The Growing Niche Market of Plus-Size Apparel

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Introduction
The current trends in retailing indicate a growing market in specialty retailers. Niche markets such as petites, plus-size, and maternity are all on the rise. This is largely due to the fact that consumers are demanding more customization from retailers than ever before. As American and global rates of obesity continue to rise, the demand for plus-size apparel will increase as well. Designers and retailers must find a way to combine style and function in order to meet the needs of this growing population. This problem goes beyond just meeting the demands for plus-size adults, but also meeting demands of plus-size children who make up more than 16% (9 million people between the ages of 6-19) of the United States population (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). This research explores the female plus-size market by identifying the growing demand for this market and consumer shopping behavior of this niche market.

Literature Review
The National Center for Disease Control and Prevention define an overweight adult as someone who has a body mass index (BMI) between 25 and 29.9. During the past 20 years the number of adults who are considered obese has increased dramatically. According to CNNMoney.com (2006) there are more than 60 million Americans who are already considered obese. This statistic is up from 23 million in 1980 (Crawford, 2006).
Research also shows that obesity rates are no longer just part of low-income families. Research performed by the University of Iowa found that obesity rates are growing among urban adults who earn an average income of $60,000 or more a year (Crawford, 2006). All states have shown increases in obesity rates, with Mississippi, Louisiana, and West Virginia having the highest obesity rates in 2005. These three states had obesity rates of 30%-34%, and only three states had obesity rates less than 20% (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006).

**Figure I**

![Map showing obesity rates](image)

Source: Center for Disease Control and Prevention

The over-weight consumers form an important consumer market. Market research firm Mintel estimates that U.S. sales of woman’s plus-size apparel increased 50% during the past five years to nearly $32 billion (Crawford, 2006). Designers like Dana Buchman, Tommy Hilfiger, Ralph Lauren, and Jessica Simpson are producing clothing to fit larger women (Crawford, 2006). One of the first retailers to offer a plus-size clothing line for women was the specialty retailer Lane Bryant. Lane Bryant began as a maternity
clothing retailer, but saw the potential in the plus-size market. In 2000, Lane Bryant had grown to more than 690 stores and $930 million in sales (Crawford, 2006). With the company boosting such large profits competitors such as Catherine’s Plus Sizes and Fashion Bug followed. Today, many retailers are focusing on developing and expanding plus-size lines. Retailers such as Old Navy and Wal-Mart have both launched new lines of clothing that are specially designed for overweight children and adults (Crawford, 2006).

Women who wear sizes 14 or larger make up more than half of the overall apparel market, and plus-size apparel is the fastest-growing segment of the clothing industry (Crawford, 2006). However, some businesses and retailers are slow to pick up the trend. Many retailers did not want to include plus-size clothing because they thought that a plus-size clothing line would hurt their image. Certain negative views go along with plus-size fashion. Perhaps it is the idea of beauty in America that creates this negative perception. The Chicago suburb of Oak Park recently blocked Lane Bryant from moving into its shopping district because “the village did not feel that Lane Bryant represented the kind and quality of retail business it was seeking” (Crawford, 2006, n.p.). With this statement many consumers in the area were outraged. Many felt that it was discrimination against plus-size women. After much criticism, Oak Park is now reconsidering Lane Bryant’s entrance into its shopping village (2006).

Despite the fact that more retailers are expanding their lines to include plus-size consumers the negativity of being plus-size still existence. The majority department stores that carry plus-size clothing only stock the clothing in the plus-size department (D’Amato, 2005). Not only are women of plus-size being segregated by retail stores but
are also fighting an online battle. Many retailers such as Gap and J. Crew offer plus-size
clothing, but their plus-size lines can only be found online. Many plus-size women feel
that they are being shunned and ignored by retailers. While some plus-size consumers
would rather shop online for privacy and self esteem issues many of them want the option
of walking in a store and finding an outfit that are fashionable and fits well (D’Amato,
2005). Consumers have a real need for stylish clothes in their size and comfortable
shopping environments that they enjoy (Spaeder, 2006).

In fact it is very profitable for retailers to cater to the plus-size consumers. In
general, plus-size consumers are very brand loyal (Spaeder, 2006). This is credited to the
fact that the plus-size market has been so underserved that when consumers do find a
retailer that offers their sizes they become “customers for life” (Spaeder, 2006, n.p.).
Research suggests that this niche market is not as price-sensitive as other niche markets.
For these consumers, right fit and style are hard to find and they are willing to pay more
when it is available (Spaeder, 2006).

