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# 'Boy smell': transgender and nonbinary people's experiences of bodily smell

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## ABSTRACT

Although smell is sometimes treated with little regard, it is invested with cultural meaning and conveys a great deal of information, including about gender, sexuality and identity. This article draws on interviews with 11 transgender and nonbinary people who have accessed gender affirming hormone therapy (GAHT), and focuses on how they understand and explain changes in how their own bodies smell. Although it is well documented that GAHT causes changes in skin oiliness, changes in smell are inconsistently documented, and within the medical literature are often commented on only in passing. Taking a discourse analytic approach, the article finds that participants noticed changes in their own smell during hormonal transition, that in many cases this change was understood as significant in some way, and that these changes could be experienced as affirming. Understandings of what changes in bodily smell meant were often derived relationally or socially, although participants' discussion of the experience frequently focused on their own embodiment. Smell seems to form part of a process of (re)identification with the physical self and gender affirmation that can be facilitated by GAHT.

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## Introduction

Smell is an often-overlooked sense in Western culture, frequently given little regard and passed over in favour of other senses; vision especially (Le Breton 2017; Reinarz 2014; Synnott 1991; 1993). Despite being paid comparatively little attention, smell conveys a great deal of information, including about identity (Largey and Watson 2006; Low 2009; Reinarz 2014). Smell is given social and cultural meaning, and among the meanings encoded into odour is information about a person's gender (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1997; Low 2009; Reinarz 2014). Commercially produced and deliberately applied fragrances are often marketed in an unmistakably gendered manner (Kjellmer 2021; Low 2009; Reinarz 2014; Synnott 1993). These fragrances are often taken to impart information about the wearer's gender and in marketing may implicitly promise to enhance the ability to perform masculinity or femininity (Graham

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2006; Largey and Watson 2006). The relationship between gender and body odour has also been detailed in the literature from a cultural perspective, identifying that there is a persistent belief in Western culture that although not necessarily desirable, men *can* smell of sweat without their gender performance being called into question, but women cannot (Synnott 1993; Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1997). Body odour generally, however, is something which is stigmatised in Western society, with this idea being supported through advertising for personal hygiene products which promise to mask or remove any smell of the natural body (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1997; Le Breton 2017).

As well as information about gender, smell is frequently used as a proxy for information about belonging within other social groups, or justification for ostracism from them. To smell at all has sometimes been taken as evidence of moral decay, while being odourless has been associated with purity or superiority (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1997; Largey and Watson 2006; Reinartz 2014). In a series of interviews, Low (2009) found that while a total absence of odour was not necessarily expected, his participants explained they considered smelling 'clean' to be a courteous act, and that people who smelled 'bad' would be excluded from groups, marked as different and rejected. Smelling 'bad' is often a charge levelled at groups who are marginalised, with the allegation used to justify discrimination: Reinartz (2014, 86, 103–4) describes the ways that 'smell... was central to the construction of racial difference' in the case of black Americans, with how someone smelled taken as a marker of racial identity as well as how they looked. Smell is also used as a marker of class position, with the working or lower class accused by the upper classes of smelling offensive, or being detectable by their smell (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1997; Reinartz 2014). The meanings attached to smells are socially and culturally constructed, and an awareness of one's smell relates to its part among the sensory characteristics which make up the body as 'a receptor of social meanings' (Low 2009, 41), as well as how smell plays into exposure to social exclusion and ill-treatment.

