

ARE U.S. PLUS-SIZE WOMEN SATISFIED WITH RETAIL CLOTHING STORE ENVIRONMENTS?

Marianne C. Bickle, Ph.D., University of South Carolina
Katherine Annette Burnsed, Ph.D., University of South Carolina
Karen Lear Edwards, J.D., University of South Carolina

ABSTRACT

U.S. plus-size female consumers account for 28% of the nation's apparel purchasing power (Binkley 2013). This group of women, who wear size 14 or larger clothing, believe that fashion retailers do not understand their clothing needs. Despite the apparently under-tapped potential of the plus-size apparel market, there is a limited amount of information on how this demographic is affected by the retail store environment. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine attributes (clothing availability, fitting rooms, mannequins, in-store signage, sales associates, and human crowding) of mainstream retail clothing store shopping environments and determine how they affect the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of plus-size female consumers. Results reveal that the store attributes of clothing availability, fitting rooms, mannequins, and in-store signage are significant predictors of plus-size consumers' satisfaction with a retailer. Additionally, results indicate that while the human attributes of sales associates significantly impact this market's satisfaction with a retailer, human crowding does not. These findings are useful to retailers, marketers, and apparel manufacturers as they attempt to satisfy this under-served market for ready-to-wear apparel.

Keywords: Plus-size; Women; Consumer satisfaction; Retail environment

INTRODUCTION

According to PLUS Model Magazine (2007), plus-size is a fashion industry standard that applies to any woman who is over a size 12. Interestingly, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) states that the average American woman wears a size 14; is 5' 4" in height, weighs 167 pounds, with a 37" waist (Binkley 2013). These dimensions place the average American woman into the plus-size market. According to Cornell University researchers, women wearing

size 14 or larger possess 28% of apparel purchasing power in the U.S., while their spending accounts for only 17% (Binkley 2013). This disparity in spending may be due, at least in part, to the fact that the women's plus-size market is dissatisfied with the retail apparel assortment offered to them. Retailers are often accused of offering unflattering plus-size clothes made to intentionally conceal the body. Additionally, retail analysts suggest that plus-size women are discouraged from spending more on apparel because retailers mistakenly think larger women do not want to dress fashionably; this misperception results in manufacturers making fewer clothes that are flattering to the fuller figure (Associated Press 2013). Further, apparel designers and retailers frequently offer dark, plain apparel in the belief that this target market does not want attention drawn to the body. Thus, the plus-size female consumer is often limited to lackluster clothing that makes her feel unattractive and unfashionable (Associated Press 2013). To compensate for the limited clothing options, many plus-size female consumers purchase more shoes, purses, and accessories (Bogenrief 2012).

In light of the misconceptions held by designers and retailers, and the plus-size consumer's historical frustration with retail clothing stores, this study seeks to examine attributes of mainstream retail clothing store shopping environments. In doing so, the researchers will investigate how these attributes—(1) clothing availability, (2) fitting rooms, (3) mannequins, (4) in-store signage, (5) sales associates, and (6) human crowding—affect the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of plus-size female consumers. This research fills a gap in the literature by incorporating six key attributes rather than focusing on only one, as with the majority of past research. Additionally, this study adds to the extant literature by focusing solely on the U.S. plus-size female market and mainstream retail clothing store shopping environments. Further, this study aids

retailers in satisfying the U.S. plus-size female market by giving them a better understanding of desired product assortments and displays, the importance of more thoughtful sales floor and fitting room planning, more considerate promotional materials and signage, and a more knowledgeable and empathetic sales staff.

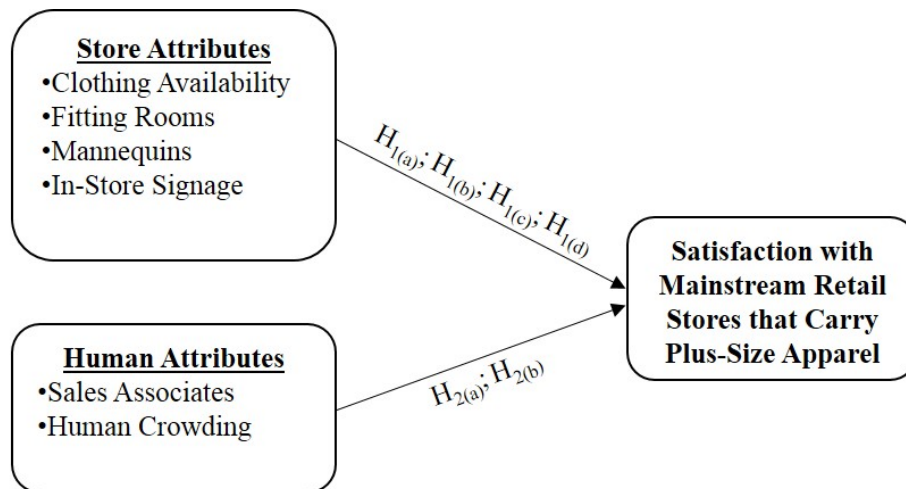
LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development
 In general, consumer satisfaction is an overall positive evaluation of performance based on all prior experiences with a firm (Halstead, Jones, and Cox 2007). Westbrook (1981) proposes that consumer satisfaction with a retail establishment is viewed as an individual's emotional reaction to his or her evaluation of the total set of experiences realized from patronizing the retailer. As such, emotional dimensions are vital in the consumer decision making process and satisfaction (Meirovich and Little 2013). Consumer experiences with retail patronage are categorized into two broad types: (1) experiences that

relate to being in the store itself and dealing with the organization (e.g., store personnel, store atmosphere, availability of merchandise, and other customers in the store), and (2) experiences that relate to consuming retail products and services (e.g., quality of merchandise assortment and fashion appeal of merchandise) (Westbrook 1981). Each experience receives an evaluation, and an accompanying emotional reaction, from the consumer (Westbrook 1981). Therefore, consumers derive satisfaction or dissatisfaction both from individual in-store experiences and in the use of retail products and/or services (Westbrook 1981).

