

The men's plus size apparel market: Bigger, but not better

Melissa L. Thompson and Ellen McKinney, Iowa State University

Significance of the Male Plus Size Consumer Market and Body Positive Movement

Plus size men constitute approximately 70% of the U.S. population. As of 2018, the male plus size market had grown to over \$1 billion in revenue and according to Sindicich and Black's (2011) study on fit and sizing of business apparel, as many as 40% of men have issues with size and fit. (IBIS World, 2019). However, the apparel needs of plus size men have not been fully addressed (Rebolini, 2017; Schlossberg, 2015). The rapidly evolving social movement known as the Body Positive Movement (BPM) has been gaining popularity as its advocates campaign to include all types of bodies in advertising and media, treating all bodies as worthy of representation in mass media and fashion (Dastagir, 2017; "The body positive," 2019). The BPM has been successful in its push to include more diverse female body types in media and advertisements and has successfully influenced the extension of plus size apparel lines for many brands and retailers including LOFT, Target and Lucky Brand (Howland, 2019; Lubitz, 2017). Yet, the near exclusion of plus size men from the BPM can be reflected in the lack of progress in the extension and inclusion of plus size men's apparel at many retailers. Despite progress made for female bodies and apparel lines, many consumers, fashion models and BPAs wonder why men have not been included in the BPM's efforts (Rebolini, 2017).

The BPM and its campaigns have neglected the male consumer and male body types, and have focused almost exclusively on the inclusion of diverse female body types (Rebolini, 2017; "The body positive," 2019). According to the CDC (2019), the average man in the United States is 5'9" tall, weighs approximately 200 pounds and has a 40 inch waist. This puts the average male in plus size market for apparel, a category that begins with a size XL or 38 inch waist pant (Rebolini, 2017). Despite the BPMs influence on manufacturers and retailers and the extension of women's apparel sizes to be more size inclusive and aesthetically appealing, the availability and aesthetic appeal of men's plus size or big and tall clothing has yet to be influenced or changed by the BPM. Although the average male is considered plus size by retail industry standards, most apparel is designed to fit men that is not reflective of this demographic (Sindicich & Black, 2011). Exploring the perceptions of male plus size consumers and their shopping experiences within the context of the BPM is critical and timely because the insights provided by participants on fit and sizing issues of men's plus size or big and tall clothing should aid manufacturers and retailers in the development of big and tall apparel products that both fit these consumers and appeal to them aesthetically.

Analysis of Literature and Data

The following section outlines the literature and data regarding the lack of inclusion of men in the BPM and the BPM's efforts, and general fit and selection of men's big and tall clothing. The analysis identifies a gap in the research addressing men's perceptions of plus size clothing fit and selection, and lack of effort on the part of manufacturers and retailers to address the needs of this growing demographic as the BPAs push for more size inclusivity in media, advertising and fashion.

Lack of Male Inclusion in the BPM

The fashion industry and mass media have been identified as one of the most pervasive and influential transmitters of appearance norms in the United States (Bordo, 1999; Pope et al., 2000). Men experience many of the same pressures to conform to certain physical appearance standards, such as a lean muscular body, and these standards are reflected most notably in mainstream advertising and fashion

(Pope et al., 2000). The last several decades have seen a drastic increase in the number of men suffering from mental health issues related to body image and it is estimated that approximately 10 million men will suffer from an eating disorder related to poor body image in their lifetime (“Eating disorders in men and boys,” 2019). Even with the substantial increase in male mental health issues due to poor body image, men have been relatively neglected from social and fashion movements to increase body positivity and include diverse male body types in media and fashion (Lorenzen et al., 2004). Women have been at the center of the BPM, and BPAs have campaigned for the inclusion of diverse female body types in media, as well as the extension of apparel sizes and styles to cater to a greater range of female body types. Men have been largely left out of the movement to include more sizes and styles for bigger and taller men’s bodies, leaving the big and tall consumer often frustrated and disappointed with selection and fit of men’s plus size clothing (Lutz, 2017; Rebolini, 2017).

