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**“OH, I’M NOT DOING
IT THEN.”**

**A REFLECTIVE STUDY ON
FEMALE PERCEPTIONS OF
PE UNIFORMS**

Lexi Rouse and Karen Broughton



INTRODUCTION

Research is multifaceted when discussing the possible reduction in physical activity participation among the youth population. Activity levels among children have remained relatively stable over the past five years (Sport England, 2023), yet they are still lower in females compared to males (Sport England, 2023, p.11). Participation in sport and physical activity begins to decline significantly as children develop into adolescents (Sport England, 2019, p.8), particularly among the female population (Women's Sport Foundation, 2024). Women in Sport (2022) reports that 59 per cent of females who enjoy sport "fall out of love" with taking part during their transition to high school.

Female participation in sport and physical activity has previously shown a strong link to clothing, particularly to school physical education (PE) uniform (Howard, 2023; Stephenson, 2016). The previous focus on PE kits has centred on their price (Henshaw, 2024), with legislation to reduce the use of branded items in an attempt to alleviate the cost to families (Long, 2024). Nonetheless, from the 1990s onwards, Scraton (1992) and Gertrud (1994) identified the detrimental effects of over-sexualised and stereotypical clothing for females, underscoring the longstanding nature of this challenge.

Historically, PE uniforms have been introduced and regulated primarily by adults (Cockburn and Clarke, 2002). Velija and Kumar (2009) have highlighted the adverse perceptions of students regarding decisions made solely by adults, advocating for student involvement in suggesting improvements to uniforms to enhance overall satisfaction. Velija and Kumar (2009) argue that the practice of adults unilaterally imposing uniform regulations perpetuates traditional gender-segregated norms, reminiscent of their own experiences as students and viewed as customary procedure.

As part of wider research into young people's perceptions of PE, research by the Youth Sport Trust (2023a) uncovered that 56 per cent of females stated that they would like more choice in what they can wear for PE, and 32 per cent of males requested more clothing options to be available (Youth Sport Trust, 2023b). As a result of these surveys, the Youth Sport Trust determined that more can be done to aid students and their PE experiences by devising a national standard for PE and sports kits in schools.

Further investigation has revealed recurring concerns about PE attire, especially among females. The reasons behind the lack of satisfaction with girls' PE uniforms are extensive. The feminine appearance and exclusive nature of PE kits have been of interest as the importance of gender evolves (Rickett *et al.*, 2021, p.9). Over-sexualisation has been a key finding by Howard (2023), Neary and McBride (2021), Scraton (2018), Paechter (2013) and Velija and Kumar (2009). Paechter (2013) states that such over-sexualisation fosters a sense of disconnection in girls from their own bodies, encouraging them to view their bodies as mere objects that perpetually fail to meet an ideal standard. Whilst aesthetics and tailoring of kit raise concerns, Women in Sport (2018) and Velija and Kumar (2009) also highlight the impractical nature of such uniforms for puberty and menstruation. This has been reaffirmed in a survey (Youth Sport Trust, 2023c, p.9) where 36 per cent of secondary school girls believe a more suitable PE kit should be available to them during their period.

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Whilst most reasoning for wanting PE uniforms to modernise may be pragmatic, the importance of feeling and looking good cannot be ignored. Bruun and Langkjær (2016, p.181) state that sportswear is no longer worn just for practicality – it has become part of the worldwide fashion industry – and it would be sensible to assume this perception exists within schools. Research by Scraton (2018, p.642) and Velija and Kumar (2009) identified the importance of body image for secondary age girls and suggest that PE kit is too revealing, especially when worn in front of male peers or male teachers. Similarly, Allender, Cowburn and Foster (2006, p.831) state that "ill-fitting" clothing and negative feelings regarding image are major barriers to participation in physical activity. This research expands on previous research findings, notably by Howard (2023), and investigates the suitability of school PE kits.

METHOD

Design

A qualitative research approach was chosen to explore participants' experiences of and attitudes towards PE kits, capturing the social meanings participants attach to them. This approach, known for generating rich insights (Hesse-Biber, 2016), was ideal for understanding motivations, beliefs and the social contexts shaping participants' views.

Participants

Convenience sampling (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016) was employed, recruiting sport students from a university. This allowed for quick and efficient data collection (Sedwick, 2013). While it did not ensure equal selection probability, it was practical given the availability of participants. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in sex, socio-economic status, race and religion. The focus group consisted of four female participants, considered appropriate to capture a range of perspectives (Breen, 2007).

