

Perspectives on Cross-dressing: A Literature Review

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Abstract—Cross-dressing, the practice of wearing clothing traditionally associated with a gender different from one's assigned sex, is a multifaceted phenomenon that transcends cultural, historical, and societal boundaries. This study employs a systematic review methodology to explore cross-dressing's historical roots, cultural significance, societal implications, and its intersections with gender identity and self-expression. A comprehensive search of peer-reviewed literature published was conducted across databases such as EBSCOhost, JSTOR, and Web of Science. Thematic analysis of selected studies identified key patterns, including cross-dressing as a tool for self-expression, its role in challenging traditional gender norms, and its polarizing reception across different cultural contexts. The findings reveal that cross-dressing serves as both an act of liberation and resistance, providing individuals with a medium to explore identity while often encountering societal stigma. Despite increasing visibility in media and public discourse, the study highlights significant gaps in understanding the lived experiences of cross-dressers, particularly regarding media influence and cultural nuance. This review underscores the importance of fostering inclusivity and empathy through education, advocacy, and research, emphasizing cross-dressing's potential to challenge stereotypes and advance discussions on gender diversity. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on gender and cultural studies, providing a foundation for future research and practical applications in policy and education.

Keywords—Crossdressing, gender identity, self-expression, societal perceptions, cultural practices, systematic review.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cross-dressing, defined as the practice of wearing clothing traditionally associated with a gender different from one's assigned sex, has been a subject of cultural significance and societal debate throughout history. In ancient Greece and Rome, cross-dressing was an accepted practice in theater and religious rituals, although it faced criticism for challenging established gender roles [1]. Similarly, in Elizabethan England, male actors commonly cross-dressed to portray female characters due to societal restrictions barring women from the stage [2]. These examples highlight the enduring role of cross-dressing as both a medium of expression and a cultural practice that defies normative expectations. Today, cross-dressing remains a complex phenomenon, simultaneously celebrated for its liberating potential and stigmatized due to lingering biases and misconceptions.

In contemporary contexts, cross-dressing is often associated with the LGBTQ+ community, particularly as a

tool for exploring or affirming gender identity among transgender and nonbinary individuals [3]. However, it is not limited to this group; many cisgender individuals also engage in cross-dressing as a form of artistic expression, personal exploration, or cultural resistance [4]. Despite its diverse motivations and manifestations, societal perceptions of cross-dressing are highly polarized, shaped by cultural, religious, and political ideologies. While some societies have embraced cross-dressing as a valid form of self-expression, others continue to view it through a lens of deviance, reflecting broader tensions surrounding gender diversity and nonconformity.

Although cross-dressing has been examined in various studies, much of the existing literature focuses narrowly on specific aspects, such as its connection to gender dysphoria [5] or its historical theatrical roots [6]. These studies provide valuable insights but fail to offer a holistic understanding of the practice, particularly its intersections with societal norms, media representations, and cultural expectations. Furthermore, while there is growing recognition of the role of media in shaping public attitudes, limited research explores how contemporary portrayals of cross-dressing influence societal acceptance or perpetuate stigma.

This study seeks to bridge these gaps by synthesizing insights from a diverse body of literature to provide a comprehensive perspective on cross-dressing. Through examining its historical roots, cultural significance, and social implications, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the practice as a multifaceted phenomenon. Such an inquiry is particularly important in today's context, where discussions on gender identity and inclusivity are becoming increasingly relevant. Understanding cross-dressing not only enriches academic discourse but also has practical implications for promoting gender equity and challenging stereotypes.

In addition to addressing gaps in the literature, this study aims to foster empathy and acceptance by shedding light on the lived experiences of individuals who engage in cross-dressing. Through exploring their motivations and the societal challenges they face, this research underscores the importance of creating inclusive environments that celebrate gender diversity. Ultimately, the findings of this study hold significance for educators, policymakers, and advocates seeking to advance understanding and inclusivity in a rapidly evolving societal landscape.

II. METHODS

This study employed a systematic review methodology to synthesize existing academic research on cross-dressing, focusing on its historical, cultural, and societal dimensions, as well as its relationship with gender identity and self-expression. The systematic approach ensured a comprehensive and unbiased exploration of the topic, guided by clear inclusion and exclusion criteria.

A detailed search was conducted using established academic databases, including EBSCOhost, JSTOR, and Web of Science, to identify peer-reviewed articles and published books published. The search strategy employed a combination of relevant keywords and Boolean operators, such as “cross-dressing,” “gender identity,” “self-expression,” “cultural practices,” and “societal perceptions.” Only English-language publications were included to ensure accessibility and consistency in analysis.

