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Do the Clothes Make the (Fat) Woman: The Good and Bad of the Plus-Sized Clothing Industry

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the relationship between the “women of size” population and the sector of the fashion industry that aims to serve them. This research intends to determine if the fashion industry truly understands the plus-size audience, or if they are simply forgetting an entire audience. It is important to identify how women of size see themselves personally, as a community, and reflected in mass media as that is where most fashion inspiration is derived. The study encompasses three research methods: interviews with self-identified plus-size women; an ethnographic approach to examining the clothes shopping options of a woman of size in Atlanta, Georgia; and an analysis of the current literature and blogs on this topic. Identifying as a plus-size woman herself, the researcher has an obvious bias and commitment to this area of study. This study is the foundation for future works to be undertaken by the author concerning the plus-size body, public confidence, and breaking the normative taboos of society with the body.

Keywords: Plus-size, women of size, fat, fashion, curvy, fat studies

The fashion industry has been infamously exclusive since its inception. While fashion trends have varied greatly through the decades and centuries, it is only recently that women of size, or plus-size women, have begun to gain representation. Today, abundant statistics spout claims of a growing American population that is considered “overweight” or “obese.” These are both medical terms that will not be used in this essay, but do represent the growing market of women of size who have been largely left out of the fashion conversation until recently. Women of size in the United States are now seeing a reflection of themselves in more media and ads, but the question this essay aims to address is if it is enough to make up for years of being ignored. As a woman of size myself, I not am not only challenging my own analysis of the plus-size fashion industry in its current state, but also the personal experiences of self-identifying plus-size women from around the United States.

Literature Review

When examining the literature on the topic of women of size and the plus-size fashion industry, many authors are split on how this trend is impacting the self-image of women of size. Is it truly a start to something much larger; a cultural shift in how we value our bodies? Or simply a passing popular trend? This literature review encompasses both the pieces from fellow academics who are passionate about learning more on this topic, as well as the popular and social media perspective which is far more readily available (and therefore influential) to the general public.

From a more academic perspective, numerous studies have been done on related topics concerning the plus-size clothing industry. One such study titled “Exploring Apparel Purchase Issues with Plus-Size Female Teens,” conducted by Laurel D. Romeo and Young-A Lee, not only exposes many holes in the plus-size clothing options available on the shelves, but also how the industry impacts the developing plus-size teen’s connection to her body. This study was even able to go a step further than in-depth interviews, having the resources to perform 3-D scans of teenage female bodies. This enabled

the researchers to compare the narrative data with the actual size of the interviewee. Ultimately, it became very obvious that the teenage participants who were a junior's size enjoyed clothing shopping a great deal more than their counterparts who were adult women sizes. The young ladies desired the fashion of their peers, and although the interviewees of my research are adults, the story is very similar (Romeo & Lee, 2013).

Another study took the researcher into the store as a part-time retail associate. The store she chose catered exclusively to plus-size fashion, and she is a woman of size herself. In "Does This Make Me Look Fat? Aesthetic Labor and Fat Talk as Emotional Labor in a Women's Plus-Size Clothing Store," Kjerstin Gruys provides an insider look at what companies are doing to get and keep the business of women of size. The store she worked for had strict hiring guidelines that dictated their sales floor employees were women of size, but still had a socially normative flattering body on which to display their merchandise. Even though the district manager was a very thin Asian woman and the behind the scenes employees were majority men, the pressure was clearly on the sales floor staff to keep up the image of the store. The franchise also used language such as "Real Woman" and "Real Woman have Curves" to create an image of exclusivity to the plus-size industry. In reality, the researcher found that many women of size were disenchanted by the flash and dance of the store, and lamented not being able to shop elsewhere (Gruys, 2012). Researchers Bickle, Bursed, and Edwards also tackled the reality of the plus-size retail shopping experience in their more scientific based article titled "Are U.S. Plus-Size Women Satisfied With Retail Clothing Store Environments?" This study dissects the plus-size retail store into components ranging from signage, fitting rooms, clothing availability, and even human crowding. This qualitative approach removes much of the narrative surrounding the issues facing women of size while shopping, but instead it sheds light on what women of size want and how a retail location could have greater success (Bickle, Bursed, & Edwards, 2015).

