performance is often a strategy for survival, rather than a mere performance, and failing to perform can have significant consequences (Butler, 1988). Thus, individuals go through great lengths and pain to perform effectively. The common phrase, "Beauty is pain," brings this idea to reality. Gender performativity is not frequently noticed or is written off as play since recognizing it would disrupt the illusion of gender reality. Gender thus exists purely in this field of active presentation, rather than being passively innate.

Despite the many years since the creation of these theories, feminist psychology has not followed through by developing a method to measure this theory. The current study aims to set the foreground to do so, by conceptualizing these matters as an act of Gender Expression Performativity rather than Gender Performativity. Gender expression is conceptualized as the performance of gender identity. The factors that go into assumed gender and expected performance of gender play mainly into the expectations of gender expression rather than gender identity. While gender is socially constructed, the expectations of performance remain on an individual's gender expression. Given the importance of gender identity in queer populations, especially those that are Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming (TGNC), it is essential to differentiate as a researcher in these communities (Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2014). The current study suggests that gender expression is the medium through which gender expectations are performed.

Gender Expression Performativity in Culture

There are classical examples of recognized performance in societies across cultures. Gender expression performativity has followed many trends in various societies, changing throughout time and geography. Throughout all these variations, gender expression has been a cultural performance. In Albania, people assigned female at birth would take a vow of chastity and live their lives out in masculine familial roles (United Nations Free & Equal Campaign [UN FEC], IDAHOT Committee [IDAHOT], & UCLA Burkle Center for International Relations [UCLA], 2014). In this society, gender expression and gender roles played importance culturally as a type of performance rather than representing gender identity. Gender and its expression as a performance has been carried through history to modern-day in Hawaiian culture. A Māhū is a person who embodies all genders and presents fluidly with their gender expression (Robertson,

1989). Māhū are not held to binaries in terms of their gender identity or expression; amongst them are various people who identify outside of the traditional, western bounds of gender expression. Their gender expression becomes a preformed representation of the idea of gender as a balance between masculine and feminine in the society.

Gender expression becomes an active performance in numerous LGBT-oriented dance clubs across the country. These individuals, who take on exaggerated features of a chosen gender – often different from their own – are participating in "Drag". Drag, originally meaning Dressed like A Girl, is the act of performing gender through exaggerated presentations of gender stereotypes (Strubel-Scheiner, 2011). Drag queens exemplify an extreme end of gender expression performativity by dedicating a part of their lives to gender as a performance. Gender expression takes on a new meaning in drag, as it allows practitioners to become explorers and resist as well as create their own gender norms and trends (Shapiro, 2007). In this culture, those that exhibit gender expression performativity come into an increased understanding of themselves and their gender.

The Creative Aspect of Gender Expression Performativity

While everyone performs gender to an extent, not all do so effortfully and creatively. The term "Gender Creative" is frequently used to refer to individuals, especially children, that do not conform to prescribed expectations of gender expression based on biological sex (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford & Airton, 2016). This definition is akin to "male" children who prefer playing dress up as princesses or individuals that were once fondly called "tomboys". While these children are expressing their creativity through their gender expression, they are recognized only because that aligns differently from the expectations of their sex. The present paper argues that effortful expression is creative regardless of how it aligns with an individual's sex.

Moreover, these terms are often only used for children. A child that grows up to still play with their gender in a way that does not align with what is expected graduates into the categories of "gender variant, gender atypical, genderqueer, or gender nonconforming" (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford & Airton, 2016). The recognition of creativity seems to be lost with age, just as it has been for individuals expressing creatively within their identified gender.

Creativity has often been reserved for the non-living – created by humans, but not on humans; however, in relatively recent years, creativity has begun to be recognized as applying to "body arts." These expressions of creativity include tattoos, makeup, and other permanent or non-permanent body modifications (Jones, 1998).

Creativity has been defined in several ways with various factors. This study will focus on Kharkhurin's definition, in which four aspects: novelty, utility, aesthetics, and authenticity, are required for something to be labeled "creative" (2014). Under these factors, individuals who exemplify CGEP differentiate themselves from those that do not by effortfully performing their gender in the following ways. The performativity brings or builds new aspects onto the existing framework of gender expression. The performance has utility, whether that be political, cultural, expressive, or protective. Aesthetics is easy to view, as the performativity must be appeasing to view as well as build on what is known. Authenticity requires that the performativity must call back to an individual's inner self. These factors are what set an individual's performativity apart in their levels of creativity.

Creative Gender Expression Performativity off the Stage

Gender expression performativity does not have to be as evidently performed as it is in Albanian, Hawaiian, or Western LGBT culture. These individuals may be easier to recognize as having CGEP, but that is likely because the performance is more visible and often goes against

what is expected by others in comparison to performativity that aligns with the expectations of an individual's perceived gender identity. Looking back at Drag Queens, many individuals find that their night jobs follow into their daily life, leading them to take more consideration into their gender awareness (Shapiro, 2007). To these individuals, recognizing gender expression performativity results in an increase in effortful expression in daily life.

Similar themes of performance can be seen outside of these communities. A report from Today and AOL, based on data collected by the Bellomy Research Group, revealed that the average woman spent 55 minutes a day on their hair and makeup (2014). Fifty-five minutes a day equates to roughly 335 hours or 13 days a year spent on makeup and hair alone, not including time spent at hair salons or cosmetic stores. These results indicate the existence of effortful performance of gender expression as, on average, women are spending a large portion of their morning routine to present themselves in a certain way. Based on the 4-criterion structure previously mentioned, creativity is exemplified as well. There is novelty in the individuality of makeup. as trends have pushed towards having makeup become an artistry, to reflect an individual's unique interests (White, 2019). There is utility in the way women wearing makeup are perceived (Miller & Cox, 1982). Beauty vloggers, makeup artists that apply and review make up in front of a camera, voice "the power of makeup" as freeing (White, 2019). Aesthetics are most recognizable, as makeup itself is an aesthetic act. Authenticity also comes into play, as many people put on makeup, to feel like their authentic self. This can be seen in the current makeup movement which calls for using makeup as self-definition (White, 2019). However not all women spend this much time or effort on their make up in comparison to other women. "Beauty gurus," those that are looked up to for their artful makeup looks, implement yet another level of commitment and creativity to this performativity compared to the average woman.

Under these guidelines, individuals who interact with their makeup routines in this matter may represent Creative Gender Expression Performativity.

Compensatory masculinity, or "toxic masculinity," represents Gender Expression Performativity that falls into the realm of creativity. Transgender and cisgender men are susceptible to this form of performativity that involves emphasizing masculinity in response to threat to status (Sasso, 2013). While it does not fall within all of the factors of creativity provided it does meet some levels. The aesthetics factor is evident in its reliance on historical motifs of masculinity, or "what a man should be". Novelty can be seen as it builds on cultural norms of gender expectations. Utility wise, compensatory masculinity may help maintain status by acting as protection to stigma and identity stress. This is most frequently recognized in queer men of color that are on the down-low." These men perform their masculinity in order to disguise or mitigate the loss of structural power from being gay (Ocampo, 2012). This may be because this causes a dissonance between what others expect from the presentation of an individual given their identities and the actual performance. The only factor unmet is authenticity, as the purpose of compensatory masculinity for cisgender men is to act as a mask. This may suggest that CGEP may exist in levels and extents that could be quantifiable.

Singular instances of this behavior are referred to as "manhood acts," which are actions intended to reassert an individual as having male status in the society (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Men who feel their status is threatened exhibit more homophobia, sexism, and desire for dominance (Sasso, 2013). Performance of these acts can be easily seen in areas where there are high volumes of masculine identifying people. For example, research has been conducted on these acts of performance in fraternities across the country. Alcohol in fraternity parties is often used as a mode through which masculinity can be performed by urging competition, sex, and

domination (Sasso, 2015). Men in fraternities often use their ability to drink more effectively (i.e., staying conscious longer while drinking more) to exert their dominance over other men. Men may exhibit these behaviors to maintain their status and appearance of expected performance.

Transgender men often perform masculinity based on ideals and motifs of gender, particularly middle-class masculinity, reporting that it is essential to understand the cultural significance of gender if they are to pass as masculine (Green, 2004). Early on in transition, trans men value masculinity as a way to perform their maleness to the public (Green, 2004). Many transgender men view masculinity as a way to do "being a guy" right (Forshee, 2006). Research has found that later in transition, trans men can integrate feminine and masculine expression as they become more comfortable with the distinction between maleness and masculinity (Green, 2004). Trans men spend much time throughout their transitioning considering masculinity extensively compared to their cisgender peers (Green, 2004; Forshee, 2006). This effort put into the presentation may suggest that trans individuals exhibit more creative performativity compared to their cisgender peers.

The workplace also becomes a breeding ground for Gender Expression Performativity across gender roles. Women often feel that men dominate workspaces, pushing women to be smaller, as they speak louder and spread out physical and in shared spaces (Tyler & Cohen, 2010). Additionally, women reported feeling pressured to decorate their office to appease their peers' expectations or to show that they were capable of the job they were assigned. Men experience similar problems of performance in the workplace. Many men find themselves in masculinity contests at their place of work (Berdahl, Cooper, Glick, Livingston, & Williams, 2018). These competitions often lead to men working significantly longer hours due to their need

to outperform their peers and win incentives (Williams, 2013). Understanding Creative Gender Performativity as a trait may help us better assess the intricacies of the people who create these contests, as well as those who willingly perform.

There are various other ways in which gender expression can be creatively performed. As long as this performance is effortful in its novelty, utility, aesthetics, and authenticity, it ascends from typical Gender Expression Performativity to Creative Gender Expression Performativity. While every individual performs their gender to an extent, it is individuals who are aware and make strides to present themselves in an ideal that truly embodies Creative Gender Expression Performativity. Despite the many examples that can be seen in society, few measures attempt to represent the present trends.

Measures of Gender Expression

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on the nuances between gender and sex. Research studies and applications have begun asking for the two factors in separate questions rather than a ubiquitous "gender." Since 1997, ways of discerning between gender and sexuality have become more sophisticated and less likely to prescribe a "one size fits all" model for identification (The GenIUSS Group, 2013).