As part of a larger project investigating transgender and nonbinary (hereafter trans) people's relationships to smell in relation to identity, this article draws attention to body odour and other bodily smells. Specifically, in this article I am interested in looking at how a group of trans people who have accessed gender affirming hormone therapy (GAHT) understand and explain changes in how their own bodies smell. Although it is well documented that GAHT causes changes in skin oiliness (AusPATH 2022; Coleman et al. 2022; Cundill 2020), changes in smell are inconsistently documented, and are often commented on only in passing (AusPATH 2022; Bosom and Medico 2021; Carbonnel et al. 2021; Ghofranian et al. 2023). Overall, the topic has been minimally addressed in the literature. Fisher et al. (2014) found that there was a statistically significant difference in satisfaction with 'body scent' between transfeminine people who were and were not accessing GAHT – their findings are quantitative, identifying that differences are notable but not exploring the experiences associated with changing bodily smell. Chester, Lyons, and Hopner (2017) in a project examining the experiences of trans people's intimate partners, found some people highlighted their partner's smell changed after they began GAHT. Their findings note changes in smell happening unexpectedly and suddenly but document these changes from the perspective of intimate partners, not trans

people themselves (Chester, Lyons, and Hopner 2017). In contrast, this article takes a qualitative approach, and explores the experiences of trans people, rather than those around them. Although it is often suggested that due to habituation ‘one tends not to notice one’s own body odour’ (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1997, 165) with this truism sometimes used in marketing for hygiene products to drive anxiety about smelling offensive, Lesur et al. (2023, 2) have proposed that that body odour, along with other sensory inputs, is used to ‘create and maintain a coherent sense of a bodily self’. The findings reported here challenge the popularly held view that one’s own smell is habituated to the point of irrelevance and indicate that in some situations one’s smell does indeed become noticeable and meaningful.

The experience of transness is often pathologised and medicalised, particularly if trans people want to access GAHT or surgery (Dewey and Gesbeck 2017; Johnson 2015), and this article does not seek to reproduce those paradigms. Medicalisation places trans bodies under scrutiny and observation, and when transness is medicalised then the power to determine what experiences and changes are important and worthy of note shifts away from trans people themselves. Medical transition is inconsistently accessible, with access often split along racial and socioeconomic lines – the norms reproduced by medical models are also typically reflective of a predominantly white and Western conceptions of gender (Johnson 2015). Medicalised frameworks are also more likely to focus on dysphoria and negative experiences, and this can limit exploration of gender euphoria and more pleasurable aspects of embodying a trans identity (Kai and Devor 2022; Beischel, Gauvin, and van Anders 2022). Community understandings of transness can be drawn upon to develop more nuanced and deeper theories of trans experiences (Kai and Devor 2022). Within this research, participants’ own sensory experiential knowledge of their embodied selves is centred.

## Methods

The findings reported in this article represent one part of a larger research project looking at trans people’s experiences of and relationships to smell and fragrance. The full project encompassed 26 semi-structured interviews with transgender, non-binary and gender diverse people. The participants encompassed a diverse range of gender identities: nonbinary, genderfluid, bigender, transgender man, trans man, a nonbinary trans man, trans woman, trans nonbinary *takatāpui*, transmasc, transmasc nonbinary, transmasculine nonbinary, and gender nonconforming. Participants varied in terms of if they had accessed or were currently accessing GAHT. This paper reports on the findings from 11 interviews where participants had accessed GAHT and experienced it influencing their own smell. Participants were initially recruited *via* a poster shared on social media, which invited responses from transgender, nonbinary and gender diverse people who were interested in discussing their feelings about and use of perfume or fragrance, as well as their feelings about smell more generally. As the project developed, further recruitment occurred through snowballing, whereby participants referred others who they thought would be interested in taking part. To qualify for the research, participants needed to identify with a gender different to the one assigned to them at birth, to be aged 18 or over, to be currently living

in New Zealand or Australia, and to be comfortable conducting an interview in English.

Before recruitment of participants commenced, the study received ethics approval from Massey University's Human Ethics Committee (Northern, Application NOR 22/65). All interviews were conducted by the author, both face to face and over Zoom, and those analysed in this article ranged in length from 27 to 51 min, with an average (mean) length of 37 min. Interviews took place between December 2022 and December 2023.

