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Crossing the Gendered Divide: Male Students' Choice of Non-Traditional College Major

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**Background.** Women are encouraged to enter traditional 'male' careers because they typically command better pay and higher status (Buschol, et al., 2014). However, society is less favorable toward men choosing 'female' occupations (Simpson, 2005). Research shows that often men working in female-dominated fields experience disapproval of friends and families, role strain, and questions about their masculinity (Karpova, Garrin, & Lee, 2014). To understand motivations of men entering non-traditional occupations, scholars investigated perspectives of males working in seemingly all female-dominated fields (e.g., nurses, social workers, teachers, librarians, and flight attendants). Even though apparel (fashion, retail) industry has been historically dominated by women and viewed as woman's work, no research has investigated how and why some men choose a career in this traditionally female profession. To address the gap, the **research purpose** was to explore men's choice of apparel academic major and, subsequently, a non-traditional career.

Theories explaining career decisions focus on psychological/personal or societal influencers. Holland's trait theory (1982) explains the 'fit' between personal characteristics and career. Social self is the center of circumscription and compromise theory that stresses the importance of gender in the career decision-making process (Gottfredson, 1981). In the realm of non-traditional career choice, Simpson (2015) proposed a typology to explain the dynamics of males entering 'female' occupations. Based on theoretical background, this research explored: (a) dynamics of career entry, (b) major motivators (personal, social), and (c) career orientation (extrinsic vs. intrinsic rewards) of students who selected apparel as their academic major.

**Method.** A qualitative method was chosen to explore men's lived experiences of selecting apparel as an academic major in college and preparing to pursue a career in the traditionally female-dominated field. Phenomenological research tradition guided the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This tradition allows exploring the structure and essence of a phenomenon experienced by a group of people from their own perspective (Denzim & Lincoln, 1994).

Data was collected through in-depth individual interviews. Twenty-two male students enrolled in an apparel program at a Midwestern university were interviewed for this research, which was approved by the Institutional Review Board. An interview protocol was used to ensure a systematic approach to data collection. Interviews lasted between one and two hours, were audiotaped and later transcribed. The data was coded by two researchers. Spiggle's (1994)

analysis and interpretation stages were used to allow major themes to emerge from the data itself to answer the research questions.

**Results.** Three topical areas emerged from the data analyses and interpretation. The first topical area explored the dynamics of male students entering the apparel major. Based on Simpson's (2005) typology, 18 participants (82%) were "settlers": they transferred to the apparel program from various 'masculine' majors such as business, engineering, and architecture. Only four participants were "seekers", who entered the college as apparel majors. None of the participants were "finders", who 'fell' into the major by chance, or as 'the second best choice'. The themes of the first topical area show participant dissatisfaction with their old majors and a search for a major and career with a better 'fit'.

The second topical area elucidates motivations behind the participants' decisions to major in apparel. All participants referred to their early experiences associated with apparel, fashion, or appearance as "have always loved" or "always enjoyed." Further, many noted special abilities related to apparel ("putting together outfits", being "best dressed in high school", forecasting fashion trends, etc.). Social influencers were not prominent in the decision process. The themes in the third topical area present students' career orientation. All participants stressed intrinsic rewards (job satisfaction, "be happy with what I do every day", self-expression) and deemphasized the role of extrinsic career-related benefits (high salary, status).

**Conclusions and implications.** This exploration of male apparel students' decisions to pursue this female-dominated college major provides practical and theoretical contributions for understanding men's career entry, career orientation, and underlying reasons to declare a non-traditional career. Based on the research results, we proposed a theoretical framework for explaining non-traditional career choices made by male students. The framework brings together Holland's (1982) trait theory, Gottfredson's (1981) circumscription and compromise theory, and Simpson's typology of career entry to explain men's choice of female-dominated major. The research findings have important implications for future research as well as recruitment and retention strategies for apparel programs to foster a greater gender diversity of student body.

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