Based on an adaption of Westbrook's (1981) conceptual model of retail satisfaction/dissatisfaction, this study examines the level of satisfaction of plus-size women regarding retail store environments. In doing so, the researchers identify the following attributes from past research (Bickle, Eckman, and Kotsiopoulos 1998; Fister 2009; Otieno, Harrow, and

Figure 1
Theoretical Model of U.S. Plus-Size Female Consumers' Level of Satisfaction with Shopping Environments



Lea-Greenwood 2005; Seo 2013; Terblanche and Boshoff 2004; Westbrook 1981) and the researchers' direct appraisals of stores: clothing availability, fitting rooms, mannequins, in-store signage, sales associates, and crowding (see Figure 1). The hypotheses for testing consumers' level of satisfaction with retail store environments are separated into two areas: ($H_{1[a-d]}$) store attributes (clothing availability, fitting rooms, mannequins, and in-store signage) and ($H_{2[a-b]}$) human attributes (sales associates and human crowding).

Store Attributes of the Shopping Environment

-Clothing Availability

Research suggests that a sparse assortment of fashionable clothing and a lack of properly fitting clothing cause dissatisfaction among plus-size women (Otieno, Harrow, and Lea-Greenwood 2005; The NPD Group, Inc. 2012). According to The NPD Group, Inc. (2012), 63% of plus-size women perceive shopping for plus-size clothing as more stressful than shopping for standard-size clothing. Additionally, 62% of plus-size women experience difficulty finding desirable clothing styles, and 56% report that it is challenging to find good quality plus-size clothing (The NPD Group, Inc. 2012). These findings are revealing, since plus-size women rank fashionable/trendy clothing as the key driver in making clothing purchases (style #2; good quality #4) (Mintel Group Ltd. 2012).

According to Mintel Group Ltd. (2012), the most popular stores patronized by plus-size women are Walmart (47%), Kohl's (37%), JCPenney (35%), and Target (27%). Interestingly, plus-size specialty retailers (i.e., Lane Bryant) are shopped at less frequently compared to mass merchandisers and department stores (Mintel Group Ltd. 2012). The report suggests three possible reasons for lower patronage at specialty stores: (1) higher prices, (2) location inconvenience, and (3) reluctance to be seen carrying a shopping bag from a plus-size retailer (Mintel Group Ltd. 2012).

Further research by Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) indicates that Fashionistas (fashion lovers who wear plus-size clothing) are frustrated with mainstream retailers because they provide too few fashionable clothing options. According to Marshal Cohen, chief industry analyst at The NPD Group, Inc., "the plus-size business is often regarded as tertiary, 'a stepchild.' Retailers don't nurture the business...so

it leaves few players in the end" (Bellafante 2010). In addition to this, some retailers (Ann Taylor, Gap, and Old Navy) only recently offer these sizes online (Postrel 2009). Other retailers (Forever 21 and Macy's), who offer larger sizes in their brick-and-mortar stores, provide few color and pattern assortment options and distribute them unevenly across various stores (Popken 2008). Ultimately, this limits availability of clothing options for plus-size women. These findings signify that retailers and manufacturers must improve their offerings in order to satisfy these consumers.

H_{1(a)}: Greater clothing availability positively impacts U.S. plus-size female consumers' overall level of satisfaction with mainstream retail stores that carry plus-size apparel.

-Fitting Rooms

Fitting rooms are perhaps the most important part of a retail store because they are where consumers often make final purchasing decisions (Seo 2013). According to the retail consulting firm Envision Retail, Ltd., customers who try on clothes in fitting rooms have a 67% conversion rate (shopper "converted" to purchaser) versus the 10% conversion rate for customers who do not use fitting rooms (Holmes and Smith 2011). Although women are more likely in general to try on clothes before making a purchase, many avoid fitting rooms because they feel negatively about themselves after trying on clothes (i.e., due to poor fit and body-image issues) (Hellmich 2008; Hengevelt 2014). Seo (2013) proposes that the fitting rooms' lighting and mirrors may cause dissatisfaction in consumers. In particular, most flat fitting room mirrors do not enable consumers to view the merchandise from different angles (Seo 2013). Hengevelt (2014) suggests that the inadequate size of many fitting rooms may cause dissatisfaction among consumers because the standard fitting room is approximately three feet by five feet in area. According to Holmes and Smith (2011), some retailers, such as Ann Taylor, Anthropologie, and Bloomingdale's, are trying to increase satisfaction and conversion rates by enlarging and beautifying fitting rooms with chandeliers, wallpaper, and back-lit mirrors. Other retailers, such as Yours Clothing, HeyGorgeous, ModCloth IRL, and Simply Be are trying to make the fitting room experience better for plus-size women by incorporating on-demand pre-recorded compliments, in-store stylists to assist

shoppers while changing, larger fitting rooms with a boudoir feel, and “magic mirrors” that will take four photos of the customer, allowing them to email their friends for a second opinion and alleviate the need to leave the fitting room (Peiser 2015; Steiner 2011; Tan 2014). To date, there is a gap in the literature regarding the influence of fitting rooms on plus-size women’s satisfaction.

H_{1(b)}: Enhanced fitting rooms positively impact U.S. plus-size female consumers’ overall level of satisfaction with mainstream retail stores that carry plus-size apparel.

