

Chapter 2

Design of the Study

Abstract In 2013, the *E-males* study was launched to increase the visibility of (and meet the research gaps on) FtM transgender Australians and their needs, with a view to informing policy. This chapter describes the study's two design components: an anonymous online survey which gathered basic data through quantitative and qualitative questions, and an anonymous online discussion-board forum which facilitated deeper discussions of the key themes with the research team and other respondents. This design allowed participants to give feedback on, and co-create, the topics and questions—to increase their ownership of the project and how they were to be presented. Participants were recruited through a range of recruitment techniques, including paid advertising, support groups and services, Facebook posts, e-lists, media interviews and so on. The study's design and recruitment processes were informed by a reference group including a diverse range of FtM transgender Australian individuals, and feedback from key organisations.

Keywords Transgender • FtM • Research • Study • Methodology • Method • Internet • Survey • Blog • Forum

I'm very open about it. I feel if people are willing to learn about gender identity, I'm willing to share what I know (Draconem, FtM transgender, 24 years).

Reference Group

In the past, FtM transgender Australians have been a difficult group to reach out to, due to issues of visibility and a lack of widely known social support groups and services. However the contemporary context facilitated several opportunities to reach out to people in this demographic, which the researchers were keen to take advantage of in order to develop the field. Opportunities to make contact abounded through the increased range of specifically FtM transgender focussed (and transgender and GLBTIQ) social groups, support groups, services and media. There were also prospects for making contact through new media technologies and social

networking sites, advocacy networks, gender clinics and individual rights champions. To ensure that these opportunities were used respectfully, we formed a small informal reference group of individual representatives from the FtM transgender community who advised us on the name of the study, and the best and most respectful ways to proceed with various elements of the *E-males* project in their view.

Overall Approach

The research team used an emancipatory approach—aiming to conduct research on, with and for the FtM transgender community. We aimed to serve social justice goals for the community (rather than simply to generate knowledge for its own sake). The reference group was particularly helpful in discussing our initial ideas about what those goals might be. The project was particularly geared towards topics relevant to legislative and policy advocacy that have emerged locally and internationally in recent years, and envisioning service and resource needs for the community. In order to gather useful data for such ends, a mixed methods approach was used.

Data Collection Tools

A combination of an online survey and an online blog forum were used to collect the data. The survey questionnaire contained both forced-choice (quantitative) and open-ended (qualitative) questions.

The E-Males Survey

The survey was mainly used to gather basic descriptive data on the demographics, identities, and experiences of participants in relation to their gender identity. This tool was specifically designed to be completed in a short space of time—approximately 10–15 min. It was anonymous, and the responses were visible only to the participant and the researchers. The key topics explored in the survey included basic information such as age, background, life circumstances, employment status, identity and so on. Early drafts of the survey were reviewed by the reference group, members of key organisations embedded in the FtM community and contacts in our extensive transgender networks. The survey design is appended (Appendix A). The survey was hosted by UNE, using the program Qualtrics. It had a URL that included a university-based web address.

The E-Males Blog Forum

The blog forum was contrastingly used for deeper explorations of key themes over time, and for interactive engagement with the research team and other participants. This tool was specifically designed to be used and re-used for longer spaces of time as needed—completion times varied greatly. Dependent on the level of engagement with both the key research topics and the *E-males* blogging community a participant wished to have, a respondent could for example answer one question quickly and skip the others, respond to a few questions and suggest some extra ones, or perhaps answer all the topics extensively and come back to engage with other peoples' answers repeatedly throughout the duration of the study. The forum included a main section (for people over 18) and a separate section (for people aged 16–17). Several members of the team moderated and reviewed the posts on the forum daily, and where participants wanted a question included or revised in the study for example, any reasonable effort was made to adapt the study to the needs and visions of the participants to increase their ownership of the study, and to enhance control over their own representation.

