

## Plus-Size in the Athleisure Wear Market

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Abstract: The population of plus-size women in the United States has reached 67%, with their average clothing size being 16-18. Since most clothing brands do not make plus-size clothing, standardly a size 12 or higher, many plus-size women are frustrated over the lack of variety and representation, resulting in a high growth potential in this market. Another rising market has been in athleisure, athletic wear worn for both exercise and casual use, seeing that this segment has been the fastest growing in the fashion industry over the last few years. With more and more companies entering this market, a competitive advantage is necessary to survive, however, there is a significant lack of research on consumer behavior for athleisure wear. For this reason, I plan to conduct two surveys regarding the plus-size consumer behavior of athleisure wear specifically. These surveys will question their attitude and intentions regarding their actual consumption as well as their predicted consumption. The results will allow athleisure wear companies to effectively produce plus-size clothing to give them a competitive advantage while valuing the needs of a market that has been long neglected.

### *Introduction*

In the United States, the average woman wears a size 16-18, and 67% of women fall into the plus size category (George-Parkin). Despite this statistic, many brands fail to create “plus-sized” garments which are size 12 or above. It seems odd to exclude such a large group of women considering that they represent a \$21 billion segment of the fashion industry (Nittle). However, many brands explain that it is more time-consuming, more difficult, and more expensive to create these extended sizes, which deters them from producing plus size garments altogether (Wang). The production costs of creating a new measurement grade, combined with the extra fabric required to create larger clothing, shows a potential financial strain for companies to introduce plus sizes. Some companies, like New Look and Old Navy, have tried to counter these extra costs by charging more for plus size clothing. However, they were met with heavy backlash for consumers saying that it was outrageously unfair to charge a “fat tax” on clothing that was “slightly above average” (Yeginsu).

The fastest growing segment of the fashion industry has been “athleisure”, which Merriam-Webster defines as casual clothing designed to be worn both for exercising and general use (Cheng). In 2015, activewear sales rose by 16%, demonstrating the success within the segment, however, their impact in on the overall fashion industry is even more notable. According to Forbes, sales of athletic apparel was greatly responsible for the 2% year-on-year increase of total clothing sales, reflected by the fact that total clothing sales would have declined 2% if this segment was eliminated (Trefis Team). In addition to growing athletic wear market, it is important to note how consumer taste also shifted within the segment. Sales of athleisure clothing had rose 24% in 2017, with a clear increase in casual, fashion-focused products over

performance-focused products (Cheng). With this vague information in mind, research becomes imperative to hone in on consumer behavior and preference within this booming market.

Several companies, with a variety of different styles, prices and brand perceptions, have attempted to introduce plus-size, athleisure apparel with very mixed results. Torrid, an exclusively plus-size company, has seen tremendous financial success in their athleisure sector, whereas Fabletics, an online athletic brand that sells both standard and plus sizes, has had mixed reviews, especially regarding fit for the larger sizes (Nittle). Other companies, like Lululemon, have purposefully disregarded the plus size market by only making clothing up to a size 12 and only nicely displaying smaller sizes in store (Bhasin). Lululemon's co-founder Chip Wilson even voiced, "Some women's bodies just don't work for [the pants]...[and that] it's a money loser for sure." This response was met with serious backlash from plus-size consumers who thought that Wilson's reasoning was an unjustified excuse to further prejudice and exclusion (Dockterman). Although a concern over profits is a shared concern for any company, it is important for companies producing athleisure wear to consider the implications of limiting this segment of consumers.

Looking at the athleisure industry from both the producer and consumer perspective, there seems to be a clear disconnect when it comes to plus-size clothing specifically. Women have shown their utter dismay for the lack of fashionable, plus-size athleisure wear by creating blogs criticizing companies and leaving critical comments on reviews (Dockerman). Some have created petitions against the "fat tax", or inflated prices of larger sizes (Yeginsu). This frustration is largely due to the lack of understanding about plus-size women's consumer behavior regarding athleisure. Companies do not want to create plus-size garments if they think it will be

more expensive and their sales will not make these additional costs worthwhile. Additionally, they are unsure over the styles, prices and purposes that plus-size women are looking for (Boorady). For this reason, I want to answer the question: What are the lifestyle orientations and consumer attitudes of plus-size female consumers of athleisure clothing? Based on this information, what would be the most lucrative size range and pricing model for athleisure wear companies that already incorporate plus sizes and those who have not?

