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Hannah R. Gnegy

West Virginia University, hgnegy@mix.wvu.edu

Deborah A. Christel

Washington State University, deborah_christel@wsu.edu

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Enclothed Cognition: Professional Clothing Symbolism among Plus-Size Women Ages 18 to 24

Hannah R Gnegy, West Virginia University, USA
Deborah A. Christel, Washington State University, USA

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The plus size apparel market is currently valued at over \$9 billion (Schlossburg, 2015). Retailers traditionally define the plus-size demographic as being a woman in her 30s or 40s, who wears at least an American size 16 (Ellison, 2002; Schlossburg, 2015). However, this definition excludes a growing population of consumers, young plus-size women. In addition to casual apparel, young plus-size consumers find themselves in need of professional attire, as nearly 71% of women ages 20–24 are currently employed in professional industries (Morris, Gorham, Cohen & Huffman, 1996; The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). The theory of enclothed cognition suggests that articles of clothing hold symbolism in the garment itself (Adam & Galinsky, 2012). This process allows the wearer to internalize that symbolism, such as the feeling of authority when wearing a business suit. As most plus-size clothing brands target a middle-aged consumer, there are challenges faced by young plus-size consumers when seeking out professional attire, as personal definitions may not match enclothed symbolism found in the garments being offered.

A purposeful sample of six plus-size adult women ages 18 to 24, who were currently employed, pursuing employment, or enrolled in a professional degree program, and wore at least an American size 16 or above were recruited for this study. Parameters were selected based on their purposeful relation to the research, as well as through reviewing literature. Participants were asked to provide their personal definition of professional clothing, through semi-structured narrative interviews. Participants were then shown apparel items from the professional clothing section of four major plus-size retailers, and were asked if they would wear the outfit in a professional setting, in addition to discussing the pieces in terms of their personal definitions of professionalism. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Each transcript was coded using a comparative analysis approach and three emergent themes were discovered.

The themes discovered were: (1) personal influences in selecting professional clothing, (2) environmental factors in selecting professional clothing, and (3) perceived risk in enclothing. One participant stated that professional clothing offered in her size did not make her feel powerful, as the clothing was aimed at a demographic more advanced in their careers, and she would feel odd wearing it. Another participant frequently changed her response to whether a professional garment matched her personal style, such as, “I would wear it...maybe not.” The participant was unable to visualize herself in the garment, as it did not match her personal style, providing disconnect between the clothing’s symbolism and personal definitions. Participants

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also noted challenges in locating professional garments in their sizes at the stores they frequent. One participant noted that she liked “pencil skirts but I don’t [she didn’t] really wear them” as they were not available in her size at the retailers she personally identified with. Participants discussed a trade-off between choosing clothing that was “appropriate” and choosing clothing they felt defined their personal style. These personal and environmental constraints often led participants to have difficulty in connecting personal definitions of professional clothing to the items being offered by plus-size retailers, thus failing to complete the enclothed cognition process. This disconnect creates a perceived risk in enclothing themselves in garments that do not carry appropriate symbolism, as they do not feel they would be able to internalize the ideals held in the clothing currently offered.

These results suggest that young plus size women may find difficulty in internalizing the professional symbolism of a garment, as they are not yet able to encloth the garment as matching their own personal definitions of professionalism. By better understanding how this demographic engages with enclothing, researchers can work to sustain the uniqueness of the process. Retailers can utilize these differences to increase garment availability for young plus-size women, while offering pieces that reflect the personal definitions of symbolism held by these women, thus allowing them to complete the enclothing process more fluidly. Future research should aim to understand how plus-size women from different age demographics may encloth professional garments, in addition to creating strategies that would help plus-size retailers offer a wider variety of professional garments.

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