Ethical procedures

Ethical approval was granted by the university ethics committee. Participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms during transcription. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time.

Data production

Participants were given the choice of composing drawings of their ideal PE kit or completing a story stem to allow their opinions to be shared in a creative manner (Boden, Larkin and Lyer, 2019) and encourage emotional and playful responses (Braun *et al.*, 2018). For the drawings, participants were given the option of creating their own or building on a gender-neutral template. The private nature of personal drawings and responses to story stems promotes equal opportunity to participate and voice opinions while removing influence from peers and “personal accountability” (Braun *et al.*, 2018, p.142). The results of these creative methods then shaped the focus group interviews.

Focus groups were chosen due to their capacity to generate rich, interactive discussions among participants, promoting the exploration of diverse viewpoints and collective meanings (Gundumogula and Gundumogula, 2020). The discussions were audio-recorded with participants’ consent and transcribed clean verbatim, emphasising the importance of interactive dialogue and collective interpretation in understanding participants’ perspectives.

Data analysis

The drawings and story stems were analysed thematically. Although analysing visual data without an art background can be complex, the researcher adopted a structured approach to interpret the drawings, noting key details and linking them to broader themes within the study. Data from the focus group discussions were also analysed using thematic analysis, enabling the researcher to systematically identify patterns, themes and relationships within the data. Prominent themes were gender inequity and neutrality, practicality and comfort.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Girls v boys: the inequity

Gender-neutral kit: addressing biological realities

When creating inclusive policies, it is important to distinguish between equality and equity (Skrla, McKenzie and Scheurich, 2009). While gender-neutral uniforms promote equality by offering the same options to all, the key question is whether this approach achieves equity, which requires recognising and accommodating diverse needs (Baily and Holmarsdottir, 2015). The challenge is determining whether equality or equity better fosters fairness and inclusivity.

Equal offers present challenges, particularly in accommodating the physiological differences between male and female bodies, which are especially pronounced during puberty (Haywood, 2003). Amber’s reflections shed light on the problematic nature of gender-neutral kit:

“We had shorts at my school... the same ones as primary school... In primary school they’re fine because I’m a little kid, but by the time I got to secondary school... I had really big thighs, really wide hips and a little waist... I couldn’t wear them because they would just go up my bum and it was embarrassing for me. It made other people uncomfortable, and it’s just like that’s not appropriate.”

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Amber’s experience highlights how standardised uniforms may overlook the diverse body shapes of female students, leading to discomfort, embarrassment and diminished self-esteem (McIntosh-Dalmedo *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, the wearing of PE kit was found to increase feelings of self-consciousness and lower body esteem if the kit was poorly fitting (Allender *et al.*, 2006), with body-conscious females reporting concerns relating to tight-fitting PE kits that reveal body shape (Velija and Kumar, 2009). Similarly, Sophie shared her opinions on tracksuit bottoms that were an option at her school:

“They weren’t flattering. They were kind of tailored for everyone. They weren’t just for girls or just for boys. Everyone had the same, so I think I never got them because I felt uncomfortable in them.”

This illustrates the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach, as noted by McIntosh-Dalmedo *et al.* (2023), which, while promoting equality, may overlook the specific needs of different genders. Furthermore, Norrish *et al.* (2012) found that uniforms have a greater psychological impact on females than males. Therefore, for adolescents to feel more body-confident, a positive body image (regardless of size or shape) is needed to improve attitudes towards physical activity (Abbott *et al.*, 2012). The issue of gender-neutral kit needs to be discussed in schools and with the young people it directly affects. A deeper exploration of gender-neutral uniforms should consider the biological differences between male and female bodies, particularly during adolescence (Haywood, 2003). Neglecting these differences in the pursuit of equality can inadvertently perpetuate inequity.

Gender disparities

Gender disparities in PE are well-established, especially from a pedagogical perspective (Stidder and Hayes, 2013). Despite progress in addressing gender parity in curricula and sports opportunities (Stidder, Lines and Keyworth, 2019), research on the impact of PE uniforms is scarce (Howard, 2023), limiting our understanding of the inequities that students face.

Findings from this focus group reveal specific instances of differences in PE uniforms, as evidenced by Sophie:

"The boys had a long sleeve rugby top that they were allowed to wear for rugby and football, whereas the girls never had that... the girls were always expected to wear their normal PE top."