Interviews were audio recorded then transcribed, and the transcripts provided to participants for approval. Participants were informed about the intentions of the research before the interview commenced and offered a gift of \$40 to thank them for their time and contributions. Participants were asked how they would describe their own gender and ethnicity, and although participants were not asked their age beyond confirming they were 18 or over, many elected to share this data during recruitment or interviews. Participants were ethnically diverse, with interviewees included in the dataset analysed for this article identifying themselves as Pākehā (white), Māori, Scottish, European, British, and Hong Kong Cantonese. Many participants identified with more than one ethnic group. Participants whose interviews are discussed in this article identified as nonbinary, a transgender man, a trans man, a nonbinary trans man, transmasculine, transmasculine nonbinary, and transmasculine nonbinary. Participants were asked to provide a pseudonym which they would like to be known as in the research or could elect to be given one by the author.

Following the approval by participants, all the transcripts were initially coded through the Nvivo software package, using the approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Themes which related to personal smell changing during GAHT were developed during coding, and the interviews which included this topic were separated out as a discrete data set for further consideration. The themes documented here were determined through a reflexive approach, informed by the author's position as a transgender person who has used GAHT (Braun and Clarke 2023). This smaller subset of interview data was further explored using a discourse analysis approach to deepen understanding and draw out meanings. The excerpts related to this theme were read and re-read to establish familiarity with the experiences described by participants, and to discern patterns in how participants expressed or described these, including where these patterns showed similarity and where they diverged, following the steps proposed by Gill (2000). Braun and Clarke (2023) and Gill (2000) both outline methodological approaches which produce themes that are shaped by the data rather than pre-defined research questions. Accordingly, while some limited existing research indicates GAHT does change people's body odour and personal smell, using this approach permitted a greater drawing out of the qualitative dimensions of this process, addressing how participants make sense of this change, and how their knowledge and experience of it was shaped through their social context.

Coming from a cultural studies and sensory studies perspective which understands the senses as mediating 'the relationship between self and society' (Bull et al. 2006, 5), this article seeks to enhance understanding of how a change in smell is understood and experienced as part of a gender transition. The sample size in this study is small, and so it is not possible to say if the findings are generalisable to a larger cohort.

That this theme emerged in 11 interviews out of a total of 26 – with not all of those 26 having accessed GAHT- does however suggest the findings here may warrant further study. The sample here exclusively represents people who had used masculinising hormones, and it may be valuable to engage in qualitative work to determine whether similar experiences exist among people taking feminising hormones, particularly given quantitative findings from Fisher et al. (2014) seem to suggest this may be the case.

## Results

### *No one talks about it*

In the course of the interviews, participants discussed becoming aware that they smelled different after beginning GAHT. Finding out if participants who had accessed GAHT experienced their own smell changing was one of the objectives of the semi-structured interviews. In some instances, participants brought up the topic themselves, sometimes in response to a question about smells they associated with transition, as with Nate (he/they) who explained:

I'm mindful of how my body odour has changed as I've been on testosterone. And how, yeah, I am really aware that I smell different. And how like, yeah, I mean. I knew that a medical transition would be quite a powerful process, but the fact that it's effect, like, I smell like a man, you know? Smell very masculine.

RB (he/him) also brought up the topic in response to this question, saying 'I hope you know what I mean, when I say teenage boy smell?' and then continuing:

I was like, horrified and disturbed to notice that my bedroom, especially in the beginning of transition, would smell like teenage boy. And I remember when I was a teenager, my brother's room smelled like that. And I was always like, what is that smell? You know, it's so distinct. And it's not unpleasant, but it's not particularly pleasant. And yeah, I used to get it a lot in the beginning. And every so often again, I go into my room and I'm like, oh god, testosterone breath is what I call it. That was bizarre. So, I always think about that. Beginning of my transition was very much like, teenage boy smell, I associate that *very* strongly.

