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# Transgender fashion: Fit challenges and dressing strategies

## ABSTRACT

*Clothing is part of our material culture and allows individuals to portray their self-image and articulate their personas to others. Clothing is performative and helps position individuals as their desired gender, which is why clothing is so important to transgender people. While the transgender medical experience has been examined, few have investigated wardrobe building for transgender people undergoing hormone replacement therapy (HRT). This research explored clothing worn by two trans women, and a trans man who experienced pregnancy, to answer the research question 'What are the clothing issues and dressing strategies of transgender individuals?'. A convenience sample (n=3) was recruited using snowball methods. Data collection followed three phases to foster a empathy and learning utilizing a qualitative, human-centred approach. To better understand the market, research began with a competitive analysis of retailers and bloggers catering to this niche market. At-home wardrobe interviews utilized participant's clothing as probes to*

## KEYWORDS

clothing  
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*discuss and demonstrate anatomy in relation to clothing choices and how participants felt when wearing the right clothing. Themes in the data included transition strategies, shopping and fit challenges as well as clothing solutions. Key outfits were photographed, providing insights regarding clothing assortment, fit criteria, as well as desirable/problematic design details and styling tips used to achieve the desired aesthetic/identity. The findings of this study offer empowering strategies to support wardrobe choices for transgender people and are important to designers, product developers and retailers.*

Clothing is part of our material culture (Miller 2005) and allows individuals to portray their self-image (Davis 1992; Entwistle and Wilson 2001) and articulate their personas to others (Hethorn and Kaiser 1999). Fashion designers create ready-to-wear clothing according to fit standards based on statistical measurements derived from heteronormative male and female bodies (e.g. see ASTM International 2011) or company-specific sizing systems. Finding apparel that fits, however, is a common problem for many (see Gill 2015), particularly people who are petite, tall or plus-size. For members of the transgender community (people who identify with a gender that does not match their sex at birth), achieving proper fit and the desired clothing aesthetic is even far more complicated. Watkins defines clothing as a portable environment, one that 'is carried everywhere with an individual, creating its own room within a room and its own climate within the larger climate of our surroundings' (1995: xv). In other words, because clothing is worn on the body, it creates a near environment, one that is closest to the self, thus creating indivisible connections between self, body and clothing. In order for product developers, retailers and designer educators to integrate inclusivity into their practice, it is important to better understand the clothing needs of transgender people.

The American Psychiatric Association (2018) uses the term 'gender dysphoria' to describe the distress associated with gender discordance, and outlines treatment plans through which people may socially transition by adopting the clothing and hairstyles of their preferred gender and medically transition through the use of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and surgical reassignment. Fein et al. (2017) found that changing one's style of dress/clothing was the most frequent, non-surgical procedure ranked after HRT for people embarking on transition from female to male (FTM). Given that clothing is designed from basic blocks specific to women's or menswear using standardized body measurements, members of the transgender community encounter challenges finding clothes that fit their anatomical body and portray their identified gender. With over 1.4 million American adults identifying as transgender (Flores et al. 2016), this niche market merits further investigation. Canadian statistics are more difficult to discern, many members of the LGBTQ+ population remain hidden, Scheim and Bauer's (2015) recent study of transgender people in Ontario estimates that one in 200 adults may identify as trans. Although the Canadian Human Rights Act (Government of Canada 1985), which includes sexual orientation as one of its non-discriminatory categories, and the legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada (Government of Canada 2005) have increased societal acceptance of LGBTQ+ couples who undergo fertility treatments, choice within ready-to-wear clothing for this niche market is not widely available, and maternity wear for trans men is

non-existent. This study aims to shed light on the fit challenges and dressing strategies of transgender people.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Although clothes in their most generic form are simply ‘garments worn to cover the body’ (*Paperback Oxford Canadian Dictionary* 2006: 172), they are also a code – a semiotic process that conveys and interprets messages based on the clothing we wear (Eco 1979). Entwistle (2015) posits that clothing is performative and helps position individuals as their desired gender, which is why clothing is so important to transgender individuals. Kaiser (1990) used the phrase ‘appearance management’ to define the ‘attention, decisions and acts related to one’s personal appearance’ (1990:5), which includes gender expression and body image. McGuire et al.’s (2016) qualitative study of transgender youths’ ( $n=90$ ) body image attitudes found that participants’ body (dis)satisfaction was linked to their perceptions about ‘passing’ (see Goffman 1959) as their desired gender, and that their body size (i.e. weight) and shape and other behaviours (e.g. binding, shaving, use of make-up and hairstyling) were important aspects of appearance management in creating the desired body image.