The first popularized demographic method of identifying expression was published in 2010 (Wylie, Corliss, Boulanger, Prokop & Austin, 2010). This self-report measure asks participants to rate their appearance and mannerisms on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from very feminine to very masculine. Before this demographic, the Bem Sex-Role Inventory was frequently used to measure gender expression (Freire, Vafaei, Gomes, Barbos, & Guerra, 2017; Taskinen, Suominen, & Mattila, 2016; Ciocca et al., 2016). The Bem Sex-Role Inventory consists of a series of adjectives that are typically attributed to feminine or masculine identities

(Bem, 1974). A cursory Google Scholar search shows 6,660 studies that contain the Bem Sex Role Inventory since 2015. Recent studies have indicated a steady decrease in validity in the inventory, with data showing that young women and men are no longer identifying clearly with the guidelines of what is masculine or feminine (Hoffman & Borders, 2001; Donnelly & Twenge, 2016). Women especially have become much more masculine, scoring at higher levels of androgyny on the scale (Donnelly & Twenge, 2016). This is likely due to a shift of the perceived sex roles of women and away from the original definitions presented by the inventory which defined masculinity as "self-reliant" and femininity as "yielding" (Bem, 1974).

Some researchers have attempted to remedy this disconnect by creating new measures of gender expression. Many of these measures are designed with specific identity groups in mind. A measure for gender expression in regard to sexual minority women specifically was developed based on the stereotypes of masculine and feminine presentation in the women-loving-women community (Lehavot, King, & Simoni, 2011). Another scale similar to CGEP is the genderqueer identity scale (GQI). This scale attempts to measure four factors: challenging the gender binary, social construction of gender, theoretical awareness of gender, and gender fluidity (McGuire et al., 2019). While this scale is similar in that it is a multi-factor examination of gender that looks at how an individual interprets and performs their gender, there are critical differences in the concepts they are measuring. GQI focuses on the deviance from gender expectations in performance rather than on the effort of performance and creativity behind the performance as a whole regardless of directionality. Discrepancy in what is being measured is a theme in the current scales being made, which has left a gap in the existing research.

Concerning Minority Stress and Negative Outcomes

People in groups with minority status are at risk for higher levels of depression and anxiety symptoms due to external stigma (Meyer, 2003). Minority stress exists in two factors: distal stressors and proximal stressors (Meyer, 2015). Distal stressors are external events, such as physical or verbal harassment; while proximal stressors are the internalizations and processing of external events. An example of a distal stressor is being harassed for one's gender expression – being called names or degraded. A proximal stressor is the process of rumination and self-doubt that an individual may experience after negative encounters. Many studies have examined minority stress, but few have looked at gender expression in association, let alone as a coping mechanism. Research has found that misgendering and misinterpretation of gender expression has resulted in increased negative outcomes in TGNC individuals (Mclemore, 2018). While research has been done on gender and sexuality regarding minority stress, little has been done on gender expression.

Research existing on the topic of minority stress is done predominantly on individuals that identify as genderqueer or gender non-conforming, as their Creative Gender Expression Performativity is more easily seen than their gender-aligning peers. Children who play with their gender expression are bullied at higher levels than their peers (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford & Airton, 2016). Genderqueer adults also face more harassment on average than their binary trans and cisgender peers (Lefevor, Boyd-Rogers, Sprague, & Janis, 2019). Much like other minority stress models, social support paired with social coping mechanisms are a significant buffer between discrimination and negative outcomes such as depression and anxiety.

Creative Gender Expression Performativity may also a coping mechanism for minority stress. Gender performativity in the creative aspect can embody utility as a form of protection.

For men hiding their sexual orientation in their unaccepting communities, by performing a hypermasculine, heterosexual façade, the Gender Performativity helps mitigate external stressors (Ocampo 2012). The performance of gender also has been shown to help women feel more accepted and less noticed in the workplace (Tyler & Cohen, 2010). In minority women groups, gender expression has been found to be a protective factor between minority stress and health outcomes (Lehavot & Simoni).

Drag Queens have also report having higher rated self-esteem than their non-drag counterparts (Strubel-Scheiner, 2011). This is significant as drag queens embody gender expression performativity. In other minority groups, self-esteem has been shown to be a buffer between minority stress and depressive symptoms (Wei, Ku, Russel, & Mallinckrodt, 2008). Research has found that in transgender communities, individuals often bond and support each other regarding their gender expression (Sanchez & Vilain, 2009). Through this community connect, a communal self-esteem is created in which individuals feel pride in their identification as transgender. These findings suggest that higher gender expression performativity may buffer the relationship between minority stress and lower self-esteem and self-image.

Research has also indicated that for transgender individuals, this performativity may be essential to being correctly gendered and assuaging proximal stress (Galupo, Farrow, & Lindley, 2019). Transgender men indicate that performing their gender helps them feel more connected with their identity and less susceptible to verbal harassment (Sasso, 2013). Individuals in this study also reported feeling more control over their identity with their gender expression which may indicate that gender expression may be a way to regain control of identity as a form of resilience. Individuals who use their gender expression this way may find that it acts as a buffer for indicators of depression such as derailment.

Derailment is a novel measure that looks at the change of identity over time as a predictor of depressive symptoms (Burrow, Hill, Ratner, Fuller-Rowell, 2018). Research suggests that when individuals feel they have deviated from their past self they are, on average, more likely to exhibit clinically depressive symptoms. The present study posits that positive self-esteem, control, and positive self-ratings of gender expression may help protect from negative outcomes related to derailment motivated depression. Further, as many LGBT individuals experience a change of identity from their previous perception of self, the measure may be less significant for the population.

The Present Study

The purpose of the current study was to conceptualize Creative Gender Expression Performativity (CGEP), and to examine it as a strategy for coping with minority stress. Specifically, using a mixed-methods design, this study examined the relationships between distal and proximal minority stressors and negative and positive mental health outcomes. Participants completed a multi-measure survey examining gender expression and minority stress indicators and (a subset of participants) completed a qualitative interview. The study fills a gap in current understanding of gender expression that uncover motives behind gender expression such as coping with minority stress.

Mental health outcomes were largely analyzed in quantitative data due to limitations in qualitative data collection for predictive sampling. Participants were asked about their experiences with mental health to provide clarity and a more detailed examination of the nuances in the relationship between gender expression and minority stress. Similarly, creative gender expression performativity was predominantly analyzed in the qualitative process due to the lack

of measures targeting this facet of identity. To conceptualize gender expression performativity in quantitative data, related factors, as identified from previous studies, were analyzed – e.g. gender congruence, self-esteem, and positive gender expression measures.

The following hypotheses were tested:

H1: Individuals with higher self-esteem would experience less derailment-mediated depression than their lower self-esteem peers.

H2: Higher levels of self-esteem would predict lower levels of anxiety symptoms through positive outlook of gender expression.

H3: Individuals self-reported gender expression measures would vary significantly from gender expression scores.

H4: Individuals with lower gender congruence would anticipate more discrimination if their gender expression or gender identity were known if they do not have a positive trans identity.

H5: TGNC individuals with higher ratings of gender congruence would experience higher self-esteem and less anxiety and depression related outcomes from Gender Minority Stress than their cisgender counterparts.

Although the qualitative portion of the study did not have specific hypotheses, we did have some expectations. Firstly, it was expected that participants would describe their gender expression in ways that fit into the four criteria: aesthetics, novelty, utility, and authenticity. Further participants would describe their gender expression as improving their overall quality of life and helping them cope with negative experiences. It was suspected that creative gender expression would have a positive impact on individual's lives and suggest distal and proximal motives for performance.

Method

Participants

Participants (N = 187) were recruited via social media outreach via Reddit, Facebook, and Tumblr. Participants were all 18 years or older and lived in the United States at the time of surveying. All identified as being part of the LGBT community. A majority identified as sexual minorities (6.4% straight, 12.3% lesbian, 10.2% gay, 25.1% bisexual, 16.0% pansexual, 10.2% asexual, 3.7% Questioning, and 9.1% Queer). The sample was largely TGNC (n = 139) with a minority identifying as only a sexual minority (n = 49). A close majority of the total participants identified with a binary gender identity (57.7%). Out of 187 participants, 26.7% identified as women, 31.0% men, 20.9% genderqueer, 14.4% another identity, and 6.4% were unsure. Participants were predominantly White (77.8%) with a small Multiracial (10.6%) and African American (4.2%) population represented. Participants were in in their early to mid-twenties on average (M = 24.15, SD = 6.83), but ages ranged from 18 to 59 years old (See Table 1).

Table 1. *Demographic characteristics for total sample and by group*

	Gender minority and/or Sexual Minority (n = 139)	Sexual minority only (n = 49)	Total (N = 187)
Age	18 – 49 (M = 24.01, SD = 6.18)	18 – 59 (M = 25.52, SD = 9.35)	18 – 59 (M = 24.15, SD = 6.83)
Gender Identity			
Woman	26 (13.9%)	24 (12.8%)	50 (26.7%)
Man	48 (25.7%)	10 (5.5%)	58 (31.0%)
Genderqueer	38 (20.3%)	1 (0.5%)	39 (20.9%)
Unsure	8 (4.3%)	4 (2.1%)	12 (6.4%)
Other	27 (14.4%)	0	27 (14.4%)
Sexual Orientation			
Straight (TGNC)	12 (6.4%)	0	12 (6.4%)
Lesbian	11 (5.9%)	12 (6.4%)	23 (12.3%)
Gay	13 (7.0%)	6 (3.2%)	19 (10.2%)
Bisexual	37 (19.8%)	10 (5.4%)	47 (25.1%)
Pansexual	26 (13.9%)	4 (2.1%)	30 (16.0%)

Asexual	14 (7.5%)	5 (2.7%)	19 (10.2%)
Questioning	7 (3.7%)	0	7 (3.7%)
Queer	15 (8.0%)	2 (1.1%)	17 (9.1%)
Other or Prefer not to Answer	12 (6.4%)	1 (0.5%)	13 (6.9%)
Romantic Orientation			
Straight	13 (7.0%)	2 (1.1%)	15(8.0%)
Lesbian	11 (5.9%)	14 (7.5%)	25 (13.4%)
Gay	19 (10.2%)	5 (2.7%)	24 (12.8%)
Biromantic	31 (16.6%)	10 (5.4%)	41 (21.9%)
Panromantic	41 (21.9%)	4 (2.2%)	45 (24.1%)
Aromantic	5 (2.7%)	0	5 (2.7%)
Questioning	11 (5.9%)	1 (0.5%)	12 (6.4%)
Unsure	4 (2.1%)	3 (1.6%)	7 (3.7%)
Other or Prefer not to Answer	12 (6.4%)	1 (.5%)	13 (6.9%)
Race			
Alaskan Native/Native American	0	0	0 (0.0%)
Black/African American	8 (4.2%)	0	8 (4.2%)
Asian	1 (0.5%)	2 (1.1%)	3 (1.6%)
White	112 (59.9%)	35 (18.7%)	147 (78.6%)
Hispanic/Latinx	5 (2.4%)	0	5 (2.6%)
Middle Eastern/North African	2 (1.1%)	0	2 (1.1%)
Other	2 (1.1%)	0	2 (1.1%)
Multiracial/ethnic	17 (9.1%)	3 (1.6%)	20 (10.6%)

Measures

Gender Expression.

