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'I just want a shirt that will fit me!': An inductive approach to understanding transgender consumers' shopping experiences

Domenique Jones

Jessica Strübel

University of Rhode Island, jessica-strubel@uri.edu

Heejin Lim

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Articles

Domenique Jones | Jessica Strübel | Heejin Lim

‘I just want a shirt that will fit me!’

‘I just want a shirt that will fit me!’: An inductive approach to understanding transgender consumers’ shopping experiences

Domenique Jones

Indiana University

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Domenique Jones, Ph.D., is a visiting assistant professor at Indiana University. Her research interests include consumer behaviour, social psychology of dress and appearance management for marginalized consumers.

Contact: Indiana University, 100 Kirkwood Hall, 130 S. Woodlawn Avenue, Bloomington, IN 47405, USA.

E-mail: domeniqueejones@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1666-3429>

Jessica Strübel

University of Rhode Island

Jessica Strübel, Ph.D., is an associate professor in textiles, fashion merchandizing and design at the University of Rhode Island where she teaches courses on the social psychology dress and appearance.

Contact: University of Rhode Island, 204 Ballentine Hall, 7 Lippett Road, Kingston, RI 02881, USA.

E-mail: jessica-strubel@uri.edu

Heejin Lim

University of Tennessee

Heejin Lim, Ph.D., is an associate professor in retail, hospitality and tourism management at the University of Tennessee. Her research interests include consumer culture for marginalized groups, sustainability issues in fashion and consumer–brand relationship in the computer-mediated environment.

Contact: University of Tennessee, 110 Jessie Harris Building, 1215 W. Cumberland Avenue, Knoxville, TN 37996, USA.

E-mail: hlim@utk.edu

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Abstract

Transgender consumers are often unable to express their identity or construct their appearance in the way they desire. Social realities inhibit realness, and it can be difficult or even impossible for them to externally realize their full identity (Gray 2009). The purpose of this research is to understand how transgender consumers' gender identity influences their shopping experiences. Utilizing a lens of gender performativity theory, the research questions guiding the study include the following: (1) In what ways do transgender and gender non-conforming individuals experience the current retail apparel landscape? (2) How do transgender individuals navigate experience shopping for clothing and grooming products? (3) How does the shopping experience exacerbate or alleviate gender dysphoria? Ethnographic and survey methods were used to gain understanding

into the shopping behaviours of these consumers. Additionally, the researchers identified × themes through thematic analysis and several rounds of coding (1) gendered and clothing, (2) positive experiences, (3) the body, fit and sizing and (4) accessibility to clothing and fashion.

Keywords: transgender, shopping, performativity, retail, identity

Introduction

People who openly identify as LGBT+ make up 5.6 per cent of the US general population, and 11.3 per cent of LGBT people over 18 years old identify as transgender, based on Gallup's latest data (Jones 2021). This number has doubled in the past decade, with most LGBT+ identifying respondents belonging to the Generation Z group who were born between 1997 and 2002 (Jones 2021). The increasing presence of gender and sexual minorities in popular culture, specifically trans and gender diverse people, and the push towards inclusivity, is extremely apparent and necessary in the apparel industry as evidenced by Gucci's Mx project that aims to deconstruct the traditional binary concept of gender particularly in the fashion system and supports individuals' freedom of self-expression through dress (Marine 2020). Gender is a major component of consumers' self-identity and the desire to express expected gender role attitudes (femininity and masculinity) may guide certain consumer behaviours, such as shopping activities, product and brand choice (Fischer 1994; Pinna 2020). Extant literature has demonstrated that gender identity and feelings about the body are significantly related to one's consumer behaviours (e.g., El Hedhli et al. 2016; Felix et al. 2022; Frith and Gleeson 2004; Pinna 2020; Sun and Guo 2014).

For example, previous research has demonstrated that gender, gender role attitudes and self-perceived schemas have a unique relationship with product involvement (e.g., Worth et al. 1992; Ye and Robertson 2012), such that men are guided by the more pragmatic features of products, such as its utilitarian value (Dittmar 1989), and women are more likely to seek products for their symbolic value, which can help them to achieve self-congruity (Dittmar 1989; El Hedhli et al. 2016). More precisely, certain brands and products (e.g., clothing) carry symbolic meanings that can be transferred to the consumer thereby establishing or confirming their identity (e.g., gender identity), or idealized somatic self (Hourigan and Bougoure 2012; O’Cass 2000; Rosa et al. 2006). Also, recent studies demonstrated the effects of gender stereotypes (e.g., the green-feminine stereotype in Pinna 2020; a perceived gender fit in a package colour in Felix et al. 2022) on consumers’ decision on buying environmentally friendly products.