-Mannequins

Mannequins provide consumers with a visual image of the garment on a human body, thereby, decreasing the perceived purchase risk and influencing consumers’ purchase intentions (D’Innocenzio 2014; Fister 2009). By taking what they view on the mannequin and mentally adapting the vision into their own body form, consumers are better able to make a purchase decision. Mannequins are financially valuable to retailers and referred to as the “quintessential silent sales people” (D’Innocenzio 2014). They are an influential factor in helping consumers make a purchase decision, ranked just behind family and friends (D’Innocenzio 2014). Although research demonstrates that mannequins affect consumers’ purchase intentions, the majority of the existing information focuses on positive influences such as the size of mannequins. This reveals a gap in the literature regarding how plus-size female consumers are affected by mannequin displays in mainstream retail clothing stores.

Consumers desire clothing to look and fit them the same way it appears on the mannequin, regardless of the differences in body shape and size (Meierdierks-Lehman 2007). Currently, the majority of mannequins in retail stores do not represent the average consumer. They are designed to highlight the body rather than the fit of the clothing. Most female mannequins are created with extremely small waistlines, sloping shoulders, narrow waists, and a pert bust. The dress size of the majority of U.S. mannequins ranges from a size 2 to a size 6 (Luscombe 2013). The store model is used to create an image based on society’s desire of being thin, athletic, and youthful (Meierdierks-Lehman 2007).

Some retailers are beginning to replace ultra-thin mannequins with more realistic size

mannequins in an attempt to appeal to their target market, since the average U.S. female consumer wears a size 14 (Luscombe 2013). Updated mannequins may wear wigs and have makeup, tattoos, back fat, thicker waists, and lower bustlines; these store displays give consumers a more realistic image of how clothing appears on a plus-size body (D’Innocenzio 2014).

Existing mannequin studies are exploratory in nature. Additional research will provide a better understanding of the benefits with using target market sized mannequins. This analysis provides retailers with a better comprehension of consumers’ attitudes toward mannequins, sizing, and shopping behaviors.

H_{1(c)}: Realistic mannequins (appearance and size) positively impact U.S. plus-size female consumers’ overall level of satisfaction with mainstream retail stores that carry plus-size apparel.

-In-Store Signage

Retailers rely on in-store signage to express the company’s identity, promote merchandise to consumers, and persuade consumers to purchase merchandise (Ruderman and Ruderman 1998). Therefore, advertising plays a key role in retailer and/or brand loyalty (or lack thereof), as well as potential sales. Altogether, if a customer dislikes certain attributes of an advertisement, the following is possible: a decrease in purchase intention, dissatisfaction with the retailer and/or brand, and complaining behavior regarding the advertisement (Fam, Grohs, and Waller 2011).

Models’ weight in advertisements is approximately 15% below that of the average woman (Tucci and Peters 2008). Existing research regarding female consumers in general suggests that advertisements may have a negative impact because of the unrealistic body types shown (i.e., underweight and/or heavily airbrushed models) (Dahl, Argo, and Morales 2012; Krishen and Worthen 2011). For instance, young girls may have the propensity to become overly body conscious, or even anorexic as a result of the portrayal of female models in advertisements (Krishen and Worthen 2011; Serdar 2005). U.S. clothing retailer American Eagle is using a campaign which shows models in their natural state including stretch marks, tattoos, and birthmarks (Dockterman 2014). While some retailers are making positive steps toward encouraging women to embrace their bodies, false representation in the media about

the female body is still pervasive (Serdar 2005).

Harper and Tiggemann (2008) and Perrier (2008) demonstrate that the body size of models in advertisements influences women's attitudes. Harper and Tiggemann (2008) reveal that when women are exposed to idealized body images, they feel negatively about their own bodies. Perrier (2008) shows that, conversely, when viewing advertisements with plus-size models, women are more likely to feel positively about their bodies. While neither study focuses on in-store signage specifically, both provide evidence that women are influenced by models featured in advertisements.

Further exploratory research is needed to determine the extent to which in-store signage influences plus-size female consumers. This study explores how in-store signage impacts plus-size consumers' level of satisfaction with mainstream retail clothing stores, providing retailers with information that will be useful in their attempts to market toward this important demographic.

H_{1(d)}: In-store signage with realistic models positively impacts U.S. plus-size female consumers' overall level of satisfaction with mainstream retail stores that carry plus-size apparel.

Human Attributes of the Shopping Environment

-Sales Associates

Sales associates are in a position to make customers feel wanted and appreciated, or they can intrude on the customer's space and impede sales (Cho 2001). Additionally, service quality is directly linked to customer satisfaction and loyalty (Srivastava and Rai 2013). Effective sales associates are those who possess product knowledge, are friendly, available to the customer, and have a well-groomed appearance (Shim and Kotsiopoulos 1993). The majority of existing research exploring how sales associate characteristics affect consumers is not focused specifically on plus-size women (Kim, Ju, and Johnson 2009; Naylor and Frank 2000). While Otieno, Harrow, and Lea-Greenwood (2005) discuss that plus-size female consumers experience the same type of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with sales associates as other consumers, further research on this demographic is needed.

A five-year, Rice University study details some of the unpleasant experiences of plus-size women while shopping (Lozano 2005). The research

reveals that obese consumers in general report higher levels of negative responses (i.e., more rudeness, less eye contact, unfriendliness, and hostility) from sales associates than thinner consumers. Furthermore, the plus-size women participating in the study state that they spend less time and money in stores where they face discrimination, and will not return (Lozano 2005).

H_{2(a)}: Effective sales associates positively impact U.S. plus-size female consumers' overall level of satisfaction with mainstream retail stores that carry plus-size apparel.

-Human Crowding

Consumers in a crowded retail store often experience what researchers refer to as *perceived crowding*. Perceived crowding exists when a consumer feels the need for additional space in the store, regardless of the actual amount of space being used by other consumers, racks, merchandise, and employees (Machleit, Eroglu, and Mantel 2000). Consumers are often uncomfortable physically and psychologically and have negative feelings as they experience perceived crowding (Kim and Runyan 2011).