Gender Expression was measured using the Open Sex Role Inventory and the Transgender Congruence Scale. These measures indicate adherence to traditional sex role stereotypes and the alignment of gender expression to gender identity.

Sex Role Stereotypes. The Open Sex Role Inventory consists of 20 items that intend to measure sex role adherence in individuals (Open-Source Psychometrics Project, 2019). Participants are asked to rate their personal alignment with each statement on a 7-point Likert

scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Questions include “I jump up and down in excitement sometimes” for feminine measure and “I have been very interested in historical wars” for masculine. This measure was created in response to the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) being copyrighted by Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc. Despite its less frequent use, it has been used many times in its interactive iteration and has found validity throughout its use. This study will hope to examine reliability more closely as it boasts reliability congruent with the Bem Sex-Role Inventory, but reliability has been declining for that measure as well. The measures are specifically less reliable for not heterosexual individuals (Roover & Vermunt, 2019). The measure was of average reliability in the current study for the femininity scale ($\alpha = .773$) and the masculinity scale ($\alpha = .765$).

Gender Expression Congruence. The Transgender Congruence Scale is a 12 item measure that examines how an individual’s gender identity correlates with their outward expression (Kozee H. B., 2008). Participants will be asked to score statements in regards to their person experience in the past two weeks on a five-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). An example statement is, “My outward appearance represents my gender identity”. The measure has been tested to have good reliability as well as sound incremental validity (Kozee, Tylka, & Bauerband, 2012). The measure had good reliability in the present study ($\alpha = .868$).

Minority Stress.

Minority stress measures look into concealment, harassment, rejection, and anticipated discrimination. Four measures were used to examine minority stress: one-question concealment, Heterosexist Harassment, Rejection, and Discrimination, the Everyday Discrimination, and Gender Minority Stress Resilience measures.

Concealment. Concealment will be measured using a one-question concealment measure. The measure will be used twice, once in terms of gender expression and once with gender identity. The question asks, "In regards to gender (identity or expression), how much do you try to keep it a secret". Responses are rated on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (Not very) to 6 (Very).

Experienced Stigma. The Heterosexist Harassment, Rejection, and Discrimination Scale (HHRDS) was used to measure how often an individual has experienced (Szymanski, 2006). The HHRDS is a 14-question measure that asks participants to provide the frequency at which stated events had happened in the past year on a 6-point Likert scale model ranging from 1 (Never) to 6 (Almost all of the time). Questions include "How many times have you been rejected by friends because you are an LGBTQ individual?" There is psychometric support for the measure including test-retests reliability and internal consistency, as well as construct and structural validity (Szymanski, 2009). The measure had good reliability in the present study ($\alpha = .884$)

Anticipated Stigma. The Everyday Discrimination Scale is a nine item measure adapted from the Discrimination scale to measure anticipated discrimination Measures (Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997). Participants are asked to rate the perceived likeliness of discrimination if others knew their gender identity or gender expression on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (Not at all Likely) to 7 (Very Likely). A selected statement reads, "Treated with less courtesy than others". The scale has been validated and has sound reliability consistently through follow up studies (Krieger, Smith, Naishadam, Hartman, & Barbeau, 2005; Gordon & Meyer, 2007). The measure had good reliability in the present study ($\alpha = .929$)

Stigma Resilience. The Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure consists of 9 scales that examine different facets of TGNC minority stress (Testa, Habarth, Peta, Baslam, & Bockting, 2015). Participants selects whether they have experienced certain events at different

points in their lifetime: before 18, after 18, in the past year, or never. The scales include discrimination, rejection, victimization, nonaffirmation, internalized transphobia, negative expectations for future events, nondisclosure, community connectedness, and pride. Discrimination, rejection, victimization, nonaffirmation, internalized transphobia, and pride will be used in the present study. Nondisclosure, community connectedness, and negative expectations for future events have been removed due to their focus on transgender minority stress specifically which is alienating to the broader scope of the participant pool. Items included include "Because of my gender identity or expression I have had difficulty finding a bathroom to use when I am out in public". Positive measures, such as pride, include "My gender identity or expression makes me feel special and unique". The measure has indicated criterion validity, convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Testa et al, 2015). This study has had good reliability in the current study ($\alpha = .915$).

Psychological Distress.

Psychological distress measures were used to measure negative outcomes from minority stress. Measures include The Beck Anxiety Inventory, The Beck Depression Inventory – II, and the Derailment scale.

Anxiety Symptoms. The Beck Anxiety Inventory was used to measure anxiety symptoms (BAI; Beck, Epstein, Brown, & Steer, 1988). The BAI is a 21 question measure that asks individuals to rate the severity of anxiety symptoms from 0 (Not at all) to 3 (Severely) (e.g. "Fear of dying" and "Unable to relax"). The BAI has internal consistency and exemplifies convergent and discriminant validity (Fydrich, Dowdall, & Chambless, 1992). The measure has been used in other minority stress related research (Igatura, Gill, & Montoro, 2009). Reliability for this measure was good in the current study ($\alpha = .938$).

Depressive Symptoms. The Beck Depression Inventory – II is a 20-item measure of depressive symptoms in which respondents choose a statement that relates most to their own feelings under a symptom header (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996). For example, under loos of pleasure, a participant can choose the severity of the symptom (e.g. "I get as much pleasure as I ever did from the things I enjoy" to "I can't get any pleasure from the things I used to enjoy"). The measure has shown reliability in measures of depression in sexual and gender minorities (Cohen, Blasey, Barr, Weis, & Newman, 2016; Tatum, 2016). The measure has further validity, especially construct and criterion validity (Sprinkles et al., 2002). The current study found good reliability for this measure ($\alpha = .933$)

Derailment. The Derailment scale is a novel scale that measures the amount that an individual feels they have deviated from who they used to be (Burrow, Hill, Ratner, Fuller-Rowell, 2018). Respondents will rate statements ("I feel like I have always been the same person that I am today") on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). As it is relatively new, few studies have used this measure to tests its validity and reliability. It has been found to predict depressive symptoms via identity instability and negative self-direction (Ratner, Mendle, Burrow, & Thoemmes, 2019). The present study found good reliability for the measure ($\alpha = .792$)

Coping Strategies.

Coping strategies are methods of buffering the relationship between minority stress and negative outcomes. The present study utilizes the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Positive Identity Measure and The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

Positive LGBT Identity. The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Positive Identity Measure (LGB-PIM) measures positive reflection of LGB identity which has been adapted to include

Transgender individuals (Riggle, Mohr, Rostosky, Fingerhut, & Balsam, 2014; Riggle & Mohr, 2015). Questions include “My LGBT identity leads me to important insights about myself” which participants then rate on a 7-point Likert Scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). The development study found that there was evidence of validity and predicted positive well-being. Further reliability has been exemplified in a number of minority stress models (Rotosky, Cardom, Hammer, & Riggle, 2018; Petrocchi et al., 2019). The measure had excellent reliability in the current study (α = .936)

Self-Esteem. General self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). The scale consists of ten questions that are rated on a 4-point Likert Scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). Questions include “I take a positive attitude toward myself” and “I wish I could have more respect for myself”. Research has indicated the scale to be reliable and valid, especially in the realm of construct validity (Tinakon & Nahathai, 2012; Henry, 2013). The present study found that the measure had good reliability (α = .930).

Post-Survey Interview The post survey interview consisted of 23 questions regarding Creative Gender performativity. Interviews were conducted via email. Questions fell into 4 general subgroups: novelty, aesthetics, utility, and authenticity. Questions regarding novelty include, “What’s the difference between someone who has Creative Gender Performativity and someone who doesn’t?” Aesthetics can be seen in, “What is your relationship with symbolic cultural norms in terms of gender? Are there any that you relate to or aspire to ‘Aesthetically’?” Utility is mostly factored in its ability to buffer minority stress as the section asks, “Does creative gender expression impact (worsen, improve) how you cope with these experiences?” Finally, Authenticity comes into play with questions such as, “How does gender expression

performativity impact the way you feel about yourself?" All responses were then open coded to best find common themes amongst responses.

Procedure

Participants accessed the survey via a shortened link and be redirected to a REDCap survey. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete in a single sitting. Participants received a user code that allowed them to pause and return to the study as necessary. After a week the code expired, and the survey had to be restarted. After completing the survey section, participants were directed to the qualitative interview opt-in feature. If participants declined an interview, they were redirected to the completion screen. Participants who agree to participate in the qualitative portion of the study provided best contact information. Interviews were scheduled within a week of quantitative completion. Qualitative participants (n = 10) answered a variety of questions about their gender expression and mental health. After interviews were coded, participants were contacted with a sample of quotes being selected for inclusion in the final write up. A qualitative analysis was performed to identify major themes in the interviews.

