

Clothing Fit Issues for Trans People

<https://doi.org/10.38055/FS010201>

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Abstract: As many as nine million people identify as a transperson in the United States, yet mass clothing designing and manufacturing do not meet the needs of this consumer group. This research examines the role of fit in ready-to-wear (RTW) clothing using qualitative research methods. 90 transpeople from the United States, Canada, and Ireland participated in interviews and data from interviews were analyzed using line-by-line analysis, resulting in three themes. Theme 1 explored current fit problems with RTW clothing, Theme 2 explored the desire to use clothing to hide parts of the body that did not align with one's gender identity, and Theme 3 explored the desire to use clothing to highlight parts of the body that did align with one's gender identity. Findings from this research confirm the assumption that current RTW clothing does not meet the needs of the transperson population and offers areas where designers and manufactures can reassess their methods relative to this consumer group.

Keywords:

Body
Fit
Ready-to-wear
Transgender
Transpersons

Introduction

Researchers estimate there are approximately 1.4 to 9.1 million people who identify as a transgender person – the identity of a person whose birth sex does not align with their gender identity – in the United States (Doan, 2016; Flores, Herman, Gates, & Brown, 2016). Despite this, there are no known statistics on the economic power of the transgender community because it is usually aggregated together with the lesbian, bisexual, gay, and queer consumer groups. Researchers estimate that the buying power of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people within just the US is over \$917 billion (“America’s LGBT 2015 Buying Power...,” 2016). Even though the transgender population is a small portion of the LGBTQ population, they represent a significant consumer group and therefore require specific scholastic research pertaining to consumer needs and wants.

Research on clothing and transgender communities typically focuses on political attributes and identity (e.g., Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Factor & Rothblum, 2008; Gagné, Tweksbury, & McGaughey, 1997; Morgan & Stevens, 2009), with little empirical research that examines the physical requirements of clothing— specifically fit— among this population. Fit is defined as “the way a garment conforms to or differs from the body” (Workman & Lentz, 2000, p. 252). In order to adequately design, create, and procure clothing for transgender consumers, clothing professionals need to understand the specific needs and wants of this population. Due to the incongruence between one’s body and one’s gender identity, current clothing fit that is designed and manufactured for cisgender – the identity of a person whose birth sex aligns with their gender identity – populations may not be adequate for transgender people.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the issues of clothing fit among trans people. While aesthetics and design features are important aspects of dress for trans people, the focus of this manuscript is the issue of fit; aesthetic and design features will be discussed in a forthcoming article. Our focus is on fit because of the intimate and critical way that clothes interact with the body; while all people experience fit issues, the transgender population has unique and vital issues relative to the way clothes are worn and viewed. The published research on clothing fit predominately utilizes (presumably) cisgender samples of adult women. To our knowledge, based on our literature search, no published research exists that examines clothing fit of transgender people. Therefore, the research questions guiding this study were: 1) How specifically do issues with the fit of ready-to-wear (RTW) clothes relate to gender expression for transgender and genderqueer young persons, and 2) How are transgender and genderqueer young individuals using available clothing to support and modify their gender expression?

Review of Literature

To better understand clothing fit issues of trans people, researchers reviewed relevant literature related to fit and sizing systems as well as body image and appearance management behaviours of transgender people. Transgender is an umbrella terms for persons whose assigned or designated sex at birth does not align with their gender identity, and includes genderqueer persons who do not conform to the gender binary (Bockting, 2014). Transwoman refers to individuals who were assigned male at birth and identify as a woman. Similarly transman refers to individuals who were assigned female at birth and identify as a man. We focus on transgender and genderqueer youth because their generational cohorts (i.e., millennials and post-millennials) have challenged the binary system of gender to the extent that transgender politics and aesthetics are regularly featured in popular culture and political discourse.

Fit and Sizing Systems

Many people are dissatisfied with the fit of ready-to-wear (RTW) clothing, or clothing that is mass manufactured in stock sizes. Fit (dis)satisfaction has been related to body type, activity, practicality (Park & An, 2014; Otieno, Harrow, & Lea-Greenwood, 2005), height (Jones & Giddings, 2010), body shape (Alexander, Connell, & Presely, 2005), and body cathexis, or emotional investment in one's body (LeBat & DeLong, 1990). Researchers of a wide variety of populations have also reported that 50% to 80% of their respondents are dissatisfied with the fit of their RTW clothing (Goldsberry, Shim, & Reich, 1996; Kurt Salmon Associates, 2000; Pisut & Connell 2007), while other researchers have noted that a majority of their respondents altered their RTW clothing in order to achieve a desired fit (Alexander, Connell, & Presley, 2005).