Human crowding consists of the length and number of interactions between sales associates and the consumer within the store. The interaction may be positive or negative depending upon situational factors such as the number of persons in the store, perceived anxiety of individuals, and consumers' expectations (Byun and Mann 2011; Kazakeviciute and Banyte 2012). Human crowding can negatively influence consumers. Some consumers may become angry, irritated, or feel shy in large crowds (Byun and Mann 2011; Noone and Mattila 2009). These feelings may result in consumers spending less time and money than previously planned, leave the store without making a purchase, or being too embarrassed to make a complaint regarding poor service (Yan and Lotz 2009). Although the majority of past studies reveal few positive aspects of human crowding, Byun and Mann (2011) suggest that human crowding provides consumers with competitive shopping excitement—consumers may view human crowding as an opportunity to find great deals, deep discounts, or special merchandise.

Research on human crowding does not focus solely on the plus-size female market. Although a minimal amount of information exists on how plus-size consumers are affected by in-store crowding,

evidence suggests that overweight and obese individuals are negatively affected while in a public setting. For instance, media stories demonstrate instances of bullying, fat shaming, and discrimination against obese and/or overweight persons in public places (Long 2013). In particular, the issue of "fat shaming" is documented through a social experiment whereby strangers' expressions toward an overweight female in public are photographed (Bahadur 2013).

While scholars reveal that human crowding influences consumer shopping behavior in general, academic studies do not focus specifically on plus-size female consumers. What limited information

exists is anecdotal and is primarily provided via media outlets (i.e., documentaries and blogs of plus-size females). As such, the inclusion of this attribute in the current study will aid retailers in the creation of more comfortable retail environments for customers.

H_{2(b)}: Affirmative human crowding positively impacts U.S. plus-size female consumers' overall level of satisfaction with mainstream retail stores that carry plus-size apparel.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Participants

| <i>Variable</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
|---|----------|----------|
| <i>Age</i> | | |
| 18-30 | 75 | 6.5% |
| 31-45 | 290 | 25.0% |
| 46-55 | 296 | 25.6% |
| 56-65 | 339 | 29.3% |
| 66+ | 158 | 13.6% |
| <i>Household Income</i> | | |
| <\$25,000 | 289 | 25.0% |
| \$25,000-\$40,000 | 304 | 26.3% |
| \$40,001-\$55,000 | 177 | 15.3% |
| \$55,001-\$70,000 | 137 | 11.9% |
| \$70,001-\$85,000 | 81 | 7.0% |
| \$85,001-\$100,000 | 65 | 5.6% |
| \$100,000+ | 102 | 8.8% |
| <i>Amount Spent on Apparel per Year</i> | | |
| <\$100 | 253 | 21.8% |
| \$101-\$150 | 196 | 16.9% |
| \$151-\$200 | 147 | 12.7% |
| \$201-\$300 | 177 | 15.3% |
| \$301-\$400 | 109 | 9.4% |
| \$401-\$500 | 86 | 7.4% |
| \$501-\$600 | 59 | 5.1% |
| \$600+ | 131 | 11.3% |
| <i>Dress Size</i> | | |
| 14 | 208 | 17.9% |
| 16 | 246 | 21.1% |
| 18 | 187 | 16.1% |
| 20 | 96 | 8.2% |
| 22 | 113 | 9.7% |
| 24 | 69 | 5.9% |
| 26 | 30 | 2.6% |
| 28 | 8 | 0.7% |
| 30-40 | 20 | 1.7% |
| Wear Multiple Sizes (e.g., 14-16) | 87 | 7.5% |
| Specialty Size (1X-6X) | 51 | 4.4% |
| Plus-Size (i.e., size ≥ 14, but unsure of exact size) | 49 | 4.2% |

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection and Study Sample

A nationwide random sample of 1,164 U.S. plus-size female (those who wear a size 14 or larger) adult consumers (aged 18+) are surveyed, using panel data from C & T Marketing Group, to investigate the theoretical model of satisfaction with shopping environments. The online survey consists of the following: (1) measurement of consumers' level of satisfaction with mainstream stores that carry plus-size apparel (dependent variable), (2) measurement of consumers' level of satisfaction and agreement with statements regarding store and human attributes (independent variables), and (3) demographic questions. Store satisfaction is generally measured using a self-reported categorical response on a single-dimensioned scale (Miller 1976; Westbrook 1981). As such, consumers' level of satisfaction with mainstream stores that carry plus-size apparel (dependent variable) is a single-item question with a five-point Likert type scale for measurement (1=very dissatisfied; 5=very satisfied). A rating of "0" is included for a category of "not applicable". The independent variables are comprised of level of satisfaction and agreement statements for the six individual attributes. Respondent selections, regarding the six attributes (independent variables) for retail store environments, for level of satisfaction (1=very dissatisfied; 5=very satisfied; 0=not applicable) or degree of agreement (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree; 0=not applicable) are based on two five-point Likert type scales. The level of satisfaction with the six attributes is similar to the five-point Likert type scale measurement that is being used for the dependent variable. The degree of agreement scale measurement consists of statements regarding the individual independent variables (six attributes), which are based on a combination of the review of literature and researcher observations since a valid construct does not exist. Finally, demographic data are measured using categorical measures.

The dress size breakdown of respondents is as follows: 21.1% wear a size 16, 17.9% wear a size 14, 16.1% a size 18, 9.7% a size 22, 8.2% a size 20, 7.5% wear multiple sizes, 5.9% a size 24, 4.4% wear specialty sizes, 4.2% wear a plus-size however they are unsure of their exact size, 2.6% a size 26, 1.7% wear sizes 30-40, and 0.7% wear a size 28 (see Table 1). The 4.2%, who report wearing a plus-size

although not knowing their exact size, may be attributed to a lack of accurate industry standards and/or vanity sizing (i.e., sizing down to make consumers feel better about themselves). Although six participants did not report their age, 1,158 provide the following age breakdown: 29.3% are between the ages of 56-65, 25.6% are aged 46-55, 25% were aged 31-45, 13.6% are 66+ years of age, and 6.5% of the respondents are between the ages of 18-30.