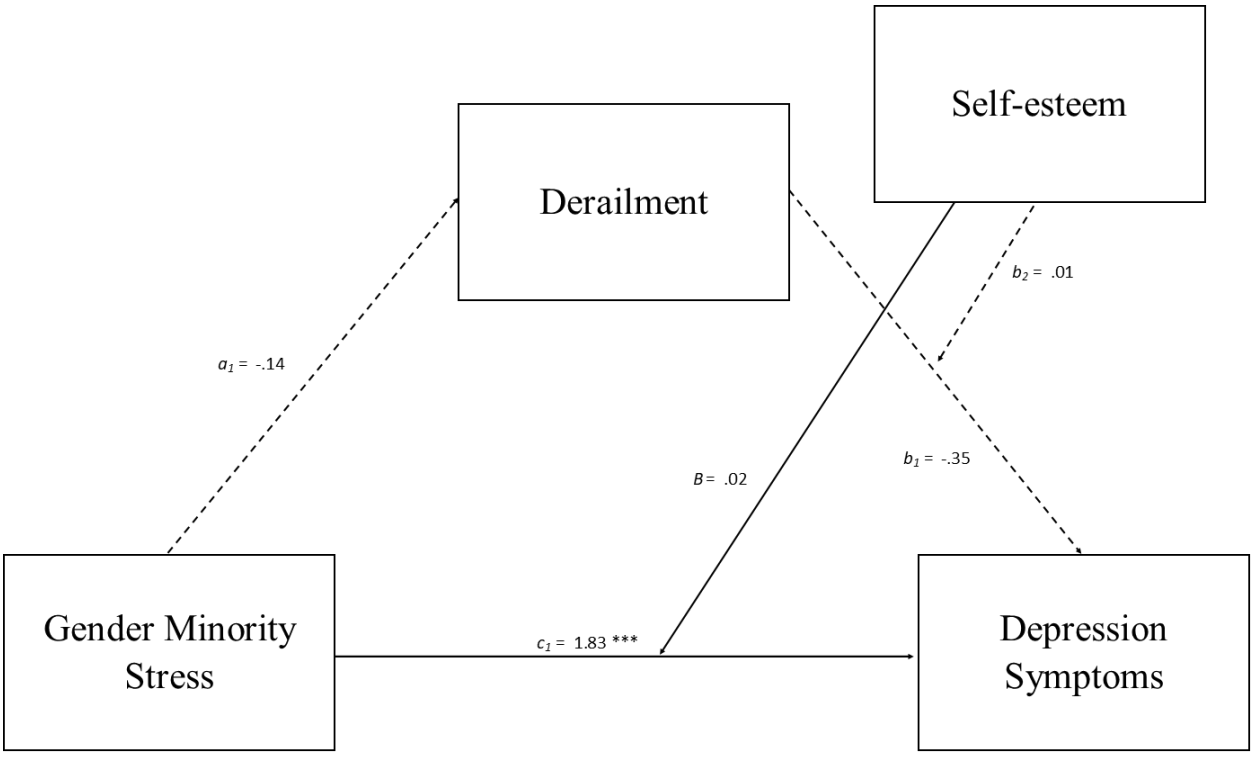
Results

Quantitative

To test the first hypothesis a moderated mediation was preformed between minority stress and depression using PROCESS (Hayes, 2017). Derailment (MV_1) acted as the mediator in the relation between minority stress and depression, while self-esteem served as a moderator. Gender minority stress did not have a significant effect on derailment (a_1 = -.14, t (159) = -.462, p = .65). Derailment also did not predict symptoms of depression (b_1 = -.35, t (157) = -.8997, p = .37). There was a direct effect between gender minority stress and depressive symptoms (c_1 = 1.83, t (157) = 4.28, p < .001). Thus, findings did not support mediation. Self-esteem was not a

significant moderator of the relationship between derailment and depressive symptoms (b_2 = .01, t (157) = 1.01, p = .31), but did act as a moderator (with a small effect) on the relationship between gender minority stress and depressive symptoms (ΔR^2 = .03, F (1, 157) = 15.17, p <.001 ;b = .02, t (157) = 1.02, p < .001). Effects are strongest for the moderation when self-esteem is low (-1 SD self-esteem = 18.57, effect = 6.60, SE = .1613, p < .001, 95% CI = .341, .978) and nonsignificant when self-esteem is high (+1 SD self-esteem = 33.36, effect = -1.94, SE = .1596, p = .230, 95% CI = -.51, .12). See figure 1 for an illustration of these findings.

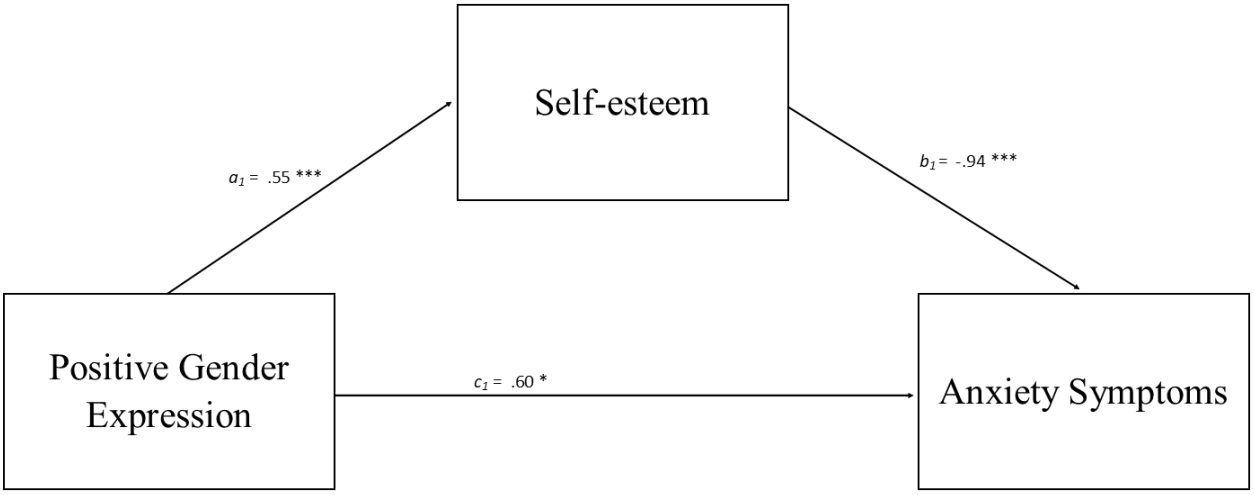
Figure 1. *Gender minority stress through derailment on depressive symptoms.*



To test the next hypothesis (H2) a simple mediation was performed using PROCESS (Hayes, 2017). Results showed a significant direct effect between positive gender expression and anxiety symptoms (c_1 = .60, t (162) = 2.30 , p < .05). There was also a significant mediation through self-esteem. Positive gender expression predicted greater self-esteem (a_1 = .55, t (162) =

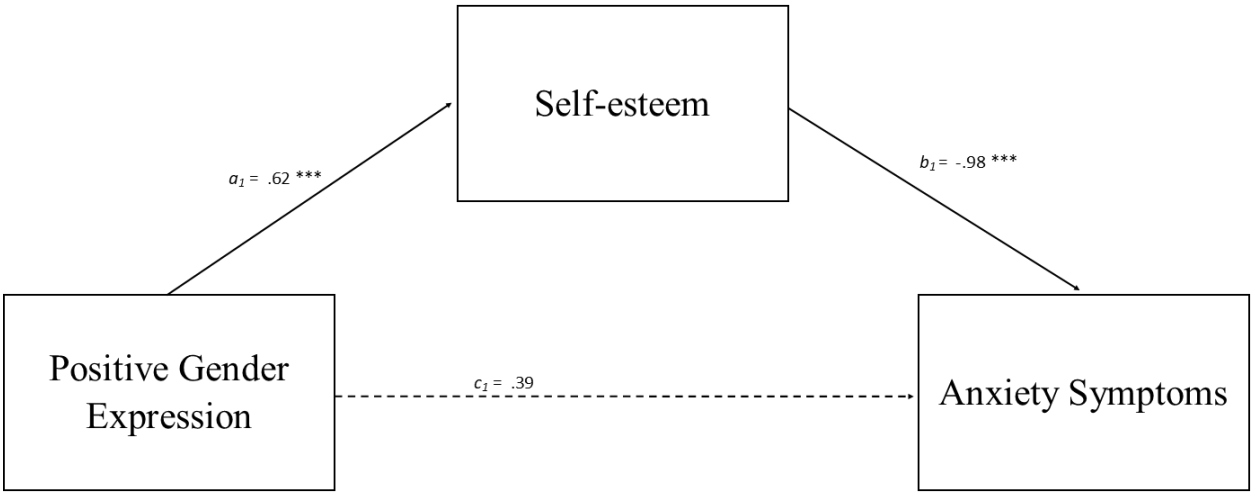
4.32, $p < .001$). Self-esteem in turn predicted fewer anxiety symptoms ($b_1 = -.94$, t (162) = -6.15, $p < .001$). The bootstrapped indirect effect of positive gender expression on anxiety symptoms through self-esteem was significant ($a_1b_1c_1 = .68$, se = .27, 95% CI = -7.23, -0.16). (See figure 2).

Figure 2. *Simple mediation model of positive gender expression on anxiety symptoms.*



To examine why a positive gender expression related to higher anxiety symptoms in H2, an independent samples t-test was preformed to examine the relationship of non-binary (n = 65) and binary TGNC (n = 77) identity on anxiety levels. Results indicated a significant difference in anxiety levels between groups. Non-binary TGNC individuals (M = 28.23, SD = 15.22) compared to the binary TGNC individuals (M = 23.69, SD = 14.23) demonstrated higher anxiety symptoms, on average, t (133) = -1.79, $p < .05$. Non-binary TGNC individuals (M = 6.57, SD = 3.98) also had higher levels of positive gender expression levels than their binary peers (M = 4.60, SD = 4.69), t (140) = -2.67, $p < .005$. When controlling for TGNC binary and non-binary gender identity, the relationship between positive gender expression and anxiety symptoms became nonsignificant (b = .39, t (120) = 1.33, p = .19). There is still a significant indirect effect from positive gender expression through self-esteem (b = .63, t (120) = 4.14, $p < .001$) to anxiety symptoms (b = -.98, t (120) = -5.92, $p < .001$).

Figure 3. *Positive gender expression on anxiety symptoms (TGNC Identity type Controlled).*



In order to examine congruence between self-reported and inventoried gender expression labels, a crosstabs analysis was performed (H3). A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between self-report gender expression and quantitative gender expression. The relation between these variables was not significant, X^2 (15, N = 187) = 19.44, p = .195. See Table 2 for a breakdown of results.