Clothing allows members of the LGBTQ+ community to convey their desired gender. Morris et al.’s (2017) qualitative study explored the symbolic and functional apparel needs of FTM participants ( $n=16$ ) before they began transitioning through surgical procedures. Utilizing photovoice (see Wang and Burris 1997), participants shared in focus groups their experiences with clothing – prompted by photographs they had taken – and discussed their body shape in relation to fit issues, physical/physiological discomfort with clothing and how they used clothes to affirm group membership, enhance self-confidence and self-expression and attain the desired body image. Reddy-Best and Pedersen (2015b) examined clothing style and appearance in relation to gender expression with LGBTQ+ female participants ( $n=20$ ) using qualitative methods that included interviews, journaling to track clothing distress and photos of outfits worn over a two-week period. Participants used particular hairstyles and clothes featuring rainbow motifs and gay pride slogans to convey their identity as members of the LGBTQ+ community; some or all of these strategies were employed according to planned activities. All participants experienced mild to severe distress about their identity portrayed by their clothing based on their environment (at home with family, at work or LGBTQ+ friendly spaces). Reddy-Best and Pedersen (2015a) also conducted a qualitative study that examined sources of style inspiration and retail shopping experiences of queer women ( $n=32$ ). Participants revealed in interviews that they looked to queer celebrities like Ellen DeGeneres as well as fashion blogs and publications targeted to the queer market but expressed disappointment that queer people were excluded from advertising media. Participants also shared their frustrations related to poor garment fit, the lack of choices in basics such as T-shirts and other negative shopping experiences related to change rooms and interactions with salespeople. While the reviewed literature provides insights into the milieu of members in the LGBTQ+ community – especially those who identify as female – the umbrella term LGBTQ+ includes a number of diverse groups whose needs are different, and there is a dearth of studies on clothing experiences of trans men. Our exploratory research focuses on the clothing needs and dressing strategies of transgender men and women in Canada, with the aim to empower the transgender

community by acknowledging the unique issues they experience with fashion and to provide information that might guide fashion designers, product developers and retailers.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The study used purposive sampling and recruited participants through Facebook posts to the Toronto LGBTQ+ community (Pride TO and Birthing and Breast or Chestfeeding Trans People and Allies) and through word of mouth to the researchers' personal connections (i.e. friends of friends). Inclusion criteria required that participants be male to female transgender individuals, over the age of 18, currently undergoing HRT and/or transgender men who were or had been pregnant in the last two years. Interested participants replied confidentially to a dedicated e-mail address set up specifically for the project. Three people participated in this exploratory study: Participants 1 and 2 were transgender females between ages 19 and 30, working in the entertainment industry and sales, respectively; Participant 3 was a 34-year-old transgender male working as a manager who had been pregnant 15–20 months ago. All participants were White.

Upon approval from the university's ethics board, data collection began with a demographic survey to confirm eligibility, family status, occupation, household income and shopping preferences. Our inquiry aimed to foster a 'progressive journey of empathy and learning' (Battarbee et al. 2014:8) using a qualitative, human-centred approach. At-home wardrobe interviews (Martin and Hanington 2012; Woodward 2007) with participants lasted 1–2.5 hours and allowed objects in the environment to act as probes (see Gaver et al. 1999), stimulating questions and topics of conversation that might have been overlooked in a more formal interview setting. Participants discussed their favourite outfits and clothing that was problematic with reference to fit, donning and doffing issues. Style strategies (tips and tricks) to achieve the desired aesthetic and identity were discussed, and photographs of key garments were taken. All interviews were audio-recorded. Data were analysed in three phases (see Creswell 2009: 185–86). Audio recording files and photographs were saved into separate folders for each participant and shared with the research team through Google Drive. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. Team members read the transcripts independently, underlined key passages, jotted notes and wrote memos. The research team met to compare notes and ideas in order to identify common themes. Transcripts were reviewed again to confirm themes and highlight key passages. Key photographs were compiled in a chart for each participant in reference to topics discussed in the interviews. Memos were then compiled to create an index of topics for analysis.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

According to Muratovski, 'design is increasingly being seen as an agent of positive social change' (2016: 121). Designing better products, environments and services requires an understanding of people (Merholz et al. 2008). The following research question framed our study: What are the clothing issues and dressing strategies of transgender individuals? Emergent themes derived from our data analysis centred on anatomy, clothing choices and styling strategies and how the right clothing made participants feel.

