# Being a Minority: Experiences of Male Students Enrolled in an Apparel Program

By: Elena Karpova, Ashley R. Garrin, Juyoung Lee

## Abstract:

The purpose of this research was to understand male college students' experiences in a traditionally female academic major, such as apparel. Based on the analyses and interpretation of interviews with 22 male students from an apparel program, two topical areas emerged: (a) attitudes of toward male apparel students; and (b) experiences of male students in an apparel program. The first topical area describes what male apparel students encounter when they inform parents, friends, and people around them about their academic major. The second topical area portrays male student experiences in a major with an overwhelming majority of peers being women. The study contributes to the literature on men in non-traditional occupations. Such understanding is a precursor for minimizing gender-stereotypic career boundaries. Implications and recommendations for apparel program instructors, advisors, administrators, and career counselors are presented.

## Article:

Despite societal efforts to eliminate gendered occupational stereotypes, men are still reluctant to enter traditional female fields, even though women appear to be crossing the gender work barrier more freely (Simpson, 2005). Because male-dominated careers offer higher pay and social status, society encourages women to enter conventional male professions such as math, sciences, and engineering. In contrast, there has been less understanding and support of males entering traditional female careers (Williams, 1992). As a result, the number of male workers in traditionally "female" occupations such as nursing, early childhood and elementary education, social work, and the apparel industry remains low (Mullan & Harrison, 2008).

In comparison with the exploration of women in occupations dominated by men, research of males in traditional female fields has been rare, with the exception of male nurses (Cross & Bagilhole, 2002). Scholars have examined male nurses' experiences, including their career expectations, career aspirations after graduation, place in the workforce, masculine identity, and societal gender role expectations (Brown, 2009; Evans & Frank, 2003; Mullan & Harrison, 2008). Very limited research is available on males' experiences in other female-dominated fields

(Cross & Bagilhole, 2002), including the apparel industry. Galbraith (1992) noted that "Both research and anecdotal reports comparing various aspects of working men and women have tended to omit the non-traditionally employed male" (p. 246). Investigating experiences of male college students in female-dominated academic majors can be an initial point of understanding gendered occupational stereotypes because the choice of career is highly dependent on the choice of academic major (Chuang, Walker, & Caine, 2009). Little is known about barriers young men face when entering traditional female academic majors. In this study, we explore the experiences of male college students majoring in the female-dominated field of apparel merchandising and design.

**Literature review**

Theoretical Background

Social construction of gender roles is the foundation of all social interactions and structures, from which definitions and meaning begin to distinguish ways of separating people into sex-classes (Goffman, 1977). Building on the social construction of gender roles, Pleck (1981) proposed the gender role strain paradigm (GRSP) that has dominated contemporary masculinity research (Levant, 2011). GRSP posits that societal expectations regarding gender determine "how parents, teachers, and peers socialize children and thus how children and adults think, feel, and behave in regard to gender-salient matters" (Levant, 2011, p. 767). Actual or imagined violations of gender roles result in disapproval, distress, and overconforming, especially for men. Both violation of and conformity to gender roles lead to gender role strain (Pleck, 1995).

The gender-appropriateness of an occupation is based on common ideals and shared understandings of people in a society (Eagly, 2009). Moving beyond societal expectations of specific gender roles can cause role strain, when various roles performed by a person conflict with the appropriate demonstration of the given gender (Kanter, 1977). When choosing an academic major or occupation that is gender-dominant, a person who does not align with the socially prescribed gender of the discipline or career faces gender role strain (Goodey, 1960). This gender role strain can limit which academic majors students consider and select.

Men in Female-Dominated Occupations

Empirical research supports theoretical propositions of the GRSP. Men in female-dominated careers are challenged about their sexuality and "ability to compete in a man's world" (Simpson, 2005, p. 366). These males experience "challenges to their masculine identity from various sources and in a variety of ways" (Cross & Bagilhole, 2002, p. 204). When men take on gender roles that are traditionally viewed as female-centric, inconsistency can occur with established societal gender codes (Goffman, 1977). Evans and Frank (2003) concluded that males in female jobs were at risk of "being unsupported, devalued, viewed as anomalies and gay" (p. 5). Williams (1992) found that heterosexual men in female occupations often felt embarrassment, discomfort, and shame when encountering discrimination from outsiders. Scholars argue that it is more difficult for men to cross over the gendered work boundaries because the sex role for males is clear cut than for females. This notion of appropriate gender roles can be rooted in childhood, when it is acceptable for girls to act like tomboys, but not

acceptable for boys to "compromise prevailing notions of masculinity and be sissies" (Evans & Frank, 2003, p. 3). As a result, men considering female occupations can be discouraged because of the associated negative stereotypes.

To maintain masculinity and self-identity, support from family members, friends, and male coworkers was found to be important for men in female-dominated occupations (Simpson, 2005). Williams (1992) found that males who chose female occupations made sure they received implicit support from mentors, friends, and/or family members. This support was important to help these males erase fears about the loss of their masculine identity. As another strategy to deal with the stigma related to masculinity, males in traditionally female jobs tend to focus on carefully maintaining or exaggerating their masculinity (Isaacs & Poole, 1996).