Clothing fit (dis)satisfaction stems from sizing categories (Brown, 2013; LaBat & DeLong, 1990; Workman, 1991), notable because RTW clothing uses sizing systems in order to accommodate the most people within a specified range of standardized measurements (Workman, 1991). One of the first attempts at a standard sizing system for womenswear was created in the 1940s by the United States Federal Trade Commission and Department of Commerce, but failed because different brands utilized different size categories (Tamburrino, 1992). Today brands determine their own sizing systems, resulting in similar products from different brands having different sizes. For example, Tamburrino's (1992) research found that garments with the same size label from different brands may vary in fit by plus or minus two sizes.

The standard sizing for fit models has changed from size 10 in 1986 to size 8 in 1997; however, the measurements of size 8 in 1997 are very similar to size 10 in 1986 (Workman & Lentz, 2000). Thus, while the sizing label changed, the measurements did not. Further complicating the issue is the practice of vanity sizing, or labeling clothing with smaller sizes, in order to appeal to a psychological need to fit into a smaller size. Of course, preferences for fit vary according to fashion trends. For example, fit in the late 1980s and early 1990s was loose and baggy, while the contemporary trend is for body-hugging clothing. Hence, clothing sizes can be frustrating to the consumer as they seek to find a well-fitting garment.

To our knowledge, no research has examined fit issues of men, whose clothing seems to be more adaptable to different bodies based on neck measurements, sleeve length, waist size, and pant length. The body of research that does examine fit and sizing issues relies on (presumably) cisgender populations of women. In addition, no research has examined the consumer population of transgender individuals and their sizing and fit needs relative to clothing. As a result of the physiological body characteristics distinctive in gender transition (e.g. waist to hip ratio, shoulder breadth) this market demographic likely has unique needs.

Transgender People's Body Image

Body image is the mental representation one has about one's body (Garner & Garfinkel, 1981). This representation may feel comfortable, eliciting body satisfaction, or may feel uncomfortable, resulting in body dissatisfaction. All people experience a certain extent of body dissatisfaction, which often drives people to engage in some type of body modification or appearance management behavior (Cash, 1996; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). However, for transgender persons appearance management can reflect efforts to express gender even when body size or physique are not consistent with an internal sense of felt gender identity (Pope, Phillips, & Harrison, 2000; McGuire, Doty, Catalpa, & Ola, 2016).

For many transgender individuals, the process of gender development involves a range of behaviors including personal and social behaviors (using different names or pronouns), appearance management (altering clothing usage, body binders, hairstyle, piercing, tattoos, or working out), or medical body modifications such as hormone therapy and surgeries. Hormonal and surgical modifications can change features like body hair, breast development, genital appearance and function, Adam's apple, muscle tone, and some fat distribution. However, unless medical care includes early puberty suppression and adolescent cross sex hormones, those procedures will likely not shift an individual's overall physique much including height, curvature, hand or foot size, and shoulder breadth (de Vries, McGuire, Steensma, Wagenaar, Doreleijers, & Cohen Ketenis, 2014). Some transgender people attempt to fit cultural gender norms, and some work actively to dismantle cultural gender standards. For transgender individuals, clothing is one option to influence gender expression regardless of the extent or satisfaction with medical interventions. As such understanding how clothing fit can support or inhibit their gender expression is of critical importance in the clothing industry.

Appearance management behaviors among transgender people may be attempts to control social interpretations of gender identity (McGuire et al., 2016). They may be dissatisfied with body parts that reveal assigned gender (i.e., hips, breasts, shoulder width, and body hair distribution) or may be dissatisfied with the size of body parts that are associated with a specific gender (i.e. the size of hands and feet or one's stature) (Ålgars, Santtila, & Sandnabba, 2010; Pfeffer, 2008; McGuire et al., 2016). For example, transmen may bind their chests in order to achieve a flattened male torso or undergo a mastectomy to remove mammary tissue, which can leave scars on the body that indicate prior surgery. Similarly, transwomen may create a female body silhouette through the use of corsets and cinchers while also removing unwanted body hair through shaving, waxing, electrolysis, or laser hair removal. Genderqueer persons may engage in any variation of appearance management behaviors to achieve an aesthetic that is not easily defined as masculine or feminine.