## ANATOMY AND CLOTHING CHOICES

Participants discussed their learning curve with clothing as well as the tips and tricks they had developed to portray their gender. The transgender women in our study had not undergone breast augmentation although some breast growth had occurred with HRT. They discussed concerns regarding their neck size, shoulders and muscular back and waist as well as the size of their arms, wrists, hands and feet. The transgender man in our study had undergone a double mastectomy; he discussed issues encountered with clothing fit with reference to his neck, shoulders, hips and feet. Clothing styles with specific design attributes were incorporated into participants' wardrobes.

### **Neck**

Both transgender women identified concerns and strategies regarding necklines given that their neck circumference was greater than the standardized sizing in women's wear. Participant 1 indicated:

A lot of trans women have this round, thick neck [...]. I like a low neckline, or even like a loose neckline. Something where my neck has room. I don't like things that are tight. I don't like turtlenecks and I don't like crewnecks [...] the low back is also a problem for me, because I have a muscular back.

Participant 2 discussed her neck: 'I like the fact that this style has a built-in choker, super trendy. It also covers up the Adam's apple' (see Figure 1f). Participant 2 also searched for necklines that fell off the shoulder; she showed us a top with a wide neckline: 'I can drop it off one of my shoulders and it looks really cute with my Calvin Klein sports bra, it's really feminine but it also looks really tomboyish'.

### **Shoulders, arms and hands**

Participants continued to discuss their anatomy in relation to standardized apparel and accessories. Shoulder breadth was revealed to be a challenge. As Participant 1, stated: 'And then of course the shoulder problem [...]. Dresses are difficult, because usually they are narrower in the shoulders, if they fit the rest of my body and then I can't get them off'. Comfort and confidence in shoulders and back varied among participants – whereas one woman was self-conscious about her muscle mass and definition, the other indicated that her shoulders had become one of her more feminine features with HRT and she would try to show them off whenever possible. Participant 2 had many 'cold shoulder' tops (styles with sleeves that had a cut out at the shoulder) in her wardrobe:

My shoulders and my arms were a problem for me, but now [...] I don't have a problem anymore [...]. My shoulders have been rounding up and slimming out [...]. Here is another cold shoulder top, I don't know why I have so many of them. But this is really simple, I like it.

Sleeve styles were key to disguising arm shape. Participant 2 liked ruffles (see Figure 1f and 1g). Participant 1 elaborated:

I usually like sleeves that are looser on my forearm, but they can be tighter on my upper arm. I don't like three-quarter length sleeves that are tighter all the way down. Because I don't think that does anything to change my arm shape.

Participant 3 discussed problems finding suits and shirts sized according to fixed combinations of neck/arm length measurements; he described this as 'size tension' – a balancing act between fitting shoulders, hips and neck: 'like if you have a 14-neck and a big ass, is that shirt going to exist?'. Likewise, when purchasing suits, he shopped at Moores and Browns:



Figure 1 a–i: Dressing strategies as modelled by Participant 1 (a–e): (a) Hayley Elsaesser overalls with correct crotch length, (b) shawl collar coat cinched at waist to create hourglass silhouette, (c) kimono cover up worn over bathing suit, (d) comfortable Fluevog shoes, (e) Steve Madden thigh-high boots; Participant 2 (f and g): (f) cold shoulder top with ruffled sleeves and choker at neckline, (g) cold shoulder top with ruffles across bodice and upper arm; Participant 3 (h and i): (h) off the rack jacket that fits in shoulder but is too long in sleeve, (i) tailored wedding suit. Copyright belongs to the authors, 2021.



They sell separates, so you can get a different size for the pant and jacket which is usually what needs to happen because I need like a big waist and then short arms so you can kind of mix and match a little bit better there.

