

**LIN207 Research Paper**



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**Do young Singaporeans aged 18-30 perceive occupational titles such as Nurse and  
Doctor as gendered and why?**

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## **Introduction**

Occupational titles are normally associated with a specific gender, which can often shape certain gender expectations. In a study conducted by Boston University, they found out that most of the participants tend to see Surgeons as a male occupational job (Barlow, 2014). Further research also supported that prestigious occupational titles tend to assign more power to males due to the traditional gender hierarchy. (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004). According to one article by Ofri (2012), it alludes a 1979 study where young children perceive doctors to be male and nurses to be female. This further supports the idea that there is gender bias in occupations from as far back as 1979. It can also be seen that gender bias is evident in society even for children at a young age who tend to develop such a perception. Moreover, there is a lack in recent findings regarding occupational titles and gender in Singapore.

Hence, the research paper aims to investigate the perceptions of young Singaporeans aged 18-30 on occupational titles such as Nurse and Doctor. It also aims to uncover the underlying reasons behind gender bias in occupations. This study uses gendered pronouns as proxies to determine if individuals are gender-biased when looking at occupational titles. It also hopes to further understand the reasons behind gender bias through interviews.

### **Literature Review**

When discussing the use of gendered pronouns, the following literature review will be looking at the impact of both gender-powered language and gender-fair language, as well as the perception of occupational titles in the recent years.

#### **Gender-powered language**

In today's society, gender-powered language can be found almost everywhere, and it can be divided into either masculine or feminine (Sczeny, Formanowicz & Moster, 2016). It is shown that prestigious occupations are generally being associated with the male gender. This is due to the traditional gender hierarchy dated years back, which allocates more power and higher social status to men than women (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004). Hence, male pronouns are typically used for generalisations. One example would be the occupation *Doctor*, where people would instinctively associate it with only male and not female. (Lei, 2006). According to Gustafsson Sendén et al. (2014), a study published between the year 1996 and 1997 with a sample size of 800,000 news, broadcasted that the pronoun *he* is used more often than the pronoun *she* both in the news and in positive contexts.

Another study had also documented the impact of gender hierarchy in language. It analysed the ratio of male to female pronouns in written texts (Twenge et al., 2012) and deduced that it reflected the status of women in the United States in the 20th century. Status was indicated by a women's educational attainment, labour force, and participation in society. It was observed that the proportion of female pronouns were higher when women's status was high as well. Consequently, female pronouns were less frequent when women's status were low.

Furthermore, gender is often lexically marked when it is unnecessary, resulting in gender asymmetry (Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell & Laakso, 2011). Gender asymmetry occurs when both masculine and feminine form of the same word is not viewed equally. Masculinity is often viewed as the default form of word. In contrast, the feminine form of the same word is only used when females are involved. For example, according to the Dictionary (n,d), the word *actor* primarily refers to “a person whose profession is acting on the stage, in films, or on television”, which includes both males and females. However, an *actress* is primarily referred to as a “female actor”. We would refer a “male actor” as an *actor*, while specifically referring a “female actor” as an *actress* instead of an *actor* in the same context. The extraction of the feminine form implies that the masculine form comes first, hence creating gender asymmetry where feminine forms are viewed as secondary.

In addition, gendered language affects our perception and judgement. According to Kollmayer, Pfaffel, Schober & Brandt (2018), when faced with gendered language, individuals will have the tendency to utilise past knowledge. Individuals interpret words by creating a representative model of the information based on their past knowledge (Kollmayer et al., 2018). According to Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2011), gender-based language can shape the mental picture we have on the world around us. This is supported by Szeny et al. (2016), where it is cited that by simply assigning masculine or feminine characteristics to an object, it is able to alter our perceptions of the object. This results in the capacity to mislead listeners, by using terms that are non-gender neutral (Redfern, n,d). Hence, gender-power language plays a role in impacting our perception of occupational titles.