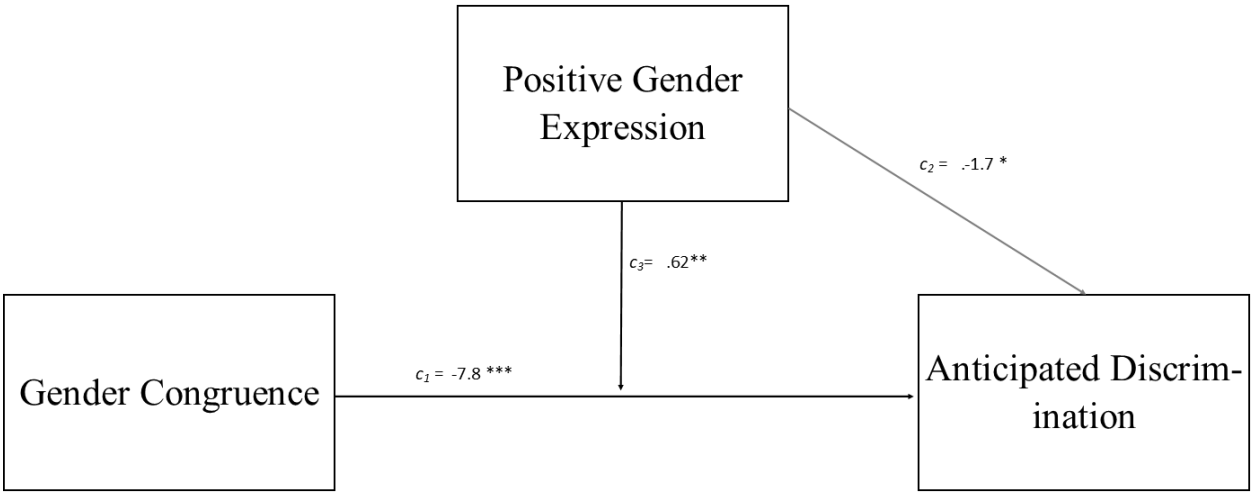
Table 2

Gender Expression Self Report vs. Open Sex Role Inventory (OSRI)

			Gender Expression (OSRI)				
			Undifferentiated	feminine	masculine	androgynous	Total
Gender Expression (Self Report)	Masculine	Count	16	19	7	23	65
		%	24.6%	29.2%	10.8%	35.4%	100%
	Feminine	Count	6	27	4	12	49
		%	12.2%	55.1%	8.2%	24.5%	100%
	Androgynous	Count	8	22	7	18	55
		%	14.5%	40.0%	12.7%	32.7%	100%
Total		Count	32	77	20	58	187
		%	17.1%	41.2%	10.7%	31.0%	100%

Next, a moderation analysis was performed to examine the relationship of gender congruence to anticipated discrimination (H4). A linear regression revealed a significant relationship between gender congruence and anticipated discrimination, $R^2 = .10$, F (1, 182) = 19.43, $p < .001$. The model showed a significant direct effect when accounting for positive gender expression, $c_1 = -7.76$, t (180) = -4.75. Positive gender expression had a small significant effect on the relationship between gender congruence and anticipated discrimination, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, F (1, 180) = 5.87, $p < .05$. Positive gender expression also had a significant direct effect on anticipated discrimination ($c_2 = -1.71$, t (180) = -2.17, $p = .31$). Effects were significant at lower levels of gender expression positivity (-1 SD self-esteem = 0.0, effect = -7.76, SE = 1.63, $p <$ .001, 95% CI = -10.99, -4.54) and average levels ($M = 5.0$, effect = -4.62, SE = 1.06, $p < .001$, 95% CI = -6.71, -2.53), but were insignificant at high levels of gender expression positivity (+1 SD self-esteem = 10.0, $p = .39$).

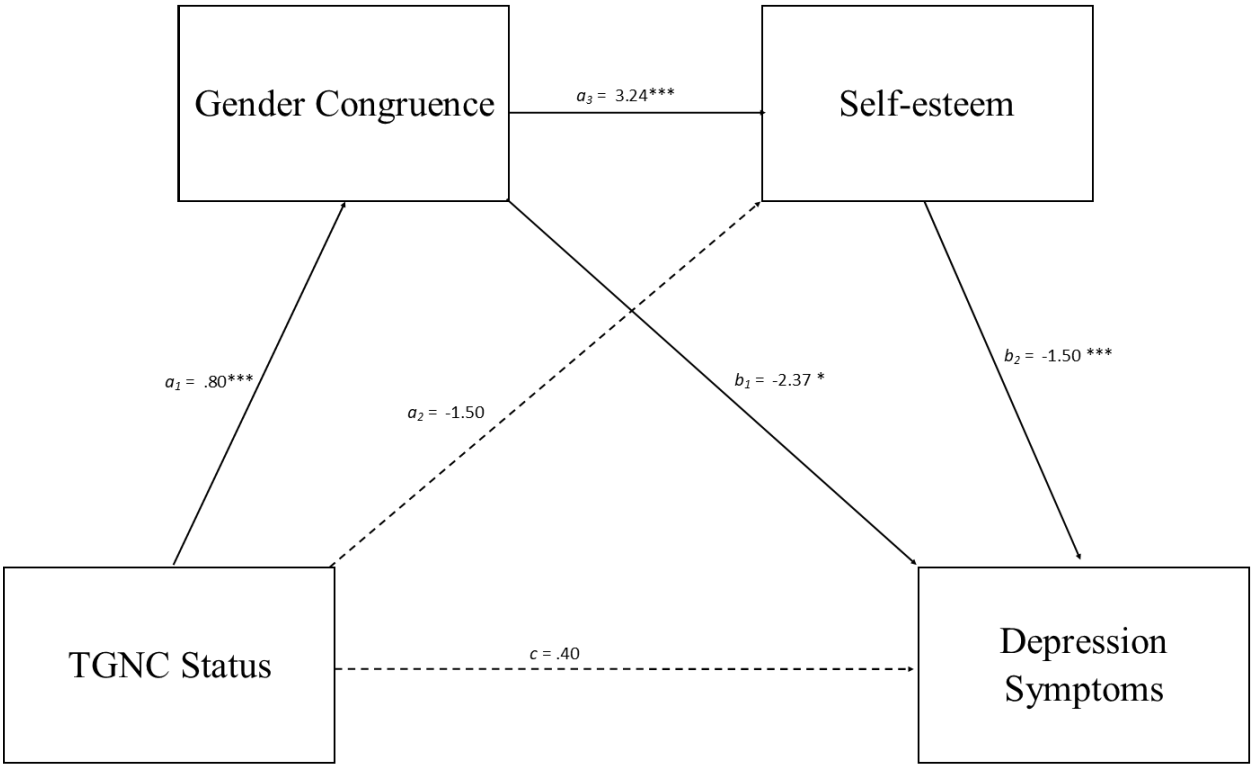
Figure 4. *Simple moderation of gender congruence to anticipated discrimination.*



To examine the relationship between TGNC status and depressive symptoms means were compared via an independent t-test. Results showed that, on average, TGNC individuals (M = 44.26, SD = 15.7) when compared to Non-TGNC individuals (M = 39.4, SD = 12.05) had significantly higher levels of depressive symptoms, t (67.17) = 1.98, p = .05.

From this a model was created to examine the effect (of TGNC status and depressive symptoms) moderated by gender congruence (MV_1) and self-esteem (MV_2), a multiple regression was performed via PROCESS (Hayes, 2017) (H5). Results revealed that TGNC identity was significantly related to lower gender congruence (a_1 = .803, t (163) = 6.70, p < .001), which was in turn, associated with lower levels of self-esteem (a_3 = 3.240, t (163) = 5.05, p < .001), which then related to more depressive symptoms (b_2 = -1.497, t (163) = -14.048, p < .001). The bootstrapped model found that the serial indirect model of TGNC status on depressive symptoms through gender congruence and self-esteem was significant ($a_1a_3b_2$ = -3.886, se = 1.17, 95% CI = -6.70, -2.11). In this model, TGNC status did not significantly predict depressive symptoms nor self-esteem. Gender congruence did significantly relate to fewer depressive symptoms (b_1 = -2.365, t (161) = -2.53, p < .001). The indirect effect from TGNC status to depressive symptoms through gender congruence was significant (a_1b_1 = -1.898, se = .86, 95% CI = -3.84, -.43).

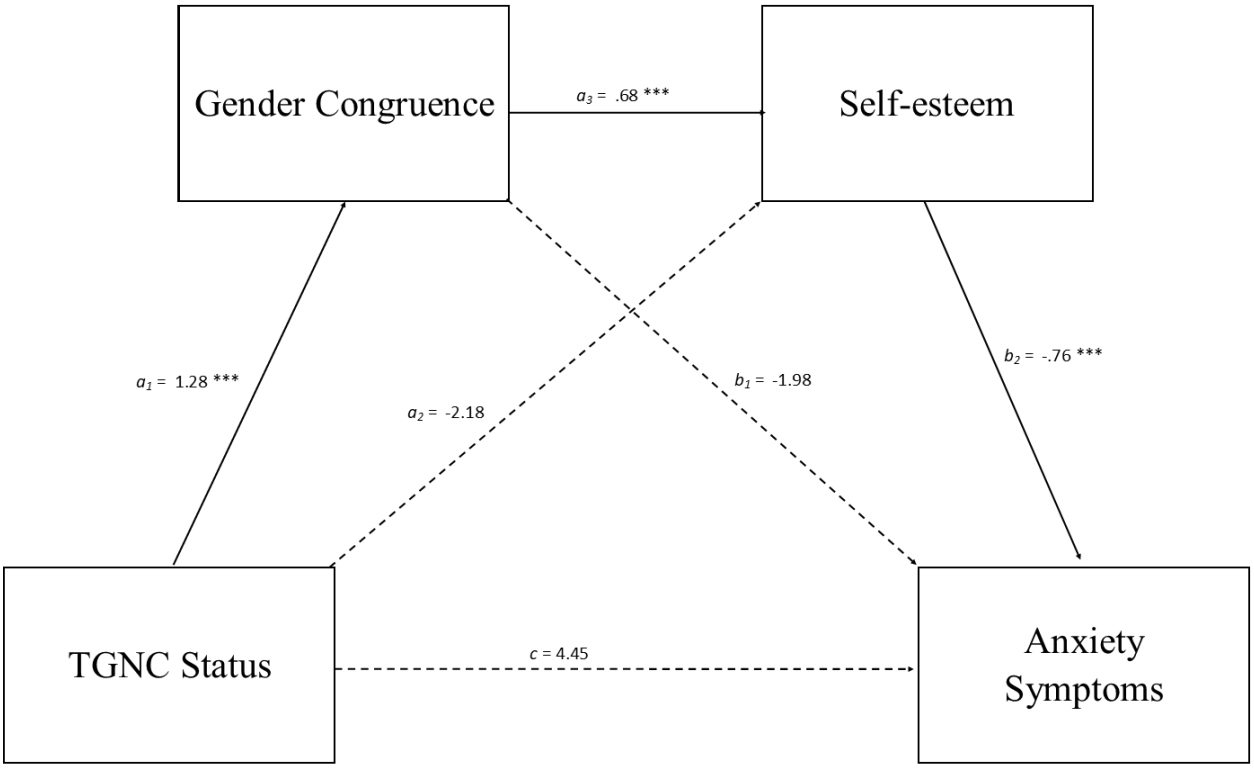
Figure 5. *Serial mediation model of TGNC status on depressive symptoms.*



Note. 0 = TGNC 1 = Non TGNC

Next, to examine the second part of hypothesis 5, the indirect effect of TGNC Status to Anxiety symptoms through gender congruence (MV_1) and self-esteem (MV_2), PROCESS was used (Hayes, 2017). Results revealed TGNC status was significantly related to less gender congruence (a_1 = 1.28, t = 8.45, p < .001), which was, in turn, associated with lower self-esteem (a_3 = 3.35, t = -1.38, p < .001), and in turn associated with more anxiety symptoms (b_2 = -.7633, t = -4.83, p < .001). The serial indirect effect of TGNC Status to Anxiety symptoms through gender congruence and self-esteem was significant ($a_1a_3b_2$ = -3.28, se = 1.11, 95% CI = -5.74, -1.45). The association between TGNC status and anxiety symptoms were not significant (p = .179). There were no other significant indirect effects. See Figure 6 for an illustration of this model.