It is important to also examine the more mainstream literature when studying fashion. Due to the somewhat recent boom in body positivity support through blogging and social media, many authors are empowering women of size to take back the power from bullies and love their body. To better understand the body positive movement, one author for *Stylish Curves* bravely wrote about what she disliked about the body positive movement. The blog post condemns brands like Lane Bryant for construing the body positive movement to only mean plus-size women. The body positive movement should indeed mean body positivity for all shapes, sizes, genders, and ages. The author goes on to state that she does not need to wear a crop top, or other revealing clothing to show the world that she loves her body. So many representatives of the body positive movement have been breaking the norm by showing more skin, but showing skin is not the only way to love your body. Lastly, the author insists that we stop idolizing leaders of the body positive movement. The leaders have bad body days like the rest of us, and placing so much pressure on them to be a representative of a social movement can easily be damaging to both sides (Alissa [No last name given], 2016).

When it comes to understanding how someone views their own body against the socially normative view of different body sizes, values play a large part. The values instilled in us throughout life have a big impact on how we see and project ourselves. Values vary from person to person, and they largely dictate how everyone reacts and responds in everyday situations. Mary Gentile outlines not only the importance of values when it comes to how we express ourselves in all facets of life, but also the circumstances that enable people to feel comfortable enough to voice their values to others (Gentile, 2010).

Methodology

For the purposes of this research, three research methodologies have been utilized:

- a critical analysis of existing literature in the field as well as in current popular culture and media,
- an ethnographic look into the state of the plus-size fashion industry today,
- and e-mail based interviews probing into the feelings women have about plus-size clothing as it relates to their own bodies and everyday lives. The identities of these interviewees has been protected by referring to all interviewee responses simply as “participant.”

It is through these three methodologies that this article aims to start the conversation about what these new plus-size fashion trends mean for women of size, if it is enough, and what more needs to be done to create size equality in the fashion industry as a whole.

As a woman who identifies as being fat, and therefore a target market for the plus-sized fashion industry, there is an innate bias that cannot be avoided. With this personal perspective, I wanted to challenge myself to critically examine the efforts of the plus-size fashion industry, as well as the popular media and ads which are starting to embrace the market of women of size. While it is easy to quickly celebrate the accomplishments of body image positivity in popular media, I am skeptical as to the lasting impact this revolution will have on future generations of women and girls. With a critical eye, I ventured into local stores and malls. Both those dedicated to plus-size fashion as well as the regular size stores that are now claiming to offer progressive plus-size fashion.

The e-mail based interview campaign began by seeking out women over the age of 18 who self-identified as plus-sized. I sought participants via social media outlets such as Facebook groups and pages dedicated to women who self-identify as plus-size. This campaign resulted in interest from 34 women, 14 of whom returned the required consent form, while 10 completed and returned the interview. The interview questions range in scope from the terminology they prefer when describing their body size, (as there has been a recent push to take back the word “fat,” but not everyone is comfortable with this

word); to questions about where and how they shop, what trends they wear at work versus leisure, and what fashion advice they would give other plus-sized women.

Terminology

One might be concerned, offended, or outright appalled by the use of the word “fat” in the title of this research article, but what *is* fat? Rather than demonize the word itself, let us consider instead the implications with which the word is often used. In a blog post titled “When Is it OK to Use the Word ‘Fat’?,” serves as a handy guide as to when it is acceptable to use the word fat. It is *not* okay to use it when:

- Describing a feeling
- Shaming someone
- Justifying discrimination
- Determining whether or not someone is healthy

On the other hand, it is okay to use the word “fat” when describing someone who self-identifies as fat (Zeilinger, 2015). By allowing someone to identify with the word “fat” we are working to remove the stigma that has long plagued mankind. Another blog post entitled “Fat Isn’t Offensive – Using it as an Insult Is,” shows the pangs of a mother struggling not only to explain the stigma of the word “fat” to her young children who are growing up in a society that uses the term almost exclusively as an insult, but also reverse the negative connotation itself (Warhaft-Nadler, 2013). What is fat? Fat is adipose tissue and, in relation to our bodies, it serves the important tasks of storing energy and insulating our bodies as well as providing padding for organs. We all have and need fat (Science Daily, 2016).

