

A Qualitative Exploration of Perceptions, Shopping Motivations, and Demands of Plus-size Women: an Ethnic Approach

Delisia Matthews,
Assistant Professor,
Textile and Apparel, Technology and Management,
College of Textiles, NC State University,
Raleigh, NC USA

Laurel Romeo,
Assistant Professor,
Textiles, Apparel Design, and Merchandising,
Louisiana State University,
Baton Rouge, LA USA

Current retail industry figures note a growth in the women's plus size market. This increase has especially been evident with the increase in the sales of women's plus-size clothing. Given this increase, it is important for apparel retailers to grasp an understanding of the unique apparel needs plus-size women may possess. In addition, past research has shown that certain ethnicities may view being categorized as plus-size more positively than others. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to gain a holistic understanding of the plus-size experience, and examine how this experience impacts their behaviors, shopping motivations, apparel demands, and ethnic perspective. A qualitative study was conducted to assess these topics, and primary data collection was executed through semi-structured, in-depth interviews of 31 plus-size females who purchased plus-size clothing, size 14 and above, within the past six months. Upon data being collected, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically, three key themes were identified: (1) Evolution of Society Against Plus, (2) Size & Ethnicity Matter, and (3) Separate But Not Equal to Missy. Each theme aided in describing the distinct experience of the plus-size female consumer. This paper, in turn, provides apparel marketers and retailers knowledge that will help them better target their plus-size offerings to better suit their customers.

Keywords: Plus-size, retail apparel, Size and Ethnicity, female consumer

1. Introduction

There is no secret that the American population appears to have growing waistlines. According to the 2008 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, about 50% of all adults in the United States are overweight, while more than one third are

obese (Mintel, 2012). In 2012 an estimated 35.5% of women were classified as obese however, a 2016 report in the Journal of the American Medical Association reported by 2014 that number had risen to 40% and was steadily increasing (Mintel, 2012; Sifferlin, 2016). Given this rate of obesity, it is

inherent that the demand for plus-size clothing options, defined as apparel over a US size 14 (Alexander et al., 2012), will continue to be prevalent. Specifically, plus-size women will drive the demand for plus-size clothing given their observed interest in apparel, as women spend, on average, \$597 annually on clothing (Mintel, 2010). Recent retail industry figures also show that there is growth in the women's plus-size market. Particularly, the sale of women's plus-size clothing increased 17% in 2016 accounting for \$20.4 billion in sales in the US alone (Banjo & Molla, 2016). Thus, it is important that apparel retailers grasp a deeper understanding of the inherent apparel needs of plus-size women, as well as their perception and assessment of the current plus-size apparel offerings. It is important to grasp this understanding specifically for the plus-size market, as several studies have shown that plus-size consumers may possess deep-rooted body dissatisfaction views in comparison to other specialty sized groups, such as petite or tall (Russ, 2008; Gruys, 2012). Moreover, past research has shown that plus-size women from different ethnic backgrounds may perceive being categorized as plus-size differently (Befort et al., 2008). That is, certain ethnicities may view being categorized as plus-size more positively than other ethnicities. To that end, plus-size ethnicities who view themselves more positively may spend more on apparel given the positive body image they maintain (Tiggemann & Lacey, 2009). This knowledge will aid apparel marketers and retailers in anticipating the unique needs of the plus-size women and may help them better target their plus-size offerings to specific ethnic groups.

Given the trend of female obesity, this paper examines the personal meaning of being categorized as plus-size and how this categorization may impact an individual's shopping motivations and behaviors. Few studies examine the personal experience and perception of plus-size women, while emphasizing their unique apparel needs. Predominantly, the literature focuses on perceptions of body image, fit, and self-

esteem. While this knowledge is essential, this study takes a different approach as the purpose of this study is to gain a holistic understanding of the plus-size experience, and examine how this experience impacts their behaviors, shopping motivations, and apparel demands. In a similar vein, limited studies have explored the differences in the perceptions and experiences that may exist among plus-size women of different ethnicities. Consequently, another aim of this paper is to uncover whether the triumphs and challenges that plus-size women encounter during their apparel shopping experiences may differ across ethnicity. Thus, this study contributes to an understanding of the apparel needs of the plus-size woman, as it not only addresses gaps in the literature concerning shopping behaviors but also captures the day-to-day experiences and challenges of the plus-size woman across different ethnicities.

2. Literature Review

Consumer behavior literature provides an extensive investigation of general shopping motivations (Cardoso and Pinto, 2010; Hibbert and Tagg, 2001; Kim and Hong, 2011; Kim and Kim, 2004). However, fewer studies focus on the specific shopping motivations of plus-size women, and even fewer on the notion of how their unique experiences impact their apparel needs (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013; Kim and Lennon, 2005; Rutherford-Black et al., 2000). While these studies reveal some key qualities about plus-size women, they do not provide deep insight into the underlying meaning of their plus-size experiences and needs. This paper seeks to provide this acute level of insight, as a qualitative approach is used to acquire this knowledge.

