Moderating roles of gender expression and social desirability in the link between status perception and assertive behaviour

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Abstract

The study was determined to look at the moderating roles of gender expression and social desirability in the link between status perception and assertive behaviour. The techniques used to select participants was targeted sampling techniques. Participants comprise 329 students both postgraduates and 400-level undergraduates from a federal university in Southeast, Nigeria. Questionnairescopies were used to collect data from participants. The research adopted a cross-sectional survey research design. Pearson product-moment correlations and regression analysis using the Hayes Process Macro were used to test the hypotheses. The results of the study indicate that there is no association between status perception and assertive behaviour. There is a significant association between gender expression and assertive behaviour, social desirability is significantly associated with assertive behaviour. Gender expression did not moderate the association between status perception and assertive behaviour, but, social desirability negativelymoderated the association between status perception and assertive behaviour. This result indicates that the interaction between high social desirability and low-status perception leads to an increase in assertive behavior and vice versa. Despite status perception does not significantly influence assertive behaviour, status events, like actions, communications, and associations that lead to increases and decreases in respect, admiration, reputation, prestige, deference, and influence are evaluated by our assertiveness.This is because one's status can affect our social interaction, influence our social circle, and interest in society.

*Keywords***:** status perception; gender expression; social desirability; assertive behaviour; moderation

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Introduction

Laurel (2021) posits that gender expression encompasses the outward manifestation of an individual's perceived gender, which can be conveyed through variousmeans such as conduct, attire, vocalisation, or other observable attributes. Societies categorise these signs as either masculine or feminine; nevertheless, the definitions of masculinity and femininity are subject to temporal shifts and cultural variations. Adrian et al. (2021) defined gender expression as how people express their cognition, belief, gender, and self-concept. In other words, gender is the specific mechanism by which diverse beliefs control the functions and tasks of each person including their mode of dressing, talking, and behaviour. Gender expression also determines access to momentary resources for the impression of everyday life in a wide range which includes sharing of labour, household responsibilities both inside and outside the home, opportunities to develop oneself academically, and career advancement, which mayimprove policy decisions. It involves a person's perception of one's own gender identity with knowledge to perceive social, cultural, and gender rules, expectations from society, and attitudes required.

Gender varies in our society, male and female self-concepts are related to gender expression, including sexual preferences and development, gender identity, roles, orientations, beliefs, and conformity. Gender is associated with a peculiar psychological phenomenon. Currently in Nigeria, cross-dressing is becoming more imperative, especially among leading figures in the fashion industry (Adah, 2023). Although not yet widely accepted, some cross-dressers have found a way to make a name for themselves in cross-dressing. They step into the Nigerian entertainment industry where they are accepted and allowed to earn huge sums of money through film deals, advertising, event appearances, and more. According to Adah (2023), Nigeria's transvestite scene is dominated by men who are treated as women by the public and are willing to swap genders to be perceived as women.

However, in many cultures, societal expectations and stereotypes about how people should behave, dress, and express themselves based on their assigned gender are still very rigid. People who express themselves in ways may be subject to bullying, discrimination, and harassment. For example, it speaks to social desirability by looking at how people present themselves and how they alert society. People have a tendency to reply in ways that make them look good to others, regardless of the accuracy of their responses. According to Paulhus (1991) cited in Stepan (2020), social desirability means the propensity to present oneself positively rather than give an exact answer. The National Cancer Institute (2022) also describes social desirability as a self-justifying propensity to avoid criticism and present a person as conforming to social principles. Social desirability is noticed from childhood and early adolescence.

Psychologists have long been interested in people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviour, which frequently depend on self-reports to gather data. You may be asked to indicate how you would describe yourself. A fundamental assumption in using self-reports to gather information is that individuals are specialists in knowing themselves. According to Stepan (2020), social desirability can take one of two forms,which is self-deception by providing inaccurate information and believing it to be true. For example, an above-average score for a particular attribute may indicate a personal truthful, and biased response. The second form of social desire is impression management, which deliberately distorts the reaction,and makes it look better. An example of impression management is the situation in a job interview; a job seeker presents himself or herself in the way that best suits the job (Paulhus & Reid, 1991).