### *Background, Related Works & Motivation*

When exploring both scholarly and general articles regarding plus-size consumer behavior, there seems to be an obvious lack of information. A common proclamation of plus-size women to retailers is, “You have no idea what it’s like to shop for my body,” which is legitimized by the lack of research on the consumption of athleisure (WWD). One foundational article that has recently been written, *Key factors influencing the purchase intention of activewear: an empirical study of US consumers* by Lauren Watts and Ting Chi, explores the purchase intentions of athleisure wear. They found that its purchase is tied to self-interest, and lack of self-confidence could inhibit purchases. Additionally, they emphasized, “[The] lack of consumer identification and understanding within the activewear market is a potential pitfall for apparel retailers and manufacturers” (Watts). From this investigation, I want to understand plus-size womens’ intentions for purchasing athleisure through the predicted behavior and actual consumption of athleisure clothes.

Besides the financial gain that athleisure companies could obtain through understanding the plus-size market, it is equally important for plus-size women to feel included and valued

within in society, starting with representation in the fashion industry. In Daiane Scaraboto and Eileen Fischer's study of "frustrated fatshionistas", they pointed out how fatness has become both a physical and character stigma, which has been driven by the fashion industry's deliberate exclusion and limited production for this group (Scaraboto). In response, plus-size women have created a growing social media presence on blogs, where they have built a sense of community and support for change, inclusion and more choices within the fashion industry. As a group that is strongly bonded by their mutual struggles and frustrations, their growing online presence has caused their opinions to be more widely spread and unified, giving them the ability to heavily support or condemn companies. For a producer, it would be incredibly beneficial to capitalize on this frustrated and underrepresented market, considering this group is highly motivated to ally with companies who will promote their cause (Scaraboto). On the other hand, this group also condemns larger presences who they believe to have caused their marginalization in the first place (Scaraboto). For this reason, an investigation into plus-size consumer attitude towards different actions by companies becomes necessary in order to see if an effort to incorporate larger sizes would be well or poorly received. The results would give companies the tools to effectively meet and value plus-size women's demands, by spawning more choices and representation in the marketplace. This acknowledgement and respect for plus-size people could be the catalyst for change, helping to expel a stigma that has negatively affected a large majority of the population.

### *Methods*

In order to answer my research question, I plan to conduct two surveys both in person and online. The first survey will be questioning the actual consumer behavior of women who have purchased plus-size clothing, regarding their basic information (age and size), intentional use, influential purchasing factors and attitude. This survey will be given to women outside athletic wear stores who have made a purchase, as well as a follow up questionnaire given to someone who purchased plus-size athleisure apparel from a wide-range of stores (Torrid, Target, Nike, Fabletics, Adidas, etc.). Rather than studying actual consumption and consumer behavior, the second survey will be conducted to establish what the predicted consumer behavior and attitude of plus-size women will be. In addition to the selected group from the first survey, the survey will also be administered on plus-size blogs and forums, where they will be questioned about their attitude and predicted behavior towards their consumption of athleisure in the future, different pricing strategies, and companies with different histories in the plus-size market.

### *Expected Results*

I plan for my research to result in a written document which will outline the data collected, critically analyze plus-size consumer behavior and attitude, and be published for other researchers and companies to utilize.

### *Conclusion*

As the athleisure is projected to continue growing and dominating within the apparel industry, it is important for companies to be strategic and responsible to consumer behavior and

tastes to remain competitive. Since the plus-size market is growing and largely untapped, these companies achieve a competitive advantage by meeting the needs and desires of this largely unsatisfied group. The results of my research will provide athleisure wear producers with a better understanding of the plus-size consumer's behavior and attitude, so companies have an empirical basis for current athleisure companies to incorporate or omit plus-sizes from their sales mix. For the companies that choose to sell athleisure apparel to this demographic based on the results, could become the catalyst in the fashion industry to value the plus-size consumer by giving them more choices and representation in the marketplace. I hope that this will make *all* women feel valued and included in the fashion industry, which will ultimately suspend the stigma of being plus-sized and promote equal respect for women of all sizes.

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## Budget

- \$2,500
  - I plan to give a \$5 reward to each participant as an incentive to complete the survey. This way, they will feel compensated for their time and will be more inclined to take their time to thinking over their answers. This will also allow a larger research sample of at least 500 plus-size women, giving the data more validity.
- \$1,000
  - This would serve as (estimated) compensation for my time conducting the research, analyzing the results, and publishing my findings.