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# Perspectives

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## The Effects of Clothing Size on Self-Esteem regarding Gender

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## The Effects of Clothing Size on Self-Esteem regarding Gender

**Cailin Mahoney**

### ABSTRACT

*Recently there has been a sufficient amount of literature regarding how clothing size affects the self-esteem of each gender in a variety of ways. The purpose of this literature review is to explore how standard clothing sizes affect the self-esteem of each gender, men and women, differently. The findings suggest a Eurocentric ideal that women are held to more of a thin ideal, while men are held to more of a muscular ideal. Additionally, when both women and men did not meet their expected ideals, it caused their self-esteem to become diminished. Overall, women cared more about the clothing size itself than men, but men's self-esteem were still deeply affected by the clothing that they either chose or chose not to wear. The review first begins with an introduction section. Next, there are two broader sections describing the importance of self-esteem and the relationship between clothing size and self-esteem. Then, there are two sections describing the effects of standard clothing sizes on both men and women. Finally, there is one section that compares the effects of both men and women, together. This review concludes with a short overview of the literature, propositions for future research, and implications of the findings that were discovered.*

## INTRODUCTION

It is commonly known that the ideal body type in our society has always been thin for as long as anyone can remember, especially in the world of fashion. The link between this ideal and the fashion world is obvious. Some specific examples that may come to mind regarding this linkage are Barbie or Marilyn Monroe. Boselli (2012) and Thomsen (2001) have shown the connection between the fashion industry's promotion of the thin ideal and the spread of anorexia nervosa among young women. Groesz (2002) and Shaw (1995) looked at the internalization of the thin ideal and how that affects body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem among consumers. Czerniawski (2015), Peters (2014), and Zangrillo (1990) all evaluated the plus-size fashion world. In more recent years, being obese or overweight has become much more normalized, meaning it is not as expected that everyone must be thin to be beautiful (Czerniawski 2016). This normalization of being "bigger" comes to portray the privileged position of the thin ideal in our fashion industry. The fashion industry is not changing their thin ideal that has been around for centuries. Instead, the fashion industry is continuing to promote clothing on thin models, even in the plus-size sections. Describing this trend, Workman (1991) states: "It has been recommended that size charts need to be checked and revised every 10 years to reflect changes in characteristics of the U.S. population (Workman 1991: 31)." Not only is the fashion industry continuing to show clothes on thinner models, but they are also restricting shoppers to small and medium sizes, which is considered less than a size 12 or a size 14 in the United States. The world needs much more variety in clothing sizes rather than the ones that are commonly available in clothing stores today. Although, the thin ideal is still very apparent in our society, "...Slenderness became a dominant cultural ideal in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bordo, 1993:46) and is

now the reference model to which men and, especially, women usually refer to when caring for their bodies (Hesse-Biber et al. 2007:252).”

This paper intends to explore to what extent standard clothing sizes within the fashion industry affect the self-esteem of each gender, men and women, differently. There is a variety of research on this topic that will be compared throughout this paper. Clothing sizes alone refer to the label sizes placed on articles of clothing either sold off the shelf in a store or a number that is visible online. Standard clothing size refers to the sizes that both men and women are expected to be based off the averages of clothing sizes purchased in our society. According to Smelser (1989), self-esteem is a person’s overall sense of personal value and self-worth and it affects one’s overall well-being. This literature review falls within the gender binary and discusses only men’s and women’s fashion. First, there will be a discussion about self-esteem and its importance. Then, there will be a section examining the relationship between clothing size and self-esteem. Finally, there will be two individual subsections, one will talk about the effects of men’s self-esteem regarding clothing size and the other will explain women’s self-esteem regarding clothing size. This literature review will end with a conclusion that compares the different effects between the two genders regarding clothing size and includes recommendations for research in the future and its implications.

#### IMPORTANCE OF SELF-ESTEEM

There are many reasons why self-esteem is important. Self-esteem is important because how one feels about themselves can affect their mental or physical health. Based on people’s own personal experiences and observing the experiences of others, there are known habits of people who experience high self-esteem and those who experience low self-esteem.

Experiencing positive self-esteem can consist of things like knowing and loving oneself,

embracing those qualities, the ability to do what one wants, keeping up with what one may like to do, and keeping up with all of these feelings (Smelser 1989:6). When a person experiences low self-esteem, they can experience the opposite of all of those encouraging aspects, and instead, experience things like self-deprecation, helplessness, powerlessness, and depression (Smelser 1989:6). All of these different effects regarding low self-esteem can lead to the causation of potential social problems based on the way people may act when they are feeling poorly about themselves. Society and clothing stores are perfect examples of settings that diminish self-esteem.

#### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLOTHING SIZE AND SELF ESTEEM

Research has shown that there is a direct link between clothing size and self-esteem. Karazsia (2013) discovered that in order to be considered attractive in society, the world has always focused on being very thin when it comes to being a woman and obtaining a muscular appearance when as a man. In fact, much of these societal expectations have to do with clothing size. The clothes that people wear affect how they feel, their confidence level, and the way that they view themselves. If a person feels good in the size that they wear or feels insecure about the size that they wear, it can lead to either high or low levels of self-esteem. The component that controls all these mixed emotions, and is an important aspect of the fashion industry, is called “vanity sizing” (Karazsia et al. 2013).

The Alexander, Connell, and Presley (2015) study utilized an all-female sample, referring to vanity sizing as the practice of allowing people to fit into smaller clothes by adjusting the measurement specifications. Although, there will be more research including men in the section regarding the effects of clothing size on men’s self-esteem. Dahl, Hoegg, Morales, and Scott (2013) emphasize the point that clothing sizes truly do not matter, yet women tend to base their

self-esteem on the number on their clothing labels. This article included five other studies that all concluded with the same results, “larger sizes result in negative evaluations of clothing and show that these effects are driven by consumers’ self-esteem (Dahl et al. 2013:70).” Also, although one may assume that a larger clothing size would prevent the consumer from purchasing the clothes, these sizes actually increased the spending of the consumer in order to help restore their low and disappointed self-esteem (Dahl et al. 2013). Therefore, the researchers relayed the complicated relationship between clothing size and self-esteem, “...where shopping can serve to build, strengthen, threaten, and/or repair appearance self-esteem (Dahl et al. 2013:70).” This apparent relationship between clothing size and self-esteem affects both men and women in different ways, although what the researchers in this study found is similar to the findings regarding the effects on women.

#### THE EFFECTS ON WOMEN

Clothing size is a major factor in whether women have high or low self-esteem. In the event women are not able to fit into the “standard” clothing size, this can lead to a negative mental state with regard to their self-esteem (Bishop et al. 2018). In 2010, Kinley conducted a study in two phases where the women participants were asked to try on pants that either “ran small” or “ran large” (Kinley 2010:317). The findings revealed that the women who could fit into the smaller-sized pants felt more positive about themselves, and this was especially prevalent for younger women (Kinley 2010). Additionally, women who considered themselves larger felt more positive about themselves when they were able to fit into the smaller-sized pants (Kinley 2010). Although, the rather interesting finding here is that the women who did end up having to try on the larger pants because they could not fit into the smaller ones did not have any effect on their self-esteem (Kinley 2010). This was one of the major differences between

Kinley's findings and the next aspect of research. Bishop, Evans, and Gruys's findings in 2018 had much of the same results as Kinley (2010), except when women could not fit into the standard clothing sizes, they tended to demonstrate diminished self-esteem.

In 1997, Brumberg concluded that women relate clothing size to their body weight, and may not purchase clothing that actually fits them because of the number on the clothing label. In 2008, Russ had also discovered that clothing size was a strong factor in how women felt about their bodies. Bishop, Evans, and Gruys's (2018) study combined research from three qualitative studies of women's clothing retailers of bras, plus size clothing, and bridal wear, where they focused on the standard sizes of clothing in our society. With regard to clothing size and women, they investigated how women come across, comprehend, and navigate these standards throughout their everyday lives (Bishop et al. 2018). The researchers of this study "...conceptualize clothing size standards as 'floating signifiers', given their lack of consistency within and across brands and the extent to which women engage in identity work and bodywork in relation to them (Bishop et al. 2018:180)." Clothing size is what women use in regard to accepting their bodies, although it also creates hierarchies among women based on their body size and shape. Women who have smaller bodies and can fit into smaller sizes have a societal advantage over the women who cannot (Bishop et al. 2018). A specific section of this research that was focused on "clothing size, identity, and inequality" stated, "Because body size carries strong moral and aesthetic meanings in American culture, clothing size standards may deeply influence individual's self-perceptions (Bishop et al. 2018:185)." In regard to plus-size clothing, Gruys (2018) found that women who had to shop in these types of stores with plus sizes often hid their bags when leaving due to the embarrassment of being a larger size. The "standard sizes" run from 0-12 and run extra small, small, medium, large, and extra-large. Sizes that are out of

this range are either petite for very small women or plus size for women who are larger, and these are usually sold in their own stores or their own section of a store (Bishop et al. 2018). Both these larger and smaller clothing sizes should be more commonly available in clothing stores.

