



Sewing for my curves: Insights into plus-sized garment fit dissatisfaction

Addie Martindale, Georgia Southern University

Ellen McKinney, Iowa State University

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Significance and purpose. Despite industry and academia knowing for over a decade that the need for plus-size clothing was increasing (Kim & Johnson, 2007) plus-size apparel design has still not gotten the research attention warranted. With evidence that the average American woman is a size 16 (Christel & Dunn, 2017) and market research revealing 56% of plus-size women are unable to find well-fitting clothing (NPD, 2012) it is now time to better understand plus size garment design needs. Additionally, with a growing number of women foregoing buying ready-to-wear (RTW) to make their own custom fit garments (Haider, 2018) the sewing practices of these alternative consumers can provide insights into fit issues that dissatisfy plus size apparel consumers. The purpose of this research was to investigate the pattern alterations practices of popular plus-size sewing bloggers regarding garment fit in order to gain a better understanding of problematic aspects of plus-size pattern design. Additional aims were to gain insights regarding body measurements, shape, and fit preferences.

Related literature and relevant theory. Recent research has provided evidence that over 50% of the U.S. female population wears a size 12 and over (Corrigan, 2013) with the average size being 16 (Christel & Dunn, 2016). A key problem in plus-size apparel design is that the apparel industry has historically created plus-size garment size ranges by evenly grading measurements up from smaller sizes (Lininger, 2015) and research has proven that pattern grading of this manner creates several body fit issues when patterns are graded to size 16 and above (Bye, Labat, McKinney, & Kim, 2007). This even grading approach has proven problematic as weight is not typically gained evenly on the body which greatly affects a garment's body fit (Brown & Rice, 2001). Considering these established fit problems, the growing influence of plus-size fashion bloggers (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) and findings that sewing is being used by women to gain control over clothing fit (Martindale and McKinney, 2018), an investigation of plus-size sewing bloggers fit adjustments can provide insights into specific areas of fit dissatisfaction to improve plus-size apparel design.

Methods. This exploratory qualitative netnographic (Kozinets, 2010) research analyzed the written content of two years of the blog series *Sewing for my curves* on a popular plus-size sewing website. This blog series was chosen because the posts were written by 15 guest plus size female sewing bloggers who have their own sewing blogs providing many different perspectives on plus size women's experiences with RTW and sewing for their bodies. Additionally, all of the guest blog posts in the series addressed the same ten questions, which included questions regarding body measurements (e.g. bust, waist, hip, bra size), RTW and sewing pattern sizing,

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description of body shape, typical sewing pattern adjustments and preferred clothing styles (eg. wrap dress, skinny jeans). This consistency in content between blog posts allowed for a comparison between the blog posts to be made. The bloggers ages ranged between 20 and 50 and were from diverse ethnic backgrounds which was determined by information disclosed in their post and the images they shared. The written content also revealed that the women lived in different geographic regions of the world, had varied style preferences and included their RTW sizing which provided a sample the authors deemed as inclusive of the female plus-size clothing consumer segment. The measurement and sizing questions were analyzed to gain a better understanding of the women's body sizing and proportions while the descriptive questions were coded for emergent themes (Saldana, 2016). Although reader comments which averaged 50 per post were not analyzed they were read by the researchers to verify that additional women were having similar experiences.

Results and Discussion. The bloggers provided their body measurements with bust measurements ranging from 36 to 52, waist ranging from 34 to 46, and hip ranging from 45 to 54. The height was also varied with the shortest blogger at 5'2" and the tallest at 6' 1". Fluctuation of measurements was revealed in several of the women's responses at the waist and hip with all indicating a regular 4-inch variation in their measurements. Analysis of their indicated RTW sizing revealed that the women wore sizes that ranged from 12 to 24. The most frequent size response (n=5) was 18-20. The majority of bloggers (n=10) indicated wearing more than one RTW size with five bloggers indicated currently wearing sizes from 14 to 20. The women all provided detailed descriptions of their overall body shapes with the majority of the women using a fruit shape description (e.g. pear, apple) or basic shape description (e.g. hourglass, rectangle). Two bloggers varied from that format with the responses "human" (blogger 15) and "adorable, sexy, and fabulous" (blogger 7). The most frequent responses were pear (n=7) and hourglass (n=5). The most common garments sewn were wrap dresses, dresses with fitted waists, skinny jeans, and other pants.

All of the women altered their sewing patterns prior to use and indicated that they blended multiple pattern sizes to fit their body shapes. Analysis of the bloggers' pattern alteration processes revealed common alterations were bust adjustment, bicep adjustment, narrowing of shoulders, lower back adjustment, and curving of waistbands. Analysis also revealed most of the women preferred clothing styles that were body contouring or closely fitting and had a hard time finding these styles in their sizes in RTW.

The findings confirmed issues previously research that indicated concerns with pattern grading at and above size 16 (Bye et al. 2008; Lininger, 2015) and verified the previous finding that plus-size women are dissatisfied with RTW fit (NPD, 2012). The bloggers demonstrated through their body measurements and shape descriptions that it cannot be presumed that weight is evenly distributed on the body (Brown & Rice, 2001). These sewing bloggers, like RTW plus-size fashion bloggers, are demonstrating their consumer authority not by demanding better

selection but creating their own which extends the findings of Martindale and McKinney (2018) that sewing provides a way for consumers to gain control over clothing fit.

Implications. Although this research is exploratory in nature with small sample it extends the understanding of the plus-size body and the clothing fit issues that these women face. As sewing patterns are created using the same proportions and measurements as ready-to-wear clothing the information regarding fit dissatisfaction and sewing alterations imparts valuable awareness of how plus-size garment design needs to improve. The findings propose that key clothing fit issues that need to be evaluated concern the biceps, bust, shoulders, and lower back. The fluctuation in the waist and hip measurements experienced by the women, the use of lower back adjustments, as well as, the percentage of women indicating a pear shape bodies brings light to a clear need for a better understanding of how to better design apparel for the lower half of the plus-size body.

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