There has been a recent discourse among the transgender community around transgender celebrities (Bissinger & Leibovitz, 2015; Steinmetz, 2014) and a contentious deliberation surrounding transgender individuals (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017, Berman & Phillips, 2017). The way people are viewed and categorized in society has a great influence on the choice of gender representation and roles in society. For example, the most

popular cross-dressers in Nigeria today are fashion and models. Society recognizes them as high-ranking. Given these reasons, we agree that social desirability and gender expression influence status perception.Busse et al. (2020) see status as the product of a universal grading mechanism that hierarchically ranks individuals within a group according to their subjective value, and respects resources. Transgender people are seen as socially deviated and stigmatized by out-group members because they are not aware of their assigned gender at birth. The standards of social status, behaviour, communication, and associations that lead to esteem, admiration, prestige, and influence are adaptively structured, numerous, specific, and evolved psychologically which is evaluated by a systematic mechanism. Various adaptation challenges people have to resolve when socializing with other persons are among the reasons hierarchies exist.

Transgender people don't always appear the same way to those around them. According to the findings of James et al. (2016), the majority of transgender individuals in the sample consistently present themselves as cisgender. According to Martinez et al. (2016), the data indicates that the majority of individuals who identify as cisgender tend to maintain their cisgender identity when engaging with transgender individuals. How does this affect your willingness to interact with other people? While most cisgender individuals are perceived as gender non-conforming, transgender individuals are more self-perceived. Being assertive to disclose one's status can affect basic social interactions, and can even affect other people's interest in friendships and dating.

Assertiveness is a significant communication style that improves successful relations with families, individuals, friends, and colleagues which is accompanied by numerous benefits. For instance, assertivenessmay improve one'sdeal with others and encourage honesty by suppressing fear and resentment. It also gives you more control over one's life and makes onefeel less helpless. Moreover, it gives individuals the right to live their own lives (Mahmoud et al., 2013). Research has shown that people who exhibit assertive behaviour generally express their true and fundamental feelings, needs, desires, opinions, and personal rights. Assertiveness makes people begin to act on their own behalf without feeling undue fear (Shimizu et al., 2004). Assertive people assert their rights, make demands of others, and express their feelings easily. All of these make an individual's life easier and receive a positive response from others. This may reduce anxiety and increase trust in interpersonal relationships (Deltsidou, 2008). Assertiveness is considered a healthy behaviour, and by being more positive, you gain more respect and recognition as a person. Individuals can get more of what they want (Sudha, 2005). Assertive behaviour requires controlling tantrums, and other behavioural forms that indicate a lack of professionalism (Amol, 2018).

Theoretical background and development of hypotheses

According to Cooley's (1902) theory of impression management, individuals develop their self-concepts and personalities by interpreting their interactions with others and their views of other individuals. When observing our gender identification via the lens of a mirror image, it becomes evident that it is influenced, to a certain degree, by our interpretation of how others view our gender. In the context of individual experience, it has been posited by Shrauger and Schoeneman (1979) as well as Tice (1992) that there exists a distinct sense of flexibility and independence, wherein one's identity is not solely reliant on external social or interpersonal connections. Cooley's (1902) theory, on the other hand, asserts that he serves as a fundamental pillar in shaping the interactive dynamics of gender. In this scenario, social stress may arise when there is a discrepancy between our perceived social interactions and the societal norms and expectations that we encounter. This study is summarized in the conceptual model presented in Figure 1.
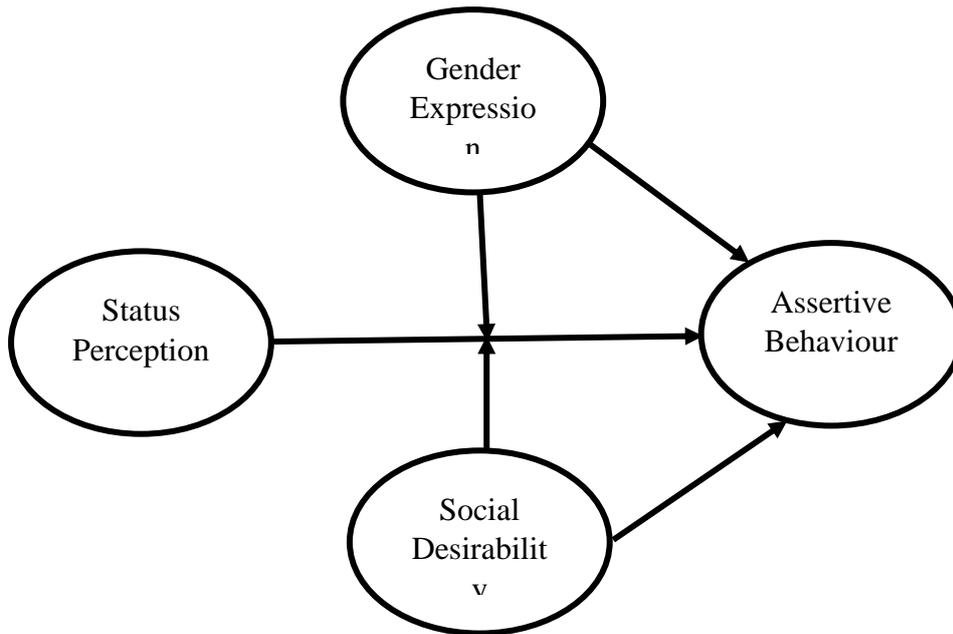
Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Status perception and assertive behaviour

