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“I’ve adopted it as my smell”: transgender identity and the olfactory

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ABSTRACT

Smell is an often-overlooked sense within transgender studies, despite the extensive theorization of the ways that scent and perfume is categorized along gendered lines, and its links to identity more broadly. This article begins to address this presently under-studied topic, drawing on data from 26 interviews with transgender people about their perspectives on smell, scent, and fragrance in relation to identity. Interview data was analyzed using a combination of thematic and critical discourse analysis approaches. The participants reported that smell was often a central component of early experiences which prompted them to explore or question their gender identity; that fragranced items were something which they used to affirm their gender personally; and that smell was something they used to manage or direct others’ perceptions of their identity, including to minimize experiences of misgendering. Participants were acutely aware of how fragrances are culturally “read” as gendered, and while they were often critical of these divisions, they also acknowledged they could be useful at times. It is evident that smell and fragrance can form part of the process of gender identity exploration and expression for transgender people.

KEYWORDS

Transgender studies; gender identity; fragrance; smell; identity construction; gender affirmation

Introduction

Smell is an often-overlooked sense within existing research into the transgender community. Defining “Perfume” for the first issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Crawford notes the neglect of this sense, and little has been written on the topic since (Crawford 2014). While transness is a topic which has attracted increased attention in scholarly and popular discourse in recent years, the sensory dimensions of transgender people’s identity formation and transition have received limited attention and this is particularly true regarding smell and scent. Crawford suggests this neglect within the field of transgender studies is because of an “occasionally ‘ocularcentric’ approach” (Crawford 2014, 151), and within queer studies more generally Graham proposes this focus on the visual has led to scent being neglected for interrogation and attention as a space where identity and desire

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is worked out (2006). This article begins to contribute to filling this oversight in the existing literature, based on findings from a series of 26 semi-structured interviews carried out with transgender people about their relationships to and uses of scent and smell.

Given the paucity of prior work on the topic the interviews were wide-ranging, covering a multitude of topics in the broad topic area of smell and identity, directed largely by the participants and what they were interested in sharing. At the highest level, the three themes being addressed were: transgender people's use of and feelings about scented products, including perfumes; transgender people's feelings about smell in the environments they occupied; if transgender people's sense of smell, sensitivity to smell, and their own smell changed during the process of transition. This article focuses on some of the findings from the first of these themes, with a central research question of if and how smell is used to affirm or explore identity. Participants shared that they used fragranced items as tools to affirm their gender, and that interactions with fragranced items – like deodorant or perfume – sometimes formed early memories of recognizing or exploring a transgender identity. Participants also discussed how smell and fragrance was something they used to influence how other people perceived them and their identity, as “an impression management technique,” showing an acute awareness of the way fragrance carries cultural meanings, including about gender (Synnott 1993, 183). The findings suggest that in keeping with the way the olfactory plays a part in rituals of transition more broadly, smell – and changing scent – is understood as part of the experience of gender transition (Howes 1987; Le Breton 2017).

Existing literature

As noted in the introduction, existing research into this specific area – transgender people's uses and perceptions of scent in relation to identity – is limited. However, work on topics such as the linkages between identity and scent more generally, transgender identity and gender affirmation, and queer relationships to scent can be usefully drawn on to contextualize the findings of this project.

Identity and scent

Work within the field of sensory studies highlights the cultural distinctions between fragrances associated with men and women and the social meanings given to scents. Someone's smell is sometimes taken to offer information about their class or gender or sexual identity, and Largey and Watson have suggested “perfuming is closely related to the presentation and manipulation of those identifications” (Largey and Watson 2006, 35). In the broadest terms, perfume and scent is sometimes considered a feminine affectation, unsuitable for “real” men, and women may be held to more stringent standards when it comes to if they are allowed to smell of sweat without their femininity being called into question (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1997; Le Breton 2017; Reinartz 2014). When men are socially permitted to wear fragranced items, the specific smells which are deemed appropriate differ between genders (Reinartz 2014; Synnott 1993). This social and cultural understanding that different scents are appropriate for different genders is reproduced in advertising texts (Synnott 1993), where fragrance may be marketed partially through the implied promise it will enhance the wearer's masculinity or femininity (Graham 2006).