Nine of the 1,164 study participants decline to report their annual household income; the majority (78.5%) reporting had an annual household income \leq \$70,000. Although six of the 1,164 respondents decline to report the amount spent on apparel per year, 83.5% state that they spend less than \$500 annually. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), average annual expenditures for women aged 16+ spend \$527 annually in 2013; therefore, a gap in average annual expenditures exists for plus-size women's clothing purchases. This could be due in part to dissatisfaction with store and human attributes of the shopping environment.

Analyses

Principal component factor analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation is conducted on the level of satisfaction and agreement statements regarding the six attributes. Items with a correlation \geq 0.40 are indicative of multicollinearity and thus deleted from the study. Additionally, items with a factor loading of \geq 0.50 and/or eigenvalues \geq 1.0, which account for a total of 100% of variance for the factor, are included in the analysis. Cronbach's alpha is conducted on each factor. Factors with an alpha coefficient \geq 0.50 are used in the analysis. PCA will yield the final versions of the independent variables (based on factor loadings) for further analysis.

Following PCA, stepwise regression analyses using a SI-entry of 0.05 and SI-stay of 0.10 is conducted to test the impact of store and human attributes on satisfaction with mainstream stores that carry plus-size apparel. Stepwise regression analysis is selected, because the analysis provides the ideal model for each hypothesis; therefore, supplying the researchers with the most significant predictors (Ott and Longnecker 2010). SPSS is the tool utilized for all statistical analyses.

RESULTS

Store Attributes: Hypotheses One(a-d)

Six items regarding *Clothing Availability* ($H_{1(a)}$) are included in the survey—(1) level of satisfaction with clothing availability, (2) I am able to readily find clothing in my size, (3) the fit of clothes influences my purchase intentions, (4) I am able to find clothing that fits my body type, (5) overall, I am satisfied by the plus-size clothing offered by retailers, and (6) clothing fit matters more to me than how a fitting room looks. After PCA, two items loaded on the *Clothing Availability* factor: (1) I am able to readily find clothing in my size (factor loading = 0.94) and (2) I am able to find clothing that fits my body type (factor loading = 0.94) (see Table 2).

The survey consists of five items regarding *Fitting Rooms* ($H_{1(b)}$)—(1) satisfaction with the ambiance of fitting rooms, (2) overall, I am satisfied with the fitting rooms offered by clothing retailers, (3) the size of fitting rooms accommodate me while shopping when shopping with a group, (4) the size of fitting rooms are adequate for my needs, and (5) fitting rooms lead to negative emotions regarding clothing fit. Of the five items, three loaded on the *Fitting Rooms* factor: (1) overall, I am satisfied with the fitting rooms offered by clothing retailers (factor loading = 0.85), (2) the size of fitting rooms accommodate me, while shopping with a group (factor loading = 0.84), and (3) clothing fit matters more to me than how a fitting room looks (factor loading = 0.56) (see Table 2).

Table 2
Principle Components Factor Analysis: Satisfaction with Store Attributes ($H_{1(a-d)}$)

| <i>Factor & Sample Statements</i> | <i>Factor Loading</i> | <i>Eigenvalue</i> | <i>% of Variance</i> | <i>Cumulative % of Variance</i> |
|--|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Clothing Availability (2)</i> | | | | |
| • I am readily able to find merchandise in my size. | .94 | 1.76 | 88.14 | 88.14 |
| • I am able to find clothing that fits my body type. | .94 | .24 | 11.86 | 100.00 |
| <i>Fitting Rooms (3)</i> | | | | |
| • Overall, I am satisfied with the fitting rooms offered by clothing retailers. | .85 | 1.73 | 57.51 | 57.51 |
| • The size of fitting rooms accommodate me, while shopping with a group. | .84 | .84 | 28.02 | 85.53 |
| • Clothing fit matters more to me than how a fitting room looks. | .56 | .43 | 14.47 | 100.00 |
| <i>Mannequins (4)</i> | | | | |
| • Most mannequins in stores represent my body type. | .82 | 2.31 | 57.69 | 57.69 |
| • The posing style of a mannequin influences my purchase intention. | .80 | .88 | 22.10 | 79.79 |
| • Mannequins alter my opinion of the clothing offered in mainstream retail stores. | .63 | .46 | 11.58 | 91.37 |
| • I can find clothing displayed on mannequins in my size. | .77 | .35 | 8.63 | 100.00 |
| <i>In-Store Signage (2)</i> | | | | |
| • Models featured in in-store advertisements influence my purchase intentions. | .84 | 1.40 | 69.92 | 69.92 |
| • In-store advertising evokes the need to compare myself to others. | .84 | .60 | 30.08 | 100.00 |

Note. () = number of sample statements loaded per factor.

Eight items regarding *Mannequins* ($H_{1(c)}$) are included in the survey—(1) satisfaction with mannequins in retail stores, (2) satisfaction with proportions of the mannequins in stores, (3) satisfaction with plus-size merchandise displayed on mannequins, (4) most mannequins in stores represent my body size, (5) most mannequins in stores represent my body type, (6) mannequins alter my opinion of the clothing offered in mainstream retail stores, (7) the posing style of a mannequin influences my purchase intentions, and (8) I can find clothing displayed on mannequins in my size. After PCA, four of the eight items loaded on the *Mannequins* factor: (1) most mannequins in stores represent my body type (factor loading = 0.82), (2) the posing style of a mannequin influences my purchase intention (factor loading = 0.80), (3) mannequins alter my opinion of the clothing offered in mainstream retail stores (factor loading = 0.63), and (4) I can find clothing displayed on mannequins in my size (factor loading = 0.77) (see Table 2).