The self-identifying plus-size women interviewed for this research have a plethora of preferences for how they refer to their body, none of which better than the next, but all meaning a woman of size. Being able to describe one’s body in words leads directly to expressing the value one

holds in their appearance and wellbeing. Our own values are not the only piece to the puzzle of understanding how someone is able to describe themselves, but also the values of one's environment and often society as a whole. Keeping in mind that the participants of this study chose their words very intentionally when responding to these interview questions, the same cannot be assumed that they would be so vulnerable as to voice these self-identifiers in another setting (Gentile, 2010). The following are the terminology as expressed by the participants:

- I prefer “thick” or “curvy.” Within the black community there is a sort of reclamation of what it means to be overweight. So for a lot of black women instead of seeing themselves as fat it is more empowering to be thick (Participant, 2016).
- I prefer to think of myself as “plump.” I have the full-rounded shape that defines plump (Participant, 2016).
- I call myself “curvy” and “chubby.” I like to be upfront about my weight, especially in on-line dating. Curvy could apply to many different body types. I am curvy when I am skinny too, but adding “chubby” to it makes it more accurate, and I don't try to hide the fact that I know I'm overweight (Participant, 2016).
- It depends a lot on my mood and how I am feeling about myself and appearance, but I usually refer to myself as “big” or “fat.” I use big with people of average weight or size since fat makes them uncomfortable. I use fat when I am talking with other women my size (Participant, 2016).
- I prefer “curvy.” I've got that hourglass figure – large breasts and big hips, but a comparatively small waist (Participant, 2016).

However, this is not to say that all self-identifying plus-size women are embracing their body size. As one interviewee notes, she would prefer not to talk about her body at all. If she has to, she will use the term “overweight” because it is least offensive (Participant, 2016). Another interviewee

acknowledges her self-deprecating behavior, referring to herself as fat in a negative sense, but prefers that other people call her “full-figured” (Participant, 2016). Not all of the women referred to in this article embrace the word “fat” positively. As such, the terminology used throughout is more often “women of size,” referring to a broader array of body types in a less-threatening manner.

The (Fat)shion Industry

The fashion industry is a massive entity that reaches all corners of the globe and dates back to early recorded history. However, the plus-size fashion industry has been what seems like an afterthought. The plus-size clothing industry as we know it dates back to only about the 1920s when Lane Bryant, who had sold exclusively maternity clothes until this point, began offering size 14 to 72 (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). While it is very common for the mainstream fashion industry to change styles from minute to minute, the plus-size designs marketed to women of size in the past are largely still the styles offered today. Because plus-size fashion grew from the maternity clothing industry, many similarities exist when it comes to styles. Although plus-size fashion styles have fluctuated some through the decades they all have one thing in common: they are designed to hide the body, giving the very loud message to women of size that we should be ashamed.

The number of stores claiming to offer plus-size options is growing, but the interviewees polled for this research feel that their expectations are not being met. When asked what they valued most when it comes to clothing shopping, the interviewees overwhelmingly cited durability, fit, progressive fashion, and price as the key factors they consider (Participant, 2016). Sizing is a huge issue in the United States because, unlike other countries, there are no federal regulations on how companies size their clothing. This both creates confusion and misleads consumers. Many brands have been accused of intentionally creating a misleading sizing scale in order to project the appearance of more options and create brand loyalty (Romeo & Lee, 2013).

Marketing to women of size is also very clearly a shame game. Many stores and brands use beautiful, flat-stomached models in their advertisements, mannequins, and sales representatives, giving a false sense of beauty in their sales technique. The flat-stomach is a normative societal standard that is only attainable when women of size squeeze themselves into shapewear, a restricting undergarment used to smooth the figure, designed to create a more flattering figure. Numerous interviewees for this research complained about the oppressive reality of shapewear essentially being advertised as the only option for a woman of size to reach societal standard beauty, and as a woman of size myself, I second that cry for freedom from shapewear (Participant, 2016).