Clothing is an integral aspect of performing gender (Ehrbar et al. 2008; Jones and Lim 2021), and as such, a person’s choice in dress can be utilized to cultivate and maintain identity with impactful symbolic meaning (Crane 2012). The consumption of and dressing with clothing possesses more meaning for transgender and gender diverse consumers than for cisgender consumers (Kates 2002). Scholars assert that transgender individuals view clothing as an important initial experimentation, on par with having others use their correct gender pronoun and preferred name (Roux cited in Brodeur 2017; Jones and Lim 2021). Judith Butler (2002) claimed that gender is a social construction that is fluid and contestable; this being said, she emphasized its performativity rather than focusing on the physical body. In the gender performative theory, scholars agree that dress is an important prop as an individual performs gender (Monden 2014; Pollen 2011).

Despite the importance of clothing in transgender people's journey to establish and perform gender of their choice (Jones and Lim 2021), few studies have collected data from transgender people and uncover their shopping experience for and satisfaction with clothing and grooming products and how the experience affects these consumers' self-concept and feeling about their bodies. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap in the literature by discovering the role of gender identity in shopping experience and satisfaction based on self-identified gender rather than on gender assigned at birth (e.g., biological sex). We conducted ethnography and surveyed transgender people to explore their experience of purchasing clothing and grooming products. Gender is no longer viewed through the dualistic lens of maleness and femaleness, and traditional constructions of masculinity and femininity have shifted over the past few years indicating a need to challenge the prevailing discourse on gender and consumer behaviour. To this end, this study seeks to alleviate gender bias and overall generalization (i.e., male and female sex only), as with the majority of past research and help to understand consumption behaviours while considering a more fluid gender spectrum (Darwin 2020).

Furthermore, our findings offer practical implications. Because gender is a common market segmentation criterion, it is important for merchandisers, marketers and consumer behaviourists to understand the variance in information processing and reactions to marketing stimuli amongst genders so that they may create consumer experiences that match each market's needs and preferences (Jones and Lim 2021). To this end, this study adds to the extant literature by demonstrating the needs for changes in the fashion system as apparel and grooming products are salient for self-expression and

perceived identity (Jones and Lim 2021). Further, this study aids designers, retailers and manufacturers in satisfying the individual self-identified gender needs by giving them a better understanding of desired product and shopping attributes.

Theoretical framework

We adopted gender performativity theory to explore the role of dress in gender performance for trans people. According to gender performative theory, gender is a socially constructed concept that is sustained by a course of performances (Butler 2002). Traditionally, there has been a cultural pressure to perform gendered role-play through buying and wearing gendered clothing (Pollen 2011). For those individuals who are negotiating the disparity between their perceived and ideal self, the consumption of appearance-modifying products, such as clothing and grooming products (e.g., cosmetics), may offer a temporary solution (Ridgway 2018). Through the direct management of physical appearance, distress caused by the body experience may be reduced, even if temporarily (Strübel and Petrie 2018).

Self-concept (actual and idealized) has a compelling influence on consumer behaviour because goods frequently act an extension of the self and assist with appearance management (Chattaraman and Rudd 2006; Ridgway 2018; Rudd and Lennon 2000; Strübel and Petrie 2018). For example, previous studies have shown that how one feels about their body has a direct influence on consumer involvement with apparel and other means of appearance management because of the socially attributed meanings that can be passed on to the individual (Rosa et al. 2006; Rudd and Lennon 2000; Tiggemann et al. 2005). Many people are motivated to consume grooming and apparel products (e.g., hair care, fragrances) to cultivate a self-image or desired identity through the transfer of

meaning from the grooming product to the self (e.g., Song et al. 2021; Sturrock and Pioch 1998; van Paasschen et al. 2015). Clothing and grooming products are classic goods as symbols that, as previously mentioned, can alter the physical appearance in hope to approximate the societal beauty/body ideal (or at least ‘fake it’). Therefore, consumers may be motivated to purchase positively valued products in order to maintain or create a positive self-image (or positive self-congruity), demonstrating that product involvement and purchase intention are affected by the relationship between actual self-image and product image.