The survey consists of six items regarding *In-Store Signage* ($H_{1(d)}$)—(1) satisfaction with in-store signage, (2) models used in in-store advertisements affect my shopping intentions, (3) in-store advertising evokes the need to compare myself to others, (4) in-

store advertisements influence my positive emotions, (5) models featured in in-store advertisements influence my purchase intentions, and (6) models used in in-store advertisements are similar to me. Of the six items, two loaded on the *In-Store Signage* factor: (1) models featured in in-store advertisements influence my purchase intentions (factor loading = 0.84) and (2) in-store advertising evokes the need to compare myself to others (factor loading = 0.84) (see Table 2).

Following PCA, stepwise regression analysis is conducted to test $H_{1(a-d)}$. The dependent variable is plus-size consumers' level of satisfaction with mainstream retail clothing stores that carry plus size apparel, while the independent variables are the store attributes—clothing availability, fitting rooms, mannequins, and in-store signage. Results reveal that all four store attribute variables are significant to the prediction of satisfaction with mainstream retail stores that carry plus-size apparel (see Table 3). The R^2 value for the model is 0.42, which reveals that approximately 42% of the variation in satisfaction with mainstream retail stores that carry plus-size apparel can be explained by the four independent variables in the model. Although the R^2 is low, the p-value is

Table 3
Regression: Satisfaction with Store Attributes ($H_{1(a-d)}$)

| Predictor(s) & Model | | R | R ² | Sum of Square | df | Mean Square | F |
|---|------------|-----|----------------|---------------|------|-------------|-----------|
| 1 Clothing Availability | Regression | .63 | .39 | 1379.75 | 1 | 1379.75 | 746.10*** |
| | Residual | | | 2148.87 | 1162 | 1.85 | |
| | Total | | | 3528.62 | 1163 | | |
| 2 Clothing Availability Fitting Rooms | Regression | .64 | .41 | 1431.78 | 2 | 715.89 | 396.38*** |
| | Residual | | | 2096.84 | 1161 | 1.81 | |
| | Total | | | 3528.62 | 1163 | | |
| 3 Clothing Availability Fitting Rooms Mannequins | Regression | .64 | .42 | 1463.23 | 3 | 487.74 | 273.93*** |
| | Residual | | | 2065.40 | 1160 | 1.78 | |
| | Total | | | 3528.62 | 1163 | | |
| 4 Clothing Availability Fitting Rooms Mannequins In-Store Signage | Regression | .65 | .42 | 1473.07 | 4 | 368.27 | 207.64*** |
| | Residual | | | 2055.56 | 1159 | 1.77 | |
| | Total | | | 3528.62 | 1163 | | |

Note. ***p<0.000.

significant ($p < 0.000$) due to a large sample size. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2001), as the number of cases (i.e., participants) becomes quite large, almost any multiple correlation will depart significantly from zero, even one that predicts negligible variance in the dependent variable. Further review of the significance probabilities for each of the independent variables reveal that all four store attribute variables contribute significantly to the prediction of satisfaction with mainstream retail stores that carry plus-size apparel: clothing availability (p-value = 0.000), fitting rooms (p-value = 0.000), mannequins (p-value = 0.005), and in-store signage (p-value = 0.019). Therefore, $H_{1(a-d)}$ are supported.

Human Attributes: Hypotheses Two(a-b)

Six items are included in the survey regarding *Sales Associates* ($H_{2(a)}$)—(1) satisfaction with sales associates at clothing retailers, (2) satisfaction with assistance from sales associates, (3) sales associates' behavior influences my decision to shop in a store, (4) sales associates influence my purchase intentions, (5) the attitude of sales associates influences my purchase intentions, and (6) the service quality of sales associates influences my purchase intentions. After PCA, two of the six items loaded on the *Sales Associates* factor: (1) overall, I am satisfied with the sales associates at clothing retailers (factor loading = 0.90) and (2) I am satisfied with assistance from sales associates (factor loading = 0.90) (see Table 4).

Three statements are included in the survey regarding *Human Crowding* ($H_{2(b)}$)—(1) I like to shop when there are fewer customers in the store (factor loading = 0.93), (2) I am happiest when the store has few people (factor loading = 0.93), and (3) when a store is crowded, I tend to spend less money (factor loading = 0.76). PCA indicates that all three statements loaded on the *Human Crowding* factor (see Table 4).

Following PCA, stepwise regression analysis is conducted to test $H_{2(a-b)}$. The dependent variable is plus-size consumers' level of satisfaction with mainstream retail clothing stores that carry plus size apparel, while the independent variables are the human attributes—sales associates and human crowding. Results reveal that the sales associate variable (p-value = 0.000) is the only significant predictor of satisfaction with mainstream retail stores that carry plus-size apparel, since human crowding is not entered into the model based on the SI-entry of 0.05 and SI-stay of 0.10 requirements ($H_{2(b)}$ is not supported). The R^2 value for the model is 0.34, which reveals that 34% of the variation in satisfaction with mainstream retail stores that carry plus-size apparel is explained by the sales associate variable (see Table 5). Although the R^2 is low, the p-value is significant ($p < 0.000$) due to a large sample size; therefore, only $H_{2(a)}$ is supported.

