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# Photovoice: A user-centered design method to understand apparel needs of Female to Male (FTM) in gender identity and expression

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## **Photovoice: A user-centered design method to understand apparel needs of Female to Male (FTM) in gender identity and expression**

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Apparel plays a significant role in gender identity and expression. For females who are transitioning to male (FTM), clothing can be used to decrease stigma, discrimination, and body dysphoria during periods of transition. Transition, or the process of making social or medical changes to live as a gender not assigned at birth, is a meaningful experience for many transgender people. Apparel, in a more user-controlled and modifiable aspect of the gender transition process (Reddy-Best, & Pedersen, 2015). Past research has found relationships between clothing and gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria, or a conflict between a person's physical gender and the gender with which they identify, is a major psychological health concern for trans people. Additional research on apparel needs of FTM can help trans people feel more comfortable with their gender expression or to "pass" as their desired gender. This project involved transgender men as active participants in a user-centered design process, known as photovoice. Photovoice is a participant-driven qualitative research strategy in which participants use images and discussions to express themselves, share ideas, and shape future apparel design by visually describing their design needs (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). To date, no apparel researchers have used photovoice methods for apparel design. Therefore, the purpose of this project was to use the photovoice method to understand trans apparel needs to make apparel a health-supportive part of the FTM transition experience. This research is framed by work done by Rosenblad-Wallin (1985) regarding both the symbolic and functional values of FTM apparel needs. The target population for this study was transgender men or FTM, who have not yet had surgical procedures to alter their appearance and are between the ages of 18-30. A convenience sample was recruited because the population is relatively small and hidden (Catalani & Minkler, 2010).

**Photovoice Methods.** Photovoice methods typically follow four similar stages: 1) initial meeting; 2) take photos; 3) meet to discuss photos; 4) share with a larger audience through a photographic exhibition. During the introductory session, participants were instructed to take photographs during moments when apparel played a role in their FTM identity, daily experiences, and quality of life. The participants had two weeks to take photos. In small focus groups of five-seven members, the participants explained the significance of each photo. During which, the researchers guided the discussion on apparel-related needs by following a semi-structured interview guide. After the focus groups, the participants exhibited a selection of their photos and accompanying text in a public exhibition. The authors qualitatively analyzed both the transcripts from the focus groups and the photographs using theme analysis.

**Results.** Sixteen FTM participants took part in the study in four focus groups of that lasted approximately 90 minutes each. Between 4-11 photographs were shared by each participant, resulting in eighty-six total photos. The mean age of the participants was  $M= 22.56$ ,  $SD = 2.66$ . The majority of participants identified as white (14 of 16) and were college students (13 of 16). Through the data analysis, it was revealed that the two primary roles of apparel in FTM identity are to reduce body

dysphoria and help people "pass" as their desired gender. These findings were further broken down into symbolic and functional values where it is acknowledged that the symbolic and functional values are not mutually exclusive.

**Symbolic Values:** Clothing can reveal group membership and grow self-confidence through self-expression while attempting to achieve body satisfaction. Clothing can show group membership where correct identification of gender by others, "passing," was a major concern for participants, "It's important to me because it's how I express myself, and if people cannot see that I'm a boy, then they will make that mistake of misgendering me...and that's really important...I don't look very masculine as it is, but I - I mean, I try. And clothes would help that. Yeah, it would help not to make me not look as feminine." How being misgendered affected the participants was related to their personal level of self-confidence. As the participant's confidence in their gender identity increased, they were more likely to explore more gender fluid apparel. Apparel was used to manage body satisfaction by emphasizing certain body areas (e.g., biceps and shoulders) and de-emphasizing other areas (e.g., breasts and hips) to achieve the westernized "ideal masculine body shape." The participants experienced the most discontent with their breasts, followed by their hips, and both of these areas were sources of dysphoria. To defeminize their breasts, participants wore a very tight-fitting compression sleeveless crop top, called a chest binder. Until a participant has a mastectomy, or "top surgery" the binder is a necessary product to ease body dysphoria and is a very significant apparel item in FTM transition.

**Functional Values:** For FTM Individuals, clothing can be the source of physical and physiological discomfort and body shape and fit issues. Most of the clothing items used by participants to "pass" as male do not have any negative health implications. However, improperly wearing a chest binder can result in physical and physiological discomfort. Because of the intense pressure of the garment on the body, participants in our study experienced restricted breathing, reduction in arm range of motion, and thermal discomfort as it cannot be ventilated easily. Currently, FTM individuals purchase clothing made to fit "typical" male bodies. However, FTM does not have male body shapes and therefore experience fit issues in over the hips in both shirts and pants because of female patterns of fat distribution around the hips and thighs; "I can't wear traditional collared shirts... blazers or vests ever because they won't fit around my hips. I can't button the bottom button at all. I've tried all sorts of different sizes. I've tried altering them." Participants found pant, shoulder, and sleeve lengths all too long.

In this exploratory research, both symbolic and functional values of apparel for FTM were addressed. Through the photovoice process, the participants were able to visually express the relationship of gender and clothing, possibly better than through dialogue alone. The next stage of this research will use the results of this data to specify design features that can be used to address symbolic and functional properties to inform novel design concepts for FTM.

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