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Outside the Range: Studying shopping experiences of plus-size women

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Abstract Sizing in the fashion industry has always been a major problem. The importance of inclusive, standardized sizing across all platforms and companies has increased recently. The purpose of this study is to observe and investigate the problems that plus-size women encounter while shopping. It makes use of data from secondary and primary research, which will be done by interviewing women of various ages for surveys. To learn more about this area, the study primarily focuses on the responses given by plus-size women. The findings of this study show that most Indian women fall between the size ranges of large and 2x-large. They have found alternatives to in-store shopping because it becomes difficult to find their size in stores, and if available, the clothes are not as trendy. It would be beneficial if brands were more inclusive and promoted plus size through their campaigns.

Keywords: Diversity, Fit, Plus-size, Retail stores, Sizing, Shopping experiences

1 Introduction

One of the most pervasive difficulties in the fashion industry, an always-changing field of creation, is sizing problems. Sizing has long been a difficult issue in the fashion industry. Sizing is the number or letter-based method used to identify and describe the dimensions of garments. These issues are the consequence of a complex interaction of factors, including variations in body shapes and sizes, varying sizing standards across industries and regions, and the lingering legacy of unrealistic beauty standards. Sizing problems have wide-ranging effects on both consumers and the industry as a whole. This research explores the complex issues surrounding sizing issues in the fashion business, illuminating their root origins, effects, and ongoing solutions. (Apeagyei, 2008).

When it comes to accommodating plus-size people, the fashion industry has a long-standing and widespread issue. Plus-size sizing issues show the industry's problems embracing diversity, inclusivity, and body positivity. These complex difficulties frequently cause customers to feel excluded, frustrated, and low in self-esteem. Unlike small-size clothes, brands do not standardize plus-size sizing. (Elliott & Finkel, 2019). Customers typically feel confused and dissatisfied because of the wide variations in their sizes. The fashion industry has been sluggish in using plus-size models and mannequins in their advertisements, which aggravates plus-size customers' sentiments of exclusion. This lack of diversity reinforces unattainable beauty standards by suggesting that just one type of body is ideal. Many fashion labels only come in a set range of sizes, excluding people who fall outside of it. This exclusivity tactic repels potential customers since it conveys the message that the fashion industry does not value their needs. (Limatius, 2020).

Similar to how standard-sized clothing is made; the fashion industry's creation of plus-size apparel entails several crucial procedures. To ensure the right fit and style for a variety of body shapes, there are several specific concerns and obstacles when designing plus-size clothes. To provide a flattering fit, plus-size clothing may need additional seams, darts, or alterations. To increase comfort and mobility, reinforcements like elastic panels or gussets may be added. (Wforwoman, n.d.). Grading is the process of changing the original pattern's size. To retain the same design and proportions across all sizes, this is where the patterns for various plus-size choices are developed. To satisfy individual needs, manufacturers and designers must collaborate closely throughout the entire process with the plus-size market. To make sure that the clothing satisfies the fit, comfort, and style demands of the plus-size demographic, fit models and testing on a variety of body types are crucial. Additionally, the fashion industry should frequently incorporate customer feedback to improve designs and raise the general caliber of plus-size clothing. (Brownbridge et al., 2018). The body-positive and plus-size communities are pressing for reform in the fashion industry. Customers' requests for better representation, more varied sizing options, and the acceptance of all body shapes are becoming more and louder. This study draws attention to the ill-informed sizing practices followed by fashion brands and the issues that plus-size women face when they shop at retail stores.

2 Material and Methods

From the perspective of plus-size women, this study emphasizes their concerns in terms of shopping in stores and its effect on their body image as well as their perception of self. It offers an evaluation of what issues are most commonly faced by them and in what way brands can overcome their shortcomings. The assessment was based on primary research done and qualitative and quantitative data gathered from surveys conducted with 30 women between the ages of 30 and 50 years. This group of women will benefit from the study as they make conscious and independent decisions while shopping. Furthermore, they can also display the problems in an unbiased manner. The survey was conducted via a structured questionnaire with open- and closed-ended questions. It consisted of a variety of multiple-choice questions and a couple of subjective ones to justify the answers provided. This is also done so that their views can be expressed freely. Customers who fell into the category of plus size seemed to project their opinions according to their personal experiences. The questionnaire was initially discussed among college students and mentors to avoid any discrepancies before being sent to the public.