A large majority of literature focused on the dissatisfaction of women overall with their bodies (Barwick et al., 2012; Hawks et al., 2008; Kim and Damhorst, 2010). Specifically, Kim and Damhorst (2010) assess body dissatisfaction using the concept of ideal self versus actual self. The authors contended that unrealistic standards based on the ideal self caused women to have body

image self-discrepancies, which leads to body image dissatisfaction. Furthermore, Kim and Damhorst (2010) confirmed that women who are affected by body dissatisfaction also have unique concerns with the fit of their clothing. While this data is valuable with regards to the body perceptions of women in general, it does not highlight the specific sensitivities of plus-size women. Further understanding of their perspectives of their bodies and clothing needs are necessary, as the population of plus-size women within the U.S. is prevalent. In addition, this study did not take into account the differences in body image perception that may exist across various ethnicities. This bears the questions whether or not plus-size women of diverse cultures possess the same levels of body dissatisfaction. Thus, further studies that examine the perception and needs of plus-size women across ethnicities are needed.

While few studies look at the differences of body image across ethnicity, Grabe & Hyde (2006) sought to further investigate the topic of body dissatisfaction of women based on the variable of ethnicity. The authors asserted that that Caucasian women have a more negative body image than women of color (Barry & Grilo, 2002 and Grabe & Hyde, 2006). However, body image understanding of other ethnicities, such as Hispanics and Asian American consumers, was not as well defined. Thus, Grabe & Hyde (2006) executed a meta-analysis of 98 research studies that encompass African-America, Asian-American, Caucasian, and Hispanic women to comprehensively assess body dissatisfaction. Their results revealed that while the comparison between Caucasian women and African-American women yielded a more positive body image among African-American women than Caucasian women, the difference was small. Moreover, the comparison between Caucasian women and other ethnicities concerning body dissatisfaction yielded an even smaller difference. Therefore, the authors implied that there may not be a significant difference between Caucasian and non-Caucasian women regarding body image (Grabe &

Hyde, 2006). Their findings suggested that more studies should be done to uncover perceptions of women of diverse ethnicities concerning their body image, specifically plus-size women. To that end, if differences exist among the ethnicities, then differences may also exist regarding the unique apparel and merchandising needs across ethnicities of plus-size women.

Several studies regarding plus-size women focus on the topics of fit, body image, and self-esteem (Alexander et al., 2012; Ard et al., 2007; Kinley, 2010; Snooks and Hall, 2002). However, they do not provide answers to the “whys” that are relevant to fulfilling the needs of this growing niche market. For instance, research by Kind and Hathcote (2000) extended beyond fit measurements and body image by further defining the shopping challenges plus-size consumers encounter, uncovering the basis for their apparel preferences. The authors focused on specialty-size college females (petite, tall, and large) using Renoux’s theory of retail to gather understanding of how younger specialty-sized women rate their satisfaction across the three factors of shopping, buying, and consuming. The results of the study revealed that across all of the three specialty-size females, the large-size college females expressed the highest level of dissatisfaction with their shopping and buying experiences, perceiving large-sized clothing to be of lower quality, not fashion-forward, and more mature in nature (Kind and Hathcote, 2000). While this article clearly identified some of the shopping challenges plus-size women have, it did not show how those shopping challenges and perceptions of being plus-size might be impacted from a cultural perspective. That is, does satisfaction within the confines of shopping, buying, and consuming differ when assessing these factors among diverse ethnicities of plus-size women? Consequently, more comprehensive research from a diverse perspective should be approached.

3. Method

An exploratory study was conducted to gain a holistic understanding of plus-size

J
T
A
T
M

women from diverse backgrounds. A qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate for this research study and was executed by primary data collection. Primary data included semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a total of 31 females who purchased plus-size clothing, size 14 and above, within the past six months. Particularly, a qualitative methodology allows for an in-depth investigation of the human experience from the participants' point of view and allows participants to present their life situations in their own words (Kvale, 2006). Given this approach, a qualitative methodology was fitting for this study as it allows for a more comprehensive assessment of the plus-size experience through the lens of the participants.

3.1. Participants

Upon the Institutional Review Board approval from the university, participants for the in-depth interviews were recruited from an initial online screening survey concerning shopping for clothing. If individuals met the

screening criteria of purchasing size 14 and above clothing, respondents were asked to participate in the one-on-one interviews. This sample was purposefully selected as these participants fit the specific intention of the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Moreover, this method of sampling aligns with this research study because purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select individuals who are uniquely knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Each of the 31 participants also completed a demographic questionnaire. The demographics of the participants included 54.8% African-American (n = 17), 41.9% Caucasian (n = 13), and 3.2% Hispanic women (n = 1). The majority of the participants fell between the 35 – 44 years (35.5%) and 45 – 54 years (32.3%) age range. Table 1 provides details about each participant. All names have been changed for the purposes of confidentiality. Thus, pseudonyms are used in the place of participants' actual names.

