

# Perceived Self-Acceptance, Gender Identity, and Body Positivity Among Transgender Women

Reuben Robert<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Akshaya I<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>M.Sc. Psychology, Department of Psychology, Kristu Jayanti College, Autonomous, Bengaluru, Karnataka

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Kristu Jayanti College, Autonomous, Bengaluru, Karnataka

## Abstract

The objective of this study was to understand the lived experience of transgender women by exploring their journey of self-acceptance, development of gender identity, and perceptions of body positivity. This research followed a qualitative approach, and the data was obtained by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 participants who identified as transgender women. The interviews were transcribed and the data was analysed using Thematic Analysis. The themes that were identified were grouped into three categories that were Self-Acceptance, Gender Identity, and Body Positivity. The themes under Self-Acceptance were Influences on Self-Acceptance, Significant Conflicts, Challenges Encountered, Coping Strategies, and Embracing Acceptance. The themes identified under the Gender Identity were Development of Gender Identity, Self-Efficacy, and Medical Aspects. The themes identified under Body Positivity were Physical Dysphoria, Influence of the Male Gaze, Existential Angst, and Validation. These themes explain the lived experience of the participants as transgender women on their journey of self-acceptance, the development of their gender identity, and their perceptions and sense of body positivity.

**Keywords:** Self-Acceptance, Gender Identity, Body Positivity, Transgender Women

## 1. Introduction

According to Morgado, Campana, & Tavares, “Self-acceptance is an act of embracing all of your attributes and traits, whether they be mental or physical, positive or negative, exactly as they are” (2014). There are three areas that we may look into. The first is the acceptance of our physical bodies. This includes being happy with the parts of our body that we are not particularly fond of and learning to accept our perceived flaws. The next area that we must look into is self-protection or deflection of judgment from the outside world. This judgment is usually negative, and only when we can ignore it will we create a safe space to fully accept ourselves. The third area is our belief in ourselves, and the things we feel we are capable of. It may even contribute to a person's negative sense of body image (Smith-Jackson et al., 2011).

Gender Identity refers to a person's innermost sense of self, and they may identify themselves as male, female, or something else, and can be the same or different as one's physical sex (American Psychological Association, 2023). Some define gender based on social constructs, whereas others base it on biology (genes and hormones). The two opposing views have been the cause of many debates. Hence it is important to note the difference between sex and gender. Sex is based on biology and individuals are categorized as

male or female at birth depending on their genes, chromosomes, hormones, and external and internal anatomy. Gender on the other hand are societal norms, behaviours, and characteristics that are considered appropriate based on an individual's sex. The term “cisgender” refers to those who express a gender that corresponds to their biological sex. The term “Transgender” is widely used for people whose gender identity does not match what they were assigned at birth, and whose behaviour is not stereotypically or culturally appropriate for what they have been perceived as so far. Taking into consideration the Neuroanatomy of transgender people, research has shown that there are structural and functional brain characteristics that are more similar between transgender people and control groups with the same gender identity when compared to individuals who share the same biological sex. These differences include the number of neurons, the volume of subcortical nuclei, like the bed nucleus and the stria terminalis (Garcia-Falgueras & Swaab, 2008), structural differences were also observed in the gray matter (Hoekzema et al., 2015) and white matter microstructure (Rametti et al., 2011), the neural response to certain sexually specific odours (Berglund et al., 2007), and visual-spatial functioning (Burke et al., 2016). However, these findings need further research as they could be influenced by factors such as hormone replacement therapy, and not being able to distinguish the brain areas involved in gender identity from the ones involved in sexual orientation (Smith et al., 2015). We must also make note that these particular brain areas and neural circuits that were identified to have differences in transgender people when compared to people who share the same biological sex are not parts that are usually associated with human sexual and endocrine functions, meaning it could also be possible that transsexuality is connected with the cerebral networks which are involved in self-perception (Roselli, 2018). Gender Dysphoria, which used to be referred to as gender identity disorder is a person's incongruence between the gender they experience or express and the one that they were assigned at birth. This explanation is given by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. This can cause a negative sense of well-being, lower levels of self-esteem, and an increased risk of developing psychiatric conditions such as deliberate self-harm, anxiety, depression, and substance use disorders (Garg & Marwaha, 2023).

Positive body image and self-compassion are aspects that lead to greater psychological well-being and activities that are considered healthy behaviour (Swami et al., 2017). Recent research has stated that body positivity is the feeling of being satisfied and content with one's body, which is different from having a dissatisfaction or negative view of one's own body. The concept of Body Positivity began as a social movement, spreading the message that all bodies are beautiful. When we trace back to the roots of this movement, we can find elements of the black, fat, and queer activism in it. This could be because these bodies are given very little representation in the media, and are usually not idealized in the fashion industry when compared to bodies of white, cis, and thin individuals. Body image is a concept that consists of various dimensions that include an individual's emotions, behaviours, and thoughts that are related to their appearance (Cash, 2004). The objectification theory speaks of how the female sex has to live in a society where their bodies are constantly sexually objectified. This theory even deals with the concept of how women and girls are taught to internalize and accept an outsider's view of their physical appearance. Over time, these experiences add to the factors that put women at risk of developing mental health conditions such as eating disorders, unipolar depression, and sexual dysfunction. And these conditions occur at a disproportionate level when the two sexes are compared (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

A study conducted in the year 2007 by Kraemer et al. explored the body image of transexual patients and aimed to understand the difference between preoperative and postoperative patients, and found that postoperative patients felt high levels of attractiveness and felt more confident in their skin. Sánchez &