Figure 6. *Serial mediation model of TGNC status on anxiety symptoms.*



Note. 0 = TGNC 1 = Non TGNC

Qualitative Results

It was evident throughout the interviews that gender expression is different for every individual, much like the experience of gender (See Table 3 for a breakdown of participant identities). While a variety of responses were given, key themes emerged in the responses.

Table 3

Qualitative Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	TGNC	Race
Avery	19	Genderqueer	Y	White

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	TGNC	Race
Dylan	29	Agender	Y	White
Nilla	19	Woman	Y	Black
Spencer	25	Genderfluid	Y	Black
Toh	21	Woman	N	Asian
Liam	20	Man	N	White
Kendal	33	Genderqueer	Y	White
Noel	24	Nonbinary	Y	Latinx
Kaitlyn	19	Woman	Y	White
Eliot	23	Man	Y	White

Creative gender expression.

Creative gender expression (CGE) is a novel term, used often only to refer to children (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford & Airton, 2016). As a result, participants had different preconceptions about what this term meant. When being asked what creative gender expression was, or more over how you distinguish those who are creative with their gender expression from those who aren't; two main ideologies about criteria emerged: effortful expression and breaking gender roles/norms.

Effortful Expression.

Four participants defined creative gender expression as the effortful expression of gender. They noted that it was to "actively express some aspect of your gender" (Liam, Cisgender Man) and that they "like to be defined by the way that [they] looked" (Dylan, Agender). Another mentioned the idea of using their gender expression to "incorporate their

tastes into everything they do" (Kendal, Genderqueer). Toh (Cisgender Woman) talked about their own conceptions of creative gender expression:

> "I think creative gender expression is putting in effort and playing with different looks and concepts. [Defining] yourself through clothes, mannerisms, etc."

For Toh, her gender expression is a conscious effort in the way that she portrays herself on a daily basis. While there is still an aspect of "play" that exists – it is not the main focus of these definitions, instead focusing on the thought and effort that goes into the presentation of gender expression. For these individuals a key aspect of their "creative" identity relates to the effort and intention behind the actions. This is may be due to common operationalizations of creativity that suggest creativity is actively preformed much like art, which is actively portrayed via paint, composition, or other means, gender expression. It has less to do with ignoring binary gender roles for these individuals, and more to do with the presentation of gender expression regardless of its alignment with gender.

Breaking Gender Norms.

Six of the participants defined creative gender expression as relating to not conforming to gender norms. Participants stated that it was about expressing yourself "regardless of masculinity or femininity" (Nilla, Woman) and "thinking outside of the binary boxes" (Avery, Genderqueer). When asked how to differentiate between gender creative and non-gender creative people, Eliot (Transgender Man) wrote:

> "I think gender creative people are not concerned with wearing certain things. For example, a person who is female and not gender creative may never think about having short hair out of fear of 'looking like a boy.' A non-gender creative male might stay far

away from the color pink, fearing it'll make them appear feminine. I think gender creative people don't think about things as much, if at all."

For Eliot, creative gender expression is related to not being afraid to wear things that may not align with their gender identity. He sees gender non-conformity as a form of creativity in itself. Rather than the effortful act being emphasized, it is instead the willingness to think outside of the "expected box" of gender when presenting oneself. Spencer similarly talked about the ability to work outside of what is expected when they said:

"[Creative Gender Expression] is the choice to live your life and express yourself outside of how people labelled you"

This perspective more closely aligns with the traditional definition of "gender creative;" a label that is typically utilized for children. As gender creative is also typically only used for children and adolescents, it is reasonable that individuals identified a similar definition for the term for themselves. Some participants in this category still focused on the effortful aspect, in that an individual exerts effort to be seen as something outside of their assigned gender role. Creativity in this sense relies on the aspect of novelty in its rejection of the norm.

Cultural Archetypes.

As individuals had these different perceptions on what it meant to be creative with their gender expression, they also had different ideas about the importance of cultural motifs and historic representations of gender. Some individuals were inspired in their ideas of gender in the "idea of a housewife, baking in an apron and twirling around the kitchen" (Kendal). Others found inspiration through photographs and older movies – an aesthetic of manhood from decades ago:

> "I love the aesthetic of a dapper young academic from the 1920's. The slick hair and the tweed, waistcoats, leather and old books is my favourite aesthetic. However, when I'm presenting more androgynous than masculine I tend to go for the aesthetic of an art student from the 70s. Like big flowy linen shawls and loose-fitting pants and curly messy hair. These two aesthetics are the two ends of my sliding scale of presentation." (Noel, Nonbinary)

Others found historical ideas of gender to be "archaic" (Dylan). For these individuals, the breaking of these norms and expectations far outweighed their cultural and personal importance. If anything, they are only important in "subverting them by not relating to the traditional [gendered] aesthetic" (Liam).

"I don't like the restrictions of cultural norms. I'm very determined, I take charge, I do many things that people would typically think of a man doing" (Toh).

This may due to the expectations of individuals to perform in certain ways to be socially acceptable to society. Similarly, individuals may have felt pressure to aspire to these aesthetics from family members. Spencer stated that historic gender motifs reminded them of their grandmother forcing them to act certain ways. These motifs may then be less desirable and instead become a mold to overcome. While participants reported that some acts made them feel more gender euphoria than others, as the paper will explore further on, it may be that creative gender expression is more about an individual creating their own path to identity, rather than following those of the past.

Gender Awareness.

Participants interviewed tended to have high awareness of their gender and their corresponding expression. They said that they were often aware of their gender in negative ways,

as they were aware of how they may be "viewed" or "what people might think of [them]" (Toh). Further they said that they sometimes "worry about what people think about me and my expression" (Liam). This higher awareness may be an aspect of the higher effort put into their expression, as they are more aware of how they present – gender wise – in society. Liam and Toh also noted this as they said they tended to consciously think about their appearance. Toh wrote that she tended to plan what she was wearing "at least the night before, but sometimes I have had outfits planned for a week or two out." When she doesn't have time to plan she said, "I get very upset when I feel that I didn't put effort into my appearance or think I look [worse] than usual" (Toh). Similarly, Liam said:

> "I consciously think about my appearance – both through my own want to present my gender, as well as how others would perceive that. I feel a lot of gender euphoria through my expression and validated through the recognition from others"

For both individuals, outward perception appears to be a major driving factor for their expression. They actively consider how they may be perceived and also feel pride when they are perceived well; paired with anxiety if they do not feel they are presenting favorably. This is similar to how transgender individuals reported, in this study and otherwise, about their awareness of their gender identity. One participant, Avery, spoke of his own awareness of his gender through external stimuli, saying:

> "I'm aware of how people look at me, whether they call me sir or ma'am, he or she. I'm also aware of it when someone uses my birthname instead of my chosen name, because of how much of a dissonance that causes me."

For Avery, they are also aware of how they are perceived in the world due to their appearance. Similarly, Eliot feels awareness of his trans identity, feeling pressure to "prove

[himself] to every as being 'trans enough'". As a result of this awareness, Eliot tends to control his expression, as he worries that he will be perceived as presenting too "femininely" to be a transgender male. For transgender individuals this attention to gender expression and gender identity. is likely related to their feelings of dysphoria. As Liam and Toh identify as cisgender, the similar experience of gender euphoria and thought into their experience within their gender may indicate that there is a similar aspect of gender expression across identities. A cisgender person that is aware of their gender identity may still be capable of feeling gender euphoria despite the concept being used mostly when referring to transgender individuals. This may indicate that some individuals are more aware of their gender and corresponding expression than others.

Creativity.

Most individuals who participated in the interview considered themselves a generally creative person. Out of this, two main types of creativity were identified. Firstly, individuals identified creativity with being related to the arts. Participants seem to have a variety of creative hobbies that fuel their creative desires. For some, their creative identity was important to them; "being able to express myself and my feeling through various creative outlets – e.g. writing, digital art, embroidery, singing, etc. – is very important to me" (Kendal). Participants enjoyed using creative ventures as outlets for their expression by being able to vent or put their ideas in a physical manifestation.

Participants also identified what they considered a "non-traditional aspects" (Liam), in the ways in which they "think and come up with ideas" (Kaitlyn). For these individuals, creativity is also about the process of novel thought. Noel spoke of this type of creativity by saying:

> "I would consider myself a creative thinker. I think that I solve problems in unique ways and work well under pressure. I would consider that creativity as well"

This speaks to the way that gender expression has been difficult to quantify across studies. The ability to use creative thinking may lend itself to also thinking about creative methods of presentation. Participants may then carry their creativity with them into their gender expression.

Creativity with Gender Expression.

Respondents reported that their creativity often intersected with their gender expression. Their fashion sense is related to their creativity (Eliot) and it can help them decide what to wear (Liam). Some participants use fiction writing and roleplaying as means of playing with gender (Osborne, 2012; Kendal & Spencer). At times, certain activities may even help them connect to their gender identity or strengthen their gender expression. Toh reported the activities that she engaged in to feel more feminine:

> "I love shopping around for brands that match my aesthetic and enhancing my natural beauty. Along with makeup, I would say crafting also makes me feel aligned with my gender. I've done papercrafts, costume making, and working with a bunch of different other mediums. I just feel very connected to myself and who I am when I am creating things and I feel that crafting is typically seen as a feminine activity or hobby."