Table 1. Name, Ethnicity, and Age Range of the Participants

Participant	Ethnicity	Age Range
Lori	African-American	55 - 64
Vicki	African-American	45 - 54
Gina	African-American	35 - 44
Carson	Caucasian	45 - 54
Carmen	Caucasian	25 - 34
Brenda	African-American	35 - 44
Brooke	African-American	25 - 34
Charlotte	Caucasian	35 - 44
Bailey	Caucasian	18 - 24
Melissa	Caucasian	45 - 54
Quinn	African-American	35 - 44
Macy	African-American	65 - 74
Vera	African-American	35 - 44
Lucy	Caucasian	45 - 54
Susan	Caucasian	35 - 44
Logan	Caucasian	35 - 44
Jasmine	Caucasian	45 - 54
Tabitha	Caucasian	45 - 54
Cynthia	African-American	25 - 34
Courtney	African-American	45 - 54
LaKenya	African-American	35 - 44

Chloe	African-American	45 - 54
Camille	African-American	45 - 54
Monica	African-American	35 - 44
Patti	African-American	25 - 34
Jamilla	African-American	55 - 64
Jackie	African-American	45 - 54
Lisa	Caucasian	35 - 44
Malita	Hispanic	35 - 44
Mandy	Caucasian	25 - 34
Katherine	Caucasian	18 - 24

3.2. Procedure

An in-depth interview discussion guide was developed to conduct interviews with each of the participants. A total of 31 in-depth interviews were held. Each in-depth interview lasted 30 – 40 minutes and was audiotaped with the participants’ consent (Merriam, 1998). Topics covered during the interviews included the following: General discussion about the plus-size term, the experience of being plus-size, the cultural impact of being plus-size, and discussion about shopping behaviors. To achieve reliability in the data collection process, the same semi-structured interview questions were asked of each participant. The following questions are a sample, and not fully exhaustive of all the questions asked to participants during the interviews: (a) When you hear the term plus-size, what comes to mind? (b) *What does being a plus-size woman personally mean to you?* (c) *How do you view your current body image?* (d) *How does your culture impact your personal body image?* (e) *On a scale of 1 – 10, how much do you enjoy shopping?*, and (f) *What are some of your favorite and least favorite retailers to shop from?*

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and typed. Interview transcripts were then reviewed separately by researchers and evaluated for collective beliefs from the participants. Thereafter, the data were categorized based on common ideas and experiences that emerged. The categories were then compared and contrasted, and common themes used to explain each category were identified (Spiggle, 1994).

Interpretation entails making sense of data that have been analyzed through a transfer of meaning. That is, the qualitative researcher articulates the abstract concepts that emerge from the research and translates them more broadly (Spiggle, 1994). Both researchers participated in this exercise and had ongoing meetings to confirm the data that emerged. Thereafter, the first author created the initial codes for all transcripts, and both researchers met and corresponded further to cultivate the codes further. Finally, the themes and subthemes were established across each transcript, and were evaluated and confirmed by each author. Lastly, to ensure that participants’ experiences were documented accurately, the process of participant confirmation was employed, and participants confirmed their statements from the transcripts (Nelson, LaBat, and Williams, 2002). Specifically, transcripts were sent to each participant to read and confirm their verbatim statements detailed within the transcript. Upon receiving transcripts, 21 participants responded confirming their verbatim statements, which meets the percentage requirement typically required for participant confirmation (Jaffe, 2011).

4. Results

Thematic analysis was used to identify themes within the data. This approach was selected because it is not bound to a pre-existing theoretical orientation, nor is its goal necessarily to generate new theories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Consistent with the steps recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), three key themes were identified: (1) *Evolution of Society Against Plus*, (2) *Size &*

Ethnicity Matter, and (3) *Separate But Not Equal to Missy*. Evolution of *Society Against Plus* addresses the participants' beliefs that being categorized as plus-size invokes negative perceptions from society, yet this negative view is slowly evolving. *Size & Ethnicity Matter* entails participant notions that size preferences are dependent on norms and standards established within certain ethnic groups. Lastly, *Separate But Not Equal to Missy* includes the idea that participants desire apparel color, style, and brand options that are more appealing, such as what is currently offered to Missy sized women.

4.1. Theme 1: Evolution of Society Against Plus

Although the participants define themselves as more intricate than just "plus-size," they are repeatedly and solely characterized in this manner by society. Even when they try to avoid it, their plus-size categorization seems to be a topic of conversation. However, participants make reference to the evolving perception of plus-size, given its recent regard in pop culture, media, and retail. This dynamic was reflected in two sub-themes, *Restrictions and Penalties and Evolving Towards Positivity*.

4.1.1. Restrictions and Penalties sub-theme

Participants readily mentioned having to deal with the negative connotations of being a plus-size woman. Oftentimes, these negative views came from their peers or other societal factors. Interestingly enough, participants also noted feeling an indirect sense of negativity towards plus-size customers from retailers, given the lack of options and pricing differences they often encounter. Thus, plus-size women confront distinct restrictions and penalties given their size categorization in various aspects of their lives.