Men in Female-Dominated Academic Majors

Mastekaasa and Smeby (2008) compared college students in traditional and nontraditional majors, where their gender was the minority. The authors found students in traditional academic majors selected areas of their study earlier than those who chose nontraditional paths. Even though the opinions of parents and friends are important when selecting an academic major (Hodges & Karpova, 2009), little is known about how they influence males' choice of female-dominated academic majors. Mastekaasa and Smeby (2008) showed that in the case of male students, fathers' support for female-dominated majors was lower than for traditional male majors, whereas female students had greater support for traditional male majors. Fathers tended to value the status of jobs for both their sons and daughters. In contrast, mothers' encouragement to their children in gender-traditional and nontraditional majors was the same.

As opposed to studies of males in female-dominated jobs, research focusing on male student college experiences in traditional female academic majors has been scarce (Mullan & Harrison, 2008). No study was identified that conducted an exploration of male college student experiences in a traditional female academic major. It is important to examine experiences of these students to provide an understanding of the formation of social stigma for stereotypical gendered occupations.

Men in the Industry

Historically, the apparel industry has been dominated by women (Barber, 1994). Since its inception as the study of home economics, sewing and designing clothing have been viewed as women's work (Bix, 2002). Hodges, Karpova, and Lentz (2010) noted that when women began attending college, textiles and apparel was viewed as one of the most appropriate majors for females. To date, no research has examined male college student experiences in the apparel field. Understanding these experiences can be useful for encouraging young males to enter apparel-related majors, thus increasing enrollment in respective programs as well as helping to create an inclusive environment conducive to male students' success in graduating with their selected degree. The investigation of male students in a traditionally female academic major is important in the context of work-related gender boundaries, with implications extending to other female-dominated majors and fields. Simpson (2005) called for more research on males in traditionally female-gendered career paths at "earlier, pre-entry stages of their career" (p. 377). As noted, this work explores male student experiences in an apparel program. The research

questions addressed in this study were (a) What do male students experience upon entrance and continued study in an apparel program and (b) How do family, friends, and the public react to male students entering and studying in an apparel program?

**Method**

Data Collection

To explore male student experiences in an apparel program, a qualitative method was selected. In-depth individual interviews were used to collect data. The interviews provided an opportunity for participants to express their thoughts and feelings in their own words and allowed researchers to ask additional questions and clarify meanings of responses (McCracken, 1988). An interview protocol was employed to ensure a systematic data collection process. Questions were followed by probes. For example, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences on the first day/week in the major or upon informing their friends about switching to the apparel major. The probes associated with the question were as follows: How did you feel about it? Why did you feel this way? Each interview lasted for 1 –2 hr. They were audiotaped with participant permission and were later transcribed.

A total of 22 students (Table 1) from an apparel program in a large Midwestern university volunteered to participate in the study approved by the Human Subjects Review Board. In interpretive research, it is typical to reach data saturation with 12 interviews, after which "no new information or themes are observed in the data" (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006, p. 57). One of the authors, a faculty member, conducted the interviews. The researcher sent an individual invitation e-mail to every male student in the program. All students enthusiastically agreed to participate in the study without any incentive. To avoid any potential pressure or participant discomfort, the faculty member interviewed participants who were no longer students in her courses. Eighteen of the 22 participants were interviewed just prior to their graduation.

Four students were juniors (18%), with the remainder being seniors (82%). Nine participants (41%) had a specialization in merchandising and 13 in design (59%). For a Midwestern university, the males represented a diverse group in terms of ethnicity: 14 (63%) were White, three African Americans and three Latinos together accounted for 28% of the sample, and two students were Asian American (9%). Four students selected the apparel major during high school (18%) and others transferred from different programs, such as architecture, engineering, or business.

Data Analysis

A hermeneutic approach was used to interpret the meanings of the participants' lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic analysis of text allows significant themes to emerge from the data through an iterative part-to-whole process of interpretation. Each interview was analyzed individually in constant relation to the whole data set. Both frequency and salience of responses, as well as their relationship to each other, were considered. The stages of the analysis were structured as suggested by Spiggle (1994): categorization, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalization, integration, iteration, and refutation.

To ensure trustworthiness of the research results, the authors completed (a) researcher check of data and emerging themes, (b) member check, and (c) reporting results using "thick"

description—each theme is supported by multiple quotes from the interviews (Creswell, 2013). First, two researchers interpreted the interview texts for significant themes that described participant experiences as male students in a female-dominated major. Then, they compared and discussed emerging themes going back to the original data. Next, member checking was employed to establish credibility of the interpretation (Krefting, 1991). Two male apparel students (not research participants) reviewed the themes and conclusions of the study, agreeing with the experiences of the research participants. Their comments included, "This happened to me all the time," "This could not be more true," and "This has been a struggle of mine as well."

Two topical areas emerged from the interpretation process: (a) attitudes toward male apparel students and (b) experiences of male students in an apparel program. Each topical area consists of three themes (Van Manen, 1990). To summarize and visually capture the two topical areas and six themes, Figure 1 was developed. Parents', friends', and public attitudes toward male apparel students are shown on the left side of the figure, while themes describing male student experiences in the apparel program are depicted on the right-hand side. The shaded middle section shows student responses to the experiences and attitudes.