Vilain in 2009 studied fear among individuals who perceived how their identity as a transsexual person would affect their life. Their main finding focussed on the self-esteem, and fear concerning an identity of transsexuality and how this influences psychological distress. They also highlighted the importance of identifying with a social group as a coping mechanism and the role to be played by counselling psychologists in aiding transsexuals in their transition. Riggle et al. studied “the positive aspects of a transgender self-identification” in the year 2011 and found eight themes related to identity through self-reported data and thematic analysis that were positive regarding transgender identity. The eight themes related to positive identity were, feeling a congruence to self, experiencing better interpersonal relationships, personal growth and building resilience, identifying an increased sense of empathy, being able to adopt a unique perspective on both sexes, breaking barriers, and living life beyond the binaries of the sexes, increasing their activism, and feeling a connection with members of the LGBTQ+ community. Glynn et al., aimed to explore “the role of gender affirmation in psychological well-being among transgender women” (2016). They found that social, psychological, and medical gender affirmation can reduce depression among transgender women and increase their level of self-esteem. McGuire et al. 2016 explored the lived experience of transgender youth concerning their bodies keeping in mind gender and body size. The analysis gave them two concepts to focus on which were body dissatisfaction and body satisfaction. They identified self-image and social distress were related to body dissatisfaction, whereas self-acceptance and social acceptance were related to body image satisfaction. According to Jones et al. “body dissatisfactions play a significant part in the distress that is experienced by trans people” (2016). This was a systematic review of literature and they explored the risks involved in developing disordered eating and how the treatments for gender dysphoria may alleviate body dissatisfaction to an extent. Mofradidoost & Abolghasemi studied the body image concerns and gender identities between transgender and cisgender people in Iran. They found that the body image concerns among transgender participants were significantly higher when compared to those of the cisgender participants. And it was observed that transwomen especially showed higher scores. It was found that body image concerns regardless of transgender or cisgender identity were higher in the female gender. Papadopoulous et al., (2020) evaluated the psychological well-being, depression, and self-esteem among transgender women who are undergoing gender affirmation treatment. It was found that these medical and psychological treatments have a positive effect on well-being and bring improvements for transgender women while reducing the risk of developing psychopathologies.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Statement of the Problem**

A qualitative study on understanding perceived self-acceptance, gender identity, and body positivity among transgender women.

### **2.2 Research Objective**

To explore the lived experience of transgender women and their understanding of self-acceptance, development of gender identity, and sense of body positivity.

### **2.3 Research Design**

This research followed a Qualitative Approach to understand the perceptions of transgender women on their level of self-acceptance, development of gender identity, and perceptions of body positivity. Participants were made to fill out a consent form to be contacted for the interview, and verbal consent was taken as well at the start of the interview. Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews

with 10 participants, and the recordings were then transcribed and interpreted using thematic analysis. Codes were generated which helped form the themes and sub-themes that are elaborated in the discussion.

#### **2.4 The Procedure of the Study**

In this study, data was collected through in-depth interviews with 10 participants belonging to the transgender community. The participants were found through word-of-mouth recommendations as well as social media platforms. The participants had to fill out a consent form which included their demographic details and consent to take part in the study, as well as give verbal consent before the interview began. The interviews were conducted over call. The semi-structured questions asked in the interview were to examine and explore the views of the participants on how they perceive self-acceptance, gender identity, and body positivity to fit their unique inclinations. The data was analysed using thematic analysis. Code and themes were generated which was then used to write the results and discussion.

#### **2.5 Operational Definitions of the Key Concepts**

- According to Morgado, Campana, & Tavares, “Self-acceptance is an act of embracing all of your attributes and traits, whether they be mental or physical, positive or negative, exactly as they are” (2014).
- According to the American Psychological Association, “Gender Identity refers to a person's innermost sense of self, and they may identify themselves as male, female, or something else, and can be the same or different as one's physical sex” (2023).
- According to Cohen et al., “The body Positivity movement was meant to challenge discrimination and oppression that was based on physical features but is still perceived to lack representation, especially from sections such as people with physical disabilities, and people who are gender nonconforming” (2019).

#### **2.6 Variables**

The lived experience and perceptions of the participants on self-acceptance, gender identity, and body positivity.

#### **2.7 Sampling Procedure**

- Sample Size: 10 participants.
- Sampling Technique: Purposive Sampling.
- Sampling Procedure: Through Semi-Structured Interviews.
- Geographical Area: Bangalore, Karnataka.

#### **2.8 Inclusion Criteria**

- Participants must identify as a transgender woman
- Participants must be able to communicate in English

#### **2.9 Exclusion Criteria**

- Participants who were not available for phone call interviews
- Participants who did not fit the inclusion criteria
- Participants who had any physical illness

#### **2.10 Ethical Considerations**

- Before the interview participants were made to sign a consent form, and verbal consent was taken at the start of the interview
- The participants were assured of confidentiality
- The participants were informed that the interviews are being audio-recorded
- Rapport will be established with the participants before starting the interview

### 3. Results

**Table 1: Shows the major themes and subthemes derived from the interviews**

Themes	Subthemes
<b>SELF ACCEPTANCE</b>	
1. Influences on Self-Acceptance	1.1 Childhood Experiences 1.2 Representation in the Media 1.3 Feminist Literature 1.4 Environmental Factors 1.5 Believing in a Higher Power
2. Significant Conflicts	2.1 Switching between Exhaustion and Fulfilment 2.2 Isolation
3. Challenges encountered	3.1 Fear of Passing as a Woman 3.2 Living in a Patriarchal Society
4. Coping Strategies	4.1 Social Support 4.2 Living a Private Life 4.3 Distractions and Avoidance
5. Embracing Acceptance	5.1 Happiness and Peace 5.2 Breathing vs Living
<b>GENDER IDENTITY</b>	
6. Development of Gender Identity	6.1 Mental Process 6.2 Physical Process 6.3 Social Process
7. Self-Efficacy	7.1 Independence 7.2 Resilience and Perseveration 7.3 Age and Experience
8. Medical Aspects	8.1 HRT as a Catalyst 8.2 Alignment of Real and Ideal Self 8.3 Side Effects and Financial Constraints
<b>BODY POSITIVITY</b>	
9. Physical Dysphoria	9.1 Body Dysphoria in Relation to Puberty
10. Influence of the Male Gaze	10.1 Early Childhood Experiences 10.2 Eating Habits 10.3 Conformity

10.4 Media and Societal Standards

11. Existential Angst	11.1 The Female Body 11.2 Character Development
12. Validation	12.1 Recognition and Power 12.2 Perfectionism

**4. Discussion**

The above themes and subthemes were derived from semi-structured interviews that were conducted on 10 transgender women between the ages of 22 and 25, residing in Bangalore city, Karnataka. The interviews were conducted over call and followed a purposive sampling method. The interview questions aimed to explore the lived experience of transgender women, which included their journey of self-acceptance, development of gender identity, and perceptions of body positivity. The interviews were transcribed and the data was then analysed using Thematic Analysis. Three areas were studied which were Self-Acceptance, Gender Identity, and Body positivity. The themes and subthemes are as follows.