For Toh, participating in these acts help her feel more connected to her identity with femininity. When doing these activities she feels a type of gender euphoria through the alignment of self. The same is the case for masculine identifying people, as Noel shares:

> "Despite not having any facial hair beyond peach fuzz, I like to shave my face just to feel a bit masculine. I also choose to go fully masculine for formal events – there's something about putting on a suit and tie that makes me feel extra good about myself"

For these individuals their gender expression carries into their daily activities. The "play" aspect of gender expression may help these individuals come up with new ways to present themselves, as the effortful aspect may help them perform these activities that otherwise may seem inconsequential.

Gender Expression Fluidity.

Many individuals also reported that their gender expression did not consistently stay the same. Individuals reported that they felt "neither pure masculinity or pure femininity adequately suited" them (Noel). Still others said that they felt their gender expression was about "not forcing yourself to be solely feminine or masculine – instead allow yourself to be both at different times" (Kaitlyn).

> "The most important thing [about my Creative Gender Expression] is that I don't conform for anyone. I'm proud of myself for not totally ignoring the typical feminine things that I enjoy and instead incorporating them into my new gender expression" (Eliot).

The fluidity of expression is an important aspect for respondents like Eliot, as it allows them more options to express themselves. By embracing femininity, Eliot is reclaiming his gender expression and identity. Gender expression fluidity also helps the boundary breaking aspects of the creativity. This fluidity may also relate to the difficulties in measuring gender expression in queer individuals (Roover & Vermunt, 2019).

The Four Criteria

The ten participants all met aspects of the four criteria set as the parameters for measuring creativity. These criteria include novelty, aesthetics, authenticity, and utility.

Novelty

Novelty in creative gender expression performativity proposes that gender expression is used to create a new aspect of identity. This can be seen in the responses from participants as they talk about how their gender expression impacts their self-image. Respondents reported that gender expression was about creating a "completely unique aspect of themselves" (Liam) and-incorporating things you enjoyed into a "new gender" (Elliot).

> "I make my look or style noticeable in a way for people to be able to look at something I would consider "my brand" and think of me." (Toh)

For Toh and other respondents, gender expression is a method of creating a new aspect of their physical presentation.

Aesthetics.

As stated previously, aesthetics can be easily seen in gender expression via an individual's physical presentation. Some participants are very aware of their aesthetic; describing it as "sparkle punk" (Spencer) or "soft butch" (Kaitlyn). For them, their aesthetic requires coordination to wear things that present themselves as they want to be seen. One respondent shared their own process in designing their appearance to be recognizable and appealing.

> "I use my creativity to build my brand or aesthetic which can be different for certain situations, but I try to have a hint of it in everything I do." (Toh).

Individuals like Toh exemplify the aesthetic aspect of creative gender expression. Their presentation is visible, definable, and unique to themselves. The aspect of aesthetic, as with artists, shows their procedural laws of style that they present to those around them.

Authenticity.

Authenticity was evident as a theme throughout the interviews with the ten participants. Participants stated that their creative gender expression allowed them to "reclaim [their] own autonomy" (Spencer) and was about "expressing how one feels most authentic" (Avery). They feel that some of the most important aspects of their gender expression is the ability to be themselves. When asked if Noel felt that their gender expression was worth any harassment or rejection, they said:

> "The freedom and peace that comes with being authentically me is sometimes worth all the pain and hardship I've gone through to get here."

Regardless of whether gender expression is performed, for these individuals, the performance reflects the authentic self within. Noel is able to feel a connection between their inner and outer self through their gender expression. While aesthetics may be most visible, it appears that the internal aspects are a driving force behind the reason why these individuals express themselves as they do.

Utility.

The criteria of utility – the performance must have purpose internally or externally – was seen in a number of ways during the interviews. While individuals gave many reasons for "why" they presented as they did, the following themes occurred across multiple interviews: Comfort, Self-Esteem, and Interpersonal Relationships.

Comfort

For individuals who fell more on the side of gender expression being about subverting gender roles rather than being about effort, comfort was an important factor regarding their choices in appearance. Dylan wrote that comfort was the "most important part of [their] gender expression". This comfort is both external and internal. Externally, participants took into consideration how they felt physically wearing certain outfits. Kaitlyn, for example, does not consider wearing things that are uncomfortable, saying that "being comfortable on a regular basis" was more important than wearing clothing that looked good but made them feel miserable. Similarly Nilla said, "I wear whatever's comfortable and looks good."

Internal comfort was also considered an important utility of creative gender expression. Participants reported feeling more comfortable when they felt that their gender was being properly conveyed in their expression. Avery said, "My gender expression helps me feel comfortable in my gender identity." He stated that his gender expression helped him feel more confident about himself and interactions with others. Creative gender expression may help individuals adapt and overcome uncomfortable feelings or situations as it helps them feel more comfortable with themselves and their environments.

"My creative gender expression makes me feel human, full, and real" (Spencer).

This quote exemplifies the great importance of creative gender expression for people like Spencer. Their expression helps them feel comfortable in their existence. The utility of the comfort is important to these individuals as it improves their quality of life.

Self-Esteem

Like comfort, self-esteem was also stressed in the interviews with participants. They said that it makes them feel "proud" (Eliot) and "validated" (Avery). Three participants noted self-

esteem as the most important aspect of their creative gender expression. Liam spoke on this by saying:

> "The most important part [of my gender expression] to me is how it makes me feel. It is most important to me that it makes me feel good and helps me improve as a person."

For Liam the biggest aspect is the utility it has in helping him feel good about himself. It improves his perception of his inner self. Similarly, Toh related by saying:

> "The most important aspect of my creative gender expression is how I perceive myself. I don't really care if others don't see what I see with my expression because my opinion of it is the only one that really matters."

Toh continues this theme by sharing the greater importance of feelings rather than external perception. It may be by developing her self-esteem, she learns to focus more inwardly than worry about external impressions. A similar statement is made in another interview:

> "The big thing about my gender expression is doing what you want. My confident look comes from not worrying about what's 'normal'" (Nilla)

Nilla states that she has become confident by learning to prioritize her own feelings rather than worrying about how it will be perceived. For these individuals, the internal validation is the most important aspect of their creative gender expression.

Interpersonal Relationships

Participants reported that their interpersonal relationships were also impacted by their creative gender expression. It helped them have a better of understanding problems from different angles, as they feel they have experienced a variety of standpoints due to their diverse expression (Kendal & Avery). Through this ability to take on other viewpoints, their relationships have benefited. Further, some participants have identified other ways that it has impacted their

interpersonal relationships. Toh shared that she felt her gender expression made her more approachable and that her expression made her "a beacon of friendliness and professionalism". Liam similarly stated that he tended to take his expression into account when interacting with others, often thinking "about what other people think about me and my expression." Beyond this, other aspects of interpersonal relationships are affected by their gender expression.

Bullying and Coping.

Participants had experienced a fair amount of bullying for their gender expression, especially when it did not align with their assigned gender at birth. "It can be unsafe to physically present as a gender other than what you were born" (Kendal). Similarly, Avery shared that he often got nervous interacting with individuals "because [their gender and expression] is outside of the norm, and people tend to fear and hate things they don't understand." Liam shared that he had to constantly think about his presentation "in terms of [his] safety and judgement of others." While this judgement may come from strangers, it also often happens with those the individuals are close with (Nilla & Liam). Nilla has experienced judgement from her parents for "not being feminine enough" or "looking gay." Similarly Liam shared:

> "I have been teased by people close to me – like my family – but also by peers at school and work. They have called me and my expression weird and have ostracized me. I have been kept out of things – especially in high school – due to my gender expression"

Liam was often isolated and bullied by his peers and family for his gender expression. He shared that often he was treated differently from his sibling and peers due to his gender expression. This may be a factor into why he is now so aware of how he presents, as it was constantly a topic that was brought to attention. For these individuals, their gender expression

can bring unwanted prejudice and negative outcomes. Their creative gender expression can also be a coping mechanism for these negative experiences.

Kendal, despite identifying more androgynously, presents predominantly as male, as "it keeps [them] safe, [they] lives in a not so socially forward place so appearing male is safe." In their case, their gender expression allows them to blend in without fear of being targeted for their gender or expression. In this case their gender expression is a protective factor against discrimination. Similarly, Liam says that his gender expression helps him "balance his relationships with others," as he may present differently with different people depending on his comfort. His gender expression helps him maintain control on the situations he finds himself in, so that he can remain comfortable and safe. Nilla shares another perspective:

> "Even though the worst of the abuse was ten years ago, my gender expression helps me cope with it now because it shows me how wrong my parents were/are"

For Nilla her gender expression helps her cope with mistreatment from her parents to this day. Rather than being protective in this situation, Nilla uses her gender expression to cope with past discrimination. It helps her combat proximal stigma by being a physical reminder of the benefits of her gender expression.

Discussion

The present study addressed gaps in the psychological research on gender expression in two ways. First, this study quantitatively examined factors of gender expression, rather than femininity or masculinity, which have been historically under-studied in a minority stress model. Second, it provided more qualitative voices on gender expression for queer individuals to help better inform the nuances of gender expression beyond directional measures. Overall the quantitative research revealed that sexual and gender minorities experience more minority stress

and negative outcomes but were buffered by positive aspects of gender expression. The qualitative research revealed in a deeper way that gender expression served to improve quality of life, especially internally with reports of self-esteem and feelings of authenticity.

Quantitative Findings.

Results indicated a direct link between gender minority stress and depressive symptoms, moderated by self-esteem. This supports prior findings on other minority populations and extended that to a gender-diverse sample (Henry, 2013). Further research would have to be done to examine whether self-esteem in this model could be significantly predicted by creative gender expression, but current research indicates positive gender expression being related to higher self-esteem levels (Brink & Vollmann, 2019). The results of the moderated mediation that examined gender minority stress on depressive symptoms through derailment may indicate that derailment is not a significant predictor of depressive symptoms in a TGNC or LGB population. This may be due to many TGNC individuals not feeling as though their identity is the same as they imagined when they were younger. Derailment scores were high across the sample which may suggest a ceiling effect for this sample (and perhaps larger population).