In addition, the use of hormone therapy, diet, and exercise can be used to modify the body to look more masculine or feminine. McGuire et al.'s (2016) research noted that many transgender people in their sample used clothing to disguise their body shape. Body weight control behaviors for transgender people were sometimes motivated by losing and gaining weight in specific areas to represent a certain gendered physique and sometimes to change physiology (i.e., stop menstruation; McGuire et al., 2016).

A transgender person's physique is in different stages of development during different times while they are undergoing gender confirmation interventions, and clothing options that are made for standard cisgender sizes and body shapes may not provide adequate fit. For example, shirts cut to a masculine frame may be larger in the shoulders and have longer arms or larger necklines per body length or chest width than women's shirts. However, shirts cut for cisgender women's proportions are more likely to have $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeves, darts to accentuate the breast line and low necklines, all things someone trying to accentuate masculine characteristics will not want. Pants designed for cisgender men have a lower crotch, and larger waist to hip ratio than pants designed for women. Thus, transmen may have a hard time fitting into men's pants, and may not be able to find pants that are sufficiently masculine while still accommodating their height and waist to hip ratio.

Framework

The Functional, Expressive and Aesthetic (FEA) Consumer Needs Model (Lamb & Kallal, 1992) provides the framework for this study. Lamb and Kallal (1992) created their model to “conceptualize what consumers with special needs desire in their apparel” (p. 42). Although their work was originally intended to address designing functional apparel for people with disabilities, they also “wanted a general framework that could be applied to design any type of apparel, including garments intended for people whose needs are not routinely met in the marketplace” (p. 42).

The model situates consumers within a culture, with culture bounded by design criteria. The design criteria are divided into three sections: functional (fit, mobility, comfort, protection, donning/doffing), expressive (values, roles, status, self-esteem), and aesthetic (art elements, design principles, body/garment relationship) (see figure 1). Furthermore, the functional, expressive, and aesthetic considerations are related to one another. The functional-expressive relationship acknowledges that apparel can satisfy both a physical need while simultaneously providing a symbolic message. The expressive-aesthetic relationship “deals with messages conveyed by apparel and the sense of pleasure obtained from the beauty of the garment” (p. 43). And, the aesthetic-functional connection highlights the often-combative nature of form and function with a goal of the designer being to reconcile form and function to create something both visually pleasing and serviceable.

Lamb and Kallal (1992) combined their model with work by Hans, Belliston, and Edwards (1977) and Koberg and Bagnall (1981) to illustrate the phases of the design process: 1) identify the problem; 2) create preliminary ideas; 3) refine the design; 4) develop the prototype; 5) evaluate the prototype; and 6) implement the creation (see figure 1). “The design process is critically linked to product development for target markets. Regardless of how a target market is defined, the analysis of consumer needs is accomplished first by determining their function, expressive, and aesthetic requirements” (Lamb & Kallal, 1992, p. 45). This framework provides a blueprint for satisfying the needs of shoppers by linking the consumers’ perspectives with the designers’ method. Understanding consumer expectations and aspirations assists the designer with creating saleable and useful products. For the purposes of this research, we concentrate on the target consumer portion of FEA model and step 1 (identifying the problem) of the design process.