Transgender identity and gender affirmation

Transgender people have a gender identity which differs from the one they were assigned at birth. They may choose to express and affirm their felt gender in a variety of ways, which may include some combination of: changing their name and pronouns; accessing medical care such as Gender Affirming Hormone Treatment (GAHT) or surgical treatments; changing their personal aesthetic presentation in terms of makeup, haircut and clothing; and participating in vocal training or therapy to alter their voice. Transgender people are subject to “gender minority stress,” which is the result of experiencing, anticipating, and attempting to avoid discrimination and stigma (Tan, Ellis, et al. 2020; Tan, Treharne, et al. 2020). The impacts of this can be heightened by experiences of misgendering (e.g. being referred to using incorrect gendered pronouns or language) (Jacobsen et al. 2023; Rood et al. 2016). However, factors such as “identity pride,” social supports and being part of strong peer and community networks all serve protective effects for transgender people, and contribute positively to improved mental health (Tan, Treharne, et al. 2020). In particular, autonomy to define and explore their own self-generated self-identity “on their own terms” is of great importance (Singh, Hays, and Watson 2011, 23). Among the goals of this research was establishing if participants perceive scent as contributing to identity affirmation or exploration, and if so how they understood this to interact with or influence other’s perceptions of them.

Transness, queerness, and scent

Some existing research considers the interaction of scent and smell with queer identities (Graham 2006; Kjellmer 2021; Morris 2021). Graham has suggested the fluid, transitory, and difficult to contain nature of smell has parallels to the way that gender and sexuality are conceptualized within queer theory (2006). Morris, considering drag performances and smell argues that “scent too has always been a latent signifier” and describes drag queens who “select a ‘women’s’ perfume that is associated with their performance persona” as a key component of their drag identity, indicating some history of the use of scent specifically to enhance notably gendered identity performances (2021, 132). Kjellmer furthers this idea, about the productive and performative potential of smell, writing that “not only will the smell change how others see us, but it will also alter the way we feel about ourselves” and that given how unequivocally gendered much fragrance marketing is – a point Morris also highlights – to wear “the ‘wrong’ fragrance can be an act of social disobedience” (2021, 150, 151). In an interview, Roberts describes using the scent of a bar of *CK One* soap as a way of “enacting my gender,” adding that “our aesthetics are resistance” (Galarte 2015, 522–523). Kjellmer suggests fragrance can be political, and a way to claim a particular identity, a form of non-verbal communication – an idea which is echoed in the findings of this research (2021). Kjellmer and Morris’ work draws predominantly on textual analysis, and Galarte’s interview with Roberts provides a compelling exploration but is limited to one data point. Building on the ideas and theories developed in this existing work, this article contributes evidence from qualitative interview data which supports and extends these notions of smell and scent as productive sites of identity negotiation, performance, and affirmation.

Methods

The findings reported in this article represent one part of a larger research project looking at transgender people's experiences of and relationships to smell, scent, and fragrance. This article is based on semi-structured interviews with 26 transgender, nonbinary, and gender diverse people: participants were initially recruited via a poster shared on social media. As the project developed, further recruitment occurred through a snowball method, where 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). Interviews were conducted face to face and over Zoom, ranging in length from 18 to 53 minutes, with an average (mean) length of 37 minutes. All interviews were carried out by the author, who is a Pākehā (white) nonbinary person.

Interviews were audio recorded then transcribed, and transcripts provided to participants for approval. Interviews with 26 participants yielded 25 transcripts for analysis, with one participant unable to be contacted to approve their transcript. 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 in the course of recruitment or the interviews. Participants were ethnically diverse, with interviewees who identified themselves as Pākehā, Māori, Sri Lankan, Vietnamese, Chinese, Scottish, European, Jewish, Pasifika, Tongan, Samoan, Maltese, Hong Kong Cantonese, iTaukei (melanesian), East Asian and Ainu. Many participants identified with more than one ethnic group. The spread of gender identities represented was similarly diverse, with participants identifying as nonbinary, genderfluid, bigender, a transgender man, a trans man, a nonbinary trans man, a trans woman, trans nonbinary Takatāpui, transmasc, transmasc nonbinary, transmasculine nonbinary, and gender non-conforming. Participants were asked to nominate a pseudonym or could elect to be given one by the author. Interviews took place between December 2022 and December 2023.