While the majority of the negative perceptions of plus-size women are expressed indirectly, some participants speak of specific instances where they've experienced negativity in a more direct manner. For instance, several participants

have received unwarranted, negative advice from individuals during their shopping experiences. Macy describes such an incident that occurred during one of her shopping experiences:

Macy: I go into the (plus-size) section where they always put plus-size women in the back corner of the store. It's all dark clothes and I want to find something colorful. Then, I ask one girl (salesperson) and she says to me, "Well, heavy women like to wear darker clothes. It makes you look skinny." I was like, "We don't like wearing only black clothes!"

From Macy's perspective, the salesperson made an assumption about plus-size women regarding what type of clothing they should wear. In the salesperson's eyes, darker clothing seems to compliment them better. Thus, when Macy asks for more colorful clothes, the salesperson interjects her opinion. That is, her perception of plus-size clothing is placing unfair restrictions on women who just happen to wear larger clothing sizes.

Katherine has also experienced this notion of restrictions, but applies it to her encounters with retailers, and the restrictions she feels when shopping with friends.

Researcher: You mentioned that you shop a lot with your friends and they range in sizes. Do you find that you are able to shop with them and find the same type of selection in stores?

Katherine: No. I just went shopping with one of my friends the other day. We went to Forever 21. They (my friends) had 2 floors (to shop from). Then, there's just this corner of plus-size (for me)... it's frustrating.

Similar to Katherine, other participants noted experiencing restrictions from retailers that in some ways indirectly felt like chastisement. For instance, their challenges extend into their shopping experiences in such a way that they felt retailers are in some ways penalizing them for their size. As several participants explained, one way they

are penalized is through pricing, since plus-size merchandise is often priced higher than Missy-size merchandise. Other participants made reference to the lack of appealing options for plus-size clothing as another form of penalty. Tabitha and Carson discuss these types of occasions from their personal experiences as plus-size women.

Tabitha: Plus-size clothing is definitely more expensive. I think they take advantage of us! It can't cost that much more to make a shirt. It might take a little bit more material, but not that much. It's very overpriced, but they can price it high cause they know plus-size people are going to go and buy it.

Researcher: I see. So, how does that make you feel?

Tabitha: Frustrated! That's where the frustration comes in. I mean, you buy it because you need it. But, you don't want to pay more just because you are not a size 8 or 10!

Carson: (Being plus-size) pigeon holes an individual into clothing that's boring. Like lack of color, lack of print, and lack of shape. It's just real boring. It's really difficult to find items that are interesting or colorful and unique. Just no fun clothes. Just because we are fat doesn't mean we're not fun and doesn't mean we don't want our clothes to be more reflective of who we are.

While the participants are aware of their size, they resent the fact that they are constantly reminded of it, given the negative perceptions and inadequacies they face. Instead of being chastised for their size, they believe society and more retailers should embrace them. However, they do note changes towards a more positive perception of plus-size within recent years. Although they regard the change as gradual, they do make reference to some improvements.

4.1.2. *Evolving Towards Positivity subtheme*

While participants talked a great deal about the disapproving perception of plus-

size from society and retailers, they did note a recent change in how plus-size was being viewed. Specifically, they attribute this notion of plus-size moving towards a more positive point of view due to its recognition in pop culture, media/advertising, and within apparel/retail venues. Bailey discusses the evolution of society's view of plus-size through the lens of pop culture.

Bailey: I did not smile when I heard the word plus-size before. I used to cringe when I heard that word. It was bad feelings being associated with that up until a couple of years ago. Whereas now, I feel happy and confident now when I associate it with myself.

Researcher: Tell me more about that... tell me about that transition. Do you think that the way plus-size has been viewed has changed or evolved in any way?

Bailey: Yeah, I definitely do think it has evolved. Leading up until just recently, going into the 2000's and 2010's where plus-size was completely nixed and really skinny was in. Super, super thin. But, now in pop culture, (it's about) anything that is more curvy, like Megan Trainer's song "All About That Base." It's all about curves and different body types and about loving yourself.

Similar to Bailey, Carmen has also noticed a change in a more positive direction regarding plus-size. Carmen specifically makes reference to an improved image of plus-size due to media and advertising.

Carmen: I think there is a bigger push for plus-size acceptance, especially in the last several years. You see more plus-size models and the images of like a different type of beauty. Like the images in the Dove campaigns. They are trying to showcase different sizes.

While Bailey and Carmen discuss the evolution of more positive plus-size perceptions from a societal point-of-view, several respondents noted seeing a more favorable perception of plus-size from the

J
T
A
T
M

standpoint of apparel/retail venues. That is, this progression is seen in the few retailers they feel are now offering more appealing plus-size merchandise. Melita discusses the advancement she's seen regarding plus-size apparel offerings:

Melita: I think it has evolved over time because stores and the market has tried to brand it (plus-size) differently... tried to sell clothing that is more appealing. Now, it fits the body more appropriately and you can find more trendy clothes.