Missing the Mark(et)

While there has been a growing number of average size female models in ads and the media, the true cause is unknown. France's recent ban on overly-thin and unhealthy models, true shifts in beauty standards, and the ever-growing outrage over the saturation of unrealistic female beauty are all likely factors (Vogue, 2015). Despite how it came about, it is a positive shift in fashion marketing which the plus-size industry has been following, albeit more slowly than most would like. While plus-size women certainly have more options in the sizes 12-28 market, retailers are still choosing to display size 12 models with flat stomachs, continuing to ostracize the latter portion of the size scale (Caylar, 2014).

Many women are opting to buy their clothes online to avoid the embarrassment and disappointment of shopping in malls and other physical stores. The arduous task of trying on item after item under the harsh lights of a store dressing room is both time consuming and often disappointing. Many women of size also opt to shop alone because they recognize if they are shopping with someone of a "regular" size then they cannot actually shop together, or else risk taking turns being bored. All of this comes back to time. Many of the women of size interviewed stated that they did not consider

shopping for clothing a fun thing to do simply because of the time commitment versus the low rates of success (Participant, 2016).

In the interviews, when asked how the plus-size fashion industry could improve, the responses were to the point. The following is a summary of the many responses received:

- Make the same clothing options in larger sizes, do not try to create “plus-size fashion,”
- Cut out the “one-size-fits-all,” because it does not actually fit all,
- Stop using flat tummy models to represent plus-size women, because most women of size do not actually have flat tummies (Participant, 2016)
- Make more durable clothing options at affordable prices (Participant, 2016)
- Stop recycling the same unflattering styles from year-to-year,
- Customize sizes to body types rather than straight sizes, because not all women of size are built the same (Participant, 2016)
- Incorporate plus-size options into the store, do not relegate us to a section or corner of a store, it feels demeaning (Participant, 2016)

These are not new complaints, nor are they unreasonable. In the grand scheme, one could say that this is simply a cry for respect and size equality. After all, should not the large cog of consumerism want to play to the desires of the market? As woman of size become more comfortable with having the necessary conversations regarding body image and popular culture, the fashion industry will, ideally, adapt to understand that they cannot oppress women of size any longer.

In conducting this research, I quickly realized how men of size are also often left out of the conversation when it comes to the fashion industry. Even more so since, per social stigmas on masculinity, men should not enjoy shopping for clothing. Men of size often have the problem of both tall and wide options not being readily available in mainstream stores. While some brands are offering

extended sizes in men's fashion, these options are generally only found online (Quintano, 2015). While this research is solely focused on women's fashion, men of size are having many of the same problems. Considerable research could be done to expound upon the issues men of size face considering both the fashion industry's neglect and social stigmas of masculinity.

In Search of Fat(shion)

As a plus-size woman, I share many of the frustrations listed by the interviewees. Therefore, I also choose to purchase much of my clothing on-line. On the off chance that I do need something sooner than I am able to get shipped to me from a website, I almost exclusively shop in plus-size specialty stores such as Torrid, Lane Bryant, and Fashion to Figure. However, for the purposes of this research, I chose to venture into several other stores that claim to offer plus-size clothing options.

My first stop was Macy's. This is a store that I have shopped at in the past but I have always had the normal frustrations of having to track down the plus-size clothing in a three-story store packed full of regular size clothing options. All fashionable plus-size clothing has been relegated to the basement of the store, sandwiched between the maternity section and children's clothing. Being someone does not have or want children, this proved to be a very uncomfortable experience. Not only was the location degrading, but the racks were in complete disarray. Clothing on the floor, half on the hanger, and I found more than a couple damaged items on the rack. Needless to say, although they have options, Macy's is not a trendsetter into positive plus-size fashion. After pursuing other department stores in the mall, I found this to be a common assessment of their plus-size options.