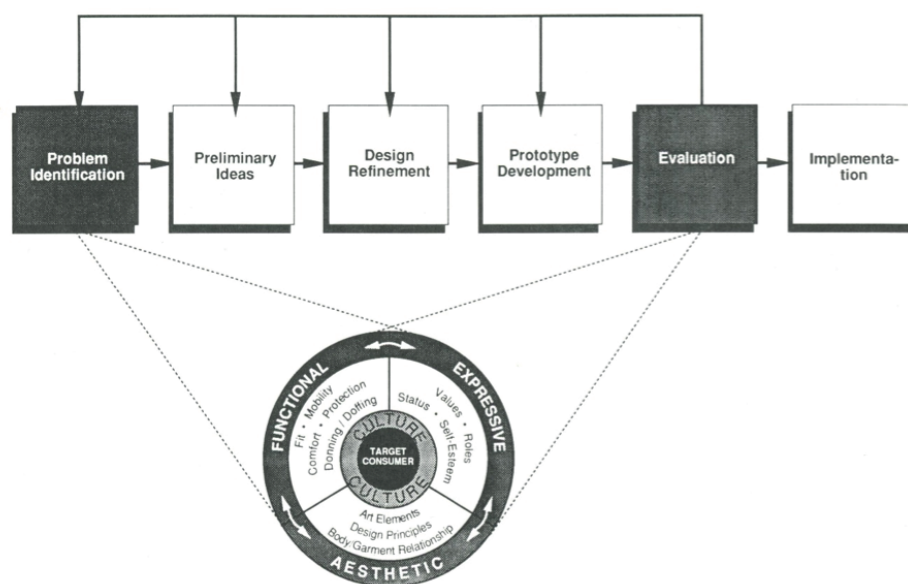


Figure 1: The Functional, Expressive and Aesthetic Consumer Needs Model within the Apparel Design Framework (Hans, Belliston, & Edwards, 1977; Koberg & Bagnall, 1981; Lamb & Kallal, 1992). Reprinted by permission of the International Textile and Apparel Association.

We also invoke Delong's (1998) Apparel Body Construct (ABC; see figure 2) to analyze the interconnections between dress and the body and how they are perceived by others. Drawn from art theory and cognitive psychology, the model posits how the viewer interprets a clothed body based on objective and subjective responses: "In *subjective* [italics original], the viewer tunes into how he or she feels personally about clothing. In *objective* [italics original] the viewer reasons or analyzes more about clothing that he or she is wearing" (p. 8). Apparel is analyzed through design elements (e.g., color, line, shape, texture) and design principles (e.g., repetition, alternation, contrast, gradation). The body's physical characteristics are integral to how apparel is worn. The form, the viewer, and the context influence the interpretation of the complete image. The form is the body and its relationship to clothing otherwise known as the "look," which elicits from the viewer expressive characteristics (e.g., emotions) and referential characteristics (symbolic meanings). The context includes the physical and cultural perspectives. Rudd and Lennon (2001) noted that context has "direct relationship to the socio-cultural norms that influence interpretations of one's body image" (p. 123).