He also had suits tailored to fit for his corporate wardrobe, which benefited his overall comfort and confidence (see fit differences in Figure 1h and 1i). Jewellery was also difficult to find. Participant 1 stated, 'I can't find rings that fit my fingers or that are flattering on my hands. And that's why I get these long nails, because it makes these fingers look so much longer and daintier'. She also discussed bracelets:

Bangles I can't get on my wrist because my hands are too big, sliding those on, it's not gonna happen. So, I always get the open backed ones [...]. But expensive jewelry usually doesn't have these open backs. So, if I was to get a gift from a gentleman suitor that had lots of money and then I couldn't fit in it I would be upset.

### ***Waist and lower torso***

The transgender women in our study used dressing strategies to create definition between their waist and hip circumference. Waist cinching was accomplished in many ways (belting, high-waisted shorts, fit-and-flare shirts, a princess seam), allowing participants to accentuate their waist and portray an hourglass silhouette, a figure they believed to be more feminine. Participant 1 stated that she did not want to look like she was 'just a big triangle'. She elaborated as she showed us her winter coat: 'I can't wear a coat unless it cinches and it creates really big hip action [...] the cowl-y neck, it's not really a cowl neck, it's [a shawl] [...] I think it makes my shoulders look much smaller' (see Figure 1b). Participant 2 searched for tops with a peplum (fabric flared or gathered at the waist seam) to create an hourglass silhouette:

I like a peplum a lot [...] it's just really shapely and really feminine. A peplum – I think looks good on anybody: if you're extremely tiny it'll give you some flare to the sides; if you're really big then it will hide your muffin top, so best of both worlds with any sort of peplum.

In order to camouflage their male anatomy, the transgender women wore specific garments and searched for particular styles and fabrics. Participant 1 wore a kimono style robe (see Figure 1c) as a bathing suit cover up because 'I don't want anything weird to pop out'. She also discussed a pair of Hayley Elsaesser overalls (see Figure 1a):

I saw them in a photo and I thought, 'kay that looks cool as hell. So, then I wanted them, because of the fit. And I do love the way it fits. It just makes me feel... like I, hmmm. I don't know, for a long time I didn't want to show my body at all, and that one shows pretty much my entire upper body and I'm okay with it, and I've never been okay with that before. But those overalls make me feel okay with it, because maybe the colours distract? I don't know. I love them [...]. I like these things because I think that I pass in them better, especially early transition.



Participants searched for shorts that were high waisted and roomy in the crotch area. Participant 1 stated:

I find with garments that are high waisted, I often have a problem with the crotch being too high [...] when I flatten things out that's fine, but it still is lower than normal. And I mean that surgery has a barrier of cost and also if you even want it, so that's a struggle for a lot of people in my community.

Participant 2 mentioned the fabric of a pair of shorts she wore:

I like them because they're structured, they're fitted, they're really cute, they're corduroy shorts. I like the material, and I like the structured ruggedness of it, especially down here because then it just distracts from any sort of lumps and bumps, you know.

Pant fit with regards to the waist/hip ratio was problematic for Participant 3, a transgender man: 'As soon as I see slim fit I just keep walking [...] the season of skinny pants was terrible'. He also avoided front pockets that could bag out and draw attention to his hips, whose measurement had changed post pregnancy. He admitted he chose pant styles by what would fit rather than what he would prefer to wear. 'I look like my Dad in pleated pants and I don't want to wear them, but I will acknowledge that they fit my hips better'. During pregnancy, he treated his growing waistline as a 'potbelly', wearing suspenders and cinching his pants below the curve. Pants were consistently a frustration as none of the maternity options were masculine enough: 'I held out for a pretty long time just wearing regular pants and suspenders [...] but at some point, there just doesn't exist men's pants that are big enough for that belly'. Another pregnancy dressing strategy he employed to conceal his growing waistline was to don his button-up shirt and fasten only the first few buttons starting at the neckline (leaving the remainder unfastened) and wear a pull over sweater on top: 'I several times considered actually getting a dickie [laughs] [...] I don't know if you can get them anymore, there was a few times where "I'm just cutting the shirt, I don't care because I was boiling all the time"'. Given that he was pregnant during the winter months, this approach was somewhat feasible, but he questioned what his dressing strategy would have been in the summer months.