Jasmine also notes seeing changes in the plus-size apparel offerings in recent years. She elaborates on the evolution she's observed over the years:

Jasmine: I'm 50 now. So, when I was in my 30's, you couldn't find anything! It was all grandma looking. It's like, I don't wanna look like my mother. So, yeah... I think it has evolved because now in plus-size you can find cute stuff. You can find dresses that look nice and trendy. You know, slacks and dress shirts as well.

J
T
A
T
M

Though the plus-size market has seen positive changes in recent years, the consensus from respondents was that there was still work to be done to bring things up to par. They acknowledge the improvements from society's perceptions and retailer's merchandise, yet the categorization of plus-size still comes with limitations.

4.2. Theme 2: Size & Ethnicity Matter

The majority participants openly discussed how their being classified as plus-size always seemed to be at the forefront of their thoughts. In other words, this notion of size always seems to matter. However, through in-depth interviews, it became clear that the way they perceived their size did seem to vary given their ethnic background. That is, cultural influences impacted their views about being categorized as a plus-size woman. Consequently, not only did size matter, but the ethnic background of the respondents also impacted individual perceptions of plus-size.

The biggest contrast regarding how plus-size was perceived was revealed between African-American and Caucasian respondents. Specifically, out of the 17 African-American women that were interviewed, 12 of the women (approximately 70% of the African-American participants) perceived being plus-size positively. In contrast, out of the 13 Caucasian women that were interviewed, only 4 perceived being plus-size positively (approximately 30% of Caucasian participants). Given this response, African-American respondents seemed to be more confident in their plus-size categorization, while Caucasian respondents did not seem to be as comfortable in their skin. For example, Vera, an African American woman, spoke about being plus-size all her life and how she accepted the label positively:

Vera: You know, being plus-size... I don't have a problem with that. I love my body! It is what it is. You know, this is the way God wanted me to be. So, I embrace it. I don't have a problem with it.

This level of positivity regarding plus-size was not as readily expressed by Caucasian plus-size respondents. Instead, several gave examples of how the perception of plus-size within their Caucasian culture caused feelings of inadequacy. Bailey and Mandy, both Caucasian women, discuss their experiences with the negative cultural connotation of plus-size:

Bailey: It's kind of always on my mind... and so, even though I may feel comfortable in my body, I still see the unacceptance by others of my body.

Mandy: I think that it is wonderful to celebrate our different body types. Black women are often celebrated for having a big booty and big boobs. White women have to look like Taylor Swift. I do not look like Taylor Swift. For me, that's very hard... It's like, "You're too big or you're too this."

One justification for the difference in the perceptions of plus-size between African-American and Caucasian women may be due to the overall cultural beliefs that each ethnicity traditionally has regarding what body types are attractive. That is, a “thicker” body frame is traditionally more appealing for the African-American culture, while a thinner frame is more appealing for the Caucasian culture. Gina, an African-American woman, further explains given her experience:

Gina: I think in the African-American community, being plus is more positive. It’s like, “Oh, she’s thick” or “Yeah, she’s got some meat on her bones.” Whereas in other communities, to be considered thick is not an attractive thing. When I was in college, the guys would say “Ohhh, look at that girl with the thick ole legs.” But they were considered flattering. I’ve never heard that in that way within the White community.

Gina’s experience being plus-size is very different than Bailey and Mandy’s, given the cultural acceptance of being plus-size within the African-American community. In some ways, a larger frame is more revered than a thinner frame. Cynthia, an African-American woman, shares an experience similar to Gina’s regarding this factor specifically from the perspective of what is typically desired by African-American men culturally:

Cynthia: Real life black men like women with butt and hips and even a little gut... big thighs. But Caucasians don’t view thicker women as ideal. They’re considered fat.

To further exhibit this cultural view, some African-American respondents referenced being chastised for once being too thin. Vicki, an African-American woman, reflects back on a time when her thinner frame was not celebrated amongst her African-American family:

Vicki: When I first got married, I was a smaller size. My in-laws thought I

was too skinny. But as I got older and put on some pounds, now I am okay in their eyes. I just think Black people are more accepting of a thicker or bigger woman.

In-depth interviews revealed a clear difference in the perception of plus-size based on the respondents’ ethnic background. Traditional cultural perceptions, in turn, impacted how respondents’ personally viewed their impression of being plus-size. Thus, plus-size African-American respondents embraced their size classification more freely.

4.3. Theme 3: *Separate But Not Equal to Missy*

Participants openly discussed the lack of diverse clothing options for plus-size women. According to participants, a large number of retailers do not carry plus-size clothing, and the few retailers who do carry options do not carry appealing selections. Repeatedly, respondents made reference to the myriad of options that were available to Missy-sized women, and how plus-size women were not afforded this same level of variety. While the majority of the respondents supported having plus-size merchandise in a separate section, they did not support having merchandise of less quality, style and appeal. Therefore, plus-size apparel offerings were deemed separate, but not equal to Missy apparel options. Three sub-themes, *Separate, Yet Convenient, A Chosen Few, and Retailer/Brand Alternatives*, help to articulate their frustration with the lack of plus-size options and detail what specific needs are not currently being met by the market.