3 Results

3.1 Gender, Age Group and Occupation

All the responses were from plus-size women. They fell between the age groups of 20 and 40 years. Out of the group of 30, 17 were between the ages of 20 and 30 years, while the rest 13 belonged to the age group of 30 to 40 years. Most of the participants (56.7%) in the former group were students currently pursuing their bachelor's or master's degrees (fig. 1). The members of the other group were women who were primarily homemakers (20%). Working women who were a part of this study held the positions of team managers (10%), trainees or assistants (3%), department heads (2%), and entrepreneurs (2%).

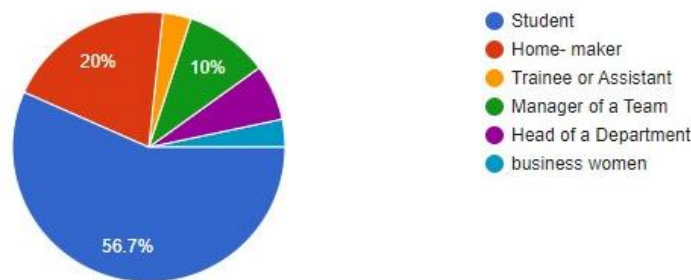


Fig. 1: Pie chart showing the percentage of each occupation of women

3.2 Respondent garment sizes

All of the respondents had garment sizes ranging from large to double XL or 2X-large for their top size. The percentage breakdown of each category was 23.3% for large, 53.3% for extra-large, and lastly, 23.3% for double extra-large (table 2). However, the majority of respondents' bottom sizes ranged from 2x-large or double XL to medium in terms of clothing sizes. Each category was broken down into percentages: 3.3% for medium, 3.3% for large, 70% for extra-large, and 23.3% for double extra-large (table 2).

Table 1

Garment sizes of respondents (Top)

<i>Size</i>	<i>No. of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Large	7	23.3%
X-Large	16	53.3%
XX-Large	7	23.3%

Table 2

Garment sizes of respondents (Bottom)

<i>Size</i>	<i>No. of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Medium	1	3.3%
Large	1	3.3%
X-Large	21	70%
XX-Large	7	23.3%

3.3 General awareness of the brands present in the market

Mango was the choice of an overwhelming majority of respondents. It contributed to a total of 53.3% of the outcome. Out of the remaining options, they were aware of brands

like W for Women (30%), FabAlley (13.3%), and Kalki Fashion (3.3%). The respondents were also asked to name any other brands that cater to this demographic. They mentioned brands like H&M, ALL by Pantaloons, Aldo, Gia Curves, Amazon, Alto Moda, Amydus, PlusS, Anokhi, Bewakoof, Chicos, Desinoor, Fablestreet, Fabindia, Global Desi, Biba, Guess, Zara, and Kohls. These brands were a combination of online and in-store retail spaces. Ethnic clothing brands were mainly observed as having a wider range and inclusive sizing in comparison to Westernwear.

3.4 Shopping habits and frequency of shopping

Results show that the group occasionally (33.3%) goes shopping within the time of a month. The frequency of going to shop for clothes in a store generally varies from never (10%) to sometimes (23.3%). Only 10% of people voted often (fig. 2). The questionnaire included a question on the likelihood of them finding their size in a retail store. Most women (21) fell in the middle on a scale ranging from least likely to most likely. This shows that it is comparatively difficult for women to find their size, and inclusivity is a recurring issue on this subject matter.