**4.1 Influences on Self-Acceptance**

According to Morgado, Campana, & Tavares, “Self-acceptance is an act of embracing all of your attributes and traits, whether they be mental or physical, positive or negative, exactly as they are” (2014). When exploring the concept of self-acceptance in the participants, the majority of them spoke on the factors that influenced their self-acceptance, who they believed they truly were and the life that they were meant to live, the conflicts and challenges they came across, coping strategies they used in their journeys of acceptance, and finally the positive effects of accepting themselves regardless of internal or external opposition. These influences played a major role in shaping their personalities and behaviour right from childhood, and finally led to the culmination of who they are today.

**4.1.1 Childhood Experiences**

Childhood experiences are said to have a major influence on our personality and behaviour, as seen in the formulations of psychodynamic theory. All 10 participants that were interviewed said that their childhood experience significantly influenced the way they view themselves as a person, and their journeys in acceptance. Some of the memories they recalled were dressing up in women's clothing, wearing makeup, or wanting to play with dolls instead of cars or whatever they were stereotypically supposed to be inclined toward. While these needs seemed to be similar in all the participants, the feedback they received for these behaviours was different. 7 of the participants said they received backlash from their families and were told to “act like a man”. On further inquiry, they said they were either confused or scared as they were too young to understand the taboo around breaking gender stereotypes. 3 out of the 7 were verbally abused by their parents and relatives for wanting to dress in women's clothing and play with dolls. The other 4 were verbally and physically abused by their families for not conforming to behaviours set for boy children. Apart from these 7, the other participants said that their inclinations towards dolls, makeup, and dresses were either ignored or when addressed out loud their parents communicated that they hoped it was just a phase that would pass by eventually. Even though they did not face any abuse, the ignorance of such needs as children made them feel invalidated and confused.

**4.1.2 Representation in the Media**

Media representations have the power to influence and validate a person. In terms of self-acceptance,

seeing transgender women being portrayed in the media as their authentic selves seems to impact the way transgender individuals understand and accept themselves. 4 participants elaborated on how as teenagers they watched a movie or series that had a character that was transgender, and this gave them insight into what they may be. As children, they were not educated by schools or parents on the diversity of gender and were never familiar with the terminology as to what they may identify as. They knew they were not male and understood that they were not accepted as female. This idea of gender diversity and there being more than the dichotomous male and female genders came from representation in the media through movies and series, which helped them understand themselves better and increased their sense of self-acceptance. 2 of the participants said that they were very fond of books as teenagers and learned about gender identity and the terminology and meaning behind what it is to be a transgender woman from the literature they've read. Out of the two, 1 read a fictional book, while the other read an autobiographical book. This finding highlights the importance of representation in the media and how it not only validates but also educates individuals and the masses as a whole, fostering a more open and inclusive society.

#### **4.1.3 Feminist Literature**

Feminist theory and literature revolve around the idea of equality. This movement which was started in the latter half of the 18th century in Europe has since gained worldwide popularity and mass support in the fight for equality. 2 participants said that this ideology was a contributing factor in their journey of self-acceptance. 1 said that it had instilled hope in her that one-day transgender women will gain the equal rights and opportunities that they are currently denied. The other participant elaborated more on the theory and how she related it to her life and the way in which it helped her grow as a woman. She said that while being in a family dominated by cis-gendered men, reading social movements such as the Feminist one gave her the strength to fight against family and societal oppression and cope with the downsides of living in a patriarchal society. She also spoke on the main ideas behind feminism, such as having a choice and feeling liberated, and how as a transgender woman, when you finally choose to accept yourself and live the life you've always wanted, you automatically will gain a sense of freedom and autonomy. The theory also encouraged her to question the society we live in and the norms she was expected to follow for being born biologically male. It also encouraged her process of self-exploration, and in forming her identity and political views.

#### **4.1.4 Environmental Factors**

Environmental factors greatly affect how we are shaped, our views, interests, fears, and the people we turn out to be. The participants reported different environmental conditions that led to their sense of self-acceptance, and the three most prominent ones were social support, family influences, and the role of an intimate partner. When looking into the role of social circles, 8 said that their friends were their main source of emotional support, and helped them accept themselves by providing an open and judgment-free zone for them to freely express themselves. This positively impacted them and seemed to be their only source of support. It was also noted that in coming out to their friends and social circles, they encountered their first experiences of acceptance, and this positively boosted their confidence. 3 said that they received family support, either from their parents, siblings, or cousins and this provided a safe space for them in their home environments. Having someone in the family accept them gave them the courage to come out to the rest of their family and society at large. It also seemed to be a contributor to their feelings of safety and sense of protection. It was also observed that gaining parental support gave them the confidence to be more open in public about their gender identity, which eventually led to their social transition. The next environmental influence that was identified was the role of an intimate partner. Only 2 participants

reported on this factor, and they both had opposing views. 1 participant was in a committed relationship and said it gave her a sense of stability and emotional support. Her partner's acceptance of her gender made her feel loved and validated, and this helped her increase her level of acceptance of self. The other participant who reported on the role of a partner said that she was conflicted about her gender identity and sense of self-acceptance, as her partner was not fully accepting of her transition into a woman, and even went to the extent of infidelity. The man allegedly was okay with her gender in the beginning, but later said that he was more inclined towards men, and gave this as the reason for his disloyalty. This negatively impacted her, made her question her gender, and digressed her level of self-acceptance, which took time to build again.

#### **4.1.5 Believing in a Higher Power**

Believing in a higher power is said to be a sense of comfort and instil hope in individuals. In this case, 3 participants said that believing in a higher power made them surrender to what life had in store for them, and increased their sense of self-acceptance. Out of these 3 participants, 2 believed in God and organized religion, which was a contributing factor to their journey of self-acceptance, and 1 said that just believing in a higher power gave her the sense of acceptance she needed about her own life. Out of the 3 participants, 1 who said she believed in God and had strong religious inclinations also reported that this belief gave her a sense of purpose and added meaning to her life. It also aided in her acceptance of gender and identity, ultimately leading to the acceptance of self.

