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

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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.

Biography

Deborah A Christel completed her PhD in 2010 from Oregon State University and focuses her research on plus-size apparel and weight bias. She is an Assistant Professor at Washington State University in the Department of Apparel Merchandising, Design and Textiles.

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