

WHERE IS WOMEN'S CONFIDENCE? MY STORY...

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Abstract

The enrolment of female graphic design students is higher than that of male students in all stages of higher education—bachelor, master and doctoral levels. However, female designers occupy much lower positions in work environments than men. Some attribute this phenomenon to the stereotypes in patriarchal societies; others to biological differences. However, another highly important factor is that women often easily lose their confidence in many areas, especially career advancement. This paper focuses on self-confidence, which is an essential factor in female designers' academic and professional achievements. Based on interviews and investigations with higher education students (bachelor, master and PhD) and female and male professionals, this research attempts to determine the causes of women's lack of self-confidence and possible influencing factors and to propose suggestions for their future practice. The results offer implications for how professional educators and social workers can help women improve their self-confidence and acquire career skills.

Key words: *gender perceptions, self-confidence establishment, innate characteristics, external effect, experience, psychological implications*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to data from the University of Lapland in Finland and Shandong Art and Design University and Shandong Women's University in China, not only do female design students have a much higher enrolment than males, but their performance and credits earned are better than male students'. Women have surpassed men not only in high school graduation rates but also in university enrolment and degree completion (National Center for Educational Statistics NCES, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Related to these achievements, the attitudes and motivations of boys indicate that, as a group, they do not seem to think that school is important in their lives as much as girls do (Clark et al., 2006). More than boys, girls find coursework to be meaningful and interesting did and see the importance of their schoolwork for their futures (NCES, 2005). However, a comparison of performance and position in academic and working environments shows that females have proven themselves superior to males in academic environments, but the situation is reversed in working environments. Various factors contribute to this phenomenon: cultural contexts, established social conceptions, biological differences and self-confidence, which is more easily controlled and changed by one's own endeavours. Earlier research suggests that confidence is a significant factor in personal achievement and success, after only talent and opportunity. In the past, an abundance of psychological theories suggested that women have an innate fear of success—that a lack of success is somehow inherent to their nature (Lips, 1997). These ideas have been completely discredited, but suspicion of women's ability to achieve still seems to linger in some quarters—not least among women themselves (Neal, 2008).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the multiple processes in which females experience confidence establishment. Qualitative data were collected and compared for subjects in Finland and China, and the records analysed for differences in innate characteristics/personality, experience, age, culture, career and gender perceptions. Accordingly, this study attempts to answer the following questions: (1) Why do many women lack of self-confidence? (2) What factors influence women's self-confidence establishment? (3) What are the different effects of internal and external behaviours on males and females? (4) What factors can be considered to help women build their self-confidence? The results of this study offer some implications for future research and professional practice.

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study included two groups, one from Finland and one from China. Both groups included students and career women and men, who were categorised by their situation in society. In the Finnish group, there were 51 design students from the University of Lapland pursuing degrees in the Faculty of Art and Design and 9 designers and design educators working for design agencies in Finland. Seventy-five per cent (N:38) of participants were female, and 25% (N:13) male; 6 career people were female, and 3 male. In the Chinese group, there were 67 design students pursuing degrees at Shandong University of Art and Design or Shandong Women's University, 6 teachers from these two universities and 7 designers from design agencies in Shandong. Sixty-eight per cent (N: 46) of the students were female, and 32% (N:21) male; among the career women and men, 8 were female, and 5 male. Data were collected from students through their stories and responses on an open-ended questionnaire, while the career women and men participated in the research through interviews. All the participants in both Finland and China were given similar questions on topics focused on self-confidence building in different cultures. The themes discussed included personal characteristics, experience, culture, gender stereotypes and social context, which are influential factors contributing to self-confidence establishment.