## **4.2 Significant Conflicts**

According to Warren et al., “Transgender individuals had the poorest level of psychological well-being across the majority of variables” (2016). Acceptance of self can become a challenge especially when deviating from what is considered normal, and in doing so an individual is bound to come across conflicts. In this study, the conflicts that were identified were internalized ones of the participants. Here the significant conflicts that were found were switching between states of exhaustion and fulfilment and the feeling of isolation. Both of these conflicts are associated with our mental states and give insight into the emotional turmoil associated with gender identity and self-acceptance. These conflicts seemed to be present for all the participants and contributed to our understanding of the lived experiences of a transgender woman.

### **4.2.1 Switching between Exhaustion and Fulfilment**

This theme explores the contradictory emotions of exhaustion and fulfilment that come along with transitioning from one gender to another in the pursuit of self-acceptance. This transition seemed to be exhausting, as participants described it as one that takes a toll on their emotional, physical, and social selves. They experienced a whirlwind of emotions from fear to sadness, shame, and self-doubt. While this was exhausting, it was also described as fulfilling as they narrated their journey of self-acceptance and all the changes that come with it. The participants described feelings of happiness when they started to physically transition and their bodies were more in sync with their minds, a sense of relief when they were finally able to come out and say aloud that they are transgender, and feelings of hope when they realized that they are free to live the lives they've always dreamed off. It was also reported that they felt validated when addressed as a woman in public, and when people referred to them with the appropriate pronouns.



#### **4.2.2 Isolation**

In the study, it was observed that social stigma and judgmental views on the transgender community were causal factors in the isolation of some of the participants. 5 of the participants said they experience the feeling of isolation frequently, and they perceive this to be caused by their gender identity. Out of the 5, 2 reported that coming out as transgender got them kicked out of their homes, and they were forced to move to another city due to rejection from their parents and the societies they lived in. While moving away provided an escape from their families, they still felt lonely due to factors such as lack of social support, difficulty in making friends, and lack of community support. 1 of the participants even reported that she was rejected by the transgender community she initially perceived as supportive and was forced to live on the streets for a while before she could land a job. The other 3 participants reported that while still being allowed to stay with their families of origin, they were constantly mocked and criticized, and as a result felt isolated and not welcomed in the family. These feelings were reasons to ultimately leave home to make a life away from the family setting. This also decreased their communication and their level of closeness with their families. 1 participant even reported that this was the driving factor that kept her going, and ultimately got her the job she had been working toward for a long time.

#### **4.3 Challenges encountered**

In the process of self-acceptance, participants described various challenges they encountered. These challenges were obstacles they eventually overcame, but at the time caused significant distress. These challenges included the physical, mental, and social aspects of what it is to be a transgender woman living in a patriarchal society. Participants even reported the fears and insecurities that come along with being transgender. It should be noted that these challenges described were all overcome by self-efficacy and resilience. Most often they had little external help and had to rely on their problem-solving skills and adopt a positive attitude to get through these challenges.

##### **4.3.1 Fear of Passing as a Woman**

The majority of the participants interviewed had a fear of passing as a woman. They reported that looking like a transgender woman would be described as still having features associated with the male sex, such as facial hair, broader shoulders, etc. But passing as a woman would include having features that are stereotypically associated with the female sex, such as wider hips, softer facial features, and a feminine voice. These features of the cis-gendered woman were important to them as they described the role it plays in social situations. 2 participants said they often noticed people staring and pointing at them. They even felt they were giggling and judging them. It was also perceived that by passing as a woman, this ridicule would stop, and they would be more accepted by society. The other participants described tedious rituals that were followed such as makeup routines, and salon services that were undertaken to look more like a cis-gendered woman, which was for their internal satisfaction. This fear of looking like a man also made them spend excessive time in front of mirrors, contemplating what flaws could be pointed out in their physical bodies, and how they may correct them. This induced a sense of dissatisfaction with their appearance and caused them to take a longer time to accept themselves.

##### **4.3.2 Living in a Patriarchal Society**

Living in a patriarchal society has its ill effects on anyone who does not fall under the category of cis-gendered heterosexual male. Here the participants described the difficulties they faced living in a male-dominated society. 2 participants described their housing situations and the difficulties it brought along. After moving out of their family homes, these participants faced a lot of rejection from landlords solely

based on the fact that they were transgender. They said that finding a rented apartment in developed cities was almost impossible due to the stigma associated with being transgender. They were told their way of life was unnatural, and went against the laws of nature, right before getting rejected as possible tenants. It was reported that all these landlords they dealt with were men who were misogynistic and transphobic. 1 participant narrated an incident in which the PG warden strictly prohibited her from bringing any guests back to her room but this same rule was not applied to others staying in the same PG, paying the same amount of rent. 1 participant reported that in the past she had only managed to procure accommodation in a men's hostel as it was her last option, and there also she was harassed by the warden and other men staying in the hostel. These living conditions though unfair could never be questioned due to the power dynamics and helpless position that transgender women are put in. The participants reported that these factors hindered their acceptance of self, due to perceived fear and rejection.

#### **4.4 Coping Strategies**

Coping strategies are the cognitive and behavioural processes we use to manage a crisis that may arise. In this study, the coping strategies explored were the ones used by transgender women to tackle situations and instances that cause conflict and distress. These coping strategies were developed over time through experience and serve as a means to get through life.

##### **4.4.1 Social Support**

According to Sánchez & Vilain “identifying with a social group is important as a coping mechanism in aiding transsexuals in their transition” (2009). A strong sense of perceived social support seemed to play a significant role in the coping methods of the participants when they came face-to-face with a problem. 9 of the participants listed social support as their way to cope with their issues. They said that in times of trouble, their friends were always there for them, whether it be a listening ear, companionship, or even someone to help them come out to their families. These friends provided a safe space for the participants to be themselves and not fear judgment and rejection, and aided in their journey of self-acceptance.