Both Nate and RB here identify the smell as being a masculine 'teenage boy smell', or as Nate put it, 'I smell like a man'. Both participants also indexed their changing smell in relation to others – RB in relation to his brother, and Nate going on to discuss their partner's 'masculine body smells'. Participants' experiences here shed light on the ways in which identity is simultaneously an active process which involves understandings developed contextually through social interaction, and also is subject to a reflexive embodiment (Aboim and Vasconcelos 2022; Nordmarken 2023). Describing this reflexive tendency, Aboim and Vasconcelos explain that 'whatever their style of masculinity, the bodily experience produces it' (2022, 61). If the topic of changes in bodily smell did not arise organically, the interviewer would ask if participants had accessed or were accessing GAHT and if they had noticed any change in their smell when they did. Sidney (they/them) explained that:

I definitely noticed that while I was on T. I could smell, I felt like I smelled different, and it was kind of one of the weird ones... Yeah, I don't know. I don't know how to describe

the change in smell, just that it was kind of different. I feel like BO smelt kind of different as well, like, I dunno. Weird, but yeah.

Sidney's account here highlights the difficulty of defining exactly what had changed in their smell. AJ (he/him) made a similar comment, saying 'I could not for the life of me describe how different. Like, in what way it's different. But definitely something has changed'. Lennox (they/them) explained 'going on T definitely changed the way my body smelled to me, and to others' and reflected 'it changes things to do with sweating and all that kind of stuff. So, it makes sense'. Morgan (they/them) also highlighted the change was apparent to them and to others around them, saying that 'my girlfriend, my friends and that, would be like, 'you don't smell bad. It's just different'. I was like, Oh, that's so weird. I'm not used to smelling like not me'.

Several participants also highlighted that although testosterone made them sweat *more*, what they noticed was a change in *how* they smelled. This is apparent in RB calling the different smell 'testosterone breath'. Robin (he/him) mentioned that 'my BO changed, and my urine changed', explaining he focused more on the change in his urine initially because 'that was more like, unnerving at the time'. He said the change in body odour was less surprising, explaining when he started GAHT he sweated more, but added in addition to this, 'then there is a change in the smell as well, in my mind'. Hamish's (he/him) comments reflected a similar idea, comparing his hormonal transition to his 'puberty round one original sweatiness' and said that 'I felt like I smelled different the first time around when I was sweating to second time'. Each participant here was careful to clarify that the smell was *different* not just *more*, and each also made comments where they identified the difference as being explicitly gendered.

Participants also sometimes reflected on whether the change in their smell was something they expected from GAHT, or if it came as a surprise. Frankie (he/they) commented, 'I feel like no one talks about it, and so when it happened, I'm just like, am I losing it? [laughing] Do I smell different? Yeah, that's a really, really strange one'. Frankie explained that they spoke with a friend 'who's also trans and he started testosterone maybe a couple of months before I did' to check if he had also experienced a change in his smell, and recalled saying "This is probably a really weird thing to ask, but do you smell different now? 'Cause I do" and reflected 'it's nice to have that validation that yes, that's something that he noticed too'. Robin discussed changes in how his body odour and urine smelled, saying:

And I feel like I don't know, maybe it's just a weird observation because I'm the only one that has observed that. I don't know, maybe it's a relatable observation, I don't know if other people can relate to it. But yeah, I feel like when I started taking testosterone there was a change there and I was like, that's weird. Well, not weird. Different, unusual, unexpected, because it's not something that they warn you about.

Hamish also mentioned he had spoken to another trans friend who had started taking testosterone three months after him, to reassure them that the experience of changing smell was common. Thinking about his own experience, he recalled 'I was worried about being like, oh no, am I the only person who feels this way?' AJ, who had started testosterone four months before the interview, was not surprised by the

change and explained that this was because 'I have a lot of friends who have been on testosterone for a while, have started testosterone recently. So, it's one of the things I was expecting, because people talk about that like, oh, boy smell'. Comments like those from Hamish, Frankie and AJ reinforce understandings about the importance of supportive peer networks and give some tangible examples of the kinds of issues and concerns which can be handled and allayed through these connections (Harner 2021; Li, Fabbre, and Gaveras 2023). Some research into interactions between medicalised knowledges of transition and experiences of embodiment indicates that online resources and peer networks are relied upon more than medical professionals for information about transition, and comments from participants about where they received reassurance that changes in their smell was typical, reflect this (Psihopaidas 2017).