Inclusion criteria were established to identify studies that directly addressed cross-dressing as a primary theme or variable. Eligible studies included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research published in peer-reviewed academic journals or scholarly books. Articles focusing solely on medical or clinical perspectives, without a connection to cultural or societal implications, were excluded to maintain relevance to the research objectives.

The initial search yielded a large number of studies, which were screened systematically based on titles, abstracts, and keywords. Full-text articles of selected studies were retrieved and reviewed to ensure they met the inclusion criteria. A standardized data extraction form was used to capture key information from each study, including research questions, methodologies, findings, and conclusions. This facilitated consistency and rigor in the data analysis process.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns across the selected studies. This process involved coding the data, grouping similar concepts, and analyzing relationships between themes. Particular attention was given to examining the cultural, historical, and societal contexts of cross-dressing, as well as its implications for gender identity and self-expression.

To ensure the credibility and quality of the review, the selected studies were assessed using established criteria for evaluating research methodology, data analysis, and overall scholarly rigor. This ensured that only high-quality, relevant studies contributed to the synthesis of findings.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section explores the multifaceted perspectives on cross-dressing as revealed by the reviewed literature. We will examine cross-dressing as a form of gender expression, analyze the influence of cultural factors, and delve into societal perceptions surrounding this practice.

A. Cross-dressing as a form of Gender Expression

According to Govender et al. [1], cross-dressing is a form of self-expression that allows individuals to transform their appearance and explore different identities. It can be used as a tool to negotiate, differentiate, and present oneself in everyday

life.

Cross-dressing serves as a means of self-expression and exploration, allowing individuals to challenge and transcend traditional gender norms. Gender expression is how individuals display themselves, often perceived by society as associated with a certain gender. The majority's gender expression validates their gender identity [7]. Cross-dressing is a means of expressing one's gender identity and is not always associated with sexual behavior. Cross-dressing is not indicative of sexual orientation [8]. Bolich [9] stated that cross-dressing can be a “behavior involving more than clothes' (p.221). It was added that some crossdressers cross-dress to express their gender identity. These people wanted to express that their “gender identity is not paired with their sexual body in the way their culture expects”. Cross-dressing serves as a form of individual expression, allowing individuals to explore different identities and roles through clothing.

Clothing can also serve as a means to masculinize or feminize the body for transgender individuals in the process of reconciling their identity [10]. Chinese stories such as “The Ballad of Mulan” and “The Butterfly Lovers” also depict cross-dressing heroines, highlighting the cultural practice of gender ambiguity and self-expression [11]. Although the LGBT community is usually associated with cross-dressing, there are cisgender people who also engage in this type of self-expression. According to Janusauskas [12], it plays a significant role in contemporary men's fashion, challenging and reshaping traditional gender norms. The practice of cross-dressing is not limited to transgender individuals and can be a form of self-expression for cisgender individuals as well.

The reviewed literature overwhelmingly positions cross-dressing as a powerful tool for self-expression [1, 7]. It allows individuals to challenge traditional gender norms and explore identities beyond the binary [10]. Motivations for cross-dressing extend beyond self-expression alone. Some individuals may use clothing to experiment with different presentations [12] or even challenge societal expectations of masculinity and femininity [9]. Furthermore, cross-dressing can be a means for transgender individuals to express their gender identity through clothing choices that align with their internal sense of self [11]. This highlights the importance of differentiating between cross-dressing as a form of exploration and as a consistent expression of transgender identity.

B. Cultural Factors Shaping Perspectives

Cross-dressing acceptance and resistance are influenced by certain cultural factors. According to Govender et al. [1], cross-dressing has been accepted in different contexts throughout history. In ancient Greece and Rome, cross-dressing was socially permitted for theater actors and as part of religious customs, but it was also linked to hostility and condemnation, associated with effeminacy and homosexuality. In Restoration Shakespeare, cross-dressing was influenced by the advent of professional actresses on the English stage, and it was used as a theatrical device in adaptations of Shakespeare's plays [13]. In medicolegal cases, cross-dressing can be significant in reaching proper conclusions, as it may indicate the individual's inclination towards transgender

identity [14]. The media portrayal of cross-dressers in Nigeria can have positive and negative influences. In Nigeria, the way the media portrays cross-dressers can have a big impact on their lives and welfare.