##### **4.4.2 Living a Private Life**

2 participants reported that living a private life away from families and societies was their way of coping, and helped them finally accept themselves. 1 said that her family rejected the idea of a transgender identity and continued to refer to her as a male. This caused issues in her accepting herself as her environment was not supportive of it. Upon moving away from home and limiting contact with her family and the people she used to once consider her society, she felt calmer and less conflicted which is when she was finally able to accept herself and her gender identity.

##### **4.4.3 Distractions and Avoidance**

Here the participants mainly focussed on work. 4 participants reported being extremely driven and wanting to reach academic excellence. This was a way to avoid factors such as family conflict and societal judgments. 3 participants described their jobs as being the centre of their lives. They said that for starters they have to stay focused as they are their primary breadwinner. And secondly, work acts as a medium of distracting them from challenges they may want to avoid for the time being. The common factor between the participants who were working women, and students was that they both wanted to avoid some unpleasant feeling or emotion and hence used work as a method of distraction. This brings us to the next aspect which is avoidance. 1 participant described feeling isolated and fearing coming out to her family, and instead of processing these emotions and trying to improve family communication, she applied for a job in another state and eventually moved away from home. Another participant described her fear of

publicly transitioning as she was unsure of the reaction she would get from her friends and family. She described repressing these emotions until she reached the age of 24 and was financially stable. This caused her to hate herself for those few years and hindered her process of self-acceptance.

#### **4.5 Embracing Acceptance**

Riggle et al. studied “the positive aspects of a transgender self-identification” and found eight themes related to identity through self-reported data and thematic analysis that were positive regarding transgender identity. According to them the eight themes related to positive identity were, “feeling a congruence to self, experiencing better interpersonal relationships, personal growth and building resilience, identifying an increased sense of empathy, being able to adopt a unique perspective on both the sexes, breaking barriers and living life beyond the binaries of the sexes, increasing their activism, and feeling a connection with members of the LGBTQ+ community” (2011). The theme of embracing acceptance was derived from the participants' description of them finally being comfortable with their gender identity, and being able to live their lives as transgender women physically, mentally, and socially.

##### **4.5.1 Happiness and Peace**

After embracing self-acceptance and being comfortable with who they are, the participants described a feeling of happiness and peace. This sub-theme was common for all the participants. They each described emotions of happiness and joy and reported that this was brought about by finally accepting their gender identity and living more authentic lives as women. It was also reported that while living as men they felt like they were trapped and not living as who they truly were and this caused significant distress in them. Some of them even described self-hate and self-criticism as constant battles they dealt with daily. But post self-acceptance, they described being more at peace with themselves and not being as critical and hateful toward themselves.

##### **4.5.2 Breathing vs Living**

Breathing vs Living was a sub-theme made out of the description by the participants stating that before their transitions, they felt like they were just breathing, living life almost as robots, fulfilling roles that were expected of them. But post-transition and acceptance of gender identity, they felt like they were living and were more in touch with their emotions. This phenomenon was observed as occurring in 6 participants. All of them described a feeling of walking around in a body that was not theirs and having the soul of a woman that was trapped inside the body of a man. It was also described that their satisfaction with themselves, the people around them, their jobs, and life in general all increased post-transition.

#### **4.6 Development of Gender Identity**

According to Glynn et al., “Social, psychological, and medical gender affirmation can reduce depression among transgender women and increase their level of self-esteem” (2016). Development of Gender Identity was described as a process by all the participants. To form this identity, they had to change their mentality, physical appearance, and their social roles. All of these factors were shaped by their sense of self and environmental influences. Most participants described their first step as feeling a sense of dysphoria, a feeling of unhappiness and negativity associated with their physical appearance. It was reported that their physical appearance did not align with their mental state of being. This dysphoria was reported to have started in childhood and continued to develop as they entered the period of adolescence. After this, they started to make mental, physical, and social changes. Participants reported that they started to accept themselves as transgender women mentally and then started to make changes to their physical

appearance, and they reported that social transitions came naturally as they came out to family, friends, neighbours, or colleagues.

#### **4.6.1 Mental Process**

The development of gender identity and acceptance of self starts with mental processes. Participants reported that as children they felt a sense of confusion and their thoughts and emotions were not congruent to that which their environment expected of them. During their childhood, it was reported that dressing in women's clothing and wearing makeup were ways of expressing what they felt inside. As adolescents and young adults, this further developed as they explored what it meant to be a transgender woman. 1 participant described the difference between superficial and deeper-level aspects of the mental processes behind gender identity. She said that the superficial aspects included dressing as a woman to soothe what they felt internally, and as time went on, she realized there were deeper aspects to it. These included fitting into society, legally changing her documents, and feeling comfortable in her skin. It was described as taking a great deal of responsibility and mental strength to accept herself, and in this process came closer to establishing her gender identity as a transgender woman.

#### **4.6.2 Physical Process**

The physical process of developing gender identity was mainly identified as medical and cosmetic procedures. Medically, it was reported that Hormone Replacement Therapy was the first step in physically transitioning into a woman, followed by surgeries such as tracheal shaves, facial feminization, and gender confirmation/reassignment surgery. The participants reported that these medical changes helped them accept themselves and feel more comfortable in their bodies. Participants explained that the physical dysphoria caused by conflicts in gender identity caused self-hate and often made them feel conscious of themselves, all of which automatically resolved when they started physically transitioning. The cosmetic procedures were mainly concerned with laser treatments for facial hair removal, and application of makeup if desired. These again were described as additional procedures that made them feel validated and more in tune with their feelings. 3 participants reported that it may seem superficial, but these additional physical changes and processes felt like healing their inner child that always desired feminine things.

#### **4.6.3 Social Process**

According to Sevelius "gender affirmation is a process by which people are affirmed in their gender identity through the process of social interactions" (2013). The changes that took place socially were the third major aspect identified when looking into the development of gender identity. All participants described their journeys in presenting themselves to societies as transgender women and the changes it brought along with it. The common thing that all participants described was the acceptance they received from friends, and the hesitance of acceptance they felt from family. In socially transitioning, 8 participants described feeling uncomfortable in public for some time after they transitioned, that is dressing as women, and going by the pronouns of she/her. They said that people often stared at time, and pointed fingers. This made them conscious and uneasy, but as time went on they reported that they learned to deal with the public by just not caring. Some of these participants also reported avoiding situations such as family gatherings, and certain friend groups where they felt they were not welcome. Apart from these 8, 2 other participants described feeling good about themselves and experiencing positive emotions. They said that they were addressed as women by the general public, such as auto drivers, shopkeepers, peers, and acquaintances. This brought about more confidence in them, and they were able to move about freely in public with little or no fear or feelings of uneasiness. From the difference in these experiences, we can see the important role society has to play in accepting transgender people and making them feel more

comfortable and welcome. Their reaction can either make a person feel conscious or confident.