### Gender-fair Language

Gender-fair language is a response to gender asymmetry where it aims to reduce gender stereotypes that reflects through language (Sczeny et al., 2016). The Sapir Whorf hypothesis states that language has the ability to shape the way we think (Boroditsky et al., 2003). For instance, male nurses are constantly being reminded that the nursing field is particularly dominated by females, to a large extent that it affects their identity (Forsman and Barth, 2017). This is due to the perception of the word *Nurse*, where it is labelled to be a female. Hence, by employing gender-fair language, it allows individuals to alter perceptions on gender stereotypes and have a less biased mental picture of the world (Vainapel et al., 2015).

In addition, Omrčen (2017) proposes that gender-fair language reduces gender bias in language. Gender-fair language aids in reducing gender stereotypess and discrimination through neutralization and feminization (Sczeny et al., 2016). Through neutralization, gender-fair language replaces gender marked terms and turns it into gender un-marked terms. A gender marked term is a male or female dominated term, as opposed to a neutral term. For example, a gender marked term would be *Chairman*. When it is replaced with a gender un-marked term, *Chairperson*, it becomes a gender-fair expression (Menegatti & Rubini, 2017). Whereas through feminization, gender-fair language aims to include females in sentences and phrases. For example, instead of *electrician*, females are referred to as *female electrician*. Sczeny et al. (2016) noted that this helps to explicitly include women, especially in grammatical gender languages. Hence, gender-fair language has been used to fight gender inequality, with attempts to make females more visible especially in male dominated industries (Sczeny et al., 2016).

Another study shows that a pre-exposure to gender-fair language reduces the tendency for use of gendered pronouns (Kollmayer et al., 2018). The study used a German ‘specialist riddle’, which the German speaking participant read after either reading text in gender-fair language, or in masculine generics. The results showed that 44% of participants who read the gender-fair text indicated that the specialist in the riddle was a woman. Hence this concluded that male bias is preventable, as long as gender-fair text is provided prior to bias-heavy information.

### **Feminine and Masculine Traits**

According to Drydakis et al. (2018), there are specific behaviours of males and females that can be linked to masculine and feminine characteristics. Masculine traits tend to be associated with success, leadership and wealth. On the other hand, feminine traits are associated with roles such as support and caregiver, seldom having anything to do with success (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Similarly, Franzway et al, (2009) noted that women have more difficulties in getting higher paid and status jobs as compared to males. According to (Franzway et al., 2009), males are typically given jobs that require more decision-making, involving negotiations, and are evidently more complex. In addition, women are often seen working in poorer working conditions, hence the association of lower status jobs with women (Franzway et al, 2009).

Furthermore, according to Heilman (2012), feminine and masculine traits are gender stereotypes that often suggests what males and females behave and should behave like. These feminine and masculine traits are also one of the leading factors that create gender behavioral

expectations. These expectations are found to be consistent across different cultures (Heilman 2012).

It is also noted by Weichselbaumer (2004) that if a job has a higher number of females working in the sector, economists will automatically associate this job as more feminine. This correlates with the hiring process of determining an applicant's success rate by looking at the applicant's gender and the job's sex association, according to psychologists Heilman and Reihle, as cited by Weichselbaumer (2004). Even though certain occupations are more male dominated taking a management job for example, females may still be considered for the position if she shows the required male traits associated with the particular job. (Weichselbaumer, 2004).

### **Perception of Occupational Titles**

Research studies have shown that the opinions of the public regarding gender equality in work have improved since 1980 (Donna, N.D) In light of gender equality, females are more likely to be included in representing an occupational title (Sczeny et al., 2016). For example, both the masculine and feminine form of the occupation *Chairperson* is represented by *Chairman* and *Chairwoman*. However, occupational titles have not yet achieved gender neutrality. When we think of *Chairperson*, we automatically assign a more masculine quality to it. This creates a male bias in mental representations and it leads readers or listeners to picture a more male than female exemplar in a person category (Sczeny et al., 2016).

Furthermore, there is a lack in recent findings regarding perception of gender in occupational titles in Singapore. Findings were leaning towards common gender stereotypes and typical

feminine and masculine behaviors in Singapore. In addition, there were no studies conducted to find out if there is a perception of gender in occupational titles in Singapore.

Hence, by reviewing the literature, it led back to the research question: do young Singaporeans aged 18-30 perceive occupation titles such as Nurse and Doctor as gendered and why?