The participants expressed frustration with such segregation, with Jade noting:

"It is a bit sexist, but when we were in the moment, you don't really think about it... But you think, why weren't we allowed long sleeve rugby shirts?"

This highlights not only the immediate impact of gendered uniform policies but also the deeper systemic issues of gender injustice in PE. That this inequity is only recognised on reflection suggests a normalisation of gender segregation within the educational system, as previously underscored by Scraton (2018).

Another focus was the debate between skorts and shorts, which recently featured in the media with the end of the rule of wearing skorts in Camogie. Jade said, "the girls had to wear skorts, the boys had to wear shorts." This gendered distinction in clothing not only reflects broader societal norms but also has the potential to reinforce gender stereotypes and limit opportunities for girls in PE (Howard, 2023; Neary and McBride, 2021). A gendered school dress code has been directly linked to influencing gendered behavioural expectations (Glickman, 2016), promoting girls to be ladylike and boys manly.

Comfort and practicality

The masculine/feminine clothing divide indicates historic and traditional boundaries, where the emphasis for boys was on practicality whilst for girls it was on having a feminine appearance (Stephenson, 2016). The lack of practicality in female clothing was highlighted by Ellie:

"Even in trampolining we had to wear skirts. Which was odd because you'd be jumping in the air. Yeah, but we had nothing else."

This gendered tradition has remained despite female sport challenging the gender order in the past two decades. A glass ceiling is evident, not based on biology but on preconceptions of femininity through the hyper-feminisation of women and their sports clothing (Dworkin, 2001).



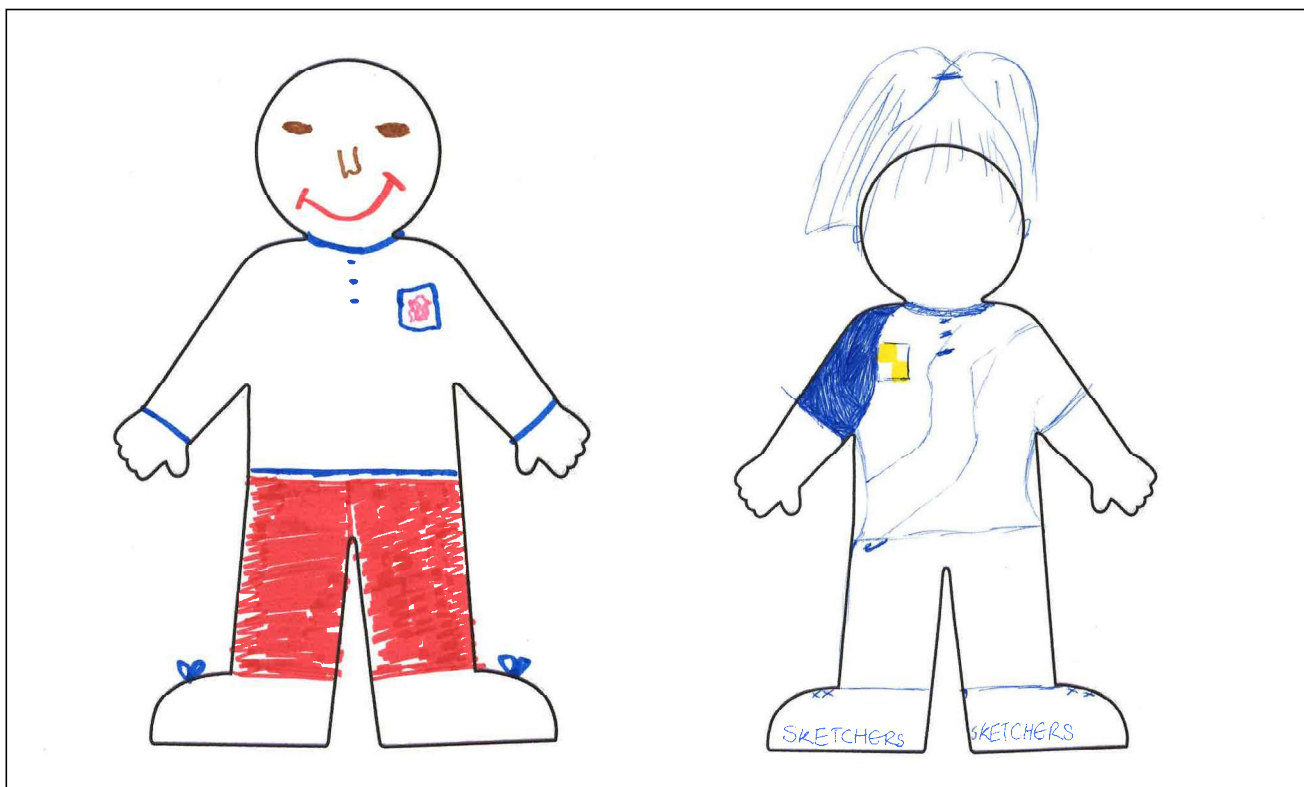


Figure 1: Participants' drawings.