#### **4.7 Self-Efficacy**

According to Bandura “Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments” (1977). Here in this study, it was observed that the participants seem to have a high level of self-efficacy. The majority of the participants described their experiences of accepting their gender identity as difficult due to unsupportive environmental factors. Yet they persisted and believed in their capability to achieve their desired sense of self and its physical manifestation. On inquiry, 7 participants described feeling alone in their transition but held on to the hope that their hard work would pay off in them being able to live life as women. 1 participant elaborated on how after getting kicked out of her home she lived on the streets for a while, but even in such a situation used her educational status to her advantage. She managed to get a stable job, set up a home, and build a life in Bangalore from scratch. While she faced difficulties, she reported that she knew she had it in her to achieve great things, which was her driving force to keep working hard, building a career, and managing to cope with isolation and life in a new city.

##### **4.7.1 Independence**

It was observed that in 8 participants, moving away from home and gaining independence increased their self-efficacy. Even while facing challenges such as financial setbacks, isolation, and family conflicts, their independence served as a means of shutting out negative feedback and putting all their motivation toward building their lives from scratch. They were able to educate themselves, find jobs, set up homes, and start afresh away from chaos and conflict.

##### **4.7.2 Resilience and Perseveration**

Resilience can be described as a person's capability to withstand or bounce back from difficult situations. In this study, it was noted that the participants had a high level of resilience as they were able to overcome challenges and setbacks by themselves, continue to find solutions and achieve success with little to no help from external sources. Some examples of these were changing their legal documents to reflect their gender identity, setting up homes by themselves, financial independence, and trying to maintain good mental health and well-being. Their level of perseveration was also high as they continued to overcome difficulties despite failing to reach the desired outcome on their first or second attempt.

##### **4.7.3 Age and Experience**

Age and Experience were noted as contributing factors to self-efficacy among the participants. They described that as they aged and entered their 20s, they were more confident and sure about themselves than when they were teenagers. 1 participant reported that she used to be scared and unsure of herself up to 17/18, but as she reached the age of 21/22, she was much more confident and sure about her capabilities and aspirations. Experience was another significant factor in building self-efficacy, as it was observed that going through challenges and learning how to come out of these made them stronger and more confident individuals. 3 participants reported that it was their setbacks that made them stronger and increased their belief in their capabilities to overcome any challenge. 2 participants said that the backlash they faced from their families was the driving force that led them to strive for high achievement as they wanted to prove that they could be just as successful as a woman as compared to if they decided to continue living as men.

#### 4.8 Medical Aspects

According to Papadopoulos et al., “Medical and psychological treatments have a positive effect on well-being and bring improvements for transgender women while reducing the risk of developing psychopathologies” (2020). The medical procedures that come along with a gender transition have been observed to play a very significant role in the lives of the participants. The main medical procedure that people who undergo male-to-female transitions is hormone replacement therapy which blocks the production of testosterone, taking supplements to increase the level of oestrogen, and undergoing surgeries such as breast augmentations, tracheal shaves, and facial feminization surgeries. Here in this study, all 10 participants were undergoing hormone replacement therapy, and out of these 10, 2 had undergone surgeries related to male-to-female transition. The participants described the positives and negatives that come along with a medical transition.

##### 4.8.1 HRT as a Catalyst

Hormone Replacement Therapy was noted as a catalyst in helping the participants accept and form their gender identity. All 10 narrated that on starting hormone replacement therapy they noticed physical changes in their bodies such as smoother skin, lesser muscle mass, breast tissue development, and fat redistribution in their chest and thighs, which all made them feel positive about their bodies and aided them in their transition to womanhood. These changes were noticed a year after they started medically transitioning and were reported to have increased their acceptance of self. 3 participants said that these physical changes brought about positive emotions in contrast to the negative dysphoria they had been previously experiencing in terms of their physical appearance. According to Kraemer et al. “postoperative patients felt high levels of attractiveness and felt more confident in their skin” (2007).

##### 4.8.2 Alignment of Real and Ideal Self

The changes that take place during and post a medical transition were observed to bring about positive changes in the participants. For starters, they felt less dysphoric about their bodies and felt it was more in line with what they felt emotionally. Many described situations in which they previously felt hate toward their body, but post hormone replacement therapy they felt better about that aspect, for example, 1 participant said that after HRT she did not hate her upper body as much due to the changes that were brought about by the medication.

##### 4.8.3 Side Effects and Financial Constraints

The downside to undergoing hormone replacement therapy was also explored in this study. Participants reported that there are side effects such as mood swings, which cause emotional disturbances from time to time. It was also reported that it's expensive and due to financial constraints, not every transgender woman can access it. Participants also said that as they were supporting themselves financially it sometimes became a burden to constantly take care of medical bills. They also expressed concern for transgender women from lower socio-economic backgrounds who cannot afford such treatments.

#### 4.9 Physical Dysphoria

According to McGuire et al., “two concepts to focus on were body dissatisfaction and body satisfaction. They identified self-image and social distress were related to body dissatisfaction, whereas self-acceptance and social acceptance were related to body image satisfaction” (2016).

The next area of this research focuses on body positivity. The aim was to explore the concept of body positivity, and what the participants made of this phenomenon. This research also aims to explore the level of body positivity that was present amongst the participants and the factors that contributed to this sense

of satisfaction or lack of satisfaction. The physical dysphoria that was described by the participants was their uneasiness with their bodies, and this dissatisfaction greatly increased after attaining puberty. All 10 participants said that as children they were unhappy with the way they were addressed and wanted to be identified as a girl. They also realized this difference in the sexes when they faced backlash for expressing themselves as the opposite sex. This dysphoria with their physical self continued throughout childhood and got worse during the adolescent period.

