



The Right Fit: A Clothing Needs Assessment of Women with Plus-size Bodies (20+)

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Keywords: body scanning, co-design, fashion, fat studies, plus-size

Introduction: While access to plus-size ready-to-wear clothing (16+) is improving, industry and researchers typically focus on the smaller sizes within this bracket (size 16-20); women size 20+ are still significantly marginalized. Overall, this cohort faces structural barriers that impede access to fashion, including: poor fit, limited styles, high cost, and a lack of retailers who offer plus-size options (Adams, 2001; Almond, 2013; Colls, 2006; Downing Peters, 2014; Heitmeyer, Rutherford-Black & Boylan, 2000). Downing Peters notes, “the plus-size consumer lacks options in fashioning her self-identity” (2014, p. 45). Functional clothing attributes are typically prioritized over expressive and aesthetic preferences (Romeo & Lee, 2014), so even when fat consumers find something that fits, it rarely aligns with the image of themselves they wish to present. The term fat has been used intentionally; the majority of participants self-identified as fat and we are respecting and reflecting their choice of language. This research explores the clothing experiences of women size 20+ and fills a gap in women’s plus-size clothing needs.

Methods: To explore this problem, women wearing size 20+, 18 years and older, were recruited through a Facebook post to take part in a full-day workshop. Interested participants (n=71) completed a short demographic survey. The workshop was limited to 20 people; researchers grouped applicants according to size and picked randomly within each group to form a purposive sample. Multiple methods (focus group discussions, body mapping, body scanning, and co-design activities) were used to elicit women’s experiences related to plus-size fashion, to identify their latent and tacit needs. This paper reports on the co-design activities that occurred at the end of the workshop. We used generative design techniques with participants to help them create clothing solutions (see Sanders & Stappers, 2008). Each participant had a body scan; the resulting personalized body outline was printed in black and white on tabloid size paper. Participants were asked to complete a chart outlining their clothing needs, to suggest clothing features as possible solutions, and to illustrate their design ideas (an outfit or a specific garment) in colour on their personalized body outline.

Results: Each design sketch was viewed together with the participant’s needs and features chart (n=16). Results were thematically analyzed with attention to key words in context. Needs were categorized according to wardrobe problems: specific garment areas and body parts that participants were self-conscious about in clothing. Features were categorized according to participant’s aspirations and grouped according to fabric, fit and clothing ideas. Wardrobe problems included clothing and accessories, specifically winter coats, jeans, brassieres, socks/tights, shoes/boots, and jewelry. Specific garment parts included waistbands (“muffin top”), inseams on pant thighs (“chub-rub”) bra friendly bodice necklines & straps, gaping

button/buttonhole closures along the bust line and disproportionately small pockets. Women discussed clothing concerns in reference to being self-conscious about their belly and bust line. Aspirational clothing attributes identified by participants included fashionable silhouettes and styling, durable fabrics with some stretch, and a variety of choices in colour and print motifs. Participants who were tall or petite experienced more difficulties. Problematic fit areas mentioned most included the armhole, neckline, and waist/hip ratio. Wardrobe suggestions included garment basics like cardigans and leggings, and multi-purpose, season-spanning modular pieces. For example, one participant's design featured a sleeveless tunic that included strategically placed drawstrings to create multiple styles that could be worn across many seasons. Participants created dream designs that included a sexy power suit, eveningwear, and lingerie.

Discussion & Conclusion: This cohort has few clothing options and this is problematic. Clothing does far more than merely cover and protect the body; it is the most visible way that individuals present themselves to the world (Entwistle, 2001). If, as Lurie (1981) describes, "To choose clothes, either in a store or at home, is to define and describe ourselves" (p. 5), then clothing choices should expand for all body shapes and sizes to allow them to express their individuality. This research used co-design methodologies to engage consumers to identify the clothing needs and aspirations of women (size 20+). In order to more effectively design for this market, fit prototypes must be developed. Future directions include an analysis of body shapes from participant's body scan data to create 3-D printed dress forms. This would facilitate designing, draping and evaluating garment fit. Findings are important to apparel designers and educators as well as product developers and retailers.

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