Following the approval of transcripts by participants, these were initially coded through the Nvivo software package, using the approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Owing to the large size of the corpus of interview transcripts, and the richness of these, this article focuses in on just one theme which emerged: how smell and scent was used and understood as something which reflected and produced self-identity and enabled this identity to be conveyed so it could be "read" by others. Distinguishing themes within the data was the first layer of analysis applied, to separate out a smaller portion of the dataset which could be more manageably analyzed within the scope of an article. The excerpts related to this theme were read and re-read to establish a deep understanding of the experiences described by participants, and to discern patterns in how participants expressed or described these which emerged on close examination. A critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach was then used for the second analytic layer applied to the data, with this methodological approach chosen for the way that it

inherently takes a political position and allows for an examination of how participants conceptualized their own responses to and movements within existing power structures (Lazar 2007; van Dijk 1993). Many participants also discussed, for example, the socially constructed nature of concepts like “masculine scents” and “feminine scents,” and with the view of discourse as constructive which is inherent to discourse analysis more generally, this approach is a methodologically harmonious choice (Gill 2000). Given the richness of what was shared by participants in relation to each theme, it would have been possible to draw out each topic addressed here as an article in its own right. My intention is that in the future the analysis of each theme will be taken further, however, here I am particularly interested in presenting a high-level summary of the key characteristics of the relationship between identity and smell, illustrated extensively with quotes from interviewees to allow their perspectives to be foregrounded.

This research is underpinned by and carried out through a lens of transgender theory (Stryker 2006). Transness has frequently been medicalized and pathologized, and this lens often produces transness as a deficit and can neglect to identify characteristics of the embodied transgender experience which are significant to trans people themselves (Easterbrook-Smith 2024). Through centering the experiences and perspectives of transgender participants, insights emerge into how trans identities can be experienced and expressed in a multi-sensory manner. Evident in many of the interviews too, is what Stryker identifies as one of the possibilities afforded by transgender theory, in the form of “a critique of the conditions that ... allow gender normativity to disappear into the unanalyzed, ambient background” (2006, 3) as some participants described deliberately using the gendered associations many smells have, while simultaneously critiquing the socially constructed nature of these. Transgender theory concerns itself with the interaction between representational-discursive accounts of gender and the material: in various ways, this concern emerged in the interviews, too.

Analysis and discussion

Within the excerpts from the interviews which related directly to identity and smell, several interlinked sub-themes emerged. These are: smell and scent as an early experience of gender affirmation or gender expansive feeling; scent as something which is used to induce a feeling of gender affirmation; fragrance as something chosen deliberately for what it conveys about identity; and fragrance and smell as part of a suite of tactics to manage or minimize experiences of misgendering.

Smell and scent as an early experience of gender affirmation

Twelve of the participants recalled smell-centric experiences from their childhood or younger years which they saw as reflective of their gender identity. In some cases these pre-dated a conscious knowledge of their identity, and could precipitate greater contemplation of their gender.

Some participants commented on how they felt drawn to the marketing of particular fragrances. Discussing *CK One's* marketing, Sage (she/they) commented “it was very fresh and the fact that it was gender neutral was really interesting” adding they asked for a bottle for Christmas in their adolescence, and while she didn't wear it often “the fact that

it was gender neutral was a whole thing and like, it resonated in the way that you don't understand until you look back." H (he/they) explained that

pre-transition, I was obsessed with the Old Spice commercials. Like, tiny closeted H was like, yeah, I want to smell like this guy who just drove through a wall on a jetski! He's just fantastic. And I didn't come out for half a decade after that. That really could have been the intervention point.