**Table 1.** Description of Participants

| Pseudonym | Ethnicity | Current Major/Second Major or Minor | Experience Prior to Apparel Major, Number of Years |
|---|---|---|---|
| Andrew | White | Apparel design | Pre-architecture major,[a] 1 year |
| Ben | White | Apparel design | Photography major at a Community College, 2 years |
| Brian | White | Apparel design/public service major | Public service major, 2 years |
| Brice | White | Apparel design/art major | Graphic design major, 2 years |
| Caleb | White | Apparel design | Engineering, 3 years |
| Chris | White | Apparel merchandising/political science major | Political science major, 1 year |
| Dan | Other | Apparel design | Architecture major, 2 years |
| Den | White | Apparel design | High school |
| Hugo | Asian American | Apparel merchandising/art major | Landscape architecture major, art |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | major, 2 years |
| Jake | White | Apparel design | Architecture major, 2 years |
| Jim | African American | Apparel merchandising/business minor | Business management major, 2 years |
| Ken | White | Apparel design | High school |
| Mike | Other | Apparel merchandising | Hospitality major, 1 year |
| Nick | Hispanic | Apparel merchandising | Premed major, 2 years |
| Paul | White | Apparel design | Business major, 1 year |
| Ralph | Hispanic | Apparel merchandising | Architecture major, 2 years |
| Rick | Hispanic | Apparel design | Agriculture, 1 semester |
| Robert | African American | Apparel merchandising | High school |
| Scott | White | Apparel merchandising | High school |
| Ted | White | Apparel design | Art major at a Community college, 2 years |
| Tim | White | Apparel design | Art major at a Community college, 2 years |
| Tom | White | Apparel merchandising/business minor | Engineering major, business major, 2 years |

[a] Unless otherwise noted, students were enrolled in various major at the same university before they transferred to the apparel program.
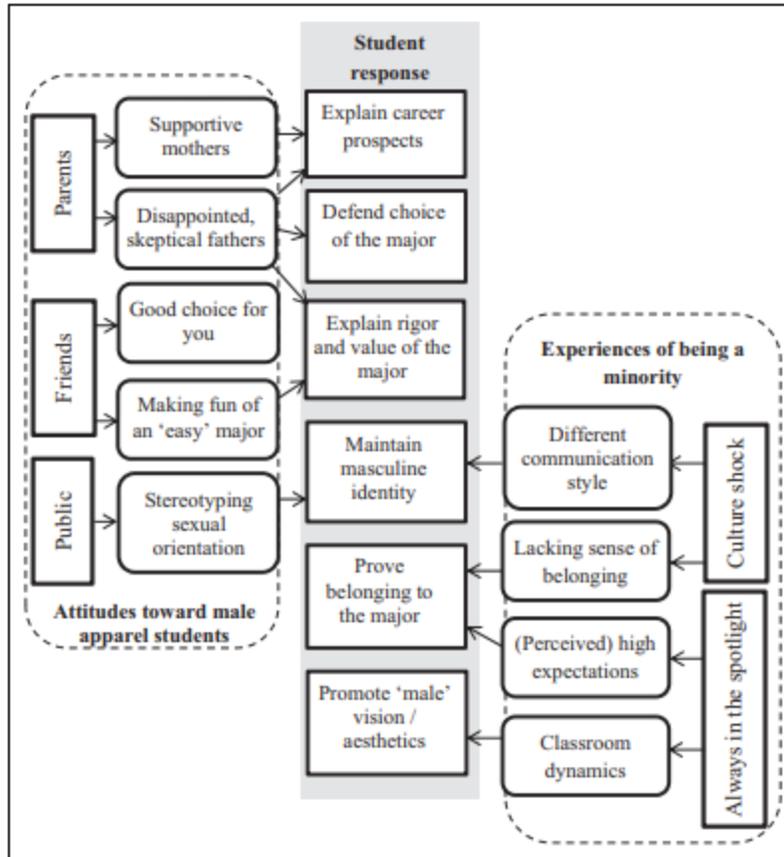
**Figure 1.** Attitudes Toward Male Students Majoring in Apparel and Their Experiences of Being a Minority in an Apparel Program.

**Interpretation**

Attitudes Toward Male Apparel Students

Parents

When parents learned about their sons' decision to major in apparel, only about one third of them had no reservations. Yet, even in these cases, the support was not specifically for the apparel major, but for any major, as long as this was something their child was excited about. In other words, these parents unconditionally backed any major their child decided to obtain a college degree in: "They were pretty supportive. They've always been supportive, 'Do whatever you really want to do and just go for it.' I think they thought it was kind of neat that I was going to do fashion design" (Ted1). These parents were simply glad that their child was getting a university degree.

> They were very supportive. My dad, he is naive and didn't get much schooling. Both of my parents didn't graduate college. So, I am their little prodigy. I am the first one who will be graduating from a four-year university. (Hugo)

More than three fourths of the participants had mothers who were supportive of the apparel major choice, as illustrated in Figure 1. Brice notes, "My mom knew I wasn't happy in graphic design. She knew I had the idea of doing apparel. So, she was very supportive and very understanding; she was 'If it isn't working, don't be miserable for four years.'" In comparison to fathers, mothers appeared to be more aware of their sons' hobbies and interests in clothing and appearance. They also appreciated participants' artistic sides and saw an apparel major as a good fit for them: "My mom was really excited. She's always loved the creative side in me, and she knew that this was something that I can excel in" (Jake). About one fourth of mothers would rather see their sons in other majors where they could become a doctor, engineer, or agriculture professional, as was the case with Den: "My mother wanted me to be a doctor and she was a little bit upset [about apparel]. But she knew that doing what I wanted to do would be more beneficial for me in the long run."