Being big has become a movement, people are bigger and want clothing sizes that fit them available everywhere. Famous models and celebrities have used their platform to “ignite a movement to encourage a fashion industry built around a thin body ideal to include women of every size and eliminate the categorial system that segregates models and consumers based on clothing size” (Czerniawski 2016:70). This is an important finding; people of every clothing size should have always been included and not forced to feel down about themselves. Although, this is still the case for many people. People will shop online in plus-size sections looking for their size clothes, yet the model in those clothes is still very small due to most modeling agencies wanting a curvy body, but they still want that thin face (Czerniawski 2016). Bigger is supposedly becoming more accepted; however, this may not actually be the case. There are still separate sections to shop for plus-size clothing and modeling agencies still want the models of those sections to be somewhat thin because they believe consumers will be more likely to buy the clothing if the model is thinner (Czerniawski 2016). “Plus-size” has recently become more accepted, but the thin ideal is still very apparent. Overall, these three different research studies portray how the size on a clothing label can deeply affects women’s self-esteem, and usually in a negative way.

#### THE EFFECTS ON MEN

Literature regarding men’s clothing sizes and self-esteem is far more limited than women’s, yet the findings from two specific studies are rather interesting. Women certainly care

more about the actual size of clothes than men, yet the sizes do still affect men in a variety of ways. Usually, people tend to assume that women care more about clothing size and their self-esteem than men do, and that is true, although men do still care about these things and two different studies portray these effects. Women often try and conform to the thin ideal, while men are more likely to conform to a muscular ideal. Frith and Gleeson (2004) relayed four themes within their study: the practicality of clothing choices, lack of concern about appearance, use of clothing to conceal or reveal the body, and use of clothing to fit cultural ideals. The two sections of this research that were relevant to this literature review were the last two sections. In the section about concealing and revealing clothing, one man in the study stated, “If I’m thinking I’m a fat git, I’ll have the tendency to wear looser clothes and adhere to various methods employed to make a person look thinner. However, on a day when I’m feeling good, I’ll be thinking under that fat is a reasonable-sized pair of pecs and I’ll wear something accordingly (Frith and Gleeson 2004:44).” Although this is not distinctly mentioning clothing sizes, it is describing how the clothes that these men wear affect how they feel about themselves. In the section of this study about conforming to cultural ideals with clothing, a man stated, “I have started to bulk out and put on weight and gain more confidence about my body shape and have started buying tight-fitting clothing (Frith and Gleeson 2004:45).” Once again, not distinctly mentioning clothing size, but showing how men use clothes to either feel good about themselves or to hide. Men tend not to have as much concern regarding clothing sizes as women do, but it is shown that men do care a lot about their appearance, which is very apparent in Sung and Yan’s (2020) study as well.

Sung and Yan (2020) explored the relationship between self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and clothing-related behaviors regarding Generation Y males. The findings were consistent with

several other studies, including the previous study mentioned. The two main findings that were focused on were the negative relationship between self-esteem and body dissatisfaction and how those with body concerns influenced the types of clothes they purchased (Sung and Yan 2020). When men felt dissatisfied with their bodies, they would choose to strengthen their self-esteem by wearing certain clothes as symbols to reinforce their identity in society (Sung and Yan 2020). The findings also supported that men avoided revealing clothes when they were unhappy with themselves and would choose to wear loose clothes instead (Chattaraman et al. 2013; Walker et al. 2009). Lastly, the findings supported that body dissatisfaction influenced a man's individual concerns positively toward clothing fit and size, which led to more engagement in clothing image avoidance behaviors (Baytar and Shin 2014; Damhorst and Kim 2010). The symbolic completion theory was highly supported throughout this study because that theory "suggests that individuals who desire to enhance their self-identities and to make themselves feel better will do so through their clothing choices (Gollwitzer and Wicklund 1982:11)." Overall, similarly to women, "when men were unhappy with their body, specifically their weight, they avoided certain types of clothes to temporarily feel happier about themselves (Carver et al. 2011:11)." Avoidance coping mechanisms could be the reasoning to this finding, as men could be steering away from certain clothing that could restore their concerns about their bodies as a way to handle the situation (Carver et al. 2011). There is a strong relationship between clothing sizes and self-esteem with regards to men, although both of these studies do not distinctly mention clothing size, both studies mention how men choose or avoid certain clothes based on how they feel about themselves. Research shows that both men and women have much in common when it comes to how clothing size standards effect their self-esteem. However, they are expected to meet

different societal standards which portrays the differences in how they are affected by clothing size.