While media portrayal can increase visibility and promote social acceptance, it can also contribute to negative stereotypes and increase discrimination and stigma against cross dressers. According to Fajoye et al. [15], cross-dressing is more common than ever before. Even in Nigerian society, there are cross-dressers. Cross-dressers come in various forms, each with a unique motivation for engaging in these behaviours. The media sways public opinion about issues, occurrences, events, or people, as cross-dressing was previously not widely accepted in society due to cultural norms and values, but is now well-publicized due to media attention. In contemporary men's fashion, cross-dressing can transform or confirm gender norms and be used as a tool for visual politics [12]. Clothing and fashion play a significant role in this process, allowing individuals to temporarily become someone else and achieve a sense of spiritual balance [16]. The practice of cross-dressing has a long history, with examples found in ancient Greek and Roman cultures. It is often associated with issues of gender identity and sexuality [1].

In contemporary Japan, female-to-male cross-dressers known as *dansō* navigate societal pressures to express their queer selves and construct a male identity [17]. Social media platforms like Instagram provide a space for male cross-dressers to self-present and showcase their dual masculine and feminine characteristics [18]. Veiling, another cultural practice, has been studied for its adaptive functions endorsed by religion and social norms.

On the positive side, media portrayal can increase visibility and promote social acceptance of gender non-conforming behavior. For example, studies by Adesokan and Babajide [19] and Akande [20] found that media portrayal of cross-dressers in Nollywood movies and Bobrisky have helped increase social acceptance of cross-dressing behavior in Nigeria. However, on the negative side, media portrayal can reinforce negative stereotypes and increase stigma and discrimination against cross-dressers. For example, studies by Ogunyemi [21] and Oladipo [22] found that media portrayal of Bobrisky has contributed to negative perceptions of cross-dressing behavior and increased social stigma and discrimination against cross-dressers. The process of cross-cultural adaptation involves deculturation of original habits and acculturation of new ones, potentially leading to assimilation into the mainstream culture of the host society [23].

Cultural contexts significantly influence the acceptance and resistance towards cross-dressing [1]. Historical examples illustrate this point, with cross-dressing being tolerated in specific contexts like ancient Greek theater while facing condemnation for perceived associations with effeminacy [13]. Similarly, contemporary media portrayals can have a double-edged influence. Studies show that media can increase visibility and acceptance of cross-dressing [19, 20]. However, negative stereotypes can also be reinforced, leading to

discrimination and stigma [21, 22]. Social media platforms like Instagram offer new avenues for self-presentation, allowing cross-dressers to showcase their unique identities and potentially challenge traditional cultural norms [18]. Understanding these cultural nuances is crucial for appreciating the diverse perspectives on cross-dressing.

C. Societal Perceptions

The way that society views cross-dressing differs depending on the beliefs and positions of various communities. It might also include both negative and good viewpoints. The way that society views cross-dressing differs depending on the beliefs and positions of various communities. Positive and negative viewpoints could also be involved. However, the majority of the time, cross-dressers in society encounter prejudice and hostility. As what Aversa [24] stated, cross-dressing, often meets resistance and judgment from society. This shows that how people dress can be a big deal and might not always be accepted by everyone. Norio [25] talks about how transgender people's feelings of safety are shaped by their experiences with prejudice and their expectations of facing more prejudice in the future. This affects how they feel overall and can impact their well-being. It shows that feeling accepted and respected is important for transgender individuals' mental and emotional health. According to Govender et al. [1], ancient Greek and Roman examples of cross-dressing reveal varying attitudes, from social acceptance in theater and religious customs to hostility and condemnation linked to effeminacy and homosexuality. When individuals challenge the stereotypical image of a man, society tends to pass judgment on them [26]. The acceptance of cross-dressers in today's society is a topic of debate, with some viewing it as a dilemma and others appreciating their existence [27].

LGBT individuals who practice cross-dressing experience discrimination in various aspects of their lives. They face elevated levels of anxiety and depression, poverty, and employment bias [28]. In terms of accessing healthcare, transgender people encounter profound rates of discrimination within the U.S. health-care system, with limited access compared to sexual minorities [29]. Discrimination is not evenly distributed within the LGBTQ community, as transgender individuals experience a higher frequency of discrimination related to housing and employment compared to cisgender individuals [30]. Additionally, according to Shanna et al. [31] transgender and gender nonconforming individuals, especially those with disabilities, face higher levels of discrimination when accessing social services, particularly in mental health centers, rape crisis centers, and domestic violence shelters. Overall, discrimination against LGBT individuals who practice cross-dressing occurs in various domains, including mental and physical health, employment, and access to social services. LGBT individuals who practice cross-dressing face various challenges in the community and organizations.

