

## GENDER CONFORMITY, UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT, AND MENTAL HEALTH: A COMPARATIVE SURVEY ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN 3 COUNTRIES

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### Introduction

The university period is characterized by various social, psychological, academic, and lifestyle-related risk factors that can lead students to experience several mental health problems. There is a growing literature on the association between not-conforming sexual orientation and mental health problems, while a paucity of studies explored the role of gender conformity, defined as the socially assigned gender expression, in influencing mental health and academic issues among university students.

The present work deepened the association between gender non-conformity and both mental health problems and academic stress among university students from three European countries (Italy, Spain, and Portugal). The investigation will compare the association among the three Mediterranean countries and could provide a geographically less limited cross-section of the phenomenon.

### Methods

The project involves students from the Universities of Torino, Seville, and Lisbon, regardless of the course of study. Data is being collected through an online survey, which students can access through an open link during the academic year 2022/2023. More specifically, information related to gender non-conformity (GNC), and sexual orientation was asked according to international guidelines (The GenIUSS Group, 2014), while validated psychometric measures were adopted to explore mental well-being (through the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form), anxiety-depression (through the Patient Health Questionnaire-4) and suicidal behaviors (through Suicide Behaviours Questionnaire), and academic stress (through the Effort-Reward Imbalance Questionnaire). More specifically, the academic stress was evaluated through the effort and reward subscales, from which the effort-reward ratio (ER-ratio) was computed. For ER-ratio = 1, the person reports one effort for one reward, for ER-ratio < 1, there are less efforts for each reward, and for ER-ratio > 1, the person reports more efforts for each reward (Wege et al, 2017). Multilevel regression models, adjusted by age, sex, and socioeconomic status, will be performed to evaluate the association between GNC and both mental health problems and academic stress.

Data collection is still ongoing at the time of abstract submission. Preliminary results were performed on current data restricted to the Italian sample (n=4357).

### Results

In the Italian sample, 75.9% are girls, with a mean age of 23.9 years (95% CI: 23.8-24.1).

Of all the students, 3.4% and 4.8% reported high and moderate GNC levels, respectively.

Students with high and moderate levels of GNC declared a higher prevalence of homosexuality than the low GNC group (respectively, 18.5 and 10.5 vs. 2.7%).

Levels of depressive symptoms are significantly higher among high (59.6%), and moderate (59.1%) GNC students than among low GNC students (49.7%), and similar patterns were also registered for anxiety symptoms (respectively, 78.6%, 82.4% vs. 74.8%).

While the mean academic effort score was consistent among the different GNC groups, lower academic reward score was registered in high GNC rather than low GNC. Mean academic effort-reward ratio (ER-ratio) varying from 1.14 (95% CI: 1.13;1.15) to 1.23 (95% CI: 1.15;1.32) were seen among

respectively, low and high GNC, accounting for statistically significant higher ER-ratio among the second group compared to the first (mean difference 0.09; 95% CI: 0.01;0.17).

### **Conclusions**

High gender non-conformity seemed to be associated with worse mental outcomes and higher academic effort to parity of reward. Results on complete data could better enlighten the effects of potential gender discrimination in the living environments of university students, also from a comparative geographical perspective, to address targeted policies in universities.

### **Bibliografia**

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