Eva et al. (2018) considered the likelihood that high-status individuals and groups possess greater levels of assertiveness, decisiveness, competence, intelligence, and other related attributes when compared to low-status individuals and organisations. The establishment of this strong connection was achieved through the implementation of different state manipulations, as demonstrated by Johannesen-Schmidt and Eagly (2002), and Sacchi et al. (2010). Additionally, housing morphology, as explored by Oldmeadow and Fiske (2007), played a significant role in the formation of distinct groups based on status characteristics, particularly in terms of priority access to resources. Based on the stereotypic content model, the perception of high-status groups as more competent than low-status groups is influenced by relative status, which plays a crucial role in determining the judgement of competence within a group (Fiske et al., 2002). According to Ridgeway et al. (1998), status expectation theory posits that persons who possess structural advantages over others are anticipated to exhibit elevated levels of assertiveness and competence.

Findings of Fragale et al. (2009)indicate that individuals with high status had greater levels of self-centeredness, as evidenced by their ambitious, controlling, confident, and independent characteristics. In a similar vein, Dubois (2010) demonstrated that there is no discernible discrepancy in perceptual abilities among managers based on their hierarchical standing. However, it is noteworthy that traits such as ambition and competitiveness, which are associated with assertiveness, tend to be more prevalent among managers at higher levels of the organisational hierarchy. Carrier et al. (2014) revealed that goals with a higher assertiveness status received more favourable scores compared to targets with lower status, which were demonstrated to have been achieved.

Collectively, these findings indicate a tendency to prioritise assertiveness over skill when perceiving status. Nevertheless, when comparing self-directed motivation (assertiveness) with task-oriented motivation (effort), it becomes evident that the latter is less closely linked to social standing in comparison to ability. Rohmer and Louvet (2013)asserted that there exists a correlation between academic performance and the perception of one's talent, rather than the perception of one's effort. Moreover, as previously indicated, individuals belonging to a lower-status category, including those with impairments, tend to receive favourable evaluations based

on their effort but unfavourable evaluations based on their ability (Louvet & Rohmer, 2010; Rohmer & Louvet, 2011). This finding implies that social status is associated with perceived competence rather than actual competence. To summarise, prior research examined the impact of assertiveness and competence (Carrier et al., 2014; Dubois, 2010) or competence and effort (Louvet & Rohmer, 2010; Rohmer & Louvet, 2011, 2013) on the formation of social judgement, specifically in relation to the perception of status. Based on the above argument, we thus hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1: Status perception would significantly predict assertive behaviour of students.

Gender expression and assertive behaviour

Previous research has indicated a significant association between gender and assertive behaviour (Park et al., 2016). According to the study conducted by Chandler et al. (1978), it was shown that women exhibited higher level of aggression compared to men in specific circumstances. For instance, female students tend to exhibit greater openness, higher inclination towards social confrontation, and greater willingness to assert their personal attributes in competitive scenarios, such as job interviews. Park et al. (2016) also observed slight gender disparity, indicating that women tend to exhibit higher levels of assertiveness. In Adejumo's (1981) research, which focused on Nigerian college students, it was observed that men had a higher tendency towards aggression compared to women. Several previous studies (e.g., Leaper & Ayres, 2007; Mueen et al., 2006) indicated that there isdisparity in confidence levels between men and women. Leaper and Ayres (2007) conducted a study examining the variations in assertiveness between genders, focusing on the linguistic patterns employed by men and women in their communicationand observed that males often employ aggressive language as a means to promote their sense of agency within specific contexts.