Transgender persons have primarily been ignored in regard to clothing and appearance-enhancing product offerings. Transgender apparel and appearance-enhancing product assortments are lacking or either nonexistent for many retailers and manufacturers (Chauhan et al. 2021). The majority of retailers and manufacturers do not understand the wants and needs of this underserved group (Polakowski 2016). Therefore, the following research questions were used to guide this study: (1) In what ways do transgender and gender non-conforming individuals experience the current retail apparel landscape? (2) How do transgender individuals navigate experience shopping for clothing and grooming products? (3) How does the shopping experience exacerbate or alleviate gender dysphoria?

Methodology

Data were drawn from two sources that include a survey of trans people and ethnography. One open-ended survey question surrounding transgender participants’ shopping behaviours was analysed in conjunction with ethnographic methods of participant observations, semi-structured interviews, field notes and memoing.

Survey methods

A survey was conducted to identify participant's shopping experience in relation to their gender identity and body image as a trans person. We developed a survey consisting of psychological measures and open-ended questions that asked about participants' gender identity, body image and consumer experiences. Then, we adopted an inductive approach for the data analysis in which we condensed the extensive raw text data into meaningful themes.

Participants and procedure

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the second author's university, participants were recruited to participate in this study. A research panel was recruited directly from Qualtrics (a market research service), and participants each received \$5.00 financial compensation. Initially, 1449 people accessed the survey. Of these, twelve were removed because they selected nonbinary/gender fluid/genderqueer or other as their gender identity, and another 258 responses were removed because they left five or more questions blank.

The final sample for the study consisted of 183 transmen. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 73 ($M_{\text{age}} = 26.10$ years, $SD = 9.58$). In terms of ethnicity, the majority were White (71.6%, $n = 139$), nineteen (9.8%) were Hispanic/Latino/Latinx, nine (4.6%) were African American/Black, five (2.6%) Asian or Pacific Islander, six (3.1%) were biracial and three (1.5%) identified as 'other' ethnicity. With respect to household income 34.5% ($n = 67$) reported an income of less than \$25,000 per year, 28.4% ($n = 55$) reported \$25,000–\$49,999, 12.4% ($n = 24$) \$50,000–\$74,999, 9.8% ($n = 19$) \$75,000–\$99,999 and 8.8% ($n = 17$) reported an annual household income of \$100,000 or more.

Open-ended survey data analysis

In the survey, participants provided their age, weight and height, and ethnicity.

Participants were also asked to identify their gender identity from the following options:

(1) trans man (2) trans woman, (3) nonbinary/gender fluid/genderqueer and (4) other.

Due to low sample sizes, those who identified as nonbinary/gender fluid/genderqueer ($n = 6$) and other ($n = 1$) completed the survey but were excluded from this study. Basic descriptive statistics were conducted to describe these attributes.

Next, several open-ended survey questions were presented. The open-ended question we used for this article asked participants to,

Please describe your experiences when shopping for clothing and grooming products (e.g., makeup). For example, do you experience frustrations or satisfaction with apparel sizing, apparel fit, product availability, dressing rooms, or the gendered division of apparel in stores? Please be as specific as possible.

The codes were based on intuitive deduction. The first author reviewed the responses and developed the following categories: *positive*, *negative*, *average/neutral*, *doesn't clearly answer the question* or *no response*. During the axial coding phase, the broad *negative* category was systematically developed into subcategories (*general negative experience*, *fit*, *sizing*, *discomfort in fitting rooms*, *lack of product availability in stores*, *lack of product availability in general*, *dislike for gendered clothing*, *discomfort shopping in public* and *price*).

Thematic analysis was used for identifying patterns in the participants' responses for the open-ended question. In this analysis, each researcher read raw textual data comprehensively and repeatedly to have our findings 'emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by