In light of the lack in recent findings regarding perception of gender in occupational titles, this paper aimed to bridge the gap between generations to find out whether gender neutrality in occupational titles have improved as compared to the past in Singapore. Additionally, this paper also hoped to uncover the underlying reasons behind gender bias in occupational titles.

## **Methodology**

To uncover the perceptions of gender in occupational titles, we have conducted this study using interviews as our main method of data collection. Interviews were used to help us in collecting qualitative and in-depth data which led us to understand the motivations behind an individual's perception. The purpose of our study was to assess individuals' perception towards occupational titles and identify any gender stereotypes that they might have.

## **Participants**

There were a total of five young adults that are aged between 18 to 30 years old that participated in the interview. Out of which, there were 2 female and 3 male participants. These participants were chosen using convenience sampling. The rationale behind including

both genders was to obtain results that will consider and be inclusive of both genders. Hence, a more representative sample of young adults was to be expected.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Current Occupation</b>
<b>A</b>	Male	18	Student
<b>B</b>	Male	20	National Service Full-Time
<b>C</b>	Male	25	Teacher
<b>D</b>	Female	20	Student
<b>E</b>	Female	33	Biotechnologist

### **Procedures**

Firstly, participants were informed that they will be taking part in an interview that talks about their perception of occupations. Next, we briefed participants on the purpose of the interview process where afterwards, they had to sign a form to give their consent to the interview on the basis that their personal details will be kept private in order to maintain their privacy and anonymity. The consent form also included permission to voice record the entire interview.

A series of occupations were asked, in order to determine their perception of the occupations listed. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in order to obtain a more in-depth response for better analysis of the data afterwards. Interviews also allowed us to observe and record any non-verbal cues that the participants displayed. These non-verbal cues were essential in letting us, the researchers, better understand the responses that were given.

The interview process was also voice recorded using a voice recorder that was placed near them during the one-to-one interview. This ensured that their voices were loud and clear enough to be used later for transcription. Transcripts were useful for the purpose of this study as it helped us to code the responses. The transcripts were inclusive of both verbal and nonverbal responses. Coding the interviews helped us to find similarities and differences in responses that allowed for better analysis of their perceptions.

### **Results and Discussion**

In the study that the team has conducted, it was observed that there may be a possibility that occupational titles are not being gendered by young adults in Singapore age 18-30. During the data collection process, we realised that young Singaporeans age 18-35 do not see occupations as gendered. For example they used more neutral terms such as “they”, the nurses, the lawyers, and the doctors. An interviewee expressed that “occupation titles are jobs right? Jobs are jobs, anyone also can do what. I in army also got see female soldier and sergeants, I go hospital also got see male nurse. Nowadays where got separate a job by male or female? Female also can be president in Singapore, you know Halimah Yacob our Singapore first female president? Perfect example that females can also be president in Singapore.”

When discussing on the topic on whether they felt an occupation is more masculine or feminine they do choose one side to represent the occupation title. This finding supported Sczeny, Formanowicz & Moster (2016)’s study about how occupation titles can be seen as more masculine or feminine. However, the team’s findings did show that even gender-neutral terms can be seen as more masculine or feminine. In the interview, there is a general

consensus that occupational titles namely “lawyer” and “chairperson” seem to be more masculine and “nurses” are deemed to be more feminine. A respondent expressed “If you tell me that there are male nurses, I wouldn’t be surprised. But if you ask me about nurses in general, the first image that comes to mind would be a female.” Another respondent mentioned that “there are definitely jobs that are more suited for males, however, I’m not against the idea of a female doing the job. Look at the army for example, being combative in nature it is more suited for males than females. The job scope of soldiers in nature is more masculine due to kind of combative work they do and train in.” Additionally, another respondent expanded on the tasks that nurses did, and elaborated on them as feminine tasks. “You see the nurses caring for the patients day in day out and support them. For example helping the patients go to the washroom if they have difficulty doing so. They also help with feeding the patient if they have difficulty in doing so.” These tasks are more feminine because females are known to be more supportive and caring. As a result, a nurse is considered a more feminine job.