2.2 Data analysis

This study applied mainly qualitative methods to address the research questions concerning female's lack of self-confidence and to compare the influence of gender and different cultural backgrounds on the building of self-confidence through a variety of processes. The data collected from Finland and China were used to compare differences in performance due to culture and educational backgrounds and to identify the common and specific factors which affect women's self-confidence establishment. The students surveyed were questioned about the same topic but gave answers in different ways. There were three parts to the research: One, data were collected from the responses to the open-ended questionnaire in a rational way which focused on self-confidence establishment. Four elements were identified in the data: innate personalities, level of self-confidence, external influences and gender differences. Additionally, the data were classified on three levels of personal characteristics: optimistic, moderate and pessimistic. The different relevance of these four elements is shown in marked lines. Second, students were instructed to write about the topic in a sentimental way—the my story method, in which participants write a story about themselves, concentrating on the theme of personal characteristics and the influential factors in their realisation of gender development. In addition, students were asked to use 'he' or 'she' to write the story about themselves. The data were divided by nationality and gender. Third, data were collected from interviews with career women and men, including designers and design educators, who were divided by gender and age, and based on these four elements, different viewpoints on self-confidence and the most influential factors were exposed. These interviews explored in-depth participants' internal views of gender, confidence and factors and compared the conceptions of self-confidence establishment held by designers who have different professional scopes and are in different career phases.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Gender stereotypes in multi-cultural backgrounds

The data come from the students' my story narratives and responses to open-ended questionnaires administered at the University of Lapland in Finland and Shandong University of Art and Design and Shandong Women's University in China, and the interviews with career persons in Finland and China.

3.1.1 Finnish participants

Sixty participants responded to the story-writing prompt; 44 were female, and 16 male. According to the data from the my story narratives, there are different models for the acceptance of stereotypical conceptions of gender.

According to the data, half of the females have strong stereotypical conceptions of gender and received information from parents, teachers, media and other information channels. This information influenced them deeply, and they enjoy being a perfect lady, as the information tells them to be. It seems to be a standard of life which they prefer: 'She is really diligent and always does homework and [is] still in the university. ... She feels that she has to do as others [tell] her to do. She also likes to take care of others and contribute to their wellbeing...'. 'She has always been the good girl: not asking much, respecting people older than her and doing as she was told ... always did her homework, and never broke the rules...'. 'She takes as her life mission to become the stereotype of girly princess, and she has strict ideas of what a woman can do and what she can't. ... She is ridiculously conservative and has, for example, stated that women can't propose; women can't [make] the first move and can't work with machines ... and she doesn't even joke about this. She believes in this 100% ...'. In addition, these respondents are afraid of being not seen as the 'fine lady': 'She is quite shy. [It's] especially hard [for her] to say an opinion or point of view if it's opposite to others' views. ... She is not used to joking or being "the funny person" in a group'.

Eleven female respondents said that they began to accept stereotypical conceptions of gender as they grew up (even at the start the respondents did not agree with the gender stereotypes), but they do not want to be different than others, so it seems best to join society. These respondents are concerned about others' opinions and evaluations: 'As a child ... she didn't really like things [that] girls more often do. ... When she became a teenager, she wanted to be more like other girls because she didn't want to be different from others...'. 'Worry about what other people think about her She thinks that the factors which have influenced her most have come from outside of her family...'. For these respondents, the gender rules seem to have limited their own characteristics and future lives: 'That role has limited/restrained her enormously during her life...'.

In comparison with other female respondents, a smaller number of 8 female respondents said they are not concerned about gender stereotypes. They have a stable conception of themselves, which is hard to change. Usually, these people have strong confidence and optimistic characteristics and do not care about what others think about them. They want to do whatever they want and try to be themselves, not others. They have moderate families which have not told them the standard rules for gender: 'She has never thought herself as a girl. ... She couldn't feel like belonging to the same "group" as other girls. ... She was a human, that's all ... '. 'She thinks the lines between boys and girls are getting blurred. ... She thinks anyone can do whatever they want and should be treated the same, no matter what they are'.

Regarding the males' answers, most do not think they are stereotypical persons who do not mind gender conceptions for males and females. Some did not even like to talk about gender. Only 2 said that they had been influenced by traditional conceptions: 'After all he thinks that being boy or girl doesn't have to characterise or define the way of thinking. ... As a parent you don't need to control children to behave [with] girl or boy characteristics ...'. 'He thinks he's lucky to be able to do whatever thing he like without having to think if they're suitable for his sex. There are certainly some predetermined roles for boys and girls in Finland, but you don't have to fit into them if you have good self-esteem ...'. 'He doesn't really care how other people view him, but he tries to live in a way himself can respect.'

The data presented suggest that females' gender perceptions mostly come from outside information, and they more easily accept it than males. The data also suggest that, relevant to why females more easily lose their confidence, information from outside is a main factor which influences their personal characteristics formation and limits their confidence establishment.

3.1.2 Chinese participants

There were 80 participants who responded to the open-ended questionnaire; 51 were female, and 29 were male. Compared with Finnish participants, the data showed similar results and similar points.