## **Feet**

Both of our female transgender participants mentioned thigh-high boots as styling strategies. Participant 1 said, 'I love these thigh-high boots from Steve Madden because I feel like they do a lot for my leg shape' (see Figure 1e). Participant 2 stated, 'I really like long high boots, I have long legs and I think boots accentuate that. Boots are absolutely staples'. Foot size and purchasing shoes was also a challenge. Participant 1 revealed (see Figure 1d):

I look for an 11 which is my size in women's [...]. I wear those white Fluevog shoes a lot because I like the style of them and they're so comfortable it's insane! And they fit me perfectly, which is almost unheard of in my life [...]. When I find something that fits me the way I want it to fit it becomes a staple.

Participant 3 identified a similar problem; his size in men's shoes was typically a 6.5 and finding small sizes was difficult. He shopped on the internet: 'It's the only way you can get shoes this size!'. Once he found shoes that fit, he would purchase multiples: 'I have these exact shoes in four colours, because they fit, and so I just buy lots of them'.

## **CLOTHING AND EMPOWERMENT**

Rowlands (1996) defines personal empowerment as 'developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the effects of internalized oppression' (1996: 87). Clothing is not frivolous; it was used strategically by the participants in this study as an integral part of the transition process. Adam and Galinsky (2012) proposed that clothing elicits symbolic implications: 'When a piece of clothing is worn, it exerts an influence on the wearer's psychological processes by activating associated abstract concepts through its symbolic meaning' (2012: 2). This was evident with Participant 1, who described her relationship with clothing this way:

Clothes do make me feel so good, it's transformative. If I felt bad or if I was feeling dysphoric, then clothes [...] or make-up [...] or some kind of fashion thing would make me feel better. It has always been like armour. I used to use clothes as a buffer to distract people from attacking me, and now I use them to get attention that is positive.

Participant 2 described the impact of clothing on her:

I like the way women's clothing evokes an emotion; I can put on something really feminine and pretty and feel that way. Clothing has a big impact on the way you feel, and the situation that you're in, the people that you're surrounding yourself with. It impacts not only me and my mental health but also how I feel in terms of social engagement.

Participant 3 was far more pragmatic in his approach to clothes:

I would have never described myself as a fashionable person. I love men's clothing, I love men's suits and I love all that stuff [...] this is the uniform. I have a rotation of shirts and rotation of pants that I hope kind of work out.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This study used wardrobe-based interviews with transgender participants to examine clothing problems and dressing strategies. Our findings expand on the knowledge discussed in the literature review and add new insights into the strategic dressing practices of transgender men who are pregnant. Sensitivities with body size and shape were disclosed – for transgender women, anatomical zones included the neck, shoulders, waist, arms, as well as hands and feet. The transgender male in this study experienced clothing issues related to the ratio between his neck, shoulder and hip measurements as well as foot size and his pregnancy. Despite these challenges, individuals developed their own solutions to problems encountered when dressing to portray their identity.

Through trial and error, participants learned which fabric choices and generic styles to seek out when shopping with reference to bodice, neckline, sleeve and trouser silhouettes that best portrayed their desired gender. Participants also became familiar with particular clothing labels and retailers best suited to their style aesthetic.

This exploratory study's small sample of three participants – all of whom were White and between the ages of 18 and 34 – is a limitation; a more ethnically diverse group of people, middle aged and older, likely would yield additional results. Still, the findings provide a targeted list of anatomical zones and corresponding fit problems as well as design solutions. This information is invaluable to fashion designers and product developers creating clothing collections for these niche markets. Clothing for transgender people must be based on blocks designed to fit bodies typical for the gender they were born and with styling congruent with the gender they wish to portray. A design process that includes 3D body scanning and personalized dress forms is a viable way to approach collection development, especially for individuals who have begun to medically transition through HRT and surgery. Although our participants may have discovered workarounds for their clothing, this is not an issue they should have to address on their own. The participants in this study highlighted the importance of clothes styling and fit and emphasized how they felt when wearing the *right* clothing. Because there are gaps in the clothing options available for this niche market, the fit issues and dressing strategies discussed in this study's findings are important for designers, product developers and design educators. This community is growing, and the need for trans-friendly clothing collections and retailers will continue to increase. By designing with and for transgender people, the fashion industry could establish a more welcoming relationship for the LGBTQ+ community as a whole.

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