The key topics explored further on the forum included gender identity, coming out, the impact of transitioning on wellbeing, sexuality, life satisfaction, health care, mental health, services, social inclusion, education, employment opportunities, community, legal issues and others. Early drafts of the forum were reviewed by the reference group, members of key organisations embedded in the FtM community and contacts in our extensive transgender networks. However, the forum was also modified in line with the suggestions of the forum participants themselves; one example of a theme that was added at the request of participants was the section on family/parenting. The forum design is appended (Appendix B). The forum was hosted by UNE, using the program Moodle. It had a URL that included a university-based web address.

Terminology Use in the Study

This study at times used terms in specific ways. The use of the criteria that participants be FtM transgender was broadly conceived—we used the concept as an ***umbrella term*** to cover a range of people who might come under this category. For example, we aimed to include those born intersex (rather than only those who were assigned a strictly female sex at birth as such), those who identified as genderqueer or a trans-man (rather than only those who identified strictly as male as such), those who had not/did not wish to/could not transition legally/socially/medically (rather than only those who had followed a very specific transition journey). We wished to support the diversity of individuals who self-identified within the category, regardless of the limitations and assumptions that have sometimes been placed upon it by psychologists, doctors and researchers in the past.

Within the questionnaire and blog forum, we sometimes used terms denoting body parts interchangeably. For example, we used chest/breasts, and front hole/boy hole/vagina to indicate particular parts, in awareness that different individuals might experience a body part in different ways related to gender identity. This sort of language use was achieved on advice of both the reference group, and later some individual participants. We wished to support the varying framings of bodies accessed by the Australian FtM transgender community, and sought to include both participants who were more, or less, exposed to such terms through supplying alternatives and (at times) definitions when needed.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained for this project from the University of New England Human Research Ethics Committee. An important ethical consideration was the level of freedom and control participants would have in engaging with the study. All participants had the right not to answer any (or all) questions in the survey or forum, the right to withdraw, and the ability to comment on questions or advise the researchers on their wording and so on. The participants also enjoyed opportunities to suggest alternative lines of questioning or topics they felt should be discussed (either in the 'Other' section of the forum, or within the topic areas). Several participants utilised the opportunity to make suggestions about how FtM transgender Australians should/could be constructed in this report and why this would/would not be useful.

As another measure to allow participants extra control over how they were constructed, we afforded all forum bloggers the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym. They could choose words, false names or numbers of their own making, which could be used to express their gender adequately and appropriately, or perhaps to particularly offer ambiguity/extra anonymity (in the case of numbers). However, because some Australian FtM transgender individuals are well known to each other, we included a request for respect for the need for confidentiality on the forum; requesting participants not to harass each-other into revealing their forum names off-line, or their real identities online, on the off-chance they might somehow recognise each-others' stories.

Another key consideration was the protection of all participants from experiencing difficulties in the process of completing the survey and/or the blog, particularly around the mental health questions and the reflections on what could have been difficult life periods. We were careful to be respectful in our wording of questions, and the details of key support services were provided through the survey and forum. In addition, trained psychologists were available to assist people through the moderation of sites by the *E-males* research team. We also protected all participants from abusive posts by moderating each individual post before it was published, and whilst this meant posts did not immediately appear on the blogs, it ensured there were no abusive/transphobic posts.

The younger participants (aged 16–17) were not required to seek parental approval for their participation in the study. This decision was made in recognition

of the lack of support—and sometimes discrimination and abuse—that research has shown some young gender questioning people experience in the home. We felt it would be irresponsible to require young people to have to disclose their gender identity in order to participate, and so we ensured the design of the study considered these participants' vulnerability and capacity to give consent, and provided clear information about the research. The young people were separated from the older group (aged 18+) on the blog forum, in recognition of the need to protect younger participants from more adult discussions of key themes such as sexuality, their different experiences/life stages, and also to facilitate separate moderation for the group by experts on youth issues.

Sampling

The target group was Australian FtM transgender people aged 16 and over. Participants needed to self-select to be part of the research. We actively endeavoured to include people from all states and territories of Australia, and from a range of FtM transgender networks and groupings (including those with varying understandings of what FtM identity can comprise).