The level of assertiveness exhibited by individuals is contingent upon the specific circumstances and context in which they find themselves(Immanuel & Muo, 2022). Individuals have the ability to place themselves in settings that either impede or promote assertiveness. The manifestation of gender expression in assertiveness can be observed in both behavioural patterns and linguistic choices. Existing research indicates that there is general tendency for men to display higher levels of aggression compared to women. Hollandsworth and Wall (1977) conducted a study, women who exhibit aggressive behaviour in the workplace may be perceived as possessing strong characteristics that are traditionally associated with masculinity. The leadership attributes that are commonly deemed suitable for women are characterised as "feminine" traits, which include possessing exceptional social skills, displaying sensitivity, and being emotionally accessible to others. In a recent study(e.g., Guriva et al., 2022) these distinctions can be observed in various aspects of life, such as cognitive abilities, personality traits, and occupational preferences.

This implies that there is anticipation for a greater number of perceptions to signify a feminine role in life, particularly among men. The presence of divergent viewpoints among men about the existence of gender differences may indicate a proclivity towards latent forms of sexism. The sensitivity of power ranges, specifically political and leadership roles, was particularly pronounced when confronted with views of gender disparities that were hostile in nature. The condition is distinguished by high degree of vulnerability. This discovery aligns with previous research indicating that males tend to endorse more conventional perspectives and notions of masculinity and femininity. We therefore state that:

Hypothesis 2a: Gender expression would significantly predict assertive behaviour of students.

Hypothesis 2b: Gender expression would significantly moderate the association between status perception and assertive behaviour.

Social desirability and assertive behaviour

Mo (2019) asserts that social desirability stems from the instinctive human need for social approval. In general, social desirability refers to "an individual's tendency to project a positive image of himself or herself during social interactions" (Johnson & Fendrich, 2002, p.1661). The adjustment approach predicted positive interpersonal outcomes for social desirability, viewing social desirability as a source of emotional stability, agreeableness, benevolence, and subjective well-being (Uziel et al., 2008). People with high social desirability scores may actually strive to perform and be perceived as they portray themselves (Fleming, 2012). Fleming (2012) and Uziel (2013), maintain that people with high social desirability may express themselves like saints, even if they are not saints. For example, someone who describes themselves as a kind person may go out of their way to help others.

On the other hand, assertive behaviour can improve psychological well-being and protect human rights. Increased self-esteem is associated with gratitude and social adjustment, and increased sense of well-being, decreased aggression (Ashouri et al., 2008), and reduced anxiety (Bandeira et al., 2005). While, Uziel (2010) argued to view social desirability as interpersonally oriented self-control (i.e., self-control in public social settings). We state that:

Hypothesis 3a: Social desirability would significantly predict assertive behaviour of students.

Hypothesis 3b: Social desirability would significantly moderate the association between status perception and assertive behaviour.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study consist of 329 postgraduate and 400level undergraduate students of Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike that comprise of 259 (78.7%) undergraduate, and 70 (21.3%) postgraduate students. The participants' age extended from 18 to 53 with a mean age of 25.32 (SD =7.01). Their gender consists of 159 males (48.3%) and 170 females (51.7%). Ethical consent was observed, permission from each participant was sought, and assurance was given to participants that their responses would be treated with confidentiality. Participants were educated on the importance of the research and they all accepted to participate in the study. Each participant received a questionnaire copy to complete and return to the researcher. After collecting the completed copies from participants, it was observed that out of the 350 administered, only 329 were retrieved (97% return rate). The researcher scored the questionnaire copies and inputted them into the SPSS (Version 22) for data analysis.

Measures

Gender Expression Scale (GES)

It was measured using a 10-item scale of Spencer (1977). Participants in this study reported the extent to which they agreed with their behaviour which may or may not influence their gender expression, which is 4 point scale varying from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). An example of an item of measure is (I feel most comfortable wearing clothes that do not conform to the expectations of my gender). The researchers carried out a test to ascertain the reliability of gender expression scale which established Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .71.