About two thirds of fathers were far from being excited about the apparel major. They preferred to see their sons in traditional male majors and, ultimately, jobs that would command a certain status and income. Participants mentioned their fathers favored engineering, agriculture, architecture, auto repair, or business: "My father is a businessman. He was very skeptical; the obvious reason—it is a female-dominated major" (Jake). Jim, who transferred from the college of business, explained that his father, a college professor paying for his son's education, did not view apparel as a career possibility for a man: "He kind of looked at merchandising, retail, and fashion as more of a hobby than an actual major. He didn't think it was very beneficial at all. He didn't really want to pay for the major." Many fathers were farmers or businessmen and expected their sons to choose a typical male occupation. "He [father] is traditional, [a] very old-school type of guy. So it was a hard transition for him." Participants had difficulty telling their parents about choosing an apparel major. They found a major they loved, enjoyed the courses, and could see a great fit for their future careers, yet they were worried about their parents' reaction: "I was pretty shy about it. I was definitely nervous to bring that to the table" (Paul).

According to participants, the rural Midwestern environment, where many of these families reside, made it more difficult for fathers to accept an apparel major. The environment was described as "very conservative," "live on a farm in Northwestern Iowa," "my dad comes from a small town," and "traditional family," as Chris' quote illustrates: "I come from a little bit more conservative family, being in Iowa and all that. Definitely conservative father, so it's the whole living up to the male stereotype."

With the apparel major, parents had concerns about job opportunities and their sons' ability to support themselves in the future. "I declared it and didn't tell my parents" [laughs]. "Then I went home and told them and they were, 'Well, if you can make a living and not die, it's fine'" (Nick). Chris described his parents' reaction: "'What are you going to do with that? And shouldn't you do marketing?' A little bit of the pushback there. They didn't understand what I would do with it. Am I going to work in a factory?" These findings are represented in Figure 1. Participants had to defend their choice of the apparel major to disappointed fathers and explain career prospects in the industry to both parents. By not following occupational gender role stereotypes and norms, participants had to deal with two conflicting roles (Pleck, 1995): a male identity and an apparel student identity, perceived as feminine. According to the GRSP, participants failed to conform to the societal and parental expectations of choosing a traditional masculine occupation, which has resulted in distress (Levant, 2011).

With time, parents became more accepting of their sons' choice of the major. As participants learned about the industry and job prospects and shared this information with

parents, the latter developed more favorable attitudes toward the major. According to Jake, "He [father] saw some of the salaries that people made at entry-level positions and was very, very surprised. He was really surprised, and over the past 2 years of doing this major, he has become very supportive." Student success in the coursework, internship experiences, or having a line in a fashion show helped parents to see the value of the major. "As time has progressed, they've gotten a lot more excited about it. As I have learned more and more about it through classes, I kind of figured out where I want to go with it" (Ken).

Friends

About two thirds of participants indicated that their friends were supportive of their choice of the major: "Seeing that I always had my own clothes, they [friends] were always, 'Yeah, you know, that was, probably, where you want to go.' I don't think anyone was really surprised that I switched over [to apparel]" (Dan). Other typical comments included "cool," "exciting," "fits personality," "good choice for you," and "you will be good at it." This sentiment is represented in Figure 1 by the good choice for you attitude. Yet, even when friends were supportive of the choice of major, some could not hold back their surprise and/or curiosity about the major, as Tom explained:

> It was interesting for a while talking with my friends, explaining to them: after I started off as civil engineering, and then all of a sudden—fashion major. It was a big change for a lot of people. They were asking how I got to it, what it's like, and lot of people were just curious.

In contrast, roughly one third of participants had a somewhat difficult experience with friends, who were "shocked" by their choice of major. This was the case for Jake: "I actually had a lot of difficulty telling my peers that this was going to be my career path. It took me a lot to adapt." Participants frequently received comments about the major being "easy," "not serious," or not a "real major," as represented by the "Making fun of an 'easy' major" sentiment in Figure 1. Ben's response illustrates that even though he had overall support from his friends, the perception of an easy major was common:

> About 90% of them loved it. They thought I would do really well. There's always a couple of people that are making fun of me because it's primarily females' [major]. My really close friends know how much I struggle with it, how much I have to work on it, but others, are like, 'Why are you taking an easy way?'

Similar to parents' concerns, these comments stemmed from lack of knowledge about the major, the industry, and career opportunities that a college apparel graduate, especially, a male, might have (Figure 1). According to Tim,

> People think it's not a real major just because they are ignorant about our major. They've always been told that they need to be in engineering, architecture, or business. Males just never really had this opportunity in front of them.

In addition to limited knowledge about the industry, even less might be known about

what students can learn in apparel courses. Along with parents, participants had to educate their friends about the apparel field and explain the rigor and value of the major, as illustrated in Figure 1. Most people understand what one can learn in math and science courses, but apparel courses seem to be a mystery.

> They are imagining that I'm just sitting in a classroom, watching runway shows all day. A lot of times my friends are shocked when I tell them about things [I do in my courses]. All of my close friends here are in science majors. They all are really, really smart people, doing really amazing things. So, when I tell them about our textiles science classes and stuff, they are really intrigued by that. I think a lot of people don't realize how much there is behind it [apparel major]. (Ken)

The perception of the major lacking rigor appears to be due to its female-dominated nature and the stereotype about "women's work" versus science and technology. Nick, who was at the top of his high school class and a former premed student, shared his engineering friends' perceptions:

> I get a lot of crap from them because most of them are in engineering, so they think this is [a] really easy major. It's just [a] bunch of stupid, airhead girls and gay people who are too stupid to be able to handle anything else. I mean, we've gotten into fights about it. So, they stopped now because I've gotten mad [a] couple of times.