Improved Fit of Big and Tall clothing Creates Margin Opportunity for Apparel Retailers

Poor clothing fit accounts for the majority of consumer returns to retailers, both to online and brick and mortar retail outlets (Chattaraman et al., 2013). According to some men’s apparel companies, it is estimated that sizes small, medium, large and extra large only fit about 15% of target consumers (Lutz, 2013). Pattern grading and sizing systems are also outdated and do not accurately represent the size and shape of today’s males. Most men’s big and tall apparel is graded up from a size medium, rather than fitting apparel to a plus size fit model. Some companies are taking steps to rectify the problem, but the process is time consuming, while, at the same time, many manufacturers have taken no action at all to adjust their sizing systems to better reflect the bodies of their target consumers (Schofield & LaBat, 2005). Unlike women’s apparel, where the BPM’s influence on manufacturers and retailers of women’s clothing has effectively led to more fit and grading changes to better accommodate a plus size woman’s measurements, the men’s big and tall category has not seen similar changes by manufacturers and retailers to adjust fit and styling to better satisfy the needs of their big and tall consumers (Lubitz, 2017; Rebolini, 2017).

Proposal for Future Action

Research is needed to understand the shopping experiences of plus size men with plus size clothing, specifically the fit and selection of men’s plus size clothing, in light of the BPM and its campaign to include more diverse female body types and apparel size options. As this demographic continues to grow in size and purchasing power, a research study should be carried out to address the following questions:

1. What is the experience of men who shop plus size clothing lines? What are the fit concerns and style preferences of male consumers who shop plus size clothing lines?
2. How do plus size men view the body positive movement and how does it influence their shopping experience?

The proposed study should use a grounded theory approach utilizing semi-structured interviews. Because the research questions are unexplored, this approach is best to elicit participant responses and understand the phenomena in question (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The grounded theory approach will also allow for the building of new theory to explain how this demographic experiences big and tall clothing in the context of the BPM (Charmaz, 2014). Lastly, one-on-one interviews allows for the free exchange of dialogue between researcher and participant to facilitate additional questions to be explored by the researcher when they arise (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

References

- Bordo, S. (1999). *The male body*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Buck, S. (2016, September 6). The first fashion models came in all shapes and sizes because they sold more clothes that way. Retrieved from <https://timeline.com/fashion-model-body-diversity-a2c24fe57938>.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). *National Center for Health Statistics: Body Measurements*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/body-measurements.htm>.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Chattaraman, V., Simmons, K.P. & Ulrich, P.V. (2013). Age, body size, body image, and fit preferences of male consumers. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 31(4), 291-305.
- Creswell, J.W. & Poth, C.N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dastagir, A. (2017, August 2). Body positivity is everywhere, but is it for everyone? *USA Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2017/08/02/body-positivity-everywhere-but-everyone/525424001/>.
- Eating disorders in men and boys. (n.d.). *National Eating Disorders Association*. Retrieved March 21, 2019, from <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/learn/general-information/research-on-males>.
- Howland, D. (2019, April 15). Big and tall could be bigger and better. Retrieved from <https://www.retaildive.com/news/big-and-tall-could-be-bigger-and-better/551059/>.
- IBIS World. (2019). Plus size men's clothing stores industry in the U.S.: Industry Report. *IBIS World*. Retrieved from <https://www.ibisworld.com/united-states/market-research-reports/plus-size-mens-clothing-stores-industry/>.
- Lorenzen, L.A., Grieve, F.G. & Thomas, A. (2004). Exposure to muscular male models decreases men's body satisfaction. *Sex Roles*, 51(11/12), 743-748.
- Lubitz, R. (2017, January 26). What really constitutes a plus-size male model? The answer, it turns out, is far from clear. Retrieved from <https://www.mic.com/articles/166354/what-really-constitutes-a-plus-size-male-model-the-answer-it-turns-out-is-far-from-clear>.
- Lutz, A. (2013, August 28). New company claims it's impossible for most men to find shirts that fit. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/company-claims-men-buy-shirts-all-wrong-2013-8>.
- Pope, H. G., Jr., Phillips, K. A., & Olivardia, R. (2000). *The Adonis complex*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Rebolini, A. (2017, July 25). You can't shop here. *Esquire*. Retrieved from <https://www.esquire.com/style/a56297/big-and-tall-plus-size-mens-clothing/>.
- Schlossberg, M. (2015, October 12). This male model just made history for Target. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/zach-miko-makes-history-for-target-as-the-only-plus-size-male-model-on-its-website-2015-10>.
- Schofield, N. & LaBat, K. (2005). Defining and testing the assumptions used in current apparel grading practice. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 23(3), 135-150.
- Sindicich, D. & Black, C. (2011). An assessment of fit and sizing of men's business clothing. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 15(4), 446-463.
- The Body Positive. (2019). *About us*. Retrieved from <https://www.thebodypositive.org/>.