4.3.1. *Separate, Yet Convenient sub-theme*

While respondents commonly discussed the typical retail set-up of plus-size clothing being merchandised separately from Missy, this was actually something the majority of them embraced. Specifically, they found that having separate sections aided in their convenience of shopping for merchandise. Jasmine, Courtney and Monica further

J
T
A
T
M

discuss their support of separate plus-size departments:

Jasmine: Personally, I like the separate section, just because it's easier for me to go there. I don't have to look through a gazillion sizes before I get to mine.

Courtney: I do appreciate being separated. That's more so because it helps save time.

Monica: I'm the type of person who has in mind what I want, and I want to be able to go directly there and say, "This is the section I need to be in." It's convenience more so. It is what it is! Misses is Misses... Petites are petites... and plus-size is plus-size.

Macy expresses similar thoughts as Jasmine, Courtney, and Monica regarding the convenience of separate sections. However, she also suggests that if there are to be separate sections from plus-size women, the same amenities that are offered to Missy women should be given to plus-size women. Furthermore, Macy suggests almost a level of customization in the shopping environment for plus-size women, as this will improve their overall shopping experience.

Macy: I'm very much in support of having a separate plus-size area. I don't want to have to look through all these racks to find what might fit. But, I also like having displays of plus-size mannequins to show us exactly how the clothing will fit. Even fitting rooms should have larger areas for us. We want to have the plus-size shopping areas and displays personalized to us the same way the Missy sections have it personalized for them. We deserve a good shopping experience too.

4.3.2. A Chosen Few sub-theme

Participants clearly communicated that they were disappointed with most of the apparel options for plus-size women. However, there were a few retailers and brands they spoke favorably about, as they felt these few met their unique needs. One retailer that was consistently mentioned was

JC Penney. While some participants commented that some of their styles were too conservative, the majority of the women agreed that the merchandise was of good quality and had an appealing fit. Charlotte, Vicki, and Cynthia discuss what they found appealing about JC Penney:

Charlotte: JC Penney is my go-to store because they have the Worthington brand and you can find them in the same section (as the Missy). They also have a curvy fit.

Vicki: I usually buy things from JC Penney. Their prices are good and it's going to fit. I can usually buy things from JC Penney... whether it be pants or a shirt. Their Worthington brand is a brand that I wear. They have good construction and the fabric is really good too.

Cynthia: They're (JC Penney) mostly for dress clothes. If I'm going somewhere like a wedding or something like that. It's very easy... they accommodate plus size.

Old Navy and Lane Bryant were also retailers that quite a few respondents mentioned as meeting their specific needs.

Patti: (Old Navy) has Rock Star jeans and they fit perfectly. They don't really lose their shape. Even when you wash them, they bounce back. I don't really care for Old Navy shirts, but I'll buy their dresses because they're made out of jersey knit and they wash really well.

Melissa: Usually Old Navy is a safe bet. Their sizes are pretty true to form.

Tabitha: Lane Bryant is expensive. You have to be kind of choosy and I use a lot of coupons. But, they do have some really nice things.

Quinn: Lane Bryant... I know that my size is my size. For the most part, it's true to size and fit. Its consistent and that's what I like, consistency.

Undoubtedly, through experience, plus-size women have identified a few retailers and brands that are tried and true for

J
T
A
T
M

them. In their eyes, they get it right, thus, the participants reward these retailers with their dollars. However, there are still certain retailer/brand alternatives they aspire to shop from that don't currently make merchandise for the plus-size customer.

4.3.3. Retailer/Brand Alternatives sub-theme

Oftentimes, when participants discussed shopping in a traditional mall venue, they frequently complained about not having enough retailers in the mall that carried their sizes. By that same token, certain retailers were not available to them, and neither were certain name brand alternatives. Thus, they articulated a limitation regarding the variety of retailers and brands that were options for them.

Macy expressed a limitation in her retailer/brand alternatives with regards to her desire for brand name clothing. She highlighted a list of designers that she finds appealing, but has never had a chance to truly experience, since they are not fashioned for plus-size women.

Macy: These are all the name brand designers that I don't think I will ever wear their designs because they don't make clothing for me. I would like to wear one of these designers one day... just the ability to go and have options. But, I don't have options with any of these designers. And I think that they don't miss our money and they should... Cause we're people too!

From Macy's perspective, the designers are sending a clear message that they do not want plus-size women's business since they are not manufacturing clothes in her size. Nevertheless, it's an alternative that Macy truly wants to experience.

Other respondent's shared Macy's sentiments and mentioned a few retailers/brands that they would like the opportunity to shop from if they offered plus-size merchandise:

Carmen: Stores like J. Crew. I think they would have a huge following. (J. Crew would offer) clothes for work that are more quality. Like clothes that

can be casual or work related. If they offered things in plus-size, that would be a huge step.

Gina: I like being able to buy clothes that are in style, but not too trendy... that looks modern or looks fresh. So, I would like to shop in stores like White House Black Market and Ann Taylor. They have a more modern, professional look.