Participants experienced gender-role harassment because their behavior (choosing the apparel major) was perceived gender atypical and not manly enough (Funk & Werhun, 2011). To deal with the distress associated with failing to meet masculine ideals, they had to "prove" their masculinity (Pleck, 1995), which resulted in a desire to gain status by explaining the value of the major (e.g., textile science), or, for participants like Nick, a loss of self-control.

General public

Roughly two thirds of participants talked about receiving homophobic comments associated with stereotyping the sexual orientation of male apparel students, as presented in Figure 1. Ralph shared, "There is a huge stereotype of males in textile and clothing being homosexuals, yeah. It's something that they tell you a lot." Similarly, Brian recounted, "They always have the stereotypical responses when they find out that a male is in a female-dominated major. I think especially in the Midwest. It sparks questions, homophobic and things like that." These participants voluntarily brought up the sexual orientation stereotype issue during the interviews.2 The discussion was relatively easy for some: "It's an instant: If you are a guy in [an] apparel program, instantly you are thought of as gay or, why you are in that if you are a guy?" (Nick). Others, like Mike, had difficulty finding words to express their experiences:

> A lot of people get the wrong perception about males in our major. Umm, honestly, I would have to say a lot of people in the fashion industry might not have the same sexual orientation as everybody else. I think that can be an issue that a lot of people automatically will be "Oh … this person is … whatever."

About one third of students did not bring up the issue at all, even though Rick's quote indicates that all males in apparel programs have to deal with the same types of stereotypes: "When I came here, I would get the regular questions, the stereotypical, 'Are you gay?'"

Interview narratives indicate that the general public views men in the apparel major and industry as gay and stereotypically flamboyant. To deal with this labeling and maintain congruence between others' perceptions and their identity as a male, participants had to defend their masculinity (refer to Figure 1). Heterosexual males felt they had to shield themselves or just brush the homophobic questions and comments off. Some students, like Jake, had an automatic, scripted answer to any of those comments:

> When I meet new people, they would ask me what my major was. Sometimes I would say I am still in architecture, just because people make those assumptions about your sexuality, and it can be difficult. I am a heterosexual male, and I am in the industry where a lot of males, most of them are homosexual. So, it was difficult, but now—no problem. I make jokes about it. I tell people that I make pretty dresses. But, yeah, it's difficult.

Societal expectations for academic majors that are gender-appropriate for males resulted in both general public disapproval of young men majoring in apparel and homophobic attitudes. Coping with the stereotype of failing to live up to societal norms related to gender roles can be threatening and psychologically draining for the members of the discriminated group (Funk & Werhun, 2011). Ultimately, the backlash toward males in this traditionally female academic major might be the main reason why very few men choose apparel as a field of study and future career. Rick shared he knew people who had retail jobs and liked working with clothing, or just had an interest in fashion in general, yet "shy away" and do not dare to declare an apparel major: "I know there're guys in architecture, I know there are so many guys who don't join the major due to what their peers are going to say." It appears that many males who are interested in apparel and fashion avoid the discipline because of negative connotations.

**Experiences of Male Students in Apparel Program**

Culture shock

All but four participants transferred to the apparel program from other majors (Table 1), where classes were either equally mixed in terms of gender or dominated by males. Students frequently described their early experiences in the major as "weird," "uncomfortable," "shocking," "intimidating," and "scary." Some, like Mike, had difficulty nailing down exactly how it felt to be suddenly surrounded by females: "I would say at first, definitely, it was a little …. I would say nerve-wracking. I don't know what's the right word to use about coming into this major …. It is very female-dominated." Paul discusses his experiences coming from the college of business: "You become a little bit self-conscious: I'm the only guy. 'Why is he here?' Everyone is staring at me because I'm the only guy." Jake described his first encounter of being one of a handful guys in a classroom with 100 girls:

> I was one of the first people [in the room]. I just sat down. It's very funny how, kind of, [a] force field [was] set up around me. The girls left the chairs around me [empty]. Whether it's [that] they don't know me, or they think maybe it's inappropriate to sit next

to me because I am a guy, they don't want to think that they are flirting, or something.

This was echoed by another participant:

> I remember my first day of class. I was ten minutes late, I walked in, and all I see—girls.… I walked in and I just sat down at the back. I mean, that first class, I wanted to drop the major because I was scared. (Nick)

It appears that both personality and the individual's social circle to a large extent defined male student experiences in this female-dominated major. It was a more natural environment for those, like Brian, who had many female friends prior to transferring to the major: "A lot of my friends are girls. So it was a pretty easy transition." It was also a simpler transition for males who could "have conversations with girls easier" (Brice), or extroverted people, like Jim, who stated, "I'm a bubbly person, so I haven't had too many problems, but I'm sure if [a] transferred student wasn't outgoing as I was, I think it can be challenging and overwhelming."

For males who did not have a "bubbly" personality, or were not accustomed to being surrounded by girls, adapting to the new social environment proved to be "a challenge." For Chris, after "business and political science classes," "it was really weird at first" to navigate the female-dominated scene. He had to figure out, "How am I supposed to be and how am I supposed to react to this social situation?" Similarly, Dan explained that he had to learn how to interact with girls, which was different from "guys talk":

> It was a culture shock because in architecture classes you have a decent amount of guys and girls. So you can, you know, talk about more, like, guy stuff. When I switched over [to apparel], it was more, umm, gossip stuff talk.