Participants were also asked if they recalled at what point after they began GAHT they noticed a change in their smell. There was a significant degree of consistency in what participants said, with most reporting the change in their smell happened fairly early on.

**Finlay:** I think I must have been like, three months on T or something.

**H:** Maybe a month or two into it, it was pretty early for me.

**Morgan:** I'd say it's probably a month or so into the Sustanon injections, which did have quite like rapid effects.

**Frankie:** Yeah, I think it was one of the first things I noticed as well.

**Robin:** I think it was quite quick. I think [laughs] 'cause I've been on testosterone seven years now I think it would have been, so it's kind of hard to remember the early, earlier changes, but it would have been within like, three months. Like one of the earlier changes from memory...

**Sidney:** I reckon it probably would have been maybe a month in or so, maybe like a little...? Yeah. It wasn't a long time. Yeah.

**Hamish:** I think it's probably something that I began to notice relatively early, maybe like six months in or something, a few months in, because one of the first things I had is I'm quite sweaty, [laughs] and I started smelling myself more.

**AJ:** I can't really remember when it was that I noticed. Probably about like... definitely after I moved, so about a month and a half in, two months in, something like that.

Some participants recalled there had been a change in smell, but not when it occurred. Nate said:

I was surprised, in some ways, but how quickly some things changed and how long some things other but I don't think I had a real moment of awareness of this was how I. you know I smell like a guy now.

Lennox's comments were similar in regard to timelines, saying they recalled a change but not the timing of it.

## ***Reacting to the change***

Participants responded in diverse ways to noticing that their own personal smell had changed, with differences between participants – some responding positively, some negatively, some neutrally – and with some reporting they had mixed feelings about the change. Across all participants, it was most common for them to express some kind of positive reaction, although as explored below in some instances this was combined with negative or neutral feelings.

### ***Neutral, mixed or surprised reactions***

One participant, Lennox, had noticed a change in their smell, but felt neutral about it: 'I didn't have a strong positive or negative reaction to that, that I can remember'. They reflected that 'I didn't have any significant feeling about it when I stopped taking T... I think it was a gradual enough process that I was not focused on that in particular, but I remember noticing it'. Some other participants recalled having responses that were not clearly positive or negative, but instead reflected reactions which were mixed or predominantly reflected surprise and curiosity. Frankie described the change as 'a bit weird but kind of cool in a way? Like, hormones are amazing, it's so crazy how much and like such small things can change as well', with their comments ultimately reflecting a degree of awe at the breadth of changes which GAHT prompted. Robin reflected, in response to a question about if there were smells he felt differently about, 'I'm kind of thinking of myself [laughs] Like I feel like initially there was probably smells about me that I was like, eh, I could smell better'. He added that 'now just like, oh, that's just a smell that's part of who I am, I guess'. Robin added that his feelings about the change in his smell encompassed several different emotional states, saying 'initially I was like, this is weird, this is unexpected. And then I think I went, [gasps] my pee smells like man pee now! [both laughing] Which is so weird. So, there was almost a sense of pride with it'. Robin also at one point corrected himself after describing the change as weird, saying 'well, not weird. Different, unusual, unexpected...;', shifting his description away from 'weird' which can carry a negative connotation, to descriptions that are more value neutral.