structured methodologies' (Thomas 2006: 238). After the initial examination of the data and initial theme development, the codebook was created through the inductive process (Braun and Clarke 201; Strauss and Corbin 1998). The first and second authors independently coded the participants' responses that include 181 individual excerpts in three major categories (i.e., gender identity, body image and shopping experiences). We used NVivo and then Excel in which themes were identified based on the similarities in responses (Lim and Kumar 2019). The second author acted as the primary coder in this study. In the open coding phase categories were developed based on disassembling the responses provided by the participants. The summary phrases and terms were then reduced in the second phase of coding and coding categories were reassembled into central phenomena. A third, and final phase of coding was completed when the first author combined the codes created from open coding with the terms and phrases used in the shopping satisfaction literature (e.g., Reddy-Best and Pedersen 2015; Rosa et al. 2006), thereby resulting in a final coding scheme (see Table 1). The reliability of the coding process was calculated for this study using Cohen's kappa (κ ; Cohen 1960). Of the 22 coded categories, four items had less than chance agreement ($\kappa = 0$); two items had slight agreement ($\kappa = 0.13$ and $\kappa = 0.20$); five items had fair agreement ($\kappa = 0.32$ – 0.39); one item had good reliability ($\kappa = 0.54$); nine items had substantial agreement and one item had almost perfect agreement ($\kappa = 0.94$; Cohen 1960). The first and second authors then independently coded the participants' responses. Coding reliability was calculated for this study using Cohen's kappa (Cohen 1960). Kappa values along with the per cent agreement for each code are reported in Table 2. Frequencies of each code are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequencies of codes for shopping experiences by gender identity. <?Triple?>

Codes	Coder 1: trans men (<i>n</i> = 182)	Coder 2: trans men (<i>n</i> = 182)
General positive	6	5
Fit and sizing	5	3
No problems	20	25
Brands and retail loyalty	1	1
Ease of locating products	1	2
Comfort	0	0
General negative	7	6
Fit of specific brands	0	2
Fit and size issues	111	117
Sizing inconsistency	4	4
Discomfort in fitting rooms	10	12
Discomfort shopping in public	12	9
Lack of product availability in stores	1	3
Lack of product availability in general	3	6
Lack of styles	5	3
Brand frustration	0	0
Online shopping	11	12
Location	2	13
Dislike for gendered clothing	12	2
Lack of gendered clothing	5	12

Fabrication/colour	3	1
Price	4	5
Body dissatisfaction	5	0

Table 2: Measure of inter-coder reliability for shopping satisfaction, frequency and percentage of sample. [Triple?](#)

Thematic category	Per cent agreement	Cohen's kappa
General positive	97.3	0.60
Fit and sizing	97.8	0.66
No problems	87.4	0.54
Brands and retail loyalty	99.5	0.66
Ease of locating products	98.4	0
General negative	97.8	0.70
Fit of brands	98.9	0
Fit and body	65.4	0.32
Fit and size issues	74.2	0.34
Sizing inconsistency	99.5	0.66
Discomfort in fitting rooms	99.5	0.94
Discomfort shopping in public	97.3	0.72
Lack of product availability in stores	97.3	0
Lack of product availability in general	98.4	0.66
Lack of styles	97.8	0.32
Online shopping	97.8	0.79
Location	93.4	0.34

Dislike for gendered clothing	93.4	0.13
Lack of gendered clothing	92.9	0.20
Fabrication	98.4	0.39
Price	98.4	0.72
Body dissatisfaction	97.3	0

In the survey, participants provided their age, weight and height, and ethnicity.

Participants were also asked to identify their gender identity from the following options:

(1) trans man, (2) trans woman, (3) nonbinary/gender fluid/genderqueer and (6) other.

Due to low sample sizes, those who identified as nonbinary/gender fluid/genderqueer ($n = 6$) and other ($n = 1$) completed the survey but were excluded from this study. Basic descriptive statistics were recorded.

Ethnographic interview methods

Participants and procedure

Social realities inhibit realness and it can be difficult or even impossible for many transgender individuals to externally realize their full identity (Gray 2009). After receiving IRB approval from the first author's university, participants were recruited to participate in an ethnographic study about how transgender consumers conceptualize and actualize identity through clothing, in the midst of potential barriers. The ethnographic component of this research began through introductions with a university faculty member who had relationships with many trans and gender diverse students, and from there introduction were made with students who identified as transgender and/or other gender diverse identities. These conversations led to several visits to the campus Pride Center in order to observe the students in a natural setting and work towards building a rapport

(Gobo and Molle 2017). Participant observation was key to provide context into the natural consumer experiences of the participants and exposure to the way the culture of trans and gender diverse students intertwines with appearance and clothing consumption (Holmqvist et al. 2020). As expected, many of the students were weary of a researcher's presence and intentions, but by the end were engaged in normal conversation about everyday life and school. Though some students never joined the conversation, the ones I spoke with had a lot to say about clothing and barriers they faced before I had even brought up my research topic. This created a set of isolated factors to focus on for the interview guide to better understand the meaning of dress and shopping for these consumers (Gobo and Molle 2017).