Table 4
Principle Components Factor Analysis: Satisfaction with Human Attributes ($H_{2(a-b)}$)

| <i>Factor & Sample Statements</i> | <i>Factor Loading</i> | <i>Eigenvalue</i> | <i>% of Variance</i> | <i>Cumulative % of Variance</i> |
|--|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Sales Associates (2)</i> | | | | |
| • Overall, I am satisfied with the sales associates at clothing retailers. | .90 | 1.60 | 80.09 | 80.09 |
| • I am satisfied with assistance from the sales associates. | .90 | .40 | 19.91 | 100.00 |
| <i>Human Crowding (3)</i> | | | | |
| • I like to shop when there are fewer customers in the store. | .93 | 2.32 | 77.16 | 77.16 |
| • I am happiest when the store has few people. | .93 | .56 | 18.64 | 95.80 |
| • When a store is crowded, I tend to spend less money. | .76 | .13 | 4.20 | 100.00 |

Note. () = number of sample statements loaded per factor.

Table 5
Regression: Satisfaction with Human Attributes ($H_{2(a)}$)

| Predictor & Model | | R | R ² | Sum of Square | df | Mean Square | F |
|-------------------|------------|-----|----------------|---------------|------|-------------|-----------|
| Sales Associates | Regression | .58 | .34 | 1196.52 | 1 | 1196.52 | 599.45*** |
| | Residual | | | 2313.40 | 1159 | 2.00 | |
| | Total | | | 3509.92 | 1160 | | |

Note. ***p<0.000.

DISCUSSION

To better serve the U.S. plus-size apparel market, retailers, marketers, and apparel manufacturers must listen and respond to consumer needs and preferences. While the number of American women who wear plus-size apparel is growing, research on these consumers' satisfaction with retailers that carry plus-size apparel is limited. To date, little is known about how the plus-size woman's level of satisfaction and corresponding intention to purchase apparel from mainstream retailers is affected by key factors impacting her in-store experience. This study begins to address that information gap, providing plus-size apparel manufacturers, marketers, and retailers with insights that may prove useful in developing product lines, planning store interiors and in-store visual communications, and training sales personnel.

While consumers determine satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a retailer from their in-store experience and actual use of the purchased product (Westbrook 1981), this study focuses on the pre-transaction experience of plus-size female consumers within mainstream brick-and-mortar retailers. Like Westbrook (1981), this study uses both a review of literature and the researchers' direct appraisals of stores for the creation of a list of independent variables and items regarding store and human attributes—clothing availability, fitting rooms, mannequins, in-store signage, sales associates, and human crowding—in order to test satisfaction/dissatisfaction of plus-size female consumers with mainstream retail clothing stores that offer plus-size apparel. Important both individually and in the aggregate, these attributes are believed to trigger strong emotional responses in consumers. As such, the current study adds validity to Westbrook's (1981) findings in that a simplistic prediction model of retailer satisfaction is pragmatic and can be carried out using multiple regression and other correlational analyses.

The study involves 1,164 adult females who wear size 14 or larger in broadly generalizable U.S. apparel sizes. Although the average American woman spends more than \$500 annually on apparel, the median plus-size woman in this study spends less than \$200. This suggests that the plus-size apparel market is seriously under-tapped, and prompts investigation into the reasons for, and remedies to such a disparity in spending. Prior studies and anecdotal evidence suggest that store attributes including clothing style and fit (Otieno, Harrow, and Lea-Greenwood 2005), fitting room configuration (Hengevelt 2014; Seo 2013), mannequin body size (D'Innocenzio 2014), and images appearing on signage within the store (Harper and Tiggemann 2008) may impact consumer levels of satisfaction with retailers. Likewise, the human attributes of sales associates (Cho 2001) and human crowding (Kazakeviciute and Banyte 2012) may have similar results.

With regard to the plus-size apparel market, this study reveals that all four identified store attributes—clothing availability, fitting rooms, mannequins, and in-store signage—are significant predictors of satisfaction with a retailer. Not surprisingly, this study reveals that consumer satisfaction increases when the plus-size shopper is readily able to find clothing in her size, and in styles that fit her body type. This reinforces and extends prior studies by Otieno, Harrow, and Lea-Greenwood (2005) and The NPD Group, Inc. (2012) which suggest that insufficient selection, size availability, and quality of apparel is a source of dissatisfaction among plus-size consumers.

Fitting rooms, in terms of size and overall acceptability, are also found to be a significant predictor of the plus-size consumer's satisfaction with a retailer. Although apparel fit is still a more important issue, this study supports earlier works which reveal that an inadequate fitting room size (Hengevelt 2014)

and amenities such as flat wall-mounted mirrors (Seo 2013) may result in dissatisfaction among apparel consumers. Additionally, plus-size shoppers are more likely to be satisfied if fitting rooms have space for shopping companions.

This study reveals that mannequins, particularly those that represent the plus-size body type and are posed appropriately, positively influence purchase intention. These findings are congruent with previous research on the general population; whereby, viewing apparel on mannequins can help decrease perceived purchase risk and increase purchase intentions (D'Innocenzio 2014; Fister 2009).

In-store signage is the final store attribute that is indicative of plus-size consumer satisfaction with mainstream apparel retailers. This study brings to light the influence in-store advertisement models have on purchase intention and consumer self-comparisons. Since most retailers currently depict trimmer people in such materials, it is possible that after viewing them, the plus-size shopper experiences negative emotions and purchasing intention consequently diminishes. Our findings are in line with research conducted by Harper and Tiggemann (2008) and Dahl, Argo, and Morales (2012), who, without analyzing the issue of the shopper's size, identify that underweight and airbrushed model images on in-store signage have a negative impact on female consumers.

Of the human attributes tested, sales associates is the only attribute found to influence the plus-size consumer's satisfaction with a retailer. For plus-size females, satisfaction with sales associates and the assistance they provide is a significant predictor of overall satisfaction with the mainstream apparel retailer. Researchers agree that as a general rule, customers evaluate businesses, in part, based on the service provided by their front-line sales staff (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996). This study supports that notion and validates the work of Otieno, Harrow, and Lea-Greenwood (2005), who state that plus-size female shoppers experience satisfaction and dissatisfaction with sales associates similar to that of other consumers.