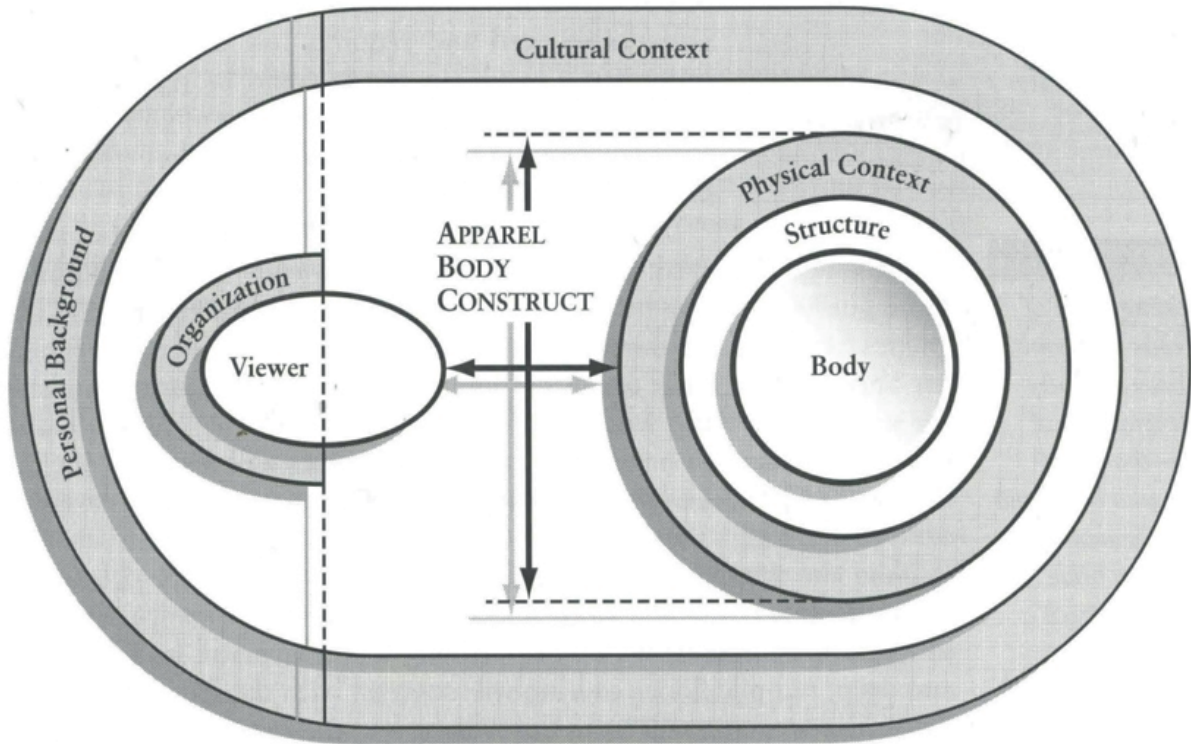


Figure 2: The Apparel Body Construct (DeLong, 1998). Reprinted with permission from Fairchild Books.

By utilizing the Functional, Expressive and Aesthetic Consumer Needs Model and the Apparel Body Construct, we surmise that transgender people will critique their “look” based on the interaction between their apparel and their bodies in the context of social-constructs of gender presentation, and that the RTW apparel products currently on the market do not meet their needs on function and expressive levels.

Method

The current study was included as a sub-study of a larger project focused on transgender adolescent and young adult development. As such, analyses focused on millennial and post-millennial consumers. According to Dimock (2018) the millennial generation was born 1981-1996 with the post-millennial generation (also known as Generation Z) born afterwards. Most of the participants in this study use clothing to express and convey their identity because this sample reported limited access to medical interventions including puberty suppression, cross sex hormones, and surgeries. Half reported at least one medical intervention including: hormones (38%), breast removal (11%), vaginoplasty (4%), or facial surgeries (2%).

90 participants from eight cities in the United States (84.5%) (Atlanta, Minneapolis, Olympia, Portland, Pullman, Seattle, Salt Lake City, and Tucson), Canada (4.5%), and Ireland (11%) were interviewed. All of the Irish and Canadian participants reported a White ethnicity. Within the U.S. sample, efforts were made to diversify the sample to fit city demographics yielding a final remaining ethnic distribution of 48% White, 12% Latinx, 10% Black/African American, 7% American Indian, 4.5% Asian, and 3% a different ethnicity. Participants identified as female-to-male (transmen, 31%), male-to-female (transwomen, 37%), and non-binary or genderqueer (GQ, 32%). Trans persons age 15-26 were recruited through community centers, list serves, and snowball sampling. The final sample included 48% aged 20-23, 24% aged 15-19, and 28% over the age 24.

Participants were recruited via advertisements and listserves at community centers that catered to the transgender community and at support group meetings. Participants were interviewed in person or via telephone or Skype by the researchers or a research assistant knowledgeable in interview techniques. Interviewers followed a semi-structured interview format using a standard set of questions, but also allowing flexibility in order to pursue topics not covered by the questions, should the participant bring them up. Examples of interview questions included "Please reflect how clothing is associated with body image and gender for you," and "When you look at yourself in the mirror, what is your impression of what you see?" In person interviews took place at youth community centers that catered to the trans person population, coffee houses, libraries, or private homes. Interviews lasted between one and three hours, were recorded, and later transcribed (note: six voice recordings were not able to be transcribed due to technical issues, and notes taken by the interviewer were used for analysis in their place). No self-identifying information was collected and participants indicated their willingness to participate verbally. Names used in the analysis/discussion are pseudonyms. Participants were compensated for their time at a rate of US\$20, C\$20, or €15. Coding of the transcripts showed high inter-rater reliability between two researchers using open coding techniques derived from thematic analysis and grounded theory coding protocols ($k=.90$; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This study was approved by the Internal Review Board of Washington State University.

Results

The results are based on the data collected from our two research questions: 1) How specifically do issues with the fit of RTW clothes relate to gender expression for trans and genderqueer young persons, and 2) How are transgender and genderqueer young adults using available clothing to support and modify their gender expression? Three themes relative to clothing and fit emerged from the data: 1) fit/cut/size problems with RTW clothing in general, 2) hiding the body with clothing, and, 3) revealing the body with clothing.