Additional conversations and observations allowed us to form questions and an interview guide for the interviews and focus groups. Field notes were utilized to memo and observe additional behaviours and commentary into the influence of clothing and appearance on identity for trans and gender diverse consumers (Gobo and Molle 2017). The ability to buy clothes and find the right clothes brought about the notions of societal conformity, finding clothes that fit, understanding one's own body and changing rooms. Through these conversations, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with three college students in the south-eastern region of the United States. Two students were White, and one was of south-eastern Asian descent. The ages ranged from 20 to 22 and they were identified as transgender male, transgender/non-binary and non-binary, respectively. The interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours to gain insight into the symbolic meaning of dress and the ways in which transgender consumers navigate clothing in and identity in the shopping experience (Gobo and Molle 2017).

Theoretical sufficiency was reached to best describe the brick-and-mortar shopping experience for transgender consumers (Dey 1999).

Data analysis

The analysis for this component of the study focused on group experiences and these consumers' specific relationship with shopping and dress. Open and axial coding were conducted to provide excerpts from the semi-structured interviews to enhance the open-ended responses (Gobo and Molle 2008). Initial categories were deduced and were subsequently refined to narrow down the themes. This allowed us to further clarify meaning and elements of clothing and shopping behaviours that influence their daily life in a manner specific to being transgender. The first author was the primary coder for this portion of the study. Codes were combined with the initial codebook from the second-author's initial thematic analysis of open-ended responses through excel.

Findings

Shopping experiences of the transmen in the current study are closely associated with cultural appearance standards (e.g., the body), and societal expectations of gender expression (e.g., what each gender should wear). When trans consumers are forced to 'pick a side' with their identity, it often results in dysphoria and discomfort (Comiskey et al. 2020). This can also make others around them feel angry and confused when a person falls outside the bounds of not only the male/female binary, but also societal gender expectations (Griggs 1999). For trans and gender diverse consumers, their external self, as perceived by others, extends farther than being different and into being diaspora (Gopinath 2005). Non-verbal cues and performances demonstrate the different parts of a person and convey their identity (Gopinath 2005) but being 'sexually indecipherable'

makes life even more difficult for these consumers than even other queer consumers (Griggs 1999). This allows for the materialization of sex through performativity, a necessary choice for many consumers in order to avoid ridicule and difficulties in social situations (e.g., shopping in a retail store; Butler 2004). The themes divulged are (1) gendered and clothing, (2) positive experiences, (3) the body, fit and sizing and (4) accessibility to clothing and fashion.

Gendered and clothing

One recurring theme from the data that was observed was the dislike of gendered clothing with a preference for gender neutral options. Clothing and appearance often intertwine with expressions of one's true self and gendered expectations and can make it difficult for gender diverse consumers to express their external identity freely, especially if they do not fully present as their identified gender.

It's always felt like a way of moving against like gendered expectations for me. Because, like, I've never like I'm expected to perform femininity because of my assigned sex. Yeah, I have never done it correctly. I've never known how to do it correctly. Yeah, it's sort of a rejection of that of no I'm going to do it my own way. And it might not even be feminine. If I do it at all. Yeah, it's going to be something different from what people expect. And I've found that really affirming and really comforting for me.

(A1)

I think the summertime is the worst time because it's so hot. And beyond that, it's so humid, that like layers are not a possibility. Yeah. You can get creative and do like short sleeve button ups and stuff like that and layered over t shirt but that's only going to get you so far, and also, it's going to be dressing hot. So yeah, if I wear a tank top, somebody's gonna make a comment about it, or. Especially because guys are starting to

wear those like I think they're ugly but like chubbies like shorts yeah I think that that's a bad. That's a bad trend, but because of that. And maybe because the reason that guys wear them. As you know, they're like, there's a definite like bulge and maybe that's like some sort of psychosomatic thing for guys, I don't know, but I'm not interested in that at all and it's super uncomfortable to use a packer, especially in the summer.