The gendered marketing of scents was something which some participants said they were keenly aware of, and Hamish (he/him) noted when he started using deodorant he mostly used ones marketed to women, "because I was worried about being perceived as smelling like a guy" which persisted until he was 17 or 18, adding he was "really excited . . . when Lynx¹ released like a woman's spray when I was like 14 or something and being like, oh, now I can use it." Other participants recalled an aversion to perfume or fragrance because they had picked up on a social understanding of it as something inherently feminine (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1997; Reinartz 2014), which they felt a disidentification with. Stacey (she/they) noted "I think that's where my natural sort of aversion to wearing perfume at all was, was like, 'oh, it's girly'," while Finlay (he/him) shared that " . . . when I identified as female, I had this real, perfume for me seemed like a waste of money . . . you know, spending hundreds of dollars and I was really anti it. And it was because it was so hyper feminine."

Finlay added that since he came out, he had developed an appreciation for fragranced items, developing a wardrobe of colognes for different occasions.

Some participants discussed smell-centric memories which in retrospect they viewed as reflective of their gender identity. Robin (he/him) recalled

. . . you know, I grew up [with] people assuming I was a tomboy. And so I very much lean into that kind of history . . . And so yeah, there are certain smells associated with that kind of outdoorsy active lifestyle . . . And all those things that aren't necessarily gendered but for me there's a certain association with gender because it is like, you know, being active and outdoorsy and getting into the mud and getting into the rough and all that kind of stuff, which stereotypically is a masculine thing even though it shouldn't be.

Flynn (they/them), discussing the kind of scent they had been drawn to prior to their own realization about their gender commented

I think it was unconscious for me before coming out, and then after I came out . . . you know, when you sort of retroactively look back to apply what you know about yourself now to how you were, you were like, gosh, yes, that's very obvious, isn't it.

Dylan (they/them) discussed wearing men's deodorant as a teenager and explained they were "not really sure of what that meant. But I knew it meant something" and although at the time they lacked the language for their identity, "I knew that I could put on this men's deodorant and feel something and feel more confident or something changed in me," and that "it felt almost like my little secret as well . . . it felt like something that was mine," with the deodorant and its smell lending a feeling of power and autonomy.

Some participants recalled experiences with smell – particularly deodorant – which were among their earliest experiences of affirmation. AJ (he/him) talked about asking if he could have an unused deodorant that belonged to his father, saying "I didn't like the way it smelled. But I liked that it was a gendered thing, because I wasn't allowed to have a lot

of explicitly male gendered things in my life at the time. My parents weren't very accepting." He continued, explaining:

I remember that being a big thing, just like having it. I don't know if I still have it . . . I held on to it for ages. Even if – even though I didn't use it, because it felt good to have just something that existed. That was like, this is a men's thing.

Nate (he/they) recalled "a time which I now see as being an example of gender affirmation before I realized what my gender identity was" where they borrowed a flatmate's Lynx body spray and "there was something about that smell, it just really lit up part of my brain and I found out what it was and bought some for myself . . . At the time, it felt quite transgressive . . ." In a very similar set of experiences, Ruby/Sebastian (he/him/she/her) explained as a teenager he had been staying at a friend's house and ended up with some Dove men's deodorant on her shirt, and "I just remember really loving that smell. And just something about it just like took me away," explaining that when she got home "I went out and bought that same deodorant to wear myself. And then that made me really happy." Ruby/Sebastian added that when, at 18, he came to recognize his own gender identity "one of the things I remembered was the deodorant thing. So that was a really big thing for me." Returning briefly to the key research question explored in this article, of if and how smell was used to explore and affirm identity, it is clear that its relevance emerges from the earliest stages of recognizing and exploring a trans identity. For some participants this was accidental – borrowing deodorant from someone else and having an unexpected emotional reaction to it, while for others they sought out particular smells before being able to fully identify what it was about those smells that they found so compelling.