In the data on Chinese participants, 46% (N: 23) of females have strong stereotypical conceptions of gender. Most of their gender conceptions come from their families, and as children grow up, information also comes from schools, the media and the girls' peers. These respondents easily accept

these gender conceptions from the beginning: 'Her parents educated her in a typical traditional way: Girls should be nice, silent, gentle, polite, take care of others...'. 'She never breaks the rule. She thinks the rules limited her characteristics but also thinks the rules made her nice. ... She wants to be the best one, and she tries her best to obtain the goal to be a "perfect lady" ...'. 'At certain level, she is more sensible. All kinds of social norms exist, information from social media, suggestions from surrounding people, cartoon figures from cartoons ... almost every aspect of lives always remind her that she is a girl, and she needs to behave like one'.

Of the female Chinese respondents, 28% (N: 14) began to accept gender stereotypes as they grew up and were influenced by external education. Sometimes, even if they do not agree with the stereotypes, they think that it is better to survive and obtain respect through such stereotypes which are widely spread and accepted in society: 'She wants to escape because the pressure on her that she should [be] married at her age in [the] traditional conception. ... She is shy talking about this before others. ... The pressure is becoming more serious as she is becoming older and older. She thinks she must find a husband before 30'. 'When she was a little girl, she was a brave, just girl and ready to help other girls [escape] from the boys' naughty games. ... But once the teacher criticised her "brave activity" to punish a naughty boy severely, something was changed. ... [As] she grows up, she is always living in the mainstream culture, which is an easy and comfortable space for her.' This kind of conception seems to have limited these respondents. They become shy, calmer and a little bit more pessimistic and control their passion and emotions: 'She's shy to face everyone. ... She has not enough confidence. She even has got a higher education and has a nice job in a good social position (most people think so), but she thinks she has nothing. ... She [is] eager to show her achievements to others [and] wants to get others' attention and respect'.

Of the female respondents, 26% (N: 13) said that they are not concerned about the stereotypical conceptions of gender. No matter what they have experienced, they still make their own choices. To support such a performance, the data suggest that most of these respondents have optimistic personalities and were not influenced by their family, especially during their childhood: 'Her father always lets her do what she wants. ... There's no information about gender choice. ... When she was 10 years old, her family had a big transition, and she had a bad experience in those 10 years, but she is still an optimistic and positive girl. ... She can do everything she wants to do ...'. 'She doesn't think she is girly. ... Her parents haven't limited her action[s that] must be like a girl. "Just do what you want and what you can". ... She doesn't mind what others look [at] her like. "I am me, that's all".'

The data from the male Chinese respondents are similar to the data from male Finnish respondents. Eighty per cent (N: 23) of male Chinese respondents are not concerned with stereotypical conceptions of gender; they just want to be themselves: 'He thinks there's no influence from external world on his gender perceptions. ... His choice is from his heart and his responsibility, not from others...'. 'He tries his best to live his life better but nothing about gender'. Only 20% (N: 6) think social conceptions of gender are normal and appropriate: 'He thinks that men feel more pressure than women because we live in this kind of culture that [holds that] men should contribute more and have more responsibility for family and society'.

Comparing the data from the male and female Chinese respondents, females are more easily influenced by external information, which contributes to their behaviour and personal characteristics formation. The data also suggest that external suggestion and information are significant factors in females' confidence establishment.

In summary, conceptions of gender come from external information sources, such as family, schools and the media. Females are more easily influenced by the stereotypical conceptions of gender in comparison to males who are not concerned about them much. Comparing Finnish respondents and Chinese respondents, there is no large difference between them. They are influenced by conceptions of gender to a similar extent.

3.2 Social influences

3.2.1 Psychological implications

Of respondents, 54% think that there are psychological implications from gender: 'I've got that feeling quite often ... that I should be more calm, not as loud and critical as I am ...'. 'From some elderly, I have heard indirectly the message, "You're a girl. You got to have your family, your kids, so you must know how to cook ...".' 'I was socialised as a girl'. There were 31% who said they did not feel the pressure of gender norms: 'As a child I was occasionally told that I should 'be a nice girl' ... as I have kind personality, nothing to do with gender'. Fifteen per cent think that people's perceptions of gender are not affected by social norms too much.