My next stop was Forever 21, one of the many fast fashion retailers in the mall. This brightly lit and colorful store was inviting to the eye, but after glancing around for a bit, I realized that all of the plus-size clothing was in the back left corner of the store. It is all but walled off with high shelving, almost as if they were trying to hide the clothing. Or perhaps it is so women can shop in the section

without being seen, I am not sure which. Once I got to the section, it was messy and limited. They had several cute options: sundresses, club dresses, pencil skirts, blouses, blazers, and work-out attire, but the size scale and availability were both sporadic. The plus-size clothing ranges in size from 0-3, and determining an appropriate size for myself was an experience in dressing room math, and trial and error. A size 3, the largest available, equates to roughly a 16/18 US. This means that, while they have this limited plus-size section, they are really only catering to those slightly larger than the average size population. While I appreciate the options, I feel for my plus-size sisters whose beautiful bodies range higher than that of a size 16/18 US. In addition to the limited selection and weird sizing, I simply felt uncomfortable in this store. There were no employees anywhere near the plus-size corner, and the open dressing room was in the opposite corner of the store, forcing me to make what felt like a walk of shame to and from the plus-size section as I tried on different items.

After two failed attempts to find a new store at which to shop, I needed a pick-me-up. My next stop was Torrid, a leader in plus-size fashion. A member of the Hot Topic family, Torrid was once an alternative store with looks you could not find anywhere else. In the last few years, however, the company has drastically changed its image to cater to a broader audience. They now offer beautiful work attire, comfortable jeans, trendy dresses, and Disney themed t-shirts. This is a far cry from the black, spikes, and punk rock image the store was once known for, but it was likely a change for the better. Upon entering Torrid, I felt completely in the right space. My eyes zoomed around the store faster than my pocketbook could handle. Although they have trendy clothes at great sizes, the price is considerably higher than most can reasonably afford without purchasing one item at a time. A good pair of jeans, that will most certainly wear out in the inner thigh region in less than 6 months, will cost between \$60-120. This would not be so steep if the jeans were more durable, but it is known they are not made to last the thigh friction from which so many bigger women suffer.

There is an alternative to Torrid which is fairly new to the scene. Fashion to Figure is a store that has the flare to look fabulous, and not go broke doing so. The employees are enthusiastic women of size who are eager to help each customer find the right outfit. The store is smaller than most, but the selection is large compared to many other stores who advertise plus-size fashion. The freedom that comes with realizing you can wear anything in the store, is beyond comparison. Many of the items are also very progressive for plus-size fashion. Styles such as plunging necklines, mini-skirts, and bodycon dresses are all readily available. The options are amazing, and the employees are very sweet, but the upsell of shapewear was a real let down. Even in a safe space, where I am surrounded by beautiful women of size, they are still trying to squeeze me into shapewear to better conform to the societal norms of beauty.

In seeking fashion, we cannot forget Lane Bryant and Catherine's. While I love that they exist, it is clear they have a message to cover and hide plus-size bodies. Much of Catherine's inventory consists of oversized blouses that have nice floral prints and flare out at the bottom. I not-so-lovingly refer to this as the "potato sack" style. While some may like this method of hiding your body, it is not for this researcher. Both of these stores feel sad. Not one item stood out from the racks to catch my eye. Clothing shopping should be fun and exciting, but these stores feel more like a chore. The employees are all dressed frumpily, and do not have the upbeat confidence expected in clothing store employees. The décor of the store itself appears to have not been updated since the early 2000s. Even though this is a store that caters to women of size, I had a similar uncomfortable feeling as when I am in a department store.

This experience did not reveal any surprises to me as a woman of size. I expect to feel disappointed, disrespected, and demeaned when I attempt to shop for clothing options in the mall. Just as the women interviewed, I too hope to see many progressive changes in the near future. Otherwise, I will continue to shop online in the privacy of my home.

Successes of the Plus-Size Community

Support for the plus-size community has never been stronger. Women from across the world have utilized the power of social media to inspire one another to the point where they can no longer be ignored. Social media truly puts the power in the hands of the people, forcing the fashion industry to take notice of the buying power of the plus-size community. It is not only the women of size who are making a stand for size equality, but also influence from recent major changes put in place by the French government. Fashion models are now required to be evaluated by a physician to ensure they are a healthy weight before they can grace the runway. The French have always been the trendsetters when it comes to the fashion industry, and this mandate is no different. The law has made waves across the world, challenging more fashion designers to consider body types outside the standard tall and thin (Vogue, 2015). This has started to shift the values system of high fashion, and ideally the fashion industry as a whole. We are beginning to see more averaged sized women and women of size represented in the fashion and modeling industry, not a number nearly compared to thin models, but a number greater than before. This is also giving a platform to models of size to scream their values at the top of their social media lungs, leading to the creation of more role models and community throughout social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