Lastly, with regards to alternatives, respondents were eager to suggest where improvements could be made from a retail apparel perspective for plus-size women. More often than not, those suggestions revolved around retailers offering them similar merchandise to what was offered to Missy customers. Cynthia, Mandy, Malita, and Bailey clearly express these sentiments.

Cynthia: Make the same things in a bigger size. Like what's so hard about making the same exact clothes (as Missy) in a larger size?

Mandy: I don't want to look pregnant. Not everything has to be empire waist. Big girls like exactly the same thing that every other (Missy) girl likes.

Malita: Do something that would somewhat accentuate your curves. Basically have it tailored and structured in a way that's a more classy fit.

Bailey: As far as improvements, I notice with plus-size that it's completely different styles, different textures, different cuts than regular (Missy) size... even if it's from the same line. So, what I notice is that I will see a shirt and will like it, but it doesn't come in plus-size. And what's two more inches of fabric? So, instead of spending money on different textures and designers and more boxier cuts, just make the same dress (for plus-size) but make it more forgiving and with a little more room.

J
T
A
T
M

5. Discussion and Implications

As discussed, the purpose of this study was to gain a holistic understanding of the plus-size experience, and examine how this experience impacts their behaviors, shopping motivations, and apparel demands. Moreover, the goal of this study was to understand these key factors among a diverse ethnic group of plus-size women and examine the challenges that exist among members of this group. As a result, this paper addresses key gaps that exist within the literature as it examines plus-size women beyond body image and fit topics.

Indeed, participants shared in-depth stories about how they must deal with the negative perception of society regarding plus-size women, and how they often feel they are being chided for their size. One distinct way that participants felt they were disadvantaged was through the lack of appealing plus-size merchandise within the retail market. This finding supports that of Kind and Hathcote (2000), who found that among all specialty-sized groups, plus size women had the greatest dissatisfaction with the apparel merchandise options available to them. This article confirms this finding, but also digs a bit deeper into what plus-size women specifically think is lacking in the market for them. This study revealed that plus-size women simply want to have the same options as their smaller counterparts. While other markets such as petite or tall consumers may also have unique needs that are not always met in clothing, plus-size women perceive that their options pose an even greater lack in options. That is, they want the option of choosing the same brands, prints, and colors as they so readily find in the Missy sections.

Considering what this study has found regarding the dissatisfaction with apparel for plus-size women, an implication for retailers would be to extend their sizes, as there is great interest from plus-size women to wear a broader range of retailer and name brand items. From the participants' perspective, as long as the Missy designs and patterns are constructed in a way that flatters them, they would be interested in purchasing these

items. Retailers indeed should consider offering plus-size collections, particularly given that the plus-size market has experienced consistent growth. Thus, a plus-size collection could deem profitable for retailers that choose to broaden their offerings.

This study also revealed a distinct difference among participants of diverse ethnic backgrounds regarding how they perceived plus-size. Specifically, African-American women viewed being categorized as plus-size more positively than Caucasian women. More often than not, African-American women within this study discussed how larger sizes and "curves" were celebrated within their culture. Thus, being plus-size was not as much of a negative issue as it was in other cultures. This finding supports Grabe & Hyde (2006) study, as the researchers also observed a more positive body image among African-American women in comparison to Caucasian women. Retailers should take notice of this difference, especially in instance where African-American women are being targeted. For instance, for campaigns that target African-American women, communication can be used that approaches plus-size in a confident, embracing, "loving the skin you are in" way.

Lastly, participants recognized a few retailers that understand the needs of plus-size women. Those retailers mentioned, JC Penney, Lane Bryant, and Old Navy, should continue to address the needs of the plus-size market. As stated by the participants, they are currently providing merchandise that is on-trend, of great quality, and of a precise and effective fit. Thus, retailers who want to gain the loyalty of plus-size women should further research what these three retailers are offering. For example, Lane Bryant is especially taking the needs of their plus-size market to heart, as the retailer has now expanded into a line of bridal gowns and lingerie (Grover, 2007). Modeling themselves after these retailers could prove profitable and cause them to be highly regarded among the plus-size market.