Marlowe Crowne Social Desirability Scale (MCSDS)

It was designed by Crowne and Marlowe (1960). The social desirability scale is comprised of 10 items that are to be answered as either true or false. An example of an item of measure is (I have never intensely disliked anyone). The encoding of key direction replies is represented by the numerical value 1, whereas non-key direction responses are represented by the numerical value 0. Hence, the maximum MCSDS score is 10, while the minimum value is 0. A greater score denotes a higher standard deviation for the response. Of these items, 10 were selected to measure social desirability, a test was done to ascertain the reliability which resulted in a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .72.

The MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (MacArthur SSS Scale)

It was created by health psychologist Nancy Adler. The MacArthur Social Status Scale (SSS) is a measurement tool consisting of a single-item rating that assesses an individual's subjective perception of their relative position within a group, as proposed by Nancy Adler et al. in 2000. The scale comprises two ladders, each consisting of ten points. The concurrent validity of the local ladder (Kappaw= 0.55), neighbourhood ladder (Kappaw= 0.60), and work ladder (Kappaw= 0.67) demonstrates a reasonable level of agreement, suggesting that the MacArthur scale exhibits subjectivity when assessing several indicators of socioeconomic position.

Rathus Assertion Scale (RAS).

The Rathus Assertiveness Scale (RAS) was developed to measure an individual's assertiveness. The scale contains a total of 10 items with an example of measure (I am open and frank about my feelings). The items are rated from very much like me (1) to slightly like me (3). The reliability of the Rathus Assertiveness Scale (RAS) was established at Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .70.

Design/Statistics

The research design of this study is a cross-sectional research design. Lauren (2022) describes a cross-sectional study as a type of study design that collects data from many different people at a single point. A cross-sectional study observes a variable without affecting it. This design is optimal because it does not involve any manipulation of variables. Data are analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviation.Pearson product-moment correlation was used to test relationships between the study variables, and regression analysis using the Hayes Process Macro (Version 22) was used to test thehypotheses.

Results

Table 1: Mean, standard deviation, and inter-correlations of study variables (n = 329)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Gender	1.52	.50	1.00	-	-	-	-	-	-
2 Age	25.32	7.01	-.22**	1.00	-	-	-	-	-
3 Student level	1.21	.41	-.18**	.75**	1.00	-	-	-	-
4 Status perception	5.91	2.63	.05	-.03	.02	1.00	-	-	-
5 Gender expression	28.40	4.78	-0.3	.01	.02	-.08	1.00	-	-
6 Social desirability	6.84	2.30	.06	-.08	.01	.07	.07	1.00	-
7 Assertive behaviour	21.46	4.99	.03	-.05	-.01	-.01	.14**	.19**	-

Notes: $^*p < .05$; $^{**}p < .001$.

Table 1 contains the correlation matrixes for all the variables. The analysis in Table 1 showed an inter-correlation between gender, age, students level, and its components of status perception, gender expression, social desirability, and assertive behaviour. The result indicates

that gender expression (r = .14, *p* < .001), and social desirability (r =.19, *p*< .001) was significantly related to assertive behaviour. While status perception (r = -.012, *p*> .05) is not associated with assertive behaviour.

Table 2: Moderating effects of gender expression on the link between status perception and assertiveness

Variables	*B*	SE	*t*	*p*	95%CI	
Status perception	.91	.62	1.46	.144	-.31	2.13
Gender expression	.33*	.13	2.46	.015	.07	.59
StatusPe x Gender Ex.	-.03	.02	-1.49	.138	-.07	.01

Note: B = Regression coefficients; SE = Standard Error; t = population t value; p = Probability level; CI = Lower & Upper Confidence Interval. *p < .05; R^2 = .03, ΔR^2 = .01.*

Table 2, revealed that status perception is not a predictor of assertive behaviour (B = .0029, p = .9778), while gender expression is a predictor of assertive bahvaiour. Gender expression did not moderate the association between status perception and assertive behaviour (B = .1644, p = .1376). The result revealed the interaction between status perception and gender expression was not significant.