There are innumerable successes to be cited for the plus-size community just over the last few years. Social media has enabled the plus-size community to band together to fight against discrimination in the market. Conventions and conferences celebrating the plus-size body have been held all over the world, creating a safe space for self-expression, appreciation, and discussion. Fat women have found their way on to the catwalk at some of the most prestigious fashion shows in the United States and Europe. The plus-size community even has its own celebrated heroes of the movement who, starting out, were just women sick of wearing ugly and uncomfortable clothing and being reminded on a daily basis to hate their bodies. None of this would have been possible before the advent of the internet and

social media. It has been due the sheer numbers of participants that the community has been able to flourish, and how so many women across the world are learning to love the skin they are in.

When posed with the question of where they get their fashion inspiration, the interviewees replied:

- The vintage fashion scene, bombshell icons such as Dita Von Teese (Participant, 2016)
- Body positive Instagram and Tumblr accounts (Participant, 2016)
- Friends and family
- And even strangers; women who already have the confidence to rock something out of the norm for a woman of size.

While the interviewees cited seeing women of size on television almost exclusively as the comic relief or the butt of a joke, they were also able to distance themselves from these characters. They are able to see more value in the inspiration they get from real women they encounter in daily life or interact with on social media platforms.

High fashion for fat women has never been a consideration prior to the last couple years, and it truly all started from a reality television show entitled Project Runway. Contestant Ashely Nell Tipton, a first of her kind, was both a plus-size woman and insisted on designing for plus-size women. She won this particular competition targeted toward an industry that values thinness, and the ripple effect of her win has been seen in numerous fashion shows across the world, featuring the full-figured woman in all her glory (Kelly, 2016).

A few companies have caught onto the plus-size empowerment movement, and have helped gain attention for plus-size women in their own ways. Lane Bryant has pushed back against Victoria Secret's impossibly thin "Angels" who model their lingerie, as well as the intolerable ad released in 2015 declaring "The Perfect Body," (See Image 1) with their #ImNoAngel campaign. The campaign featured

women of many shapes and races plastered on buses and billboards, in an effort to create more visibility for the beauty of the plus-size woman (See Image 1). They received some pushback for exclusively hiring models with an hourglass figure and flat stomach but, overall, the campaign did right by the community. Dove is another company fighting the good fight to help all women love their bodies, and they are not even in the fashion industry. The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty encourages us to “Imagine a World Where Beauty is a Source of Confidence, Not Anxiety” (Dove, n.d.). The company even did research into how many women around the world thought of themselves a beautiful (about 4%) while a study of 1,200 10-17 year olds found that 72% felt tremendous pressure to be beautiful (Dove, n.d.). The campaign garnered great attention for the exposure of unrealistic beauty standards, and included women of varied shapes and sizes (See Image 2).

Image 1: Victoria’s Secret’s Ad declaring “The Perfect Body” (Victoria Secret, 2015)



Image 2: Lane Bryant’s #ImNoAngel Campaign Models (Lane Bryant, n.d.)



Image3: Dove Campaign for Real Beauty models (Dove, n.d.)

Conclusion

In seeking a conclusion to the question of whether or not all of these efforts being made by the fashion industry and popular media are actually enough to make up for years of being ignored, my personal analysis, as both the academic researcher of this essay and a woman of size, is not fully convinced. I am encouraged by what I am seeing, but just as many fashion trends come and go, this too may very well go the way of the bellbottom jeans. The issue of size equality in the fashion industry is more than simply adding patterns and extra fabric. It is a social movement and a cultural revolution. Women of size (and even men of size) are clearly tired of limited options and unwelcoming shopping experiences. In the words of Michel Foucault, “Where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1976). The fashion elite have held the power for centuries, but the resistance of the people, enabled greatly by social media, is creating a revolution. This movement will, in turn, hopefully result in an increasingly progressive plus-size fashion industry that actually meets the demands of the ever-growing market.

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