Discussing narratives about medical transition observed in digital support groups, Psihopaidas (2017, 422–23) noted that as part of a rejection of the medicalised 'wrong body' framing, some people articulated the changes brought about by hormones as just changes, rather than 'corrections', indicative of an opening up of new potentials and possibilities. Comments from participants identifying changes in smell seem to resonate with Psihopaidas' findings, their responses reflecting an interest and curiosity in the change or – in Robin's comments – the reflexive relationship between bodily experience and identity (Aboim and Vasconcelos 2022).

### ***Negative reactions***

Both Morgan and Finlay explained that when they first became aware of their own smell changing – or as Morgan put it, being able to smell themselves after being used to their previous smell - they were initially anxious about others' reactions. Morgan said their response initially was 'kind of just like, oh god, will I ever feel clean again? But then once I was convinced that it was like quite normal and not actually

offensive to anybody else, then I was like ok, cool, that's fine'. Finlay (he/him) recalled, 'I think I was quite self-conscious at first, you know', explaining it brought back memories of high school when someone in his class was ostracised for how they smelled. Finlay segued from a discussion about deodorant and said '...when I started T, there's a point where your sweat actually starts to smell really fricking gross'. Finlay recalled a specific incident early in his hormonal transition, where he went for a bushwalk, explaining while previously it had made him sweaty 'it was always kind of bearable', but this time 'I just remember going, Oh, my God, I smell frickin awful!', but realising based on a conversation with his partner, a nurse, that 'yeah, that's probably hormones'. Both Morgan and Finlay here recalled their initial negative reactions being tempered to some extent by a reassurance that the change was explicable or 'normal' in Morgan's words. Frankie reflected on his experience of his own smell changing, saying 'It was quite disconcerting in a way, because you're so used to how you smell prior that when it changes it's not something that you are really aware of until it does change...'

Participants' comments here indicate the ways that smell functions socially, and how a sudden awareness of one's smell could trigger anxieties. As indicated earlier, smell is often used rhetorically to mark and alienate the 'other', and cultural discourses about smell to some extent serve a disciplinary function, exerting a pressure towards an odourless or at least inoffensive norm. As Frankie explained, it is not until someone's smell changes that they become aware of it, and from participants' comments, it is evident this can be troublesome.

### *Positive reactions*

Other participants were more positive about the change in smell they had noted. Participants were asked if there were smells which they perceived differently during transition, particularly if they moved from finding them pleasant to unpleasant or vice versa. In response, Hamish said 'my own body odour I feel like smells more masculine on testosterone and that's like, weirdly euphoric. I didn't feel like I smelled like a woman before it, but then like, I get joy out of that more now...'. Hamish felt he smelled 'more like my partner's armpits', indexing the meaning of the change in smell in a similar socially structured and contextualised way to Nate and RB. Nate explained the change in smell was something he found affirming, and that as well as visual changes – 'it's wonderful to look in the mirror and see this masculine version of myself' – changes in how he smelled were a welcome part of his transition. H (he/they), after a pause, said, 'I think I did remember enjoying it?' then elaborated, saying of his changed smell 'this feels a little bit closer to me, like who I am and how I want to present in the world'. AJ explained, 'it was nice. It was affirming' and added that part of why he was pleased by the change was that 'it's not like super dramatic all at once, right? And so it's nice whenever little things show up and you're like, oh, that's right. I am on testosterone'. Frankie also commented about the timing of the change, saying, 'it was so early on that that is an effect that happens... before anything else really happens, like voice changing and all of that' adding that it was reassuring in some respects, indicating 'this is actually changing something'. Sidney's comments echoed this too, and they noted 'I think I was excited to see any changes, because I was like, oh, it's doing its job'.