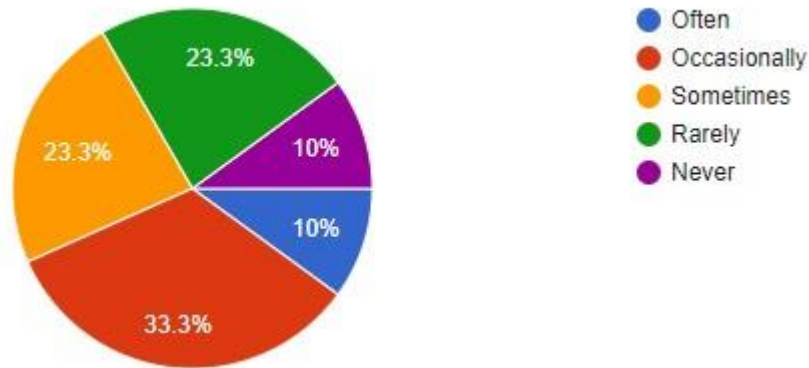


Fig.2: Pie chart showing the percentage of shopping habits in a month

3.5 Qualities prioritized in a garment

A total of 63.3% (19) of respondents voted for comfort as an essential element of their clothing (fig. 3). This goes in line with a question asked later, which proves that when it comes to plus-size clothing, comfort plays an important role. The next option, which held a vast majority of votes, was garments based on design 20%. Following this were fit at 13.3% (4) and stretchability at 3.3% (1).

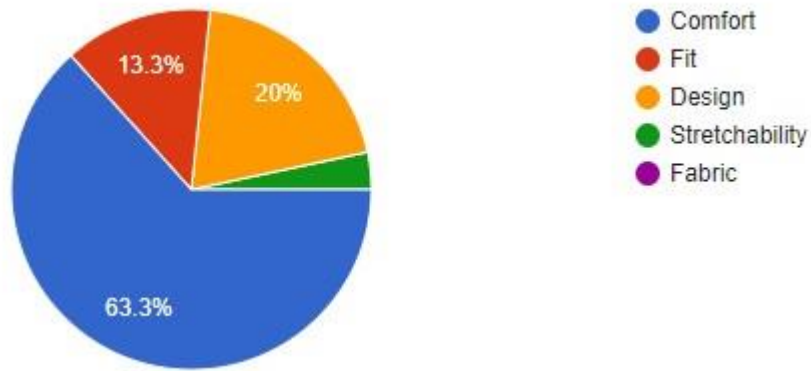


Fig. 3: Pie chart showing what qualities women prefer more in a garment

3.6 Issues observed while shopping

Out of the multiple-choice options given, limited fashion choices (63.3%) and a lack of trendy fashionable choices (60%) came up as the most popular issues when it comes to shopping (fig. 4). Inconsistent sizing was next on the list of problems, followed by heightened prices (8%), negative body image or self-esteem (6%), and lastly, judgmental or unhelpful staff (5%). According to the above data, it shows that if there are options available, they are either not up to date with what is currently in style. There is a need to solve this issue and come up with better-looking options for plus-size women.

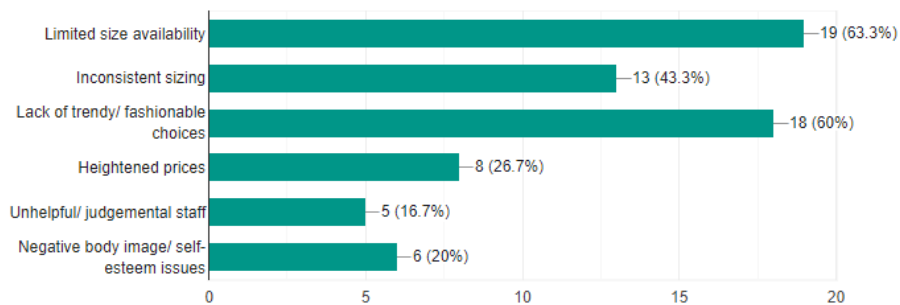


Fig. 4: Bar graph showing issues women face while shopping in-store

3.7 Coping with issues observed when shopping at stores

The findings of this study suggest that while there is limited availability of options in the market, people have found ways to make themselves look trendy. The majority (66.7%) of these habits include shopping online instead of at stores or malls (fig. 5). This is because there is more size availability on an e-commerce website. On the other hand, some respondents were inclined towards focusing on comfort over style (43.3%) when it came to their clothing, or they preferred getting them tailored and modified to fit them better (26.7%). A few also showed that they would shop at specialized plus-sized stores (23.3%), and not all the issues observed at stores changed their perspective. They continued shopping despite them (26.7%). Observations conclude that women have to resort to online shopping websites when it comes to finding their size and trendy-looking pieces. Otherwise, they have to compromise on style with comfort since the availability of both options is low. Tailored clothing has become an alternative to verify these issues.