3.2.2 Psychological implications from family

Thirty-eight per cent of respondents think that there are psychological implications on gender from family. This information constantly influences respondents and affects them deeply, which is hard to change: 'It has been typical that girls do the household work and boys do [the] outdoor jobs ...'. 'When I did something considered feminine, my parents said, "You are a fine girl"'. 'Many times, I wanted to escape from the gender cage, but nothing has changed forever'. Fifty-four per cent think that there are no psychological implications from family: 'My family doesn't always ask my opinion, and there used to be certain tasks which were just for women but also tasks for men...'. Eight per cent think that there is not so much influence: 'I know that, but I don't concern myself about that, just leave it there'

3.2.3 Psychological implications from education

Of the respondents, 38% think that there are psychological implications for gender from education. These deeply affected them throughout their education: 'In school, girls are supposed to behave like girls, behave well and control all impulses. ... I was supposed to be calm and nice. ... When a girl succeeded in school, the teachers and other kids thought that she is hard working. When a boy succeeded, everybody thought that he is talented...'. 'Teachers also expected that girls write more complicated things than boys. Therefore, it is also more difficult for girls if they have not achieved big success; however, for boys, that would not be a big issue'. As well, 62% think they did not feel the pressure of gender norms in education: 'I think the education had been quite equal to boys and girls, equality in the university...'. 'Good behaviour and kindness [were] expected from everybody, not just girls'

3.2.4 Psychological implications from the media

There were 62% of respondents who think that there are psychological implications on gender from the media. The respondents were deeply affected, especially the females, as they grew up: 'The role that [the] media sets for women has been quite narrowed. ... Still the traditional role of woman is promoted in [the] media: Women should be beautiful, take care of people, take care of [the] household, etc...'. 'There is [a] really strong message about the way you should be as a woman. ... Women have to be splendid and competitive when [they] compete with man'. There were 38% of respondents who thought that the media had no influence on them: '[The] media is full of stereotypes of stupid females, sexist jokes and other false ideas ... nothing on my personality...'. 'I try to fight against these effects; I try to live my life in my own way, without stereotypes...'. 'I'm not been affected; that is because, since I was a child, I was aware of [how] society [is] trying to effect on me. Therefore, since I have always been conscious that, it helped me not to be affected.'

3.2.5 Attitudes towards the psychological implications

Of the respondents, 15% prefer to have information on gender views and like to follow them and be the perfect model of what they believe they should be: 'I love them...'. 'I become sad because I can't be what media tells me to be...'. 'I have friends who have trouble because they think they aren't pretty enough'. There were 77% of respondents who think the opposite and 8% who do not mind gender stereotypes and want to avoid them or confront them: 'Also I become annoyed because I don't want to listen to the media ...'. 'We could think that this is real, which would destroy us...'. 'It is often with

hierarchical order: Women are most of the time presented as less [good] than men. ... It's like discrimination'. 'As a feminist, I try to not be influenced by the propaganda from [the] public media; however, it is not easy to get away from them'. 'I try to create artwork that does not fit these stereotypes but challenges them'.

4. DISCUSSIONS

Comparing innate characteristics and external influences, which is more important in forming personality? What factors influence self-confidence establishment? Comparing female participants in Finland and China, what are their similarities, and what are their differences?