Hamish specifically used the term ‘euphoric’ above to describe his response to his changed smell. In different ways these more positive reactions to a change in body smell can be understood as forms of ‘gender euphoria’. Gender euphoria as a phenomenon has been described for some time within trans communities (Kai and Devor date the first usage of the term back to 1976) but which has only recently made its way into the academic literature (2022; Beischel, Gauvin, and van Anders 2022). Ashley and Ells describe gender euphoria as ‘a distinct enjoyment or satisfaction caused by the correspondence between the person’s gender identity and gendered features associated with a gender other than the one assigned at birth’ (2018, 24). Work which investigates experiences of gender euphoria have found it exists across a spectrum, ranging from intense surges of joy to a quieter, calmer and more contented feeling of ‘rightness’ (Kai and Devor 2022; Beischel, Gauvin, and van Anders 2022). Gender euphoria can be triggered by physical and embodied changes, but also by social interactions. Comments from participants about both their own smell as an embodied characteristic which they now noticed day to day, as well as ‘how I want to present in the world’, indicate that changes to smell may sit across both these domains.

Signalling the frequent focus on the visible in discussions of transition and GAHT, Kai and Devor noted that ‘even before any *visible* changes had occurred... participants identified the knowledge that changes would soon occur as empowering’ [italics added] (2022, 127). Some participants in this study noted that the early emergence of a change in how they smelled was a reassuring experience, confirming that they were taking action, and that the actions they were taking were having perceptible effects. An overemphasis on the visible risks ignoring olfactory changes, can sometimes function as a vector to euphoria. Gender euphoria may have protective functions against the effects of minority stress, and documenting and describing euphoria as a characteristic of the trans experience just as much as dysphoria, serves an important political and philosophical function (Kai and Devor 2022; Beischel, Gauvin, and van Anders 2022). The pleasurable and contented affective experience which some participants reported further points towards the salience of elements of the trans experience formerly overlooked, or deemed unimportant, by medical systems of knowledge.

## Discussion

Findings from this study indicate that a change in personal smell and body odour during GAHT is something which trans people noticed, and which in many cases was invested with meaning. When it changes, one’s personal smell becomes something that can be detected, with the habituation that usually occurs being temporarily disrupted. Participants described being surprised by the change in some instances – and in others recalled expecting it because they had been told about it by other trans people. As discussed earlier, smell as a sense is granted less attention and significance than vision, and one popular method of disseminating information about the effects of GAHT – transition video blogs – focus primarily on the visual, and to a lesser extent aural effects of hormones (Horak 2014; Raun 2015). Changes in smell, when they are mentioned either in community resources or medical guidance, tend to be referenced in passing rather than discussed in depth. One possible reason for this brevity could be the difficulty in explaining exactly what has changed – this was

apparent in AJ saying, about his changed smell, 'I could not for the life of me describe how different. Like, in what way it's different'. The shift was evident and unmistakable, but describing it is confounding, with smell's description subjective, revealing an 'interior geography and history' (Le Breton 2017, 138–9).

The relative paucity of information in medical literature about changes in smell can be understood as reflecting smell's historic status as a disregarded or 'lower' sense. Compared to the visual or auditory, smell is harder to quantify and harder to regulate, outside of the cultural imperative to be odourless. Perhaps it is overlooked by these regulatory apparatuses precisely because it resists ready standardisation, conveying meanings which are by their nature fluid, relational, and temporally determined. To smell has historically been associated with the 'other', held in opposition to the odourless and powerful. Medicalised models are more inclined to *produce transnormative*<sup>1</sup> subjects who would, it follows, fit into the relatively more powerful and odourless category. Potentially the omission of details about, and attention to, changes in smell within medical discourses relates to this too: as a normalising technology, medical transition should not be functioning to produce subjects with a newly detectable smell.