(Jack)

Though some trans and gender diverse consumers desire gendered clothing to externally affirm their identity, others prefer to cross the binary-gendered retail sections in brick-and-mortar stores. Many participants explained that they disliked gendered clothing and would prefer additional options for gender bending apparel:

I enjoy dressing masculinely, femininely, and androgynously, which definitely causes issues when it comes to the clothes I wear. I personally believe that clothing has no gender, but a lot of people disagree with this sentiment, and I am pressured to dress a certain way. For the actual apparel items themselves, 'women's' clothing is often too tight or revealing, and 'men's' clothing is often too big or disproportionate for me.

This lack of gender fluid clothing creates additional barriers for trans and gender diverse consumers as they seek to outwardly present their gender: '[g]endered clothing is frustrating. Especially working in a retail environment as a trans male. I love mixing men's and women's gendered clothing together, but when I do it occasionally leads people to misgender me'. Overall, the in-store shopping experience can be very difficult for these consumers to circumvent: 'I hate the way stores are divided up by binary gender, as well as the dressing rooms and the products themselves. It makes shopping for things that empower me feel disempowering and uncomfortable in that environment'.

Positive experiences

For some transgender consumers, they felt a positive experience while shopping because it led to feelings of affirmation, self-acceptance and comfort. Perhaps social recognition for one's gender expression through dress helps to establish gender congruity, which positively contributes to, and confirms, one's sense of self. For instance, one participant stated 'I no longer feel frustration now that I am in the right body. Prior to transition this was a terrible problem'. Many participants expressed their shopping experiences were dependent on their current degree of dysphoria, or lack thereof, while others never had any issues: 'I've had nothing but positive experiences shopping for clothes that fit best for my identity'. When the participants felt comfortable in their body and felt that their outer appearance was congruent with their inner self, they were able to find pleasure in shopping and view brick-and-mortar apparel stores as positive environments. According to Riggle et al. (2011), transgender individuals often report high levels of personal growth and resilience, which may help them to overcome seemingly innocuous daily challenges.

The body, fit and sizing

For transgender individuals, clothing is central to the process of constructing and expressing one's true gender. Clothes provide a means to potentially reduce body image dissatisfaction and improve appearance esteem through the management of physical appearance (i.e., suppressing femininity or masculinity) and social feedback; however, the lack of congruency between gendered clothing options and body image among transgender adults may impact psychological well-being (Strübel and Goswami 2021; Tiggemann et al. 2005). One participant stated:

I find shopping for clothes uncomfortable because no matter what section I'm in I feel dysphoric, mens clothes don't fit me correctly or look good on my body & womens clothes are always designed to accentuate curves in a way that makes me look even more feminine.

For trans men, especially, it can be difficult to find clothing that feels masculine while also hiding feminine body features.

Regardless of where one finds themselves in the process of realizing their true gender identity, these consumers must navigate the social terrain put in front of them where they must alter their appearance and hide their realness in certain settings:

It can be frustrating to find clothes that fit me properly in stores. It is disturbing to me how clothes are all divided by gender, because I feel like if I'm in the wrong section according to society, I will be judged.

This may cause anxiety, dysphoria and overall discomfort, especially because many of them have recently realized their identity or found terms to identify how they were feeling about themselves (Gray 2009).

Jack: 'I think it's just that like for trans people that pushback doesn't stop like once you start actualizing gender, and then figure out that you're trans, that pushback doesn't stop and you do that, you do that until you die'.

It can be difficult for these consumers to navigate society's perception of their identity and acceptance in a retail store, while simultaneously struggling with their body and finding the right fit.

I didn't get a binder until my freshman year of college, because I didn't fully identify as trans until like my roommate, my freshman year was a trans guy, and at one point I was talking to him and I said you know I don't really think I'd identify as female if I wasn't assigned that and he went that's called being trans. And it's a lot more nuanced than that,

but it did like, it sort of forced me to confront that notion like oh I can wear a binder because I convinced myself that like I had to be trans to bind, even though all through high school it was like doubling and tripling on sports bras which is very bad for you, don't do that.

(Al)

Me going through this, like, set of the set of bras that I have, because, because I can't bind for, like, lung reasons, but like you go through and you're like, you know what kind of what kind of intensity of holding pressure are you going to put on your chest? Like, if I have a really short day and I'm not going to do a whole lot then we can go for a lighter like hold.

(Jack)

Yeah, um, but I think most of the things that like I have discomfort, wearing now that I'm like really analyzing and thinking about it center around like that sort of combination of body dysphoria and body dysmorphia that sort of stems from the eating disorder.