Scent inducing feelings of affirmation

Many participants explained that scented items or fragrance were part of how they affirmed their own identity. Ash (they/them) explained that scent was "one extra dimension" of doing things which made them feel expressive, and was part of "how I made myself feel more comfortable." H explained they changed fragrances when they started transitioning, switching from what they identified as "a very traditionally femme perfume," Chanel No. 5, to a woody, smokey cologne which they described as "really gender affirming." H talked about the cologne as something he wore "to feel quite composed and put together . . . it almost feels like armor in a way," indicating the emotionally protective effect which a smell that felt "correct" could have for some trans people. Star (they/them) also expressed that their perfume felt "validating," adding "I feel like it's something quite affirming about using something that's specifically made for not your assigned gender." Where – as above – some participants explained that at earlier stages in their life they had been conscious of not transgressing gendered norms about smell, throughout the process of transition some expressed this deliberate transgression made them feel autonomous and empowered. Participants were invited to begin each interview by discussing a smell they particularly liked or felt strongly about, and Nate brought along a bottle of Armani *Eros*, gifted to him by his partner after he came out, which he described as "the scent that I associate with my masculinity." Finlay also nominated a cologne that

a friend had helped him choose, Dior's *Sauvage*, which he explained was his first cologne, adding it represented a "pivotal moment" in his transition.

Smell often formed a core part of early steps toward affirming one's felt gender. Frankie discussed the deodorant they used, saying they began buying it prior to socially transitioning "so that was like, I'm doing this for myself, people might not know this, but it makes me feel a little bit more like I'm starting to present the way that I want to present." Frankie was one of many participants who simultaneously made use of and critiqued the way that scented products are so unmistakably gendered through their marketing. He explained, "when I was looking for cologne or deodorant or whatever for myself it was kind of gender affirming in a way *because* of the gender binary" but also observed that as a nonbinary trans man "while it's affirming in the sense of I am trans masculine and so that's how I want to be seen . . . at the same time I'm kind of like, at some point we need to do away with things like that." Charlie (they/them) was another participant who used scent to affirm themselves, explaining they'd selected men's deodorant after contemplating "what's kind of inexpensive and easy to use that is affirming scent-wise."

Participants often used positive language to describe smells which they felt fit with their identity. Dyan (they/them) explained a perfume oil they used "feels like this instant little lift," "exactly right," while Flynn who self-identified as being very particular about smell explained "when I find something that affirms that or confirms it or fits in . . . it's really pleasing and satisfying and comforting." Sidney (they/them) explained wearing fragranced products which affirmed their gender was "really validating. I felt more confident in myself" and Ruby/Sebastian similarly described fragranced items as making him feel "good and calm and confident." The language here is reflective of the findings of Riggle et al., in their investigation of the positive elements of a transgender identity, where participants expressed a feeling of congruence as a positive outcome of claiming their identity (Riggle et al. 2011).

Participants sometimes articulated that what they wanted or needed from a scent in order to feel affirmed shifted over time, particularly as they got further into their transition. Hamish, discussing a cologne he had been gifted after he came out explained "I was just excited to have something that was masculine. And now I think I don't use it as much, because I think I'm at a point where I'm more comfortable in my identity." Dylan explained they were at a place of "accepting all possible aspects of myself" and for them, that could mean "I might wear my men's deodorant, which I've worn for the past 10 years, and then also have a sweet little scent on too, you know? And feel comfortable being in those two spaces in one body." Scent here is both a tool, and a lens through which the shifts in participants' identities were reflected and could sometimes be tracked and observed.

Fragrance to convey identity

Some of the comments in the previous section indicate participants viewed scent as something which conveyed information about their identity, and when this information was correct, enhanced a feeling of comfort. Their perspectives here reflect prior work on the links between scent and identity: Synnott suggests "odours define the individual" and adds that they "mediate social interaction" (Synnott 1991, 438). As some participants explained, although the more overtly masculine and feminine scents could be strategically useful to convey information about gender, these often became less important or

less desirable as their transition progressed. Participants would explain how they sought out a smell which reflected them as an individual, with their gender a part of that but in a more complex and subtle way than what Peach (they/them) described as a spectrum of gendered smells where “out at the very edges of both of them, it goes disgusting,” citing Lynx and Vanilla Impulse body spray as examples.