According to Sharma [32], these challenges include discrimination, hostility, and negative attitudes towards gender and sexual minority groups. They may experience subtle

forms of discrimination and exclusion, which can affect their identity management [33]. Additionally, transgender and gender-diverse individuals may encounter barriers to healthcare access and inequities in treatment, which can impact their overall well-being [34]. In order to address these challenges, it is important for organizations to adopt holistic and intersectional approaches that promote inclusivity and cultural sensitivity [35]. Effective solutions are needed to ensure that the cancer care continuum is person-centric and gender diversity-sensitive.

Despite cultural mechanisms in some traditional societies, the full recognition and participation of transgender individuals in broader social activities remain limited [36]. The journey towards normalization of cross-dressing in society involves navigating complex intersections of gender identity, societal norms, and cultural evolution [1]. Ryder [37] talks about new laws in Canada that are meant to protect people from being treated unfairly because of how they identify their gender or express it. These laws aim to make things safer and fairer for transgender and gender diverse people by stopping discrimination and violence against them. This shows that Canada is taking steps to make sure everyone is treated equally and respectfully, regardless of their gender identity or expression.

Societal views on cross-dressing remain complex, often characterized by a mix of positive and negative perspectives [24]. While some celebrate self-expression and challenge rigid gender roles, others express prejudice and hostility [26]. The reviewed literature highlights the challenges faced by cross-dressers, particularly those who are LGBT [30, 31]. Discrimination can manifest in various ways, impacting mental health, employment opportunities, and access to healthcare [28, 29, 34]. However, it's important to acknowledge positive developments. Legal advancements promoting gender identity rights, such as those in Canada [37], signal a move towards greater societal acceptance. Further research could explore how these changes influence people's perspectives on cross-dressing.

D. Gender Identity Development and Exploration

Cross-dressing can be a significant tool for individuals to explore their gender identity, as it allows for experimentation with clothing that aligns with their internal sense of self, potentially leading to a clearer understanding of their gender expression. Studies suggest a link between cross-dressing and questioning one's gender identity. For example, Poteat et al. [5] found that a significant portion of adolescents who cross-dress experience gender dysphoria, highlighting the potential role of cross-dressing in navigating gender identity development. Furthermore, van der Miesen et al. [38] examined transgender and gender-nonconforming youth and found that a history of cross-dressing was a predictor of later identifying as transgender. These findings suggest that cross-dressing can be a stepping stone for some individuals on the path towards understanding and expressing their authentic gender identity.

The relationship between cross-dressing and gender identity exploration is further supported by historical and

cultural perspectives. For instance, during the Elizabethan era, cross-dressing for theatrical purposes was common, with men playing female roles due to societal norms that restricted women's participation in theatre [2]. This practice challenged gender norms and provided a space for individuals to explore different gender identities. Similarly, in the Victorian era, cross-dressing women, like Nancy Astley in Sarah Waters' novel "Tipping the Velvet," embraced masculine identities to gain power, independence, and freedom [39].

In contemporary society, cross-dressing continues to be a significant aspect of gender identity exploration. Cross-dressing encompasses a range of expressions, from wearing a single item of clothing to fully adopting the attire and behaviors of the opposite gender, and it is not necessarily indicative of one's gender identity or sexual orientation [40, 41].

In conclusion, cross-dressing can be a valuable tool for individuals to explore their gender identity, providing a means for self-expression and potentially leading to a clearer understanding of their gender expression. Historical and cultural perspectives, as well as empirical evidence, support the link between cross-dressing and gender identity exploration.

E. Performance and Self-Expression

Beyond gender identity exploration, cross-dressing serves as a powerful form of artistic expression and performance, allowing individuals to find joy and liberation in expressing themselves through clothing that defies traditional expectations. Empirical evidence supports the notion that self-expression is a significant motivator for cross-dressing. Feinberg [42] delved into the experiences of drag queens, revealing the creative outlet and sense of empowerment they derive from performing femininity through flamboyant costumes. This study underscores how cross-dressing can be a means of artistic expression that goes beyond mere gender identity exploration.

Similarly, Russell [6] conducted research on male cross-dressers, uncovering that many of them experience a profound sense of freedom and self-discovery by expressing themselves in ways that challenge traditional masculinity. This study sheds light on how cross-dressing can be a transformative experience, allowing individuals to break free from societal norms and explore different facets of their identity through clothing and performance.

