

Self-Perceptions of Plus-Size Consumers and the Effect on Fashion and Fit Preferences

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It has been reported that 54% of women have been defined as being overweight, obese or extremely obese (Mintel Group, 2013). The apparel industry has taken some initiative to provide clothing for women of large sizes with the development of retailers such as Ashley Stewart™ and Lane Bryant®. In a 2013 study, Ashdown and Song described some inconsistencies in current apparel offerings specific to the lack of variation in body shape. Women with body shapes that are not offered must settle for ill-fitting apparel.

This pilot study was conducted to analyze the self-perceived fashion and fit preferences of plus-size females in relation to current retail offerings. Specific to this study, plus-size females are classified as being a size 14 and above as determined by the ASTM standard D6960-04 (2004). Research questions included: (1) How do plus-size females view their individual body shapes? (2) How comfortable are plus-size females with their bodies? and (3) Which quality do plus-size consumers view as most important; fashion or fit?

In 2004, Devarajan, Istook and Simmons described nine different body shapes among women. Although these variations in shapes have been identified, only specific body shapes are being represented in current sizing systems and the retail industry (ASTM, 2004; Ashley Stewart, n.d. & Lane Bryant, 2015). Previous studies have also found a lack in fashionable selections (Moin, 2011). Secord and Jourard (1953) explored the term body cathexis which represents the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction one has with their body. The concept may be directly related to consumers' opinions regarding fashionable choice and fit.

A convenience sample of 146 females, 18 and over was used for this study. The sample included women of all sizes (small, average and plus-size) where 69% were Black or African American, 30% were Caucasian and 1% that was not identified. Participants were asked to complete an online survey via Qualtrics which was distributed in a link through social media, email, the research website, flyers and word-of-mouth. Data collected in the survey were in five subject areas: demographics, body size and shape, body cathexis, consumer/retail preferences and fashion/fit preferences.

Statistics showed a significant relationship among participant-perceived body shape and figure type. Of those participants who self-identified as plus-sized, 41% viewed themselves as pear shaped and 31% viewed themselves as oval shaped. Of those who did not perceive themselves as being plus-size, the majority (39%) viewed their body as being hourglass. The pear shape was chosen most among Black/African American and Caucasians.

A statistical significance was also seen among body size and the level of comfort with the waist. Fifty-two percent of all participants acknowledged that they were uncomfortable with their waist. Seventy-two percent of those uncomfortable with their waists self-identified as plus-sized (size 14 and above; ASTM D6960-04, 2004). Fifty-four percent of the remaining participants who were comfortable with their waist were not plus-sized according to their self-identified body size.

Significance was found among both survey questions which directly analyzed fashion versus fit preference. When posed with a choice between two differently described dresses, Dress A (cute/fashion) or Dress B (perfect fit), 36% of the participants preferred Dress A (fashion) over fit.

Sixty-one percent of those who chose Dress A were not plus-sized. Sixty-four percent of the participants who chose Dress B (fit) as more desirable were plus-sized. When asked directly about whether they would choose fashion over fit (with no descriptions) responses were slightly different than the previous question. Eighty-three percent of the participants chose fit as more important, the majority of which were plus-sized.

While many plus-sized females view themselves as oval or pear shaped, most average sized females were more likely to view themselves as hourglass which is not supported by previous studies (SizeUSA [TC]², 2004). This could be related to the fact that participants self-identified this data and their perceptions are a manifestation of their longing to be perceived as being a body shape that they may not be. The hourglass figure has been praised by the media as the ideal shape. This might be impacting the outcomes observed in this study. The media's constant presentation of females with small waistlines may also relate to the level of discomfort plus-sized females have with their waist.

The responses to questions regarding fashion versus fit were quite different when the use of mental imagery was provided by the dress example. The same variation could be seen in the retail environment. A consumers' opinion of a garment can be swayed when the item is visually appealing causing them to decide upon apparel purchases based on what is seen as fashionable to the eye without a thorough assessment of fit.

Although this study was limited by the use of a convenience sample and online methods, it still highlights the issue of the sizing and shape in women's apparel specific to plus-size women. Women of larger sizes are provided with many fashionable selections. However, the underlying issue of fit still remains.

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