Finlay also discussed a spectrum of smells, explaining he wasn’t aiming for “sweaty locker room, or you know, leather and wood” but instead a smell which felt “really good,” finally arriving at a scent where “when people smell that, I want them to associate that with me.” Charlie explained when they put on the deodorant they now preferred, they “felt more like me.” Ruby/Sebastian, who changed the fragranced items he wore depending on how her gender felt on that specific day, said once he’d decided on a scent she hoped “if someone were to smell me, they would . . . get a sense of my personality and identity.” She explained sometimes this signaling of identity could be a little anxiety inducing, explaining: “I have a bit of nerves sometimes. But then when I, like look at myself or smell myself and remind myself why I’m doing it, I feel good. And I feel yeah, quite excited.”

Alex (they/them) explained the kind of identity they wanted people to perceive had shifted before and after they got top surgery. They had always preferred “fragrances that are marketed, you know, as non-gendered or for both men and women” but then following surgery “suddenly was like, ‘I want to smell like jasmine!’” Alex explained “up until now I had dressed really heavily in black and had been like, I want to dress like a void. I don’t want anyone to observe my body” and that this “severity” was reflected in the scents they had worn. However, after recovering from surgery, they became interested in scents where “there’s something about the warmth or the lushness of them that kind of . . . invites someone to perceive me.”

Dylan discussed their shifting feelings about femininity as they explored and came to understand their own nonbinary identity, explaining “I was really concerned about looking too femme,” and “it took a while for the pin to drop,” but that they came to realize “I can wear sweet vanilla oil if I want and feel like a sexy little gal-y, you know. . . No one’s going to take away my certificates of being nonbinary.” In terms of the scent they often wore, Dylan explained “I just feel comfortable when I can have a scent that’s accepting of all areas of me.” The scent which participants chose to wear often became integral to their identity. Responding to a question about how putting on Chanel No. 5 made her feel, April (she/her) mused “Maybe makes me feel normal to put on? If I leave the house and I realize I haven’t put on perfume, I get pissed, you know?” Robin explained that when he put on his cologne that morning “I sprayed it on, I was like, ah, yes, smells right,” continuing “I’ve adopted it as my smell. So, in my mind it smells like how I think I should smell.”

Fragrance and scent as a way to manage misgendering

As indicated above, participants considered what information their smell might convey about them. A further way that transgender people use scent is as part of an attempt to minimize their experiences of being misgendered. Misgendering – identity invalidation – is a stressor, and recent work has found a correlation between frequency of misgendering and anxiety levels (Jacobsen et al. 2023). Scent here is “an impression management

technique,” but one with unusually high stakes (Synnott 1993, 183). Sage commented that they tried to match their scent to the rest of their aesthetic presentation, making sure “there isn’t a kind of . . . *incongruity* between smell and general . . . the perception that I’m wanting to make them have of me.” Some participants discussed how using smell to help ensure they were gendered correctly could be a kind of feedback loop, in terms of if it impacted them or the people they interacted with more. Both Moss (they/them) and Morgan (they/them) called it a “chicken and egg” situation. Moss reflected on it, saying “is it because I know I’ve done something that I’m more confident inhabiting the space and then people are interpreting me as such, or is it, people are responding to me differently because I’ve done this thing?”

Some participants explained they felt self-conscious about using any scented products which didn’t align with their gender identity, particularly early in transition. Finlay explained that “I got very sensitive around that early in my transition . . . I almost went down this ‘oh, I’ve told everyone, I’m a man. So therefore, I can’t even entertain the idea of looking at the woman’s section.” He said that “I was so scared that if people knew I was using a female body wash . . .” they would react poorly. He reflected on a recent trip to the supermarket, having just moved cities, experiencing a disruption to his routine which he said triggered some of these feelings again, and “I had every sign in the supermarket telling me, this is the men’s section go to the . . . you know, and all that toxic masculinity flared up.” Finlay was acutely aware of the constructed nature of distinctions between masculine and feminine smells, and highly critical of them – “I think if most men ever tried a vanilla bean or whatever, they’d probably really fricking enjoy it. But all they’ve ever known is the sweaty locker room.” Despite this, he felt a pressure to adhere to these norms. AJ similarly identified that

. . . in a more hostile environment . . . there was quite a bit of pressure to conform to the sort of hegemonic standards of masculinity, in terms of how to present because otherwise, people would just doubt you in a way that is like, “so you’re not really trans,” which is frustrating.