This was similar to the findings of Heilman (2012) where Heilman noted that gender characteristic stereotypes can lead to assuming one’s femininity or masculinity. A possible explanation for this would be that they associate the job characteristics of occupation titles with either femininity or masculinity. For example, associating a chairperson with someone who is bossy and a perfectionist makes it look more masculine, and associating nurses with people who are supportive and caring, makes them look more feminine. Participant A mentioned “I always think that chairperson is normally narcissistic and harsh. Sometimes, they are manipulative which makes them very smart but scary as well. I think these are the qualities that makes them stand out from the rest. Normally a chairperson is a male as they

seem to have more power and they are more dominating. They are always demanding for things to be done or given to them. I think most of them instill fear in their employees? Similar to Hitler and Stalin like what we have learned in History class. During the war, males are the only ones tasked with leadership roles but females are always treated unfairly as comfort women. They were not even given chances to learn to be a leader and men from the past are generally assumed to have natural leadership skills.” According to Drydakis et al., (2018)’s study, it states that caring traits are typically associated with feminine traits. This supports our respondent’s response that males and females have particular traits associated with them. In this case, a male chairperson is naturally perceived to be more dominating by our respondents. Hence, job characteristics of occupation titles are often tied in with femininity or masculinity.

In addition, a handful of our interviewees felt that the prestige or status of the job affected their opinion on whether an occupation is more feminine or masculine. This finding supported those of Barlow (2014) and Franzway et al (2009)’s studies. One of the interviewees expressed that “I think that better jobs like doctors and lawyers would be more masculine and lower-class jobs would be more feminine. Most of the cleaners in school are women too.” One reason that may help to explain this is media effects.

It seems that media portrayal can play a part as well in inducing a belief that a certain occupation is more male or female dominated. Most of the interviewees expressed that this notion came from drama serials, common media celebrities or images from the internet. One participant talked about the popular k-drama “Doctors” and expressed that almost all of the doctor roles were played by males and majority of the nurse roles were given to females. An

interviewee mentioned “I feel that it is more male-dominated because like for example in movies or shows, most of the doctors portrayed are males and not females.” The show mentioned by the interviewee is a Korean drama called “What’s Wrong with Secretary Kim?” The drama revolved around a female chairperson of a major corporation and his female secretary. Another participant mentioned that “There are many Korean dramas about the corporate world. One of the Korean drama starring Park Seo Joon, What’s Wrong with Secretary Kim, talks about a chaebol. Actually all the chaebols are male. You will never see any female chaebol in drama.” ‘Chaebol’ is a term widely used in Korea to address someone who is the heir to a major corporation. They are the ones that dominate South Korea’s economy (Albert, 2018). Despite the fact that the term ‘chaebol’ can be referred to both males and females, the media only portray males as powerful and respectful ‘chaebols’.

An interviewee, when asked about why she found lawyers male dominated, talked about popular TV series such as *Suits*, *Better Call Saul*, and Movies such as *Liar Liar* as major factors for why she believed lawyers were mostly male dominated. The main characters of the first season of *Suits*, portrayed a law firm in the US as male dominated, with female secretaries. Correspondingly, *Liar Liar*’s main character is a male, giving them the impression that lawyers were male dominated professions.

A media theory that can be used to explain this phenomenon is the Agenda Setting Theory as proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972). This theory proposes that the media is able to influence how the public views a situation or an idea. The media is constantly framing how individuals will view careers such that often times those in higher, more prestigious job positions such as lawyers and doctors are being portrayed by male actors. As a result, media

frames the situation such that the public is likely to think that prestigious jobs are more often than not likely to be dominated by males. The same goes for the opposite whereby less prestigious jobs are commonly portrayed by female actors as seen in the media. A respondent supported this by mentioning that “Usually TV shows and movies will portray nurses as females rather than males.”

There is evidence of gender inequality presented from the results of the interviews. All of the interviews that were conducted indicated that participants perceived males and females in Singapore as having unequal rights and opportunities when it comes to finding jobs and careers in the workforce. A respondent stated that “there are less opportunities for females to take up the same jobs.” Furthermore, another respondent mentioned how “males can generally earn more than females.” This shows that even in the same career line, it is possible for males to earn more than females. There is a wide disparity in the wage level for males and females which supports the assumption that males and females do not have the same career opportunities. A factor that can be used to explain the idea of gender inequality is how males and females are perceived to have different roles in society.