Theme 1: Fit/Cut/Size Problems with RTW clothing

Responses in this theme highlight how RTW clothing does or does not fit the body. For example, a transman participant noted, “The way [clothes] fit me, it pissed me off ‘cause they wouldn’t fit me properly because I have this girly body and the clothes are made for men figures,” while another participant responded, “I don’t typically wear women’s clothing... as uh most of my binders don’t fit very well anymore and uh my, my chest just looks really awkward in things that are cut for women.” Likewise, pants were also a problem; a genderqueer participant said, “I’m really short and jeans — boy jeans kind of just look retarded when you’re really short ‘cause the crotch is like that much longer than it should be.”

These responses illustrate how current categories of RTW clothing, created along a gender binary, do not meet the needs of transgender persons. Furthermore, one transman observed that when clothes do not fit, the issue is not with the clothing but with his body:

I feel like I’m supposed to shop in the men’s section, I feel like I’m supposed to wear men’s clothing. Like, I feel like I’m just supposed to. Like just, like I’m a guy and I’m supposed. So I don’t know why I keep on mentioning clothing, I don’t know, I guess it all, it all connects to the way my body is too ‘cause if the clothing doesn’t fit right on me then obviously that means there’s something wrong with my body and I want it to be more masculine I feel like it feel like it should be, you know broader shoulders, tapered, you know, no hips, just V-shaped. No boobs.

This is especially significant because the participant placed blame on himself and his body rather than on the sizing system currently in use.

Theme 2: Hiding the Body with Clothes

Responses in this theme illustrate how clothing is used to disguise the body. For transgender people, cloaking the body is an important aspect of achieving an aesthetic that is affirming of their gender identity. Participants made the connection between disguising the body and psychological comfort. One transman respondent said, "I wear pretty baggy clothes. And they make me feel comfortable," and one transwoman respondent said, "I've actually changed out my entire wardrobe ... before, I only wore like, sweatpants and ... baggy shirts because I believe that subconsciously...embarrassed about my ... personal appearance, like my body structure, so I hid it under ... over-sized clothing." Further, one genderqueer participant noted, "My shirts are big enough to wear, and the little bit [of chest] I have don't [sic] show. And my shorts and pants are big enough to where my hips don't show. And my butt don't [sic] show and my thighs don't [sic] show."

Another genderqueer participant noted that when clothing accentuates or calls attention to specific body parts it created an uncomfortable situation: "I put on a shirt and I see it's accentuating parts of me that I don't like ... It's hard for me to want to go out and party, 'cause I'm always like is everyone paying as much attention to my chest as I am, so that kind of makes me a little socially awkward sometimes." Situations like these may be remedied by different garments. In one case, a binder helped create the desired silhouette and improved psychological comfort, as noted by a genderqueer participant: "I got a binder shirt ... and I've been wearing it a lot. And that definitely — definitely helps, 'cause it's like, I'll look down like, 'it's flat, yes!' And you know, I feel more comfortable ...when I'm trying to be masculine, it's like, to have a masculine chest." Likewise, a transwoman remarked, "I always make sure I have a long enough shirt so it covers up this section [motioning to her groin]."

Theme 3: Revealing the Body

The third theme to emerge relates to the desire to highlight body parts via fitted clothing. Motivations interpreted from the data include to celebrate or show pride in one's body and a desire to highlight one's bodily changes post gender confirmation treatment. A masculine presenting genderqueer participant noted, "I feel like [I] fit my body or accentuate parts of my body that I like; I actually have parts of my body that I like." This desire to draw attention to the body was enacted via form-fitting clothing, while a feminine presenting-genderqueer participant explained their clothes were, "replaced with more um, form fitting ... stuff. They highlighted that "form fitting stuff [looked] a lot a lot better than the baggy stuff." In addition, another transwoman participant described the purpose of form fitting clothing, saying; "I try to ... find clothes that accentuate my feminine attributes, I try to you know, get shirts that kind of hug so, to give an hour glass shape, or wear pants that make my butt look good." For our masculine presenting participants, they sought to accentuate aspects of body pride, while our transwomen participants sought to accentuate and reveal a physique related to the feminine ideal of an hour-glass shape.