(Al)

The ways in which others around them react based on their appearance and the way they read the individual brings about the question of allowing people agency to create their outward appearance and the question of which bodies matter. Additionally, this ties into a lack of clothing items that fit. Trans and gender diverse consumers struggle to find apparel that fits their identity while also fitting their body shape, which can be difficult when there is a lack of size continuity among different brands and brick-and-mortar stores often have fewer styles and size options.

For some, there are brands that work better,

I'm 5'2'ish so most pants are too long and at places like H&M it's often hard to not feel like they were made for me. Often slim shirts that have the cut and designs I like don't work for my waist or curves.

However, for others, there is a constantly issue with sizing: 'I'm frustrated because I'm too fat and too short! I mean come on stores of America, there are guys 5'6' and under [...] lots. Not everyone is a freaking basketball center' and '[f]inding jeans has been difficult because of my hips. Growing up and identifying as female there were always a lot of style choices. Whereas men's clothes there are limited choices. Which is frustrating'. Many consumers also do not want to pay a premium to find clothes that fit:

Clothes for my height never fit for my width, and vice versa. Clothes made for women are also absolute shit, it's just blatant sexism that women pay \$14 for a sheer t-shirt when men pay \$5 for the same thing with a thread count 5 times that of the womens shirt. Fuck that shit, I just want a shirt that will fit me!

Additionally, the gendered clothing products and sections lead to difficulty circumventing dress for various social situations:

I hate how things look on me and as I can wear casual clothing at work, I stick to jeans and tshirts and sweaters that don't fit tightly. I can find things I like to wear in the men's section and am not bothered by gender division, though I do sometimes find things in the women's section that I feel I could 'pull off' as a fun look if I were much thinner and confident.

Accessibility to clothing and fashion

Participants felt a general discomfort while shopping in brick-and-mortar apparel stores. This was primarily related to a lack of products, discomfort in the fitting rooms or discomfort in general, which often lead to online shopping behaviours:

I experience frustrations because I'm often afraid of shopping in men's sections because I still look like a female, and people give me odd looks for it. It's also very difficult to find masculine clothes to fit me because of my delicate build.

They did not feel safe or comfortable in stores, usually depending on their perceived gender identity: 'I definitely distinctly remember feeling incredibly shameful and embarrassed when I was early on in my transition (and still being read as female) and I would be "caught" shopping in the men's section'. That is why many of these consumers admitted to shopping solely online to avoid judgment and difficulty with fitting rooms, as well as better options for additional product offerings and size inclusive brands: 'I avoid shopping for clothes that require trying them on whenever possible mainly due to feeling uncomfortable walking into women's fitting room. I do a lot of online shopping to avoid negative experiences when buying masculine clothing or products'.

Where to buy clothing was brought up several times in the semi-structured interviews in terms of the local Forever 21 closing and the difficulty that comes with the lack of convenient places that are close to campus with trendy and affordable clothes and the availability of gender-neutral fitting rooms. The participants expressed how fitting rooms are already a struggle in and of themselves due to the nature of trying on clothing because of dysphoria, and it is even worse when employees question where they should be allowed to try on clothes. Thrift stores are a great place to shop, but they do not always have enough size options.

So, if they don't work for my dad it goes to me [hand-me-downs], if I wear it and I don't like it or whatever, it then goes to my mom. And then after that it goes to my cousins. Just package it all up. That's also what we did when I was growing up, a lot of my clothes went to them. They went to my younger cousin. And then from my younger cousin, it went to like family friends there [India].

(Ash)

Like if it's like a wool coat. And I find it for \$20 a store. Yeah, I am getting that coat
 Yeah, yeah, they did get that coat. It's a great deal. Yeah. But yeah, a lot of like, just like
 if I'm like going out with friends to like get clothes. It's a lot different experience than if
 I'm going with my parents. Yeah, because my parents. They don't not like thrifting they
 just believe that you can get like better quality clothes at like a Macy's or Dillard.

(Ash)

Many transgender consumers are socio-economically disadvantaged (Jenkins cited in [Difranco 2017](#)), and it is important for them to have their own money in order to have independence in what they buy and what they wear, which is directly correlated with full affirmation and comfort in expressing their fully identity. The ability to wear the clothing of their choice is important for their mental health and well-being.

