



Coping by cross-dressing: An exploration of exercise clothing and consequences for obese heterosexual women

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Editorial Note

Over the past decade participation in physical activity for adult women has decreased while body size has increased. Overweight and obese individuals are considered the majority demographic in the United States; however, plus-sized clothing sales are minimal in comparison to other segments. Furthermore, there is little known about the clothing practices of obese women who engage in physical activity. The current study addresses this research gap by exploring obese heterosexual women's clothing practices for exercise, with an emphasis on what women wear, their perceived choices, alternatives and satisfaction. Lowe and Anspach's notion of freedom of dress was the guiding conceptual framework for in-depth interviews with (n=56) obese women. A majority of the women perceived having limited freedom in dress, and reported cross-dressing in men's clothing to engage in physical activity, which resulted in a perceived lack of gender expression. Cross-dressing is wearing clothing of the opposite sex and gender expression; it is a way in which a person acts to communicate gender within a given culture. Women in this study indicated and the authors discuss that as clothing size increases, perceived freedom in dress decreases. In order to increase freedom in dress, our participants tended to believe that it is their personal responsibility to lose weight.

Weight bias

Numerous studies have made clear that persons perceived to be overweight or obese are responded to negatively. Jutel (2006) notes

that how researchers use the terms overweight and obese has recently shifted.

Her meta-analysis of articles in the Pubmed database from 1964–2003 shows the words were originally used in research as descriptors of bodily stature.

In the 1990s the terms shifted to signify disease rather than to imply physical size.

Jutel argues that discursively denoting overweight and obesity as diseases and “epidemics” (2006, p. 2270) frame fat bodies as non-normative, illness bearing, and in need of pharmaceuticals, clinical monitoring, and/or surgical treatment.

Furthermore, defining the term fat solely based on an individual's BMI creates a proposed ingroup and outgroup and Cooper (2010) suggests this devalues fat bodies and places blame on the individual.

From this perspective of blame and personal responsibility, the theory of social conduct (Weiner 1995) helps explain how people socially respond to one another and may aid understanding in the root cause of clothing dissatisfaction for obese women.

Recently academics have worked to differentiate between sex, gender, and sexuality, as these are traditionally binary concepts (Vencato 2013).

Most commonly, sex (referring to biology, male or female) has been contrasted with gender (referring to culture expressions of masculinity or femininity).

In multiple ways, the body and its differentiating sexual characteristics (such as breasts) become a metaphor for sex (female), where clothing (pink skirt) and its cultural meanings become a metaphor for gender (feminine) Gender is socially constructed in conjunction with other factors of culture such as age, religion, race, ethnicity, body weight, size, and shape.

There are numerous definitions and perspectives with regard to crossdressing. Crossdressing is defined as wearing the clothing of the opposite sex Crossdressing is further defined by Hegland (1999) as, “those occasions when a male puts on feminine dress or a female adopts masculine dress for whatever purpose or to whatever effect” Male to female crossdressing provokes more anxiety than female to male crossdressing, due to the inequality of gendered power relations

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