Although not all participants attached significance to their change in smell, when they did so, the way it was discussed made it clear these meanings were culturally and socially constructed. Even when participants' own reactions to, and feelings about, their smell reflected personal embodied experiences, it is clear that the gendered dimension of smell obtains meaning through a relational process (Butler 2004). Sometimes this meaning was verbally conveyed, as in Morgan checking with their friends and girlfriend to confirm they smelled different but not offensive, or with Finlay drawing on the knowledge of his partner, a nurse, to confirm the shift was occurring because of changing hormones. Sometimes the meaning was based on community knowledge, whereby acquiring a 'boy smell' was understood as one milestone in a hormonal transition, a form of identification with peer community (Li, Fabbre, and Gaveras 2023). On other occasions, knowledge about a change in smell was understood through processes of comparison between the self and others: smelling 'masculine' in the same way as a male partner or a brother. Regardless, the shift was understood as a shift towards an embodied experience which was closer to internal felt identity. AJ described his transition 'less as escaping from dysphoria' and more about moving towards what made him happy, and other participants like H described the change in their smell as something which felt 'a little bit closer to me'.

It is pertinent, too, that all participants whose experiences are discussed here were using testosterone. The changes they were experiencing related to masculinisation and shifts in how their own masculinity was embodied and experienced. Several participants made reference to adolescence or puberty, drawing comparisons to 'teenage boy smell' or their transition experience versus 'puberty round one'. Smell often occupies a role in rituals of transformation and movement from one social category to another, or one life stage to the next (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1997; Howes 1987; Le Breton 2017). By drawing comparisons between adolescence and their experiences of GAHT, participants narrativised their experiences, describing and locating these in relation to

their own histories and the wider communities they were a part of Nordmarken (2023). Participants identified their experiences with GAHT as having a resonance with other periods of change and exploration, notably adolescence which involves growing into, exploring, and potentially discarding different kinds of femininity and masculinity. Aboim and Vasconcelos (2022) found some transmasculine people explained how they learned a kind of masculinity from their bodies through a reflexively experiential process; that is, their reactions to embodiment and changing embodiment helped shape their understanding of masculinity. Participants here drew on concepts of adolescence and teenage identities to make sense of the olfactory changes they experienced and how they related to their own relationship to masculinity.

That all participants were using testosterone is a limitation of the study, and a potential avenue for future research lies in establishing whether trans women and transfeminine people using GAHT have similar experiences, particularly since Fisher et al. (2014) seem to suggest this may be the case. Additionally, it is possible that the participants – who volunteered to take part in a project about smell – may place greater importance on this sense than the broader population.

## Conclusion

Within this article, I have explored the understandings which a group of trans people who have accessed GAHT have of changes in how their own bodies smell. Although the meanings attached to changes in smell are socially constructed, to a significant extent when participants discussed this change, their experiences reflected impacts on their own embodiment. Interview excerpts in this article were drawn from a larger project, and within the broader corpus of interview data, participants discussed how smell was something they sometimes used to try and shape how others perceived their gender. This consideration of others' perceptions was especially evident in the case of commercially produced and deliberately applied fragranced products like perfume, cologne or deodorant. In contrast, in the discussions of personal odour, of 'boy smell', this is less evident. Although some participants were concerned their change in smell might be offensive, the way their smell was perceived by others figured far less in the talk about this topic. Instead, there was more commentary on emotional states and embodied experience. Although smell's significance is informed by the ways that gender is 'a social relation that is embodied in certain ways' (Connell 2009, 108), when it is aligned with one's felt gender there seems to be space for this meeting point of the social and the personal to be reflected upon for its affective impacts, a reflexive embodiment (Crossley 2006). That smell is intimate feels almost trite to point out. To perceive it requires presence and proximity to the source. When participants describe noticing their own smell and feeling affirmed by its changed quality there is to an extent an experience of being proximate and also aware of the self: reflective of what Horak describes when she says that 'hormone time' has an 'orientation towards a joyful future' (2014, 581). Smell in these discussions often seems to form part of the process of (re)identification with the physical self and of gender affirmation as facilitated through GAHT.

## Note

1. 'Transnormative' here refers to a normalising ideology which privileges experiences of transness that can be explained within particular, constrained, narrative and discursive arrangements; which involve medical treatment; and which involve a binary as opposed to genderqueer or nonbinary identity (Johnson 2016). Transnormative identities are also frequently those that are white, non-disabled, and economically productive.

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