He explained that previously he’d “resisted just sort of doing things that might be stereotypically feminine,” but once in a more supportive environment where he was confident he would be consistently gendered correctly by the people around him, he felt he could “play around with it, have a bit of fun.”

Gendered expression and what felt “safe” was dependent on who participants expected to be interacting with, with misgendering or being identified as transgender also something that they identified as opening them up to transphobic harassment or violence. H explained he would find himself asking “is this scent, is this going to be something that potentially outs me to someone who I’m not comfortable being out to?” adding “in New Zealand sometimes people really don’t like men who smell like flowers and that’s not great.” Lennox (they/them) also reflected on the considerations that shaped how they decided whether to wear anything scented, explaining “if I knew I was going to go somewhere and interact with other people out in the world, I would wear less scent for sure.” They commented that looking visibly queer meant getting attention, some of it hostile or unpleasant, and “it would feel like I wanted to remain a bit more neutral, you know?”

Crawford, writing about the concept of “queer smells” proposes that scent “communicates to those who would never think of talking to us” (Crawford 2014, 152), and

sometimes participants would express that smell permitted them a degree of autonomy in unfriendly environments. As Sidney put it: “I don’t know if I’m going to be perceived in negative ways by strangers, but at least my scent is something that I have full control over.” Smell here acts as the kind of resistance proposed by Kjellmer (2021).

Conclusion

Hsu posits that a collection of all the scented items used by an individual, their “self-curated olfactory ambience,” offers “abundant information about their class, their rituals of self-care, and their olfactory presence” (Hsu 2019, 25). The participants in this project were acutely attuned to the information offered by their smell, and explained how in many cases they took pains to consider how to use scent as part of the sensory assemblage which would best allow them to manage the point of tension where their internal sense of identity interacted with the rest of the world. As Sione (they/them) put it, trans people “do almost everything in advance to prepare for that moment of contact with someone who is not trusted, is not known to us.” Sione explained scent was part of how they managed these “moments of contact,” where they were “hoping that either there’ll be some sort of engagement where . . . I can actually say that this is who I am, and this is how I am addressed.” Scent is transitory and permeable, and it communicates silently, invisibly, bridging space between the self and the other. As Sione points out, it can open up the possibility for productive discussions. Simultaneously, when used thoughtfully, it might close off the possibility of upsetting interactions by communicating a gender identity unmistakably.

Fragrance is something which also acts “to please the one wearing it” something which “creates a favorable self-image” (Le Breton 2017, 132). It is clear from how participants spoke about their choice and use of scented items that this is true of transgender people. Smell added to positive emotional states: the joyful and euphoric feelings of gender affirmation, as well as quieter, more settled, feelings of comfort and rightness. As has been extensively cataloged in prior research, commercial perfume is strongly gendered. Participants expressed that while they often found this frustrating and did not necessarily especially like the smell of some of these fragrances, what they represented or what they offered in terms of securing their identity publicly, could be valuable. Although only a small proportion of the findings which emerged from the interviews are reported in this article, it is evident from analysis of this theme that smell forms part of identity exploration and consolidation by transgender people in many instances. An occularcentric approach thus far may have led to a neglect of the role which smell plays as part of the multi-sensory experience of transness: directly addressing smell offers new ways into understanding this.

Note

1. Lynx is a brand of body spray and deodorant sold as Axe in some markets.

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Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith (they/them) is a media studies researcher, based at Massey University's campus in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand. Gwyn's primary areas of research focus are trans-gender studies, and sex work in Aotearoa. Their work uses media and cultural studies frameworks to examine the creation and negotiation of identity and community among marginalized groups.

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Ethical statement

Interviews were conducted under ethical approval from Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application NOR 22/65.

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