Ralph adds to the description of the female environment: "Being in this major, which is predominantly female, is harder cause there is more drama to it." Figure 1 shows participant negotiation between maintaining masculine identity, which, among other things, is expressed through guys talk, and a different communication style and interaction dynamic in the predominantly female apparel major.

Transition to college in general is a big change for young adults: getting to know classmates, developing new relationships, and adapting to new social groups and environments (Pampaka, Williams, & Hutcheson, 2012). This challenge can be amplified when "you are not one of them," do not have a peer group to turn to for support, or lack a sense of belonging to the major: "At the beginning, it was uncomfortable because I felt that I needed [a] sense of belonging. I wanted to belong to [the major] right now" (Rick). Ken notes that if you are different from most (if not all) people in your classes, it can be difficult to initiate contact and build camaraderie with classmates: "Freshman year, it was somewhat intimidating because [there were] all these girls everywhere and it seemed they all knew each other! I felt weird just walking up to them and being, like, 'Hey, what's up?'"

Male students wanted to fit into the apparel major, which would mean embracing the dominant female culture expressed, among other things, through daily interactions, communication patterns, and conversational subjects. Due to the prior socialization experiences, participants felt pressure to continue conforming to masculine gender roles expressed through how they think, feel, and behave (Pleck, 1981). The contradicting demands for both feminine and

masculine gender roles proved to be challenging for the participants, as they strived to maintain their male identities while fitting into the new environment. The connection between participants lacking a sense of belonging and proving they belong to the major is illustrated in Figure 1.

After a semester or two of being in the major and getting to know other students, all participants adjusted to being in the minority and reported being comfortable: "After a year I didn't really notice it" (Paul). In fact, Nick, who was scared in his first class, noted the opposite effect: "Now I'm used to it. It's weird because now I feel uncomfortable in a classroom full of guys (laughs)." Overall, once past the initial culture shock, students agreed that being in a female-dominated environment did not have any negative effects on their studies and experiences in the program. For example, Ken, who was intimidated in the major during his freshmen year, explains, "For the most part it doesn't matter [studying with majority of girls]. I think especially now that I do know a lot of people …. I think now it doesn't really bother me."

Always in the spotlight

Being a minority, participants talked about getting more attention and perceived greater expectations not only from classmates—"Everyone's staring at me"—but also from faculty members. Like Ben, they noted that even in large lecture courses, all professors identified them by their first names: "Every instructor knew me by my name just because I'm the only guy. So, I kind of stand out." As a result, male students get called upon in class more frequently and are, of course, more easily noticed if absent: "I did stand out because I was male. I had to be in class, usually, otherwise people would notice that I am gone" (Jake). Ken explained how this realization happened for him:

> One day, [X] was walking down the hall, and I only had her for one course. And she said, 'Hi, Ken.' And I was, 'What?! How do you know my name?!' There [were] at least [a] hundred-some people in the class. Then it clicked, 'Okay, everyone really knows who I am.'

Participants were aware that they were given extra attention and, to some extent, higher expectations, whether regarding attendance or ability to answer a question on the spot, because they were a minority in the program. In this experience, role strain is rooted in being the minority in a classroom but plays out in various ways of singling out male students. For example, occurrences of instructors calling on male students more often, or female classmates not sitting next to them in a lecture, or not trusting their opinions on a project may become stressors for males in apparel majors. As Rick describes,

> There're not many of us. Whatever each and every single one of us does is looked at very precisely. So, I guess being a minority is very, like, you stand out in the classroom. You are always in the spotlight.

Jim brings up another valuable point of the experience of being a "double minority": "You are obviously the minority, doubled, being black, and a male in this major. So it can be a little complicated." In this study, eight participants (36%) represented ethnicities other than White/Caucasian (Table 1).

Being one of few males in a field that is traditionally perceived as a female dominated

and a career path for women, some participants felt that they were viewed as "underdogs" by their female peers (Ralph). Hugo explains, "In a way, I feel we are underestimated in the major—'Oh, this is a really dominant women major. You, guys, probably don't have that much knowledge.' And I was, 'Really? We are learning the same things as you are. It's nothing too different.'" Students agreed they had to prove themselves and show that they belonged academically to the major: "I think it drove me a little bit more, you know, to be a little bit more successful. So, it's kind of proving myself: yes, I am here, one of the few males, and I should be here" (Chris). In a way, students continued to defend their choice of the major by showing to their classmates, instructors, and themselves that they can be at least as successful in the coursework as their female counterparts: "I had to prove myself. Everyone was 'Why is he in this major? Why does he want to be a fashion designer?' So, you have to prove you are knowledgeable and you are on par with everyone else" (Caleb). In line with the GRSP, perceived violation of gender roles (male in a female-dominated major) resulted in participant desire to gain social power and status through focusing on achievement and demonstrating high performance in coursework. The strategy of proving that they can be at least as successful as female classmates was used by participants to compensate for being in the major that signified femininity (Levant, 2011). Figure 1 shows the connection between how participants' experience of being "always in the spotlight" led to perceived high expectations and the need to prove they belong in the major.

Classroom dynamics

All participants agreed it "would be nice" to have more guys in the major. Among positive aspects of greater gender diversity, they talked about having "someone to partner with" who would be "easier to relate to" when working on projects or homework or just sitting next to in a class. Rick noted that it "would make it easier for new males in the major to transition." Participants expressed that having more males in apparel courses would help in dealing with "girls' moods" and "drama," especially when working on group assignments, as Ken explained:

> There are times when I don't really want to deal with all-girls-group projects. Sometimes they make [it] a way bigger deal than it is. I just feel sometimes things are a lot more high stress than it could have been if there would be more males.