I was a child, but I had my own money to purchase things like that kind of weird time
 that when I started purchasing things I could just like, pull things, pull something off the
 rack and be like, Oh yeah, that's my size ish, or if I'm like just shopping at one store then
 I know that that's my size, again, a whole different topic because now I can just buy
 pants online. Yeah, and all of them fit. Yeah, because men.

(Jack)

Puar (2018) criticizes the need for consumption in order to conform to societal standards. Many trans and gender diverse students engage in swapping clothes and shopping at thrift stores, as they do desire to engage in consumption practices. The need for binders and special sizing forces these consumers to buy and spend more in order to fully realize their identity. This allows them to fit in, avoid dysmorphia and not look *too out of place*. However, they also find meaning in both the pieces they thrift and the items they create

and modify. Gray (2009) expresses that consumption is a form of identity work, where trans and gender diverse students find community in self-realization through the places they shop and the resources that allow them to craft their identity (i.e., thrift stores, Forever 21, etc.)

Conclusion

On the surface, it appears that retailers and manufacturers assume that once transition is complete, that consumers will automatically be fitted to wear existing women's or men's apparel. As evidenced by our findings, many retailers do not understand that many transgender and gender diverse consumers have problems with apparel fit (e.g., shoe, pant and top sizing issues) due to bone structure. For instance, female to male transgender individuals have larger hips and bigger breasts, and their bodies do not always fit off the rack. It also appears that retailers and manufacturers assume that once a person decides to come out as transgender and begin the apparel purchase process, that they will just purchase their identified gendered apparel and that will satisfy their apparel needs versus many consumers who prefer gender fluid and genderless apparel products and categories. Many companies that are creating non-gendered/gender neutral apparel are primarily high-end designers/companies that the average person cannot afford (Difranco 2017).

The interview participants all talked about how they did not feel welcome shopping or frequenting other places. Gopinath's (2005) work into the depth of being different versus diaspora influenced the interview guide through the many ways students spoke about not just being seen as different, but actually falling outside the bounds of *normal* spaces and environmental inclusion. One participant expressed that 'binding is unhealthy, but not as bad as being uncomfortable in one's own body and suicide'. The

awareness of obstacles for these consumers by retailers can lead to increased education and opportunities for allowing trans individuals to freely express themselves and their authentic identity behaviour. The contribution of knowledge will address the dearth of literature pertaining to performance tools for trans and gender diverse consumers, specifically within Millennial and Gen Z groups. This study can allow people to have a glimpse into the environmental impacts on identity for trans and gender diverse consumers as they shop retail.

The shopping experiences of the participants in the current study may be related to where they find themselves in the transition process from their at-birth identity to their actual gender identity. Studies have shown (e.g., Kozee et al. 2012; Sevelius 2013) that congruence or reconciliation of one's external appearance and gender identity is positively related to satisfaction with life. Furthermore, the more that a person approximates their genuine gender identity, the less likely they are to present with depressive and anxiety symptoms (Kozee et al. 2012). Respondents in a study by Sevelius (2013) maintained that the act of 'passing' (i.e., presentation that meets sociocultural standards) helped to reduce the pain of marginalization, stigma and discrimination that can threaten one's identity. Transgender individuals are often ignored and underserved in the current marketplace. Shopping experiences are closely associated with cultural appearance standards (e.g., the body), and societal expectations of gender expression (e.g., what each gender should wear). It would behoove retailers and manufacturers to pay attention to product assortment, specifically fit, size availability and gender-neutral offerings. Transgender bodies do not always fit in off the rack garments. Perhaps this means producing items in neutral colours that do not gender clothing.

Implications

Overall, there is a need for inclusivity, such as universal fitting rooms to alleviate embarrassment and/or fear of being asked to leave a fitting room area. Inclusivity also pertains to retail venues. Retailers need to educate and train their sales associates on the needs of transgendered people and how to provide proper customer service (e.g., non-discriminatory customer service). This research enhances the current body of knowledge within gender performativity to provide better understanding for how transgender consumers enact identity through shopping behaviours and clothing consumption. As an integral component of identity, dress and appearance are demonstrated in this study to provide insight for retailers into a subset of their consumer population and how retailers can cultivate a more comfortable and inclusive environment. Additionally, we provide additional opportunities for brands to create necessary size inclusive and gender fluid clothing to appeal to this integral consumer audience.

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