These studies collectively emphasize the importance of performance and self-expression as significant psychological factors influencing cross-dressing. Engaging in this form of artistic expression allows individuals to not only navigate their gender identity but also find avenues for creativity, empowerment, and personal growth. The act of cross-dressing transcends mere clothing choices; it becomes a medium through which individuals can authentically express themselves and challenge societal expectations, ultimately leading to a deeper understanding of self and a sense of liberation.

F. The Role of Sexual Arousal

The role of sexual arousal in cross-dressing is a complex and multifaceted aspect that warrants careful consideration. While sexual arousal may not be the primary motivation for most cross-dressers, some individuals do experience arousal associated with wearing clothes traditionally associated with another gender. It is essential to distinguish between sexual arousal and self-expression for gender exploration within the context of cross-dressing. Empirical evidence from studies on the relationship between cross-dressing and sexual arousal indicates a spectrum of experiences.

Blanchard et al. [43] conducted research that differentiated between "autogynephilia," which refers to arousal from dressing femininely, and transgender identity. This study highlighted the need to understand the various motivations behind cross-dressing, including the interplay between sexual arousal and gender identity. While some cross-dressers may experience sexual arousal, others may have a genuine desire to express a different gender identity through their clothing choices.

Further research is crucial to delve deeper into the intricate relationship between sexual arousal, gender identity, and the motivations behind cross-dressing. Exploring these dynamics more comprehensively allows researchers to gain a better understanding of the diverse experiences and motivations of individuals who engage in cross-dressing. This nuanced exploration can contribute to a more holistic understanding of cross-dressing as a form of self-expression, artistic exploration, gender identity exploration, and potentially sexual arousal, shedding light on the complexities of human behavior and identity.

G. Socialization and Gender Norms

Early childhood experiences and societal messages about gender roles can significantly impact an individual's decision to cross-dress. Research indicates that rigid gender socialization can lead to discomfort with traditional gender expression, prompting individuals to seek alternative means of self-expression. Ridgeway [44] delved into the concept of "doing gender," emphasizing how individuals actively construct and perform their gender identity through everyday behaviors and interactions. Within this framework, cross-dressing can be seen as a form of resistance or subversion against societal norms dictating masculinity and femininity.

Studies by Frischen et al. [45] shed light on the experiences of male cross-dressers, revealing that many individuals found a sense of liberation and freedom by expressing themselves through feminine clothing. This research suggests that cross-dressing can serve as a way for individuals to challenge and transcend societal pressures surrounding masculinity, providing a space for authentic self-expression and identity exploration.

The interplay between early socialization and internalized gender norms appears to influence the motivations behind cross-dressing. Through examining how individuals navigate and negotiate their gender identity within the context of societal expectations, researchers can better understand the complexities of cross-dressing as a form of self-expression and identity assertion. These findings underscore the

importance of considering the impact of socialization and gender norms on individuals' decisions to engage in cross-dressing as a means of expressing their authentic selves and challenging traditional gender roles.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study has explored the multifaceted perspectives on cross-dressing, examining its historical, cultural, and societal dimensions, as well as its significance in gender identity and self-expression. The findings underscore that cross-dressing is a complex phenomenon that serves as a means of personal exploration, resistance to traditional gender norms, and cultural expression. While often associated with the LGBTQ+ community, cross-dressing also holds relevance for cisgender individuals, reflecting its broader implications for challenging binary gender constructs. Despite growing visibility and societal discourse, individuals who cross-dress continue to face prejudice and discrimination, highlighting the need for greater inclusivity and understanding.

To address these challenges, future research should delve deeper into the psychological impacts of cross-dressing, focusing on identity formation across diverse populations, including both cisgender and transgender individuals. Longitudinal studies exploring evolving societal perceptions and the role of social media in shaping public attitudes are particularly valuable. Additionally, educational initiatives promoting awareness and acceptance of gender diversity can mitigate stigma and foster inclusivity. Policymakers and advocates should prioritize creating supportive environments through inclusive policies in workplaces and institutions, while media outlets are encouraged to portray cross-dressing in a positive light, emphasizing its cultural and personal significance. Strengthening community support systems, such as counseling and peer groups, can also help individuals navigate societal challenges and affirm their self-expression. These efforts will contribute to a more inclusive society that respects and celebrates diversity in all its forms.

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