Additionally, positive gender expression positivity predicted higher levels of self-esteem and thus lower anxiety symptoms. This model helps exemplify that positive gender expression correlates with self-esteem. Unexpectedly, results indicated that those with higher positive gender expression also exhibited higher anxiety symptoms. This does not support current findings about identity positivity (Flanders, Shuler, Desnoyers, & VanKim, 2019). Nonbinary TGNC individuals were found to have higher levels of positive gender expression and anxiety symptoms. When controlling for non-binary individuals the connection between positive gender expression and anxiety symptoms became non-significant. This supports a small amount of

research existing on nonbinary individuals in comparison with binary individuals (Thorne, et. al, 2018); nonbinary individuals may experience higher levels of anxiety due to being less visible within the community and experiencing less affirmation regarding their gender identity.

Individuals with lower gender congruence anticipated higher levels of discrimination if their minority identity became known. This is likely because people with lower gender congruence may be less likely to be out as transgender or presenting as their gender daily. These findings contribute to the current research (Brink & Vollmann, 2019) and contributes by introducing the factor of positive outlook on gender expression. These results may indicate that gender congruence may be less negatively impacting to an individual when they believe their gender expression makes them unique or a better person.

A Chi-square test was found to be nonsignificant between gender expression self-reports and results from the OSRI and supports previous findings about gender expression measures (Roover & Vermunt, 2019). These non-significant findings further support the purpose of the study, to examine directional gender expression measures. This may indicate that traditional conceptualizations of gender expression may differ from identity-based perceptions. Similar to gender identity, gender expression may be harder to quantify directionally. A measure that instead relies on importance of expression may result in more significant results and further help examine reasoning behind an individual's gender expression.

Finally, the serial mediation performed on TGNC status to depressive symptoms through gender congruence and self-esteem indicated a significant serial indirect effect. The relationship between gender congruence and self-esteem has been found in previous research (Brink & Vollmann, 2019), but has not been looked at in relation to depressive symptoms and anxiety symptoms. Further similar models have not been examined with a TGNC and non-TGNC

population. Results indicated that the relationship between TGNC status and depressive symptoms in the model was explained by the serial moderation through gender congruence and self-esteem. These results may indicate the importance of therapy and physical transitioning for members of the TGNC community.

Qualitative Findings.

Creative gender expression performativity was described in two ways by participants. One aspect is effortful presentation, similar to the ideas proposed conceptually by theorists (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1988). The second perspective is akin to more traditional conceptions of "creative gender expression" by relating the concept to gender-nonconformity. For all individuals, similar themes occurred about their gender expression.

From these responses the present study posits a suggested format for future development. At a basic level, to measure creative gender expression performativity, gender-nonconformity and effortful expression would be measured. The proposed model creates two continuous scales that could be graphed on a four-quadrant graph to place participants in one of four categories (See figure 7). The four typologies are as follow (Top to bottom, left to right): Aesthetic Driven, Genderqueer, Not Gender Creative, and Gender Role Apathetic.

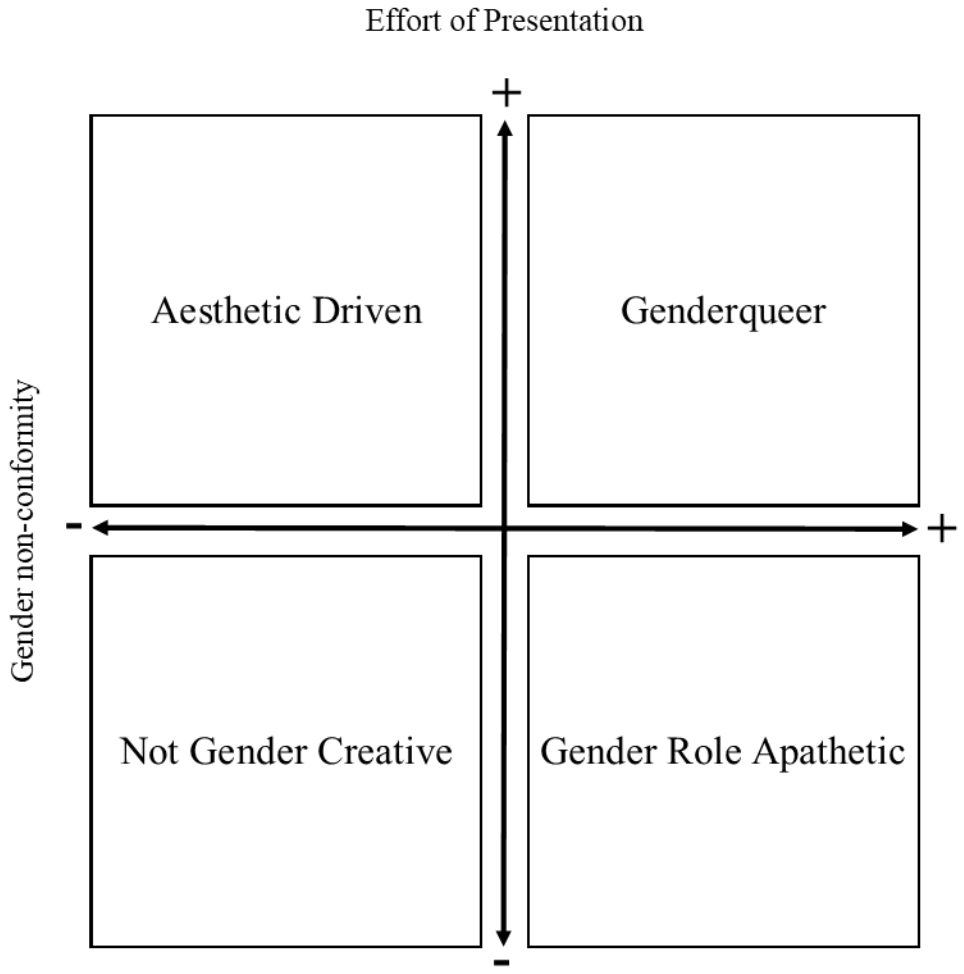
Individuals who are "Aesthetic Driven" conform with their expression but pay a lot of attention to what they wear and how they appear to others. An example of this is Toh who despite being a feminine, cisgender woman, talks about the amount of time she puts into her appearance. Toh describes her gender expression as a "brand" and thinks about everything she wears in how it will affect that brand. For Toh, creative gender expression is about creativity in the performance, rather than creativity in the non-conformity.

Genderqueer individuals (gender expression wise), put in high effort and also stress the importance of non-conformity. This category is exemplified by Liam, a gender non-conforming, cisgender male. Liam stated that he put a lot of effort into his gender expression and focused a lot of this effort into subverting gender norms. Liam said he experienced a type of gender euphoria from being able to work outside of the norms for his gender identity. For individuals like Liam, creative gender expression is about finding comfort outside of the binary expectations of gendered expression.

Individuals who are not gender expression creative do not put forth consideration and effort into their gender expression nor their conformity to gender roles. There is no example from the study, as these individuals were not interviewed. Individuals in this category may not have high levels of gender awareness and may not consider their expression when presenting themselves.

Lastly, “Gender Role Apathetic” individuals do not put in high effort into their presentation and do not care about conforming to gender roles. An example of this is Nilla, who stated that she wore whatever was comfortable regardless of intended gender expression. When speaking of the most important aspects of her gender expression she wrote about being comfortable. For Nilla, creative gender expression is about wearing whatever you want to regardless of what others think.

Figure 7. *Proposed model of Creative Gender Expression Performativity.*



Better understanding the effort and purpose of an individual's gender expression may unveil important connections in minority stress models in ways that directional models may not. Being able to uncover utility of gender expression through the proposed model as well as understanding the type of gender expression an individual has may be beneficial to better see the nuances of an individual's identity.

Limitations and Conclusions

The role of gender congruence in the presented models supports the importance of gender affirming processes (correct gendering, medical interventions, etc.) in the treatment of TGNC individuals. The study also further highlights the importance of focusing on transition through mental health rather than just physical transition. Counselors and clinicians may want to examine an individual's self-perceived gender expression and gender congruence when discussing depression and anxiety while treating TGNC patients. It may be beneficial to focus on gender congruence internally rather than focusing on physical transition, especially with a growing number of TGNC individuals (approximately 16%) not desiring physical transition (James, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet, & Anafi, 2016).

Therapists may benefit from helping clients find positive aspects of their gender expression and gender identity. Identifying positives aspects of gender expression may mimic the positive outcomes relative to a positive gender expression outlook found in the study. One strategy may be to focus on authenticity and comfort that were identified in the qualitative portion of the study.

However, implications of this study's findings must be considered in light of study limitations. This study's sample was limited; the sample was mostly white, young, and TGNC. This is likely due to the sampling method of using social media posts in LGBT+ groups where similar samples are usually pulled. A more diverse sample may have lent a fuller view of the nuances in the model by seeing if there were different effects when accounting for race and age. A more racially diverse sample would've been more representative of the LGBT community in the United States. The sample may not be applicable to all groups.

In addition, participants in this study largely identified themselves as transgender and/or gender non-conforming. This may limit the significance of conclusions that may otherwise be

significant with equal sample size. The unequal sample sizes may be because of the one question screener for TGNC status. Future research may wish to implement a two-question screener, asking first about identifying as transgender, then asking if a participant is gender non-conforming. Many cisgender individuals identify as gender non-conforming (e.g. "butch women"), but still experience different sets of proximal and distal minority stressors (Lehavot, King & Simoni, 2011). A data set similar to this one may be useful for future research, as population was closely split between cisgender, nonbinary TGNC, and binary TGNC identities.

Another limitation of this study is the lack of measures for gender expression that would allow for a direct comparison of gender expression to stressors. The present study only included a single measure of gender expression. Future studies may wish to use others such as the Genderqueer Inventory, Gender Expression – Sexual Minority Women, and the Bem Sex-Role inventory (McGuire, Beek, Catalpa & Steensma, 2018; Lehavot, King, & Simoni, 2011; Bem, 1974). These were removed from the present study due to access issues, relevance, and survey length, but future research may want to focus in on testing these measures. Findings may vary with more accurate measures tailored for sexual and gender minorities.

Future research would benefit from developing a measure that could be used for the proposed gender expression model. Further, research would also benefit from testing gender expression in more models related to minority stress to see if other significant findings are possible. Finally, creative gender expression performativity research should be conducted on populations outside of the LGBT community to see significance in the general population.

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