#### **4.9.1 Body Dysphoria in Relation to Puberty**

There seemed to be a heightened sense of dysphoria on attainment of puberty. It was observed that most participants when developing the characteristics of grown men, such as a deeper voice, body and facial hair, broader chests and shoulders, and the development of the male sex organs had a heightened sense of physical dysphoria. All of them described childhood experiences and wanting to identify with the opposite sex, but on reaching puberty this got worse, and participants described more feelings of hate toward self. Most participants described an increased sense of consciousness and feeling uneasy. They described not wanting to talk loudly for fear of sounding too masculine. It was noted that these observable changes made them awkward in social situations and were cause for isolation early during their teenage years. They also reported making changes such as the removal of facial and body hair to feel more feminine. And 7 participants reported developing unhealthy/poor eating habits to cope with bodily changes such as their chests and shoulders broadening. This was done to achieve a more feminine figure according to the participants and to an extent helped them, but was not a permanent solution to the physical dysphoria they felt regarding the changes brought about by male puberty.

#### **4.10 Influence of the Male Gaze**

According to Mofradidoost & Abolghasemi, “body image concerns among transgender participants were significantly higher when compared to those of the cisgender participants and transwomen especially showed higher scores. It was also found that body image concerns regardless of transgender or cisgender identity were higher in the female gender” (2010).

The male gaze stems from the feminist theory and explores how women are viewed and portrayed by heterosexual men for their pleasure. It can include sexualizing women, and viewing them as an object rather than a human. In this research, it is observed that the male gaze has shaped how participants view themselves, and could also help in understanding the reason for them wanting to conform to societal standards of beauty that are set for women. Through the data obtained, it can be observed that standards that are set by men are still being used by women (transgender women) to measure their beauty, in turn, affects the way they view their bodies and the level of satisfaction that comes along with it.

##### **4.10.1 Early Childhood Experiences**

Early childhood experiences play a vital role in shaping the personality and identity of a person. In this research, it has been noted that childhood experiences contributed to the level of body positivity that today exists amongst the participants. When asked about their satisfaction with their bodies and what shaped this understanding that this is how they are meant to look, participants described always having this idea that men are strong and tall, whereas women are weak and soft. They described women from the view of the male gaze and tried to live up to these standards. 4 participants said that from a very early age, their parents would often make the boy children lift heavy boxes, suitcases, and furniture around the house, whereas the girl children were made to cook and clean the house. These differences gave them an idea that women are weak and not capable of physical labour, and the understanding that living up to these

standards would make them more of a woman. 1 participant reported seeing the power dynamics in her family and how it was always her father who always had the last say. Growing up, she said she too felt that without the approval of a man, a decision cannot be made.

#### **4.10.2 Eating Habits**

According to Jones et al. “body dissatisfactions play a significant part in the distress that is experienced by trans people” (2016). Amongst the sample taken for this study, 7 reported having unhealthy eating habits from the time they attained puberty. On further inquiry, it was found that this need to be thin and slim came from them observing how men around them preferred to date slimmer women. All 7 reported that the obsession with a slim body was partly for male attention, and said they felt validated when they got it. It was also reported by 5 participants that they felt the need to have a slim body for themselves because the society in which they grew up glorifies slimmer women, and this caused them to think they would be accepted as women if they were slimmer or skinnier, leading to the development of poor eating habits.

#### **4.10.3 Conformity**

Carrying on from the previous sub-theme, living in a society that cherished women with slim bodies, these transgender women naturally felt that to gain more acceptance, conforming to the standards set for cis-gendered women would eventually bring them closer to being recognized as women. It was also reported that their peer groups and partners would often compliment them when they lost weight or appeared thinner, reinforcing this idea that slimness was more feminine. It did not occur to them that these standards were set by men, and they kept trying every method possible that got them closer to the male perspective of the female sex.

#### **4.10.4 Media and Societal Standards**

Media and the societal standards that are set for women's beauty were additional factors that were observed to influence the participant's view of self and satisfaction with the body. 8 participants reported that the content they viewed in the media such as movies, TV series, and social media all affected the way they viewed themselves and their level of body satisfaction. It was noted that how women were portrayed reinforced their idea of the ideal beauty type which included being slim, tall, and fair. They explained how they understood these beauty standards are unrealistic for cis-gendered women, and even more unrealistic for transgender women, yet they try to come as close to it as possible. It was also reported that society's views of what is considered beautiful, such as having a rounded yet slim body impacted how they viewed their bodies and the level of satisfaction they felt with it.

#### **4.11 Existential Angst**

According to Sánchez & Vilain, “individuals experienced perceived fear of how their identity as a transsexual person would affect their life. Their main finding focussed on self-esteem, and fear concerning an identity of transsexuality” (2009). Existential Angst is also sometimes referred to as existential anxiety, and this feeling is usually negative. It arises when one suddenly has an amount of freedom and responsibility and this term is commonly used by existential thinkers. This feeling can be caused by multiple events, including change which brings about questions of one's safety and security, and the need to be able to adapt to new situations and surroundings. The participants described feelings of fear and uncertainty that come along with a male-to-female transition. It was also noted that this dread made them examine the difference in the lived experience of a man and a woman.



#### 4.11.1 The Female Body

The experience of living in the female body was another area that was explored in this study. The participants reported feeling conflicted yet satisfied to be in a female body. 3 participants reported only experiencing positive emotions and said they felt happy and were finally feeling like their bodies were in line with their minds. The emotions ranged from content with the appearance in the mirror, joy with finally feeling like a woman, and excitement about the prospects that lay ahead of them. On the other hand, the rest of the participants did not have quite the same positive reaction. They reported emotions of confusion, anxiousness, guilt, and criticality. The reasons behind these are as follows. The participants reported feeling confused when they looked in the mirror and saw someone different from who they were used to seeing all these years. They questioned the meaning of their lives, and what exactly the purpose of this transition was. They also reported often feeling anxious, especially when in public as they noticed people staring. 2 participants also reported incidents in which strangers approached them and point blank asked them if they were men or women. They often felt conscious and had a difficult time navigating social interactions after incidents such as these. 1 participant reported that she had been approached by multiple men who allegedly had a fetish for sex with transgender women and would make inappropriate passes at her, heightening her level of discomfort in public situations. 3 participants reported feeling guilty over the fact that they had disappointed their family in giving up their male body for a female one and perceived this new body to have a lesser value as compared to the old one. 8 participants reported being critical of themselves and said that as men they were not as bothered about their looks, but as women, the pressure to fit in was perceived to be much higher. As a consequence, they strived for perfection and unrealistic standards that would make them look more feminine.