Discussion

The data indicate that current RTW apparel does not meet the needs of this consumer group on both a functional level (e.g., fit) and an aesthetic level (e.g., alignment with gender identity). The three themes extracted from the data align with functional, expressive, and aesthetic dimensions of the FEA Model (Lamb & Kallal, 1992). Theme 1: "Fit/cut/size problems" aligns with the functional dimension of the model, which includes fit, mobility, and comfort. Participants noted the difficulty of wearing clothing designed for bodies that do not match with their gender identity. Components of RTW clothing are too long, too short, too tight, or too loose, indicating that the current assortment of apparel offered at mass market do not meet the needs of this consumer group.

Clothing fit also plays a role in the expressive-aesthetic dimension of the FEA Model. "Theme 2: Hiding the Body with Clothes" and "Theme 3: Revealing the Body" align with the aesthetic dimension of the model, specifically the body/garment relationship, and therefore the form-viewer-contextual aspect of the ABC (DeLong, 1998). Participants noted using loose or baggy-fitting clothing, or body-shaping undergarments, to disguise body parts in order to create a look that matches their gender identity. Participants' responses highlighted the interaction between the body and apparel that yielded incongruent messages about one's gender presentation. Clothing that did not fit properly or called attention to gendered physique characteristics resulted in a negative evaluation. Participants reported looking "awkward" or avoiding social situations. However, clothing could be used to highlight and reveal body parts that participants felt aligned with their gender identity and thus resulted in a positive evaluation.

The role of body image is instrumental to the consumer in creating a desired "look" and to the designer/merchandise/retailer in satisfying the consumer's needs. As McGuire et al. (2016) and Catalpa and McGuire (in press) noted, transgender people utilize appearance management behaviors, including clothing, to control social interpretations. Gender-conforming dress helps to avoid hostile situations and maintain gender identity for transgender individuals (Catalpa & McGuire, in press). According to the recently released U.S. Transgender Study of over 27,700 trans persons in the U.S. and all territories (James et al., 2018), almost half of respondents were verbally harassed and almost 10% were physically attacked in the prior year alone due to their transgender status. The number was higher (around 65% percent) for those who said people could usually recognize their transgender status.

Conclusion

In this study we used a consumer needs perspective to examine clothing fit issues for trans people. We used qualitative methods to gather data and thematic and grounded theory techniques to analyze data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Analysis of the data yielded three themes: 1) fit/cut/size problems with RTW clothing in general; 2) hiding the body with clothing; and, 3) revealing the body with clothing.

This research should be considered in light of its limitations. The sample was quite diverse in region, nationality, and ethnic group. No attempt was made to separate out the responses by diverse groups to specify specific concerns within any particular group. The use of qualitative research methods does not yield generalizability to the entire transgender population, but rather begins to establish the range of considerations within the population. It should also be noted that about half of the sample in this research project did not have access to medical care such as puberty suppression and cross sex hormones, and were relying on clothing to express identity. Nonetheless, the findings do highlight thematic issues in clothing fit for transpersons that should be addressed by designers and marketers who desire to better accommodate this consumer group. For example, British retail store Selfridges has removed gender designations in its department Agender, and New York City retail store Phluid Project offers all clothes sans gender designations, thus indicating that some clothing stores and brands are moving to a model that challenges the binary gender system.

Issues with clothing fit are not unusual as RTW clothing is often cited as having discrepancies between the cut/size and the body (Goldsberry, Shim, & Reich, 1996; Kurt Salmon Associates, 2000; Pisut & Connell 2007). However, for the transgender population these issues are particularly disconcerting due to the desire to present affirmed gender identity. Clothing that is incongruent sends confusing, inappropriate, and/or misleading messages to the public. Body image plays a significant role in clothing choices; shapeless clothes disguise body parts that reveal the sex-assigned-at-birth, whereas form-fitting clothing reveal body parts that highlight one's gender identity. These findings align with research that demonstrates that transgender people experience body dissatisfaction due to features that reveal sex-assigned-at-birth, and thus use appearance-management behaviors to control social interpretations of their gender identity (McGuire, et al., 2016).

It is necessary for designers and manufacturers who wish to serve this niche market to understand the fit issues surrounding the transgender consumer. Body issues are different from those associated with cisgender consumers. While it may be impossible to achieve fit satisfaction with 100% of any consumer group, understanding the needs of this consumer group can lead to better design.

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Article Citation

Reilly, Andrew, et al. "Clothing Fit Issues for Trans People." *Fashion Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2019, pp. 1-21, www.fashionstudies.ca/clothing-fit-issues-for-trans-people, <https://doi.org/10.38055/FS010201>.