Human crowding—being ill at ease from feeling that there are too many people in the store—is not shown to impact the plus-size consumer's overall satisfaction with a retailer. Supporting previous research (Machleit, Eroglu, and Mantel 2000), the influence of human crowding may be largely

dependent on the internal perceptions of the individual, and not by their personal physical size.

Managerial Implications

Among women wearing size 14 or larger, the most popular stores patronized by plus-size women are Walmart, Kohl's, JCPenney, and Target (The Mintel Group 2012). Yet, despite broad access to these national retailers, plus-size American women seem to be spending less than the average American woman on apparel. Thus, these national retailers should attempt to respond to apparel fit and size availability issues by testing new styles and stocking deeper runs in larger sizes to determine whether sales volume can be gained. Ascena Retail Group, owner of the smaller but well-established national full-figure shops Catherine's and Lane Bryant, are successfully using this strategy (Kraft 2013). For regional retailers and smaller operations with less name recognition, attempts can be made to either tap into the plus-size market, or gain market share, by carrying appropriate styles, sizes, and stock levels of apparel, and aggressively marketing to the plus-size consumer. Cato, a successful regional retailer that provides near-identical style options to both misses and women's sizes, and devotes to them equal amounts of floor space, strategically leases space in strip plazas anchored by category competitor, WalMart (Kraft 2013).

Although many mainstream retailers understandably carry limited brands, styles, and quantities of plus-size apparel due to traditionally lower profit margins and floorspace constraints, these findings suggest that retailers who are able and willing to increase stock levels of adequate quality apparel can position themselves to gain both sales volume and market share within this underserved and important demographic.

Because conversion rates for shoppers who try on apparel are dramatically higher (Holmes and Smith 2011), retailers should make every effort to increase try-on rates. Store planners should ensure that fitting room environments are conducive to the plus-size customer's meaningful assessment of apparel fit, appearance, and comfort during movement, whether alone or with others. This will likely include providing three-sided mirrors, and building new or enlarging existing fitting rooms to enable a larger woman's freedom of movement and space for shopping companions. One solution for mainstream retailers may be to provide more than the required Americans with Disability Act (ADA)

compliant fitting rooms, which are more spacious than standard fitting rooms, have a full length mirror, and include a bench for seating (U.S. Department of Justice 2010). Providing adequate directional signage and training staff to encourage fitting room use are also important.

The ability to easily locate the garments displayed on mannequins increases customer satisfaction with the retailer. Because mannequins are an important "silent sales force" that brings featured items to the attention of shoppers, failure to carry adequate size ranges/quantities of the featured product causes disappointment and frustration for the consumer and loss of profit-enhancing "impulse" purchases for the retailer. Where stock levels are adequate, training merchandising associates to place featured products in close proximity to the mannequin is paramount in increasing ease of shopping and reducing the likelihood of customer dissatisfaction and lost sales. Because shoppers expect apparel to look on them the same as on the mannequin (Meierdierks-Lehman 2007), retailers should place in their women's apparel departments' mannequins that more accurately reflect the body type of the intended wearer. While purchasing a troupe of new plus-size mannequins may be beyond some retailers' immediate budgetary allocation, they should at a minimum, replace unrealistically svelte mannequins as they are retired with larger-proportioned ones. In addition, at least in the women's apparel department, retailers should feature larger models on in-store promotional signage and print materials, offering images with which the plus-size consumer can positively identify, as suggested in earlier work by Perrier (2008).

In-store sales personnel possess the power to either strengthen or diminish the customer's satisfaction with the store in which they shop. At least one study (Lozano, 2005) reveals that plus-size women experience greater levels of discrimination from standard-size sales associates, retailers of all genres must work proactively to screen, hire, and train sales personnel who are friendly and welcoming to all customers, and treat plus-size shoppers with equal respect and dignity. Additionally, retailers could enhance the customer experience by providing specialized training to sales staff in plus-size apparel departments, focusing on the unique needs of their customer base. Accordingly, all retailers should strive to provide adequate space for safe and comfortable movement, regardless of the target customer base.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The authors are fortunate to have a sizable number of plus-size consumers responding to the survey. We are however, somewhat puzzled at the extremely low dollar amount plus-size consumers reported spending annually on apparel. Over 66% of those surveyed state that they spend \$300 or less on apparel annually. These consumers are either (a) extremely frugal; (b) do not care about clothing; (c) do not want to reveal the actual amount spent; or (d) did not understand the question. This study clearly demonstrates that mainstream retailers that sell plus-size clothing are not meeting the store or human attributes of this target market. Retailers make changes based on financial implications. If this target market does not make a large impact on the retailer's financial statement, it is highly unlikely that the retailer will consider making changes. Future research must clarify the importance of data regarding this market if changes in the industry are to be considered.

Obesity is a global issue and is indiscriminate of age, race and gender; this study focuses only on U.S. adult (18+ in age) women. Future research is warranted on the examination of the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of big and tall men and plus-size teens in relation to store and human attributes of mainstream retailers. Big and tall men may be particularly sensitive to mainstream retailers; the majority of men are not known to be as adept to shopping environments as are women. Plus-size teens may face different clothing and shopping issues. Teens often use shopping malls as a form of socialization. It will be interesting to learn how plus-size teens perceive mainstream retailers' ability to satisfy their clothing and shopping needs.

An examination of geographic location will assist academics and retailers in understanding attitudes and levels of satisfaction. Geographic location is an important variable due to the fact that geography is known to play an important role in obesity. For example, consumers in the South tend to more overweight than those living in the West.

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Please address all correspondence to:

Katherine Annette Burnsed, Ph.D.
 Department of Retailing
 College of Hospitality, Retail and Sport
 Management
 University of South Carolina
 kburnsed@mailbox.sc.edu