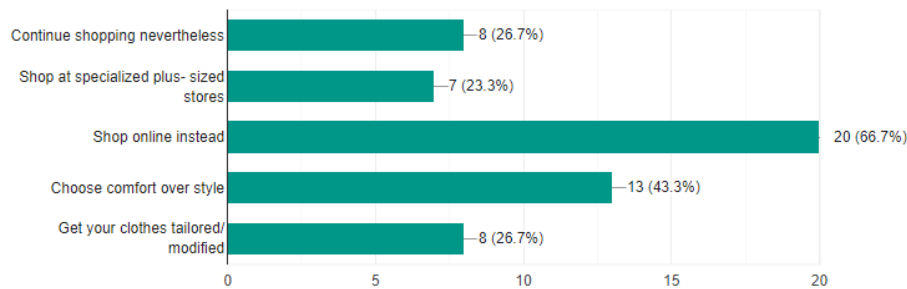


Fig. 5: Bar graph showing techniques women adopt to cope with issues

3.8 Effect on body image and self-esteem

However, many the issues are, they do not harm 61% of this group. The rest 39% do deal with body image and self-esteem issues (table 3). Women voiced their perspectives by using terms like non-standard sizing, disheartening, limited options, and a lack of idols who looked like them. Many have brought up the fact that mannequins in stores are generally only for small-size reference. Media banners and photoshoots display women who look a certain way and measure perfectly as well. It becomes difficult to not compare oneself when media and stores idealize a particular body type.

Table 3

Effect of shopping images on body image and self-esteem of respondents

<i>If affected</i>	<i>No. of respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
No	19	61.3%
Yes	12	38.7%

3.9 Suggestions for making shopping experiences better

A plethora of designs for plus-sized individuals should be available in all the stores. As the clothing manufacturers make clothes, they can add plus-size as well, and their income would increase due to the high demand for plus-size clothing. If they create unique or out-of-the-box designs, that may help with the manufacturer's popularity. The majority of women wanted to have more styles and options to shop from. Inclusivity also plays a major role in swaying consumers to spend their money on a particular brand.

4 Conclusion and Discussion

Inconsistency in sizing in the fashion industry has been a running issue, causing women to look for ways other than in-store shopping to find their outfits. Data derived from this study show that the majority of Indian women between the ages of 20 and 40 lie within the size range of large to double XL. They occasionally go shopping for their outfits. Most of the group prefers comfort to style and would choose an option that might lack design elements if it fits accurately. Since the respondents were mainly of Indian origin, the brands they were aware of regarding plus-size clothing were also primarily catered to Indians. Among Western wear, brands like H&M and Mango hold stable positions. However, a setback is that, while they offer a wider range of clothing, the options available to shop are meek and not fashionable in comparison to their normal range of sizes. The findings of this study suggest that women who belong to the plus-size category face some issues regarding fit and the availability of options. They have to resort to alternative options or opt for online shopping websites to shop for clothing. Brands should be more inclusive of plus-size women's clothing. Mannequins placed in stores as well as media campaigns should also advertise and popularize plus-size women.

Plus size is an increasing market in India. Thus, retail shopping experiences should be seamless, and the designs should be equally trendy as standard-sized garments. It's good to see that so many brands are already incorporating exclusive plus-size collections, catering to these sizes, and providing comfort with style. In the future, some more famous brands should do the same and promote plus-size models with their clothing while also catering to comfort and fit. This could also help many individuals gain confidence and raise their self-esteem, making them feel free, beautiful, and comfortable in their respective body types. Another thing noticed is that there has been a slow yet significant rise in the number of

brands catering to plus-size clothing specifically as well as promoting body positivity. In conclusion, brands need to step up to lure their target audience to indulge in them more. They should be the pioneers in creating awareness about this subject matter. Providing a wider and more sophisticated range of products has become a need in today's times.

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