4.1 Personal characteristics establishment

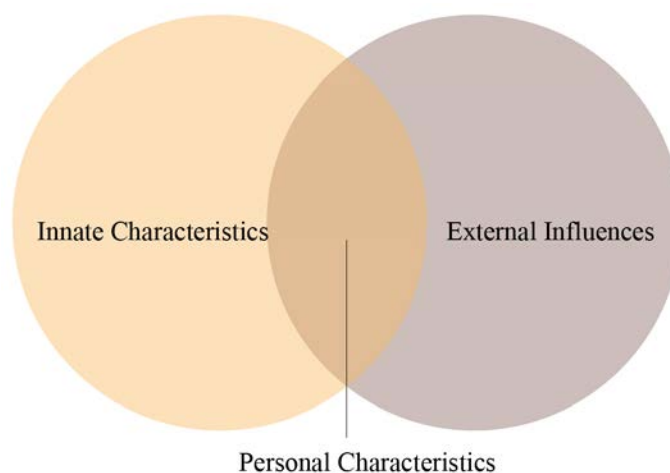


Diagram 1. Personal characteristics establishment framework

According to this investigation, 54% of respondents think that their characteristics are mainly derived from inherited factors, while 31% see their characteristics as mainly affected by external influences (traditional conceptions, experience, family, education and the media). Of females, 54% think that their behaviour is in according only with their own wish to act as a human, not as a gender actor. However, some change their minds as they grow up and want to be normal girls who are not different than others, so they accept the recognised norms. Thirty-eight per cent of females have a strong feeling that they have been influenced by external influences, which have contributed to their personal characteristics establishment. In contrast to females, all the males think that their personal characteristics establishment has not been greatly influenced and that most of their characteristics they had from the beginning, inherited from their families. The data also suggest that females are more easily influenced by external information and more sensitive to the attitudes of the people around them. Their experience also is a main factor that influences their personal characteristics establishment. Additionally, unlike career women and men, students have few experiences of working in society, which makes it possible for them to think that they have not been influenced by society deeply. In contrast, participants who have worked for several years feel that influence from society is an important factor in the formation of their personal characteristics, which to some extent contributes to their situation and position in society.

At this point, inherited innate and external influences appear to be two significant factors in personal characteristics establishment, but the degree of the effect of external influences depends on personal innate characteristics.

4.2 Self-confidence establishment

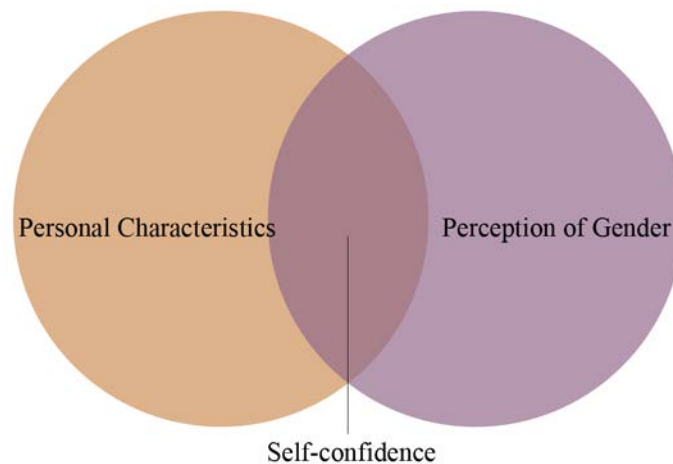


Diagram 2. Self-confidence establishing frame

Regarding gender perceptions, the data suggest that 80% of females think that they are influenced by their family and educational backgrounds, and 62% think that they are influenced by the media. The data collected from respondents who said that they have been influenced by external factors show that 59% think that the gender guidance has had a negative influence on their self-confidence establishment, 27% a positive influence, and 12% no influence. Of all respondents, 85% think that their confidence or lack of confidence comes from their good and bad experiences. In addition, the data suggest that perceptions of gender influence personal self-confidence establishment. The discipline or standard gender model of fine lady did not encourage self-confidence but, instead, limited it. The data indicate that the discipline mostly acted as a negative factor in self-confidence establishment. Personal characteristics and perceptions of gender are the main factors contributing to self-confidence establishment, and the results depend on the balance of these two significant factors.