As Catherine Lippincott, Lane Bryant (2006) stated: “(Oversize consumers are)
not some small subgroup living somewhere in a dark hole. This is us. This is me. This is
your mother, our sisters, our wives, our daughters. This is every American woman.” So,
retailers have to recognize the growth and importance of this consumer segment, and
cater to the needs and wants of these consumers. This niche market is not limited to the
apparel industry. As people continue to get larger the need for right size shoes, furniture,
and other items will increase as well.
Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore over-size female apparel shoppers’ needs and wants so that retailers can understand them better and provide them better services and products. It intended to find out whether consumers of this niche market believe that retailers are adequately catering to their needs and wants and whether there are certain negative perceptions associated with this niche market. To answer these questions, three separate research questions were investigated:

1. Do consumers feel that there are enough specialty retailers?
2. Do plus-size consumers feel alienated when shopping at traditional department stores?
3. Are plus-size consumers often embarrassed to shop with others who are not plus-size?

Methodology

In order to explore the research questions, both in-depth personal interviews and surveys were conducted. In-depth personal interviews were used because it is very useful for exploratory research to gain insight from consumers directly. Three plus-size female consumers between the ages of 19-30 were interviewed to seek their opinions about the plus-size industry and their personal shopping experiences.

At the same time, a survey questionnaire with constructed questions was developed to explore plus-size consumers’ shopping habits, the level of difficulty finding right size and style, and the demand for specialty retailers. Female consumers shopping at the Turtle Creek Mall in Hattiesburg, Mississippi were approached randomly and invited to voluntarily participate the survey in October 2006. Fifty useful questionnaires
were collected. Of the 50 survey participants 38 of them had a size of 12 or larger, which shows the impact and demand for the plus-size market.

**Findings**

The interview data showed high levels of similarity among the responses from all three participants. The interview data revealed that when it comes to apparel purchasing decision, right fit with trendy style was the most important factor and price was the least important factor. The participants felt that retailers, especially traditional department stores did not do enough to meet their needs. Although they have the option of online shopping, it makes some plus-size consumers feel alienated. One participant expressed the frustration coming from the fact that much of her shopping has to be done online (Participant C). She said, “for once I would like to walk into a store and find something that is cute and fits my body.”

The interview data also revealed that participants were very self-conscious. All of them stated that they shopped at the specialty retailer Lane Bryant, but often felt embarrassed. When asked about this embarrassment, participant A said, “Everyone knows that Lane Bryant is a plus-size store, so when you walk out of there with a bag of clothing with Lane Bryant wrote on the bag it feels as if every one is saying look, that lady is fat because she shops at Lane Bryant.” This self-consciousness was also revealed by their shopping preferences. The participants felt more comfortable and supportive shopping at plus-size retailers with other plus-size individuals (Participant A and B). So, they were less likely to shop with non-plus-size friends. As participant C stated that she would not shop with her friends because none of her friends were plus-size consumer and
they do not understand her fit issues. The in-depth interviews aided in uncovering the negative connotations of the plus-size market.

The survey data also indicated similar findings. The participants felt that there were not an adequate number of retailers dedicated to meeting their needs. An astounding 48 of the 50 survey participants claimed that they often find it difficult to find the right size clothing. This number was not just limited to plus-size individuals, although plus-size individuals made up the majority of the surveyed consumers. Fit and style were found to be the most important factors when shopping for clothing, which were followed by price. The participants also claimed that Lane Bryant was one of the popular specialty retailers they shopped at. Lane Bryant was followed by New York and Company and Victoria’s Secret as the leading specialty retailers. At the same time, 79% participant had a size of 12 or larger (30 out of 38) indicated that they rarely shop with others. This implies that plus-size consumers may be more self-conscious and they are embarrassed when shop for apparel. There is a negative perception associated with this niche market.

Conclusions

This research focused on plus-size female consumers. Although the results of this study are limited to the sample sizes it provides a better understanding of plus-size apparel consumers and market. The study revealed that retailers have not done an adequate job of supplying the plus-size market with trendy clothing options and there are certain negative perceptions associated with this niche market. The negative perceptions associated with the plus-size market are dominantly expressed through the in-depth
interviews and confirmed by the survey results. Despite efforts of retailers and designers the majority of consumers in the plus-size niche market feel discriminated against, alienated, and overwhelmingly underserved. As the average size of consumers continue to increase and as the number of overweight children and teens continues to grow, retailers must find ways to combine fit and fashion. The benefits of finding this balance can be very rewarding, including a loyal customer base and higher markups. Retailers and designers also need to discover ways to overcome any negative feelings for this niche market. To cater and meet the needs of this population, retailer must learn to not alienate but rather aid and assist these consumers in meeting their fashion desires.
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