Similarly, Dan talked about dominance of female ideas and perhaps aesthetics when working on group projects:

> When I am working in groups, or when just talking to people in class, there are stronger opinions toward female stuff than toward male ideas. It's, mainly, 'Oh, it looks pretty and fun and flirty' rather than (pauses) structured and functional.

Figure 1 illustrates this point: As a result of female-dominated classroom dynamics, participants felt the need to promote "male" vision and aesthetics. With respect to having female professors, participants felt that it did not make a difference in their studies: "It doesn't bother me" (Robert), "I don't think it really affected me too much" (Chris). Students wanted instructors who are "good," know the subject, and are capable of helping students to learn. As Andrew explained, the instructor's skills were by far more important than gender: "It all depends on their

experience and expertise, I guess. I'd rather have a really well-qualified female over a mediocre male." In fact, it was not a surprise for participants to have female educators, as Robert noted, "Pretty much ever since I was at elementary school, most of my teachers have always been female."

At the same time, students expressed that it would be "nice," "fun," and "encouraging" to have more male faculty in the program, which would allow for richer experiences. For example, teaching styles of male instructors might be different than female instructors.

> I would enjoy having a male professor once in a while. I can't even tell you why necessarily I would prefer a male professor once in a while, just [that it would be] refreshing to have it different because guys have different teaching styles than females. (Paul)

Other reasons included "good to have a different perspective," "hear their experiences," and a greater focus on men's apparel: "I think it would help to diversify the program a little more and sort of broaden what the students think they can go into when they are done instead of just women's wear" (Andrew). Students felt it would be easier to relate to a male professor and simply have someone to turn to for encouragement and understanding: "Would I like to have more male professors? One hundred percent, because then I would be very comfortable going and reaching out to them" (Scott).

## Conclusions and Implications

We explored experiences of male students in an apparel program. About one third of the participants' parents were fully supportive of their sons' decision to get a college degree in apparel. The rest of students experienced varying degrees of parental disappointment, misunderstanding, and initial discontent with their academic major choice, more commonly from fathers. Students experienced strain associated with compromising appraisal they received from their parents for choosing the major they loved. The choice of gender-atypical major and future career path coupled with the lack of parental support resulted in distress associated with failing to meet masculine ideals (Levant, 2011). Mothers were more supportive of their sons' choice of the apparel major. These results were consistent with Mastekaasa and Smeby's (2008) findings.

Male students received various derogatory comments stemming from the incongruity of male gender and the traditionally female major. Some comments made by male peers majoring in engineering, architecture, and sciences were lighthearted, whereas others questioned the participant's masculinity, ability to compete in the "male world," and/or sexual orientation. These standpoints were referenced from general beliefs about gender norms and roles within U.S. society (Funk & Werhun, 2011). The level of role strain experienced by negotiating their incongruous gender and chosen major were different, depending on the level of participant internalization of others' opinions (Pleck, 1995). Participant personality, background, and level of closeness with or importance of those who commented about the apparel major may cause them to be more or less affected by their experiences, leading to varying degrees of role strain.

Overall, participants faced a general misunderstanding, and at times even disapproval, of their choice of major. They believed this was because of gendered stereotypes about the major, despite the fact that males dominate the industry's higher management and prominent positions of status. For example, historically, many well-known designers have been male. Further, men

more often than not lead fashion and apparel-related businesses, regardless of their educational background (Hodges, Karpova, & Lentz, 2010). The educational path to a career in the fashion industry can be achieved through training in business, marketing, or other related majors. Besides apparel, examples of common college degrees men in the apparel industry might have include business management or marketing. In this aspect, men are able to attain positions within the industry using transferrable skills from academic majors outside of apparel programs. Yet, occupations as a whole in the apparel industry are still perceived as being of a primarily female prerogative.

Tension was created for the students based on conflict between society's idea of masculinity and the choice of a major that does not fit with the prescribed gender role. All participants expressed some degree of distress stemming from friends, classmates, or family remarks. However, in contrast to Simpson (2005), who reported male professionals' internal dissatisfaction when choosing a female occupation, participants in the current research were completely content with their choice of major. In our study, all feelings of discomfort expressed by participants had an external source and were associated with parents', friends', and the general public's perceptions of males majoring in apparel. Participants were sensitive to comments about (a) the apparel major being easy, not real or serious and (b) assumptions that only a man who identified as gay would choose this female-dominated major. Coping mechanisms for these comments included: choosing to focus on business aspects of the apparel major (merchandising or marketing) and/or keeping their old majors or minors (e.g., business or political science) and a prepared defense about the value of an apparel major and potential career prospects. The extra effort on the participants' behalf indicates the internalization of comments about their major choice. Participant experiences might have been affected by the fact that the apparel program was housed at a Midwestern university, a relatively conservative and traditional region, with less exposure to the industry in comparison to the East and West coasts.