The desire for less gender-stereotypical kit, with full sleeves and long leg options, was evident in participants' drawings (see Figure 1). They indicated a wish for more body coverage to conceal certain body parts. One participant's story stem repeatedly highlighted the pressures of being scrutinised in relation to clothing, reinforcing the theory that appearance plays a significant role. This sentiment was echoed by Amber, who said, "I try to avoid shorts, and that's possibly because I've got stretch marks around my knees", highlighting genuine concerns arising from rigid uniform policies. The group felt that lack of choice and strict policies were perhaps unnecessary, with Jade asserting, "It doesn't really matter. Wear what you want. Wear what you feel comfortable in", raising pertinent questions about the true purpose and inclusivity of PE kits.

McIntosh-Dalmedo *et al.* (2023) delve into the impact of PE attire on female self-esteem, revealing its detrimental effects on body image, which subsequently diminish participation rates and foster enduring negative perceptions of PE. Furthermore, feelings of self-consciousness are enhanced for women when wearing tight and/or revealing clothing (Cox *et al.*, 2020). This type of clothing has been linked to feeling less comfortable and more body-aware when exercising (Bell, Cardello and Schutz, 2005). This was reiterated by Alex:

"I've always been used to wearing baggier kind of T-shirts and shorts and stuff. And even now, I much prefer to wear kind of tracksuit bottoms and hoodies."

However, this feeling of comfort is subjective, as identified by Sophie who stated:

"What to one person might be too baggy, to another person might not be baggy enough or too tight for

them. It's based on personal preference and personal comfort and how comfortable they feel."

This personal preference and comfort also extended to the colour of the kit. Participants were unanimously grateful that they never had to wear white shorts, though white polo shirts were acknowledged for their lack of practicality:

"You can be quite conscious that it's showing...you almost feel conscious that people are gonna see your bra... and sometimes you see people when they're wearing white shirts and they've got massive sweat stains under their arms and it's not their fault like it's a really sunny day."

The heightened feeling of self-consciousness has been associated with increased body-awareness and negative perceptions of the body when exercising (de Bruin and Oudejans, 2018). Furthermore, Cox *et al.* (2020) identified a relationship between tight-fitting and/or revealing clothing and poorer motor control in physical tasks. This has been attributed to the clothing directing participants' attention away from their motor planning and control processes leading to less efficient movement and adaptation. Therefore, tight-fitting and/or revealing sports clothes can impact negatively upon self-esteem, confidence and competence within PE.

Therefore, the need for a kit that is practical, suited to the activity, not revealing, not showing underwear and sweat marks, and allowing a degree of individual comfort was recognised as important for participation in PE. This emphasises the need for flexibility within PE kit and underlines the point that any future changes to clothing need to be made in consultation with the students who will be wearing it.

CONCLUSION

The extent of issues with PE kit appears considerable, highlighting concerns over inclusivity, gender stereotypes and decision-making processes historically dominated by adults. The Department for Education (DfE, 2024) specify that school governing bodies should strive for an inclusive uniform policy, yet findings suggest that, historically, this has not been achieved. DfE advises schools to choose PE kits that are practical, comfortable and appropriate. However, discrepancies arise when considering practicality and comfort criteria, as comfort is subjective. For instance, while shorts are acceptable attire for males in various sports, similar options are not universally provided for females. Additionally, gender-neutral uniforms, while intended to be inclusive and mitigate issues related to gender stereotypes, often fail to accommodate the female body adequately, inadvertently perpetuating exclusivity and discomfort. Furthermore, the disparity between gendered PE uniforms is marked, with significant differences in the options available for male and female students.

If PE departments are determined to address inequalities in their subject, then the importance of schools consulting students on their preferences and needs for PE attire cannot be understated, especially regarding comfort and suitability for different activities. A common-sense approach is to engage students in making decisions about PE kits. Involving students in such decisions could lead to more practical, comfortable and acceptable uniforms, fostering a more inclusive and encouraging environment for physical activity. ■

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