Table 3: Moderating effects of social desirability on the link between status perception and assertiveness

Variables	*B*	SE	*t*	*p*	95%CI	
Status perception	.66*	.26	2.50	.013	.14	1.17
Social Desirability	1.02**	.24	4.24	.000	.55	1.50
StatusPe x SocialDe.	-.10*	.04	-2.91	.004	-.17	-.03

Note: B = Regression coefficients; SE = Standard Error; t = population t value; p = Probability level; CI = Lower & Upper Confidence Interval. *p < .05;* **p < .001; R^2 = .06, ΔR^2 = .02.*

Table 3, revealed that status perception is not a predictor of assertive behaviour (B = -.06, p = .588). Social desirability is a positive predictor of assertive behaviour (B = .41, p = .001). Social desirability negativelymoderated the association between status perception and assertive behaviour (B = -.10, p = .004). The result revealed the interaction between status perception and social desirability is significant.
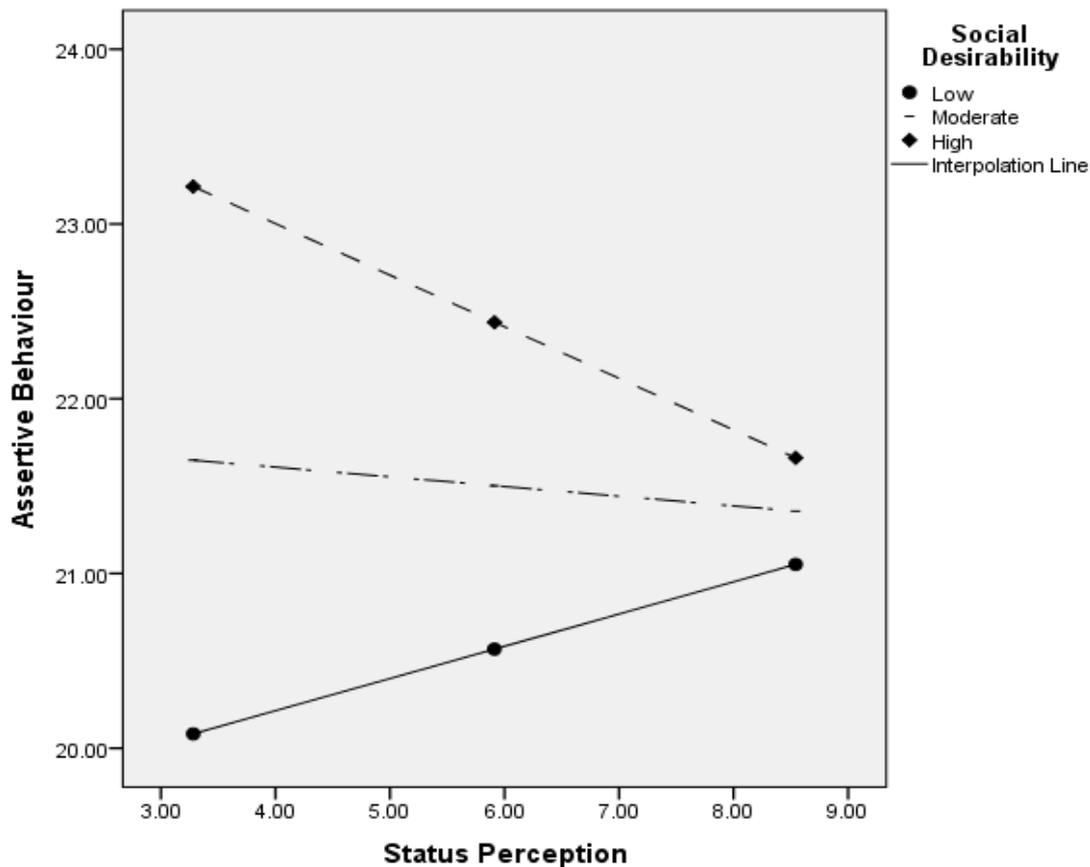
Fig. 2: Interactions between status perception and social desirability on assertive behaviour.

The slope simply shows the effect of the moderating variable on the predictor and outcome variables. The study indicated that having high social desirability predicted an increase in assertive behaviour. Although, status perception is not a predictor of assertive behaviour (B = .0029; t = -1.4884, 95% CI = .0103, p = .9778).

Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that there was no statistically significant relationship between status perceptions and assertive behaviours. This discovery aligns with the research conducted by Dubois (2010), which showed that there were no discernible differences in perceptual ability among managers according to their hierarchical standing. Additionally, the study found that high-level managers were characterised by attributes associated with assertiveness, such as being ambitious or competitive. Moreover, the research conducted by Eva et al. (2018) suggests that it may be advisable for individuals to hold the belief that individuals and groups with higher status tend to exhibit greater assertiveness, decisiveness, competence, intelligence, and so on, as compared to individuals and groups with lower status. This finding, however, does not align with the results of this investigation.

Results showed that the interaction between status perception and gender expression on assertive behaviour was not significant. Gender expression did not moderate the association between status perception and assertive behaviour. However, the research of Fragale et al. (2009) showed that high-status goals are more self-centered (ambitious, controlling, confident, and independent). Eva et al. (2018) also recommend that individuals and groups of high status should probably be believed to be more assertive, decisive, competent, and intelligent. The result is in line with the findings of Heimberg and Becker (1981), who opined that social situations can provoke unhelpful beliefs and evaluations. We assume that a person without

assertiveness has negative self-beliefs but the study of Immanuel and Muo (2022), states that assertiveness depends on the situation and environment. People can put themselves in environments that inhibit or encourage assertiveness. Further studies also identified gender variances in assertiveness over the language males and females use to communicate (Leaper et al., 2007). However, males often use firm language to improve their ability to act in certain situations. Women, in contrast, prefer affiliative language used to validate or actively engage someone else.

In addition, there is a significant association between social desirability and assertive behaviour. This finding is in support of Stepan (2020), which stated that social desirability can take one of two forms. One is self-deception and impression management which is done by providing inaccurate information and believing it to be true. A study conducted by Havan and Kohút (2019) also explored aspects of social desirability and extraversion, particularly its association with sociability, positivity, and energy levels. Significant and positive associations were found between social desirability and all three aspects of her. Sociability and assertiveness are related to social desirability at low power, and energy level is related to social desirability at medium power. No differences were found between men and women in the relationship between aspects of extraversion and social desirability.

However, the result in Table three shows that social desirability negatively moderated the association between status perception and assertive behaviour, which simply means that social desirability has a significant causal influence on status perception and assertive behaviour. This result indicates that the interaction between high social desirability and low-status perception leads to an increase in assertive behavior and vice versa. Individuals low in status perception with high social desirability are likely to be more assertive in their behaviour.

Implications of the study

These research variables are recent trends in Nigeria. Considering the findings of the study, it will aid psychologists, parents, and teachers in mapping out plans on how to guide youths to develop positive behaviours, in order to manage other people's perceptions of us as it requires a change in behaviour and appearance.

This study shed light on how to develop appropriate assertive skills and communication styles that will increase one's status perception, social desirability, and improve their mode of gender expression.

The study also revealed a negative interaction between status perception and social desirability on assertive behaviour exists. This implies that high social desirability relates to low-status perception to increase assertive behaviour.

Limitation of the study and suggestions for further studies

This research is limited to the moderating roles of gender expression and social desirability in the link between status perception and assertive behaviour. The researcher did not look at the cognitive aspect of gender and social desirability. Also, the research was limited to only 400 level undergraduate and postgraduate students. There is need to research on this variables cognitively and broaden it research participants.

The researchers would suggest that future research needs to push even further and examine in much more depth the potential role of gender expression in assertiveness and the influence it has on the cognitive aspect of behaviour. This is because what makes a person's expression different from their biological sex needs to be critically examined cognitively. Nowadays, some person's gender expression may not be fixed by nature it is the schemas they form from the environment that influences their thought which results in the behaviour they put up or expresses.

Conclusion

This study investigated the moderating role of gender expression and social desirability in the link between status perception and assertive behaviour. From the result of the study, gender expression and social desirability do not necessarily influence assertive behaviour, and status perception. Meanwhile, one's status perception has a significant influence on being assertive or not. Status events, like actions, communications, and associations that lead to increases and decreases in respect, admiration, reputation, prestige, deference, and influence are evaluated by our assertiveness this is because one's status can affect our social interaction, influence our social circle, and interest in society. However, being assertive enhances cordial relationships with our social circle and this comes with a reward like trust and high self-esteem. People will trust and listen when you speak, the emotionally assertive individual has less anxiety because since you are telling the truth, you know what you want and go for it, you have higher self-worth and self-respect. An assertive communication style enhances successful relationships in society.

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