J
T
A
T
M

6. Limitations

While an exploratory approach was an appropriate choice for this study, this research approach does present some limitations. One primary limitation is that a qualitative method lacks external validity given the small and homogenous sample. However, a homogenous sample of women who shared commonalities in the plus-size experience was suitable due to the aim of the study. Another limitation of this study was that the majority of the respondents were either from African-American or Caucasian ethnic groups. While the researchers tried to achieve more equal participation across ethnicity through a purposive sample, this was not reached. Therefore, future studies need to consider more diverse ethnic segments, including more Hispanic, Asian, and Native American segments. Third, data was collected solely in the Southern United States region. Thus, we suggest researchers consider expanding the study focus to different geographical areas. Lastly, this study focused specifically on plus-size women. However, further studies can consider examining male plus-size consumers through an in-depth interview methodology, as this would allow the researcher to spend time understanding the unique motivations and needs plus-size men may have.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, M., Pisut, G., and Ivanescu, A. (2012), "Investigating women's plus-size body measurements and hip shape variation based on size USA data", *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology & Education*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 3-12.
- Ard, J., Greene, L., Malpede, C., and Jefferson, W. (2007), "Association between body image disparity and culturally specific factors that affect weight in black and white women", *Ethnicity & Disease*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 34-39.
- Banjo, S., & Molla, R. (2016, May 10), "Retailers ignore most of America's women", Bloomberg Gadfly, <https://www.bloomberg.com/gadfly/articles/2016-05-10/plus-size-could-save-retailers> (accessed 6 June 2017)
- Barry, D.T. and Grilo, C.M. (2002), "Eating and body image disturbances in adolescent psychiatric inpatients: Gender and ethnicity patterns", *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, Vol. 32 No. 3, pp.335-343.
- Barwick, A., Bazzini, D., Martz, D., Rocheleau, C., & Curtin, L. (2012), "Testing the norm to fat talk for women of varying size: What's weight got to do with it?", *Body Image*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 176-179.
- Beafort, C.A., Thomas, J.L., Daley, C.M., Rhode, P.C. and Ahluwalia, J.S. (2008), "Perceptions and beliefs about body size, weight, and weight loss among obese African American women: A qualitative inquiry", *Health Education & Behavior*, Vol. 35 No. 3, pp.410-426.
- Cardoso, P. and Pinto, S. (2010), "Hedonic and utilitarian shopping motivations among Portuguese young adult consumers", *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, Vol. 38 No. 7, pp. 538-558.
- Grabe, S. and Hyde, J.S. (2006), "Ethnicity and body dissatisfaction among women in the United States: A meta-analysis", *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 132 No. 4, pp. 622-640.
- Grover, J. (2007), "Big opportunities", *Shopping Centers Today*, Vol. 28 No. 2, pp. 15-18.
- Gurrieri, L. and Cherrier, H. (2013), "Queering beauty: Fatshionista in the fatosphere", *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 276-295.
- Hawks, S., Madanat, H., Smith, T., & De La Cruz, N. (2008), "Classroom Approach for Managing Dietary Restraint, Negative Eating Styles, and Body Image Concerns Among College Women",

- Journal of American College Health*, Vol. 56 No. 4, pp. 359-366.
- Hibbert, S. and Tagg, S. (2001), "Shopping Motivation: Investigating the Shopping Process and Outcomes of the Retail Experience at a Craft Fair", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 17 No. 3/4, pp. 341-366.
- Kim, H. and Damhorst, M. (2010), "The relationship of body-related self-discrepancy to body dissatisfaction, apparel involvement, concerns with fit and size of garments, and purchase intentions in online apparel shopping", *Clothing & Textiles Research Journal*, Vol. 28 No. 4, pp. 239-254.
- Kim, H. and Hong, H. (2011), "Fashion leadership and hedonic shopping motivations of female consumers", *Clothing & Textiles Research Journal*, Vol. 29 No. 4, pp. 314-330.
- Kim, E. and Kim, Y-K. (2004), Predicting online purchase intentions for clothing products", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 38 No. 7, pp. 883-896.
- Kim, M. and Lennon, S. (2005), "The effects of customers' dress on salesperson's service in large-sized clothing specialty stores", *Clothing & Textiles Research Journal*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 78-87.
- Kind, K.O. and Hathcote, J.M. (2000), "Specialty-size college females: Satisfaction with retail outlets and apparel fit", *Journal of Fashion Marketing & Management*, Vol. 4, pp. 315-324.
- Kinley, T. (2010), "The effect of clothing size on self-esteem and body image", *Family & Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, Vol. 38 No. 3, pp. 317-332.
- Merriam, S.B. (1998). *Qualitative Research and Case Study Application in Education*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.
- Metro-Jaffe, I. (2011), "Is that what I said? Interview transcript approval by participants: An aspect of ethics in qualitative research", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 231 – 247.
- Mintel (2010), "Women's attitudes towards clothes shopping – US, December", available at: <http://www.academic.mintel.com> (accessed 10 June 2016)
- Mintel (2012), "Shopping for plus size teens' and women's clothing – US, November", available at: <http://www.academic.mintel.com> (accessed 10 June 2016)
- Rutherford-Black, C. Heitmeyer, J., and Boylan, M. (2000), "College students' attitudes towards obesity: Fashion, style and garment selection", *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 132-139.
- Sifferlin, A. (2016, June 7), "40% of U.S. women are now obese", available at: <http://time.com/4359637/obesity-americans-women-men/> (accessed 6 June 2017)
- Snooks, M. and Hall, S. (2002), "Relationship of body size, body image, and self-esteem in African American, European American, and Mexican American middle-class women", *Health Care For Women International*, Vol. 23 No. 5, pp. 460-466.
- Spiggle, S. (1994), "Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 491-503.
- Tiggemann, Marika & Lacey, Catherine. (2009), "Shopping for clothes: Body satisfaction, appearance investment, and functions of clothing among female shoppers", *Body Image*, Vol. 6 No. 4, 285-291.

J
T
A
T
M