4.3 Self-confidence

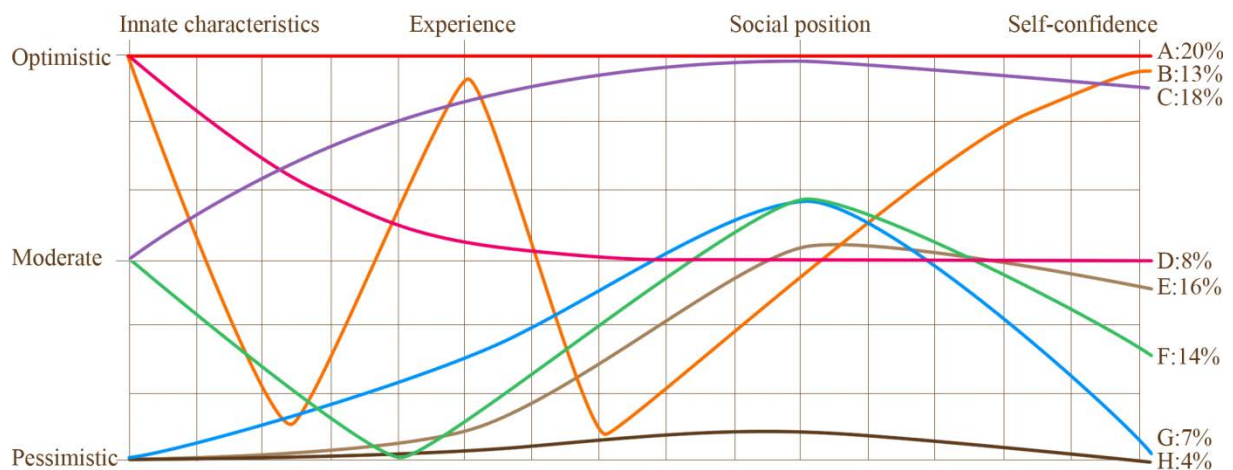


Diagram 3. Self-confidence establishment models

According to this study, three relative factors—innate characteristics, experience (family, educational and childhood background, media influence and culture) and achieved social position—contribute to self-confidence establishment. These three factors have both positive and negative influences on self-confidence establishment. There are quite different tracks of self-confidence establishment based on

different models. According to Diagram 3, innate characteristics are the foundation of self-confidence establishment, and given different experiences and social positions, individuals will achieve different levels of self-confidence. As the diagram suggests, people with an innate optimistic characteristic will achieve confidence along any track, but people with an innate pessimistic characteristic have difficulty obtaining confidence. Even when they have a good position in society and not so bad experiences, their inner world is hard to change. People with a moderate characteristic are influenced easily by their experiences and the social positions they have achieved. Good experiences help them to gain confidence, but bad experiences lead them to lose confidence. In addition, 38% of respondents said that their experiences in childhood were an important factor contributing to their self-confidence establishment. Therefore, both innate characteristic and external influences are important for self-confidence establishment. Innate characteristics are fundamental conditions which are hard to change, but external experiences are a factor that can be changed in certain situations. This is the purpose of this study—identifying the possible factors that can be changed during higher education.

4.4 Gender differences

Female students liked to answer the questionnaires and write the story of their lives because it was a way of expressing their feelings and talking with themselves. They enjoyed the process of writing to show their own inner world and of discussing their feelings about the topics. However, males did not seem to like to talk about these topics, especially their inner world. Their answers were short and concise, with few details. The data from teachers suggest that female students always ask questions, even though they are skilled at studying. However, male students do not ask questions much and only do when they decide to. In addition, 81% of female respondents who lack of self-confidence said that the main reason is their bad experiences when they were young, e.g. pressure from parents, being educated in a wrong way, bad evaluations or low social position. However, males did not report these same problems.

4.5 Cultural differences

The factors which affected the self-confidence establishment of both Finnish and Chinese participants are similar on key points: innate characteristics, perceptions of gender and external influences from education, media and family. The only difference comes from their childhood experiences. The Finnish females' experiences are more complicated than those of Chinese females; however, Chinese females are more sensitive to others' evaluations than Finnish females. Therefore, culture, religion, area and language are not important factors in personal characteristic formation; instead, personal characteristics and international conceptions of gender are significant factors contributing to self-confidence establishment.

5. CONCLUSION

Personal characteristics are shaped by both innate characteristics and outside influences, but innate characteristics are the fundamental factor. Self-confidence is formed by personal characteristics, experiences and achieved social position. For the purposes of education, innate characteristics are the factor which is hard to change, but experience is the one that can be changed to some extent. Among those factors, what people experience in their childhood deeply influences their future characteristics, especially those people who have a pessimistic or moderate characteristic.

Culture, living area, national tradition and religion beliefs are other factors in females' self-confidence formation, but this study comparing Finland and China, a European and an Asian country, did not find many differences in females' confidence establishment. International perceptions of gender were a background for both.

Males and females concentrate on different parts of their lives. Males are more positive about doing, while females are more positive about thinking and more sensitive to the evaluation of others. This is also a significant factor in self-confidence formation and indicates why males are more positive and confident than females in many aspects.

It is clear that both internal and external factors greatly contribute to self-confidence establishment. For the purposes of improving the pedagogy process, it is suggested that, as the innate characteristics inherited from family are hard to change, the first vital step is to thoroughly explore individuals' external experiences and accordingly widen the conversation in education. Next, more effective methods for the education process should be developed to help female design students to improve their self-confidence and encourage them to pursue a better future.

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