#### 4.11.2 Character Development

In this research, it was found that the participants went through some form of character development post the stage of dissatisfaction with their physical appearance. It was reported by 4 participants that while the gender dysphoria made them critical at times toward themselves, after hormone replacement therapy, cosmetic procedures, and lifestyle changes they started to feel more positive toward their bodies. 1 participant recalled a phase in her life where she would sit and cry in front of a mirror for hours at a stretch because of the negative emotions attached to her physical appearance. However, after this phase of her life, she said she learned to accept herself, and it made her stronger for who she is. She underwent HRT and other such procedures, and understood as a transgender woman there will only be many changes she will be able to make, yet she should find a way to be happy in life. She reported this being a breakthrough for her, and that rough phase helped her develop her strength.

#### 4.12 Validation

The theme of Validation concerning body positivity was generated, as the participants described feeling more positive and confident about themselves, on receiving external validation. It could stem from their need to be heard and understood. Right from childhood they expressed their wishes to be a girl and were rejected by their parents, and as adults, they continue to be rejected by society when they expressed their desire to live as women, which is where validation comes in. Participants reported feeling good about themselves and their bodies when they were addressed as women. 1 participant said that she felt especially confident when she landed a modelling gig and was asked to play the role of a woman. This reinforced her belief of being viewed as a woman by the world around and outside of her head. It was also noted that perfectionism played a role in internal validation.

#### 4.12.1 Recognition and Power

When looking into the part validation plays in the lives of the participants, it's also important to see where these needs stem from. The need for power and the need for recognition make validation essential. 1 participant reported that after getting kicked out of her home, she was told by her family that she would not be able to make it out in the world. They even gave her a choice to stay at home, provided she denied her identity as a transgender woman and remained a man all her life. This drove her to work extra hard, get a good job, and gain power. After availing of a promotion at work, she was given a car to drop and pick her up from and to places. This car served as a symbol of power and won her back their respect. After seeing that she was successful and recognized by the world outside, they were kinder to her and offered her a place to stay in their house. Her need for recognition drove her to do better at work.

#### 4.12.2 Perfectionism

Perfectionism was a character trait that was seen in 9 of the participants who were interviewed. They reported feeling validated when their internal needs were met. For example, 1 of the participants reported that she felt more positive towards her body when she exercised and maintained a particular shape of her body, which she perceived to be feminine. Another participant reported that by undergoing cosmetic procedures and applying face makeup, she felt more like a woman and in touch with her emotions. Participants also reported dressing a certain way to be able to pass for a cis-gendered woman. All these perfectionist behaviours required time, energy, and money from the participants, which they were more than willing to invest to attain their ideal body image and increase feelings of positivity toward their bodies.

To summarize, the themes that were identified through the semi-structured interviews were grouped into three categories based on the perceptions of the participants. They were Self-Acceptance, Gender Identity, and Body Positivity. The themes under Self-Acceptance were Influences on Self-Acceptance, Significant Conflicts, Challenges Encountered, Coping Strategies, and Embracing Acceptance. The themes identified under the Gender Identity were Development of Gender Identity, Self-Efficacy, and Medical Aspects. The themes identified under Body Positivity were Physical Dysphoria, Influence of the Male Gaze, Existential Angst, and Validation. These themes explain the lived experience of the participants as transgender women on their journey of self-acceptance, the development of their gender identity, and their perceptions and sense of body positivity.

### 5 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to understand the lived experience of transgender women by exploring their journey of self-acceptance, development of gender identity, and perceptions of body positivity. This research followed a qualitative approach, and the data was obtained by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 participants who identified as transgender women. The participants had to fill out a consent form after which they were contacted, and data was collected via telephone interviews. The questions aimed to explore their journeys of self-acceptance which gave insights into the influences that played a role in their life, conflicts, and challenges they encountered, coping strategies they adopted, and how they finally embraced self-acceptance. The Influence on Self-Acceptance was identified to be childhood experiences, representation in the media, feminist literature, environmental factors, and believing in a higher power. There were Significant Conflicts that were identified which were in the area of feeling exhausted and fulfilled at the same time while accepting themselves and dealing with isolation. The fear of passing as a woman and living in a patriarchal society posed challenges that were

encountered by the participants. The coping strategies that the participants used in the journey of self-acceptance were having strong social support, living a private life, using distractions such as work, and avoiding processing their emotions. Finally, how they embraced acceptance was studied, and it was found that they experienced happiness and peace, and finally felt like they were living. The second area of study was gender identity, and the questions probed answers on the development of their gender identity, the self-efficacy they experience, and the medical aspects that are involved in a gender transition. The development of gender identity consisted of three aspects that were mental processes, physical changes, and social acceptance. Self-efficacy was seen to promote independence, resilience, and perseverance, and age and experience were noted to contribute to these factors. Then the Medical Aspects were explored which understood hormone replacement therapy as a catalyst, the alignment of the real and ideal self by a medical transition, the side effects of HRT, and the financial constraints of medically transitioning. The final area of study was body positivity, and the interviews gave an understanding of the physical dysphoria that they face, the influence of the male gaze, the existential angst they have experienced, and the role internal and external validation plays in their life. Physical dysphoria was something experienced by all the participants and it seemed to increase at the time of puberty. It was also observed that the male gaze shaped their early childhood experiences and sense of self, eating habits, their need for conformity, and media and societal standards, which all influenced the way they viewed their bodies, and made them more satisfied or dissatisfied with their physical appearances. There was also existential angst which was identified when they started living in the female body, and some reported a sense of character development. The role of validation was explored, and it was reported that recognition and power were their main sources of external validation, and internal validation was achieved by striving for perfection.

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