E-Males Concept and Logo

In celebration of the opportunities to contact FtM transgender Australians through modern technologies, and of the online supports and communities now available, we named this study *E-males*. This name was also used for its interesting play on the words used to denote sex and gender, modern identity and an emphasis on modern males. A logo was also produced in the form of a blue male scientific symbol emerging from a faded female scientific symbol, signifying male identity with a twist, sex/gender transition, affirmation of masculinity and other possible meanings that could be relevant to a diverse range of FtM people. While we knew some participants would identify squarely as men, we felt that the gender history they'd experienced was certainly in focus in the study, and so we needed to indicate this in the logo. This option for the logo (Fig. 2.1) was most widely supported by the reference group and our networks.

Fig. 2.1 The *E-males* logo



Recruitment and Promotion

The survey and forum were opened in April 2013, when active recruitment began. They were closed at the end of July 2013, after a total of fourth months. We used a range of media to promote the project: FtM transgender Groups/Networks/Services, mainstream/GLBTIQ/FtM transgender media (print, electronic and radio), social networking sites, websites, e-lists, emails, gender clinics, rights groups, individual advocates and rights champions, and word-of-mouth.

Press Release/Media

A press release describing the project was designed by marketing staff and sent out to key mainstream and alternative media, including print and radio. The project was featured in several print news stories, special features in magazines and live radio interviews (Fig. 2.2).

Internet, E-Lists, Networking

Some key Australian FtM transgender groups (and related transgender, genderqueer and other GLBTIQ groups) organise their contact online through websites and e-lists. It was therefore important that recruitment processes developed new online



The E-Male Project: An online exploration of the experiences of Australian female-to-male trans* people

- Are you afemale-to-male trans* person aged 16 and older?

- You can participate in the first Australian online study focused on the lived experiences of FTM.

- Participation is fully anonymous. Approved by UNE HREC HE12-229

http://unebcss.us2.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_9SOLx5W9hqUPcuV

Fig. 2.2 The *E-males* project advertised by LOTL

contacts to increase the potential reach of the survey. The researchers constructed information about the project that could be sent to groups, and then emailed and called people running these groups, sites and lists. This information was widely disseminated throughout the contacts of these groups and networks. For example, FtM Australia was able to contact over 800 people on their list. Transmen Australia, DUDE Magazine, the National LGBTIQ Health Alliance, Ygender and others also gave the project wonderful support.

Social Networking Sites

Due to the popularity of social networking as means for sharing information and facilitating community contact for FtM transgender people, we created a Facebook page and also circulated posts on the project through online pages, sites and groups. The “I’m Transgender Facebook” Page, Trans Health Australia Page, Open Doors Page, Australian Transgender Proud, Trans Panther SA, Transgender Victoria (TGV) Page, GSMA Page and many others featured our posts.

Gender Centres

Gender Centres around Australia displayed leaflets and posters with information about the project, or passed on information to interested community members. We also bought some paid advertisements where available. For example, Fig. 2.3 shows project information featured on the Zoe Belle Gender Centre’s website.

More Information

If you are FTM and 16 and over, you can now participate in the first Australian study exclusively focusing on Female-to-Male trans*people. Complete discussion blog. The questions and discussions will focus on topics such as your sexual orientation, your experiences about disclosing your preferred gender and mental health, experiences with healthcare services, and other aspects of your life. This study has been approved by the University of New England.

http://unebccss.us2.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_95QLx5W9hgUPcuV/

Many members of the E-Males research team have previously engaged in legal and educational advocacy.



[Flag ad](#)

Fig. 2.3 An *E-males* advertisement on the Zoe Belle Gender Centre website

Data Analysis

Data were downloaded from the survey site and then transposed into quantitative (SPSS v10) and qualitative (Leximancer, Excel) computer programs. Descriptive and comparative statistical analyses were undertaken, and thematic analyses of written responses. All significant differences in the report are calculated at 0.05, however, to ensure the accessibility of the report, specific statistical results are not presented here. The journeys of many *E-males* participants are also displayed within this report.

Female-to-Male (FtM) Transgender People's
Experiences in Australia
A National Study

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2015, XIX, 154 p. 28 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-13828-2