Gender roles are critical in deciding job opportunities. For example, one main difference in gender roles between females and males is that females are expected to take on the task of caregiving and maintaining the upkeep of the household. While males are not expected to take on caregiving duties, they are expected to play a more prominent role in the workforce and be more career oriented than females. A respondent mentioned how “women had to stay at home and care for the family.” This is in line with Heilman (2012)’s study where gender roles lead to behavioural expectations in our society. As a result of gender roles, it serves as a

possible reason as to why females generally do not have equal opportunities to take up the same jobs as males. This leads to the perception that certain jobs are more male dominated which results in gender bias towards certain occupational titles.

### **Limitations**

The sample size is too small to be considered a representative sample as only 5 participants were interviewed in the data collection process. Therefore, this cannot be considered a representative sample size to represent the entire population of young adults. Since all 5 of the participants that were interviewed were Chinese, the results were also not inclusive of the other cultural races in Singapore. The data collection period was also time limited which could have affected the quality of the interview responses.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of the study was to answer the following research question: Do young Singaporeans aged 18-30 perceive occupation titles such as Nurse and Doctor as gendered and why? The results indicated that young adults do not entirely perceive occupation titles as gendered but they do have a clear perception of it leaning towards either masculinity or femininity. Through the process of data analysis, a few factors have been identified as reasons for their perception. The reasons for the perception of occupational titles as gendered are the association of job characteristics with masculinity and femininity, the prestige or status of the job, gender inequality in society, gender roles in society and media portrayal.

Hence, this paper serves as a bridge between the past and the present, that there are still evidence of gender inequality in Singapore's society despite the increasing awareness of

gender equality. Given enough time, people's perception of gender inequality will change accordingly. Therefore, the results might differ in the future, such that there might be an increase in occupations being perceived as gender-neutral.

### **Directions For Future Research**

Although the topic of perception of occupational titles as gendered have been increasingly prominent recently, there are only a few studies that have been done in this area. Past research done in this area were broad and generic and there were no focus on a particular group. In addition, there were no studies done based on Singapore's society. Thus, this study serves as a direction for future discussions in this area.

Firstly, future scopes for research may include conducting research which places emphasis on minority cultural groups in particular. Research done with this emphasis in mind will lead to observing if there are any differences in the data collected as compared to this current study. This will help better analyse the perceptions of young adults. Secondly, multiple studies can be done by participants with different personal characteristics yet, with the same demographics to get a more representation of the sample. This will help to see if personal characteristics affects their perception. Lastly, further studies can go more in-depth into looking at individuals' motivations that drive their perceptions. This will help to better analyse their perceptions better.

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### Appendices

	Interview Questions	Notes for interview
1	What is your current occupation?	
2	What do you think are the top 3 most popular occupations here in Singapore?	
3	What do you think a “ <b>occupation</b> ” does?	Randomized occupations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nurse</li> <li>• Lawyer</li> <li>• Cleaner</li> <li>• Doctor</li> <li>• Chairperson</li> <li>• Cook</li> </ul>
4	Do you personally know anyone who is in this line of work?	Person must be connected to you. Within two degrees of separation.
5	Can you name a well-known person that you have heard of?	
6	What do you think they are like?	Optional
7	What is another term you would use for “ <b>occupation</b> ”?  <hr/> Do you think “ <b>occupation</b> ” is male or female dominated?/ more masculine or feminine?	(refer to question 3) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nurse</li> <li>• Lawyer</li> <li>• Cleaner</li> <li>• Doctor</li> <li>• Chairperson</li> <li>• Cook</li> </ul>
8	Why do you think you use this term?	Refer to question 7
9	Earlier I heard you using he/she pronoun  Why do you think you associate <b>this occupation</b> with <b>this gender</b> ?	
10	Do you think Singapore is a gender equality country? Why or why not?	
11	Do you think there are occupation gender inequality? Have you experience or heard any?	