Similar to Cross and Bagilhole's finding (2002), participants in our research felt they had to work and study harder to prove to instructors, classmates, and, perhaps, themselves that they belong to this major. Students noted that they knew other males who had an interest in clothing and/or fashion but were unwilling to pursue or learn more about the major and potential career opportunities because of the stigma associated with men in this traditionally female major. These findings support both (a) role strain theory, which proposes that societal expectations for gender roles prevent men from choosing nontraditional occupations (Kanter, 1977) and (b) previous research reporting that identities of men selecting a traditionally female career are challenged in our society (Simpson, 2005; Williams, 1992). Coping strategies to minimize discomfort used by participants in this study included not reporting their current major to strangers and instead stating a previous major, emphasis on the business or marketing aspects of the apparel industry, and a focus on designing menswear.

Similar to men in Simpson's (2005) study, with time, participants became less sensitive to and were able to brush-off questions about being a male in an apparel program. Overall, students interviewed in our study were satisfied with their experiences in the program. They noted that it was critical to have people supporting and encouraging them in their choice of the apparel major. This has important implications for apparel program instructors, advisors, administrators, and career counselors, who can and should provide support to male students considering and/or entering apparel and fashion majors, as well as any other traditional female majors, such as interior design, social work, and women's and gender studies. Such support for males is critical during the early stages of being in the major, that is, first year, first semester, first week, and first

class. A specific plan can be developed to ensure students have someone to talk to about their initial experiences in the program. For example, a male apparel club, similar to an ethnic club/group established in many colleges, might be an option, where upperclassmen can share their experiences and encourage incoming students. Hosting male alumni and other speakers might be another option. Providing mentorship and support can help create a greater sense of belonging to the major and reassure appropriateness of their new role as male student in the apparel major.

To recruit more men, it is important to ensure that information presenting apparel programs, or any other female-dominated programs, to prospective students is gender inclusive. For example, photos (e.g., student activities, field trips, internships, study abroad programs, etc.) in common areas and informational sources such as program websites and brochures should not only include female students but also male students working on projects together. Male students should be present and active in recruiting campaigns such as open-house events. In addition, recruiting vocabulary should include verbs that are familiar and attractive to male students considering transferring to apparel from other majors. For example, constructing/engineering a garment might be more appealing than sewing/drawing a garment to male prospects.

A greater focus on gender-inclusive perspectives in courses and curriculum is encouraged. Educators should be more aware and sensitive to the paradigm of teaching diverse students. For example, most textbooks in patternmaking, draping, or illustration, written by women and for women, cover primarily, if not exclusively, women's wear (croquis, slopers, etc.) and often rely on language and vocabulary that is more feminine than masculine. Similarly, projects in design and product development courses tend to focus on women's wear. While the latter is a big part of the apparel industry, many male students like to work with menswear and should be given an opportunity to master the skills and pursue their passion.

This research contributes to the literature on gender roles, which is a precursor for minimizing occupational gender stereotypes, specifically in the topic of career boundaries. Just as there is encouragement for women to cross gendered work boundaries, men should be able to make career choices without experiencing pressure from people around them or being questioned about their masculinity, abilities, and/or sexual orientation. This study brings attention to male experiences in female-dominated college majors and suggests steps to increase the number of male students in nontraditional fields and the apparel domain specifically.

Students from one specific apparel program were interviewed in this study. Perspectives and experiences of men enrolled in apparel programs located in or near fashion centers might differ from Midwestern students. Participants in our study were able to effectively cope with gender role strain, which was indicated by their successful completion of the apparel degree. It was beyond the scope of this study to interview males who might have considered majoring in apparel but opted not to choose the major or those who declared the major but did not finish the degree program. Even though the researchers, being ethnic/cultural minorities in U.S. academia, were able to relate well to participants' experiences, they were female faculty members/graduate students. The authors' gendered perspective might have entered into the interpretation of the data.

Only 18% of participants declared the apparel major in high school. Male high school students are either unaware of this career opportunity (e.g., career counselors do not present it as an option) or do not dare to declare the major in high school due to gender role strain. Investigation of high school and middle school male student perspectives on traditionally female-dominated occupations and role strain due to the formation of social stereotypes related

to gender and sexuality is needed. To protect participant privacy, in this study, questions about sexual orientation were not asked. Some participants volunteered this information either directly ("I'm a heterosexual male") or indirectly, by referring to their girlfriends or wives during interviews. If any of the participants had a homosexual orientation, none volunteered to talk about it. This was in contrast with Simpson's (2005) study, where homosexual participants openly discussed their sexual orientation. The difference might be due to the fact that Simpson interviewed older participants in the workforce, not college students. Future research might explore experiences of male students of different sexual orientations in female-dominated majors. This research discovered an important phenomenon of being a double minority (being a racial minority and a gender minority). Experiences of this group warrant further investigation. Finally, in the future, a study can be designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed measures to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for male students in traditionally female academic majors.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

## Notes

1. To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms are used instead of real names.
2. No specific questions were asked about sexual orientation stereotypes. The majority of participants discussed the issue when asked questions about friends' views of the major.

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**Author Biographies**

**Elena Karpova** is an associate professor in the Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, Iowa State University, Ames, IA. Her major research interests include global textile and apparel industries, trade, and markets; creative thinking and problem solving; and preparing global citizens for careers in the apparel industry.

**Ashley R. Garrin** is a doctoral candidate in apparel, merchandising, and design at Iowa State University. Her research interests include the historic and social aspects of dress and appearance of marginalized groups in the United States.

**Juyoung Lee** is an assistant professor in fashion design and merchandising in the School of Human Sciences at Mississippi State University, Starkville, MS. Her research interests include international trade and sourcing, economic development, and knowledge management in the textile and apparel industries