#### COMPARISON OF MEN AND WOMEN

The last aspect of research included in this literature review included a comparison study differentiating between men and women. Engeln and Zola (2021) explored how often women, versus men, reported wearing clothing that is painful, distracting, or restricting, which is referred to as “PDR” throughout their study. The difference in body surveillance and appreciation between those who wore PDR and those who did not was also looked at throughout their research. The results showed that “women were substantially more likely to wear PDR clothing than men (Engeln and Zola 2021:467).” The largest difference between men and women was concerned with wearing uncomfortable shoes and wearing distracting clothes (Engeln and Zola 2021). Both women and men that had higher levels of body surveillance were more likely to wear PDR clothing (Engeln and Zola 2021). A difference between genders in this research that related to the previous studies in past sections, was that there was a negative association between body appreciation and wearing PDR clothing. Although, these results were inconsistent between men and women (Engeln and Zola 2021). The fact that these results were inconsistent relates to previous research in past sections of this paper because it was often only women who had this negative association rather than men. Overall, Engeln and Zola’s (2021) research was “consistent with the notion that the gendered nature of clothing might reflect and provoke chronic vigilance of the body’s appearance (Engeln and Zola 2021).”

#### CONCLUSION, FUTURE RESEARCH, IMPLICATIONS

This literature review explored to what extent standard clothing sizes within the fashion industry affect the self-esteem of each gender, men and women, differently. This literature

discovered that there is an apparent relationship between clothing size and self-esteem for both men and women, but affects each gender in different ways. Women are expected to meet the standards of the thin ideal, and if they did not, they tended to feel more insecure about themselves (Kinley 2010; Bishop et al. 2018). Men are expected to meet the muscular ideal, and if they did not, they also tended to feel more insecure about themselves (Frith and Gleeson 2004; Sung and Yan 2020). Although, overall, women tend to care much more about what their clothing size is than men (Frith and Gleeson 2004). Also, both genders used clothes to either cover up or reveal certain parts of their bodies that they either felt insecure or happy about (Bishop et al. 2018; Frith and Gleeson 2004; Kinley 2010; Sung and Yan 2020). The evidence found clearly portrays the relationship between clothing and self-esteem regarding gender and how it affects each gender in different ways.

Although, future research is necessary in order to get more of an understanding of this topic. Clothing size and self-esteem have always had an apparent relationship, and to this day they still do, but new information is always needed in order to discover the new depths of this relationship that are constantly being changed and updated. It would be helpful to know more about this relationship regarding men. Information was discovered on this relationship regarding men, but it was difficult to find and did not talk about clothing size specifically. It would also be beneficial to find more information regarding plus size clothing and that new movement that is very apparent in our world right now, one article was found on this, but it would be interesting to know more about how plus-size women feel regarding their self-esteem. Another aspect that could be discovered regarding this relationship is age. Most of my research was based on young adults, so it would be interesting to know more about younger children and the elderly regarding this relationship. Lastly, there should be more research regarding every gender, my research was

only talking about the gender binary fashion industry, but there are more fashion industries out there for every gender and every sexuality. Overall, these different scopes regarding this topic were limitations for my research; however, these limitations outline future opportunities for expanding the literature in this field.

Based on these findings, it is obvious that clothing size deeply affects the lives and self-esteem of both men and women. Both men and women have based how they feel about themselves on the number they see on a clothing label. When each gender does not meet the standards that they are expected to, they start to feel diminished about themselves and start to obtain habits that are not beneficial such as anxiety, eating disorders, emotional distress, panic disorders, risky behaviors, substance use, or stress. Since these sizes have such a huge impact on everyone's lives, we need to get rid of them. As previously stated, clothing sizes are supposed to be changed and updated every ten years, but they never stay the same (Workman 1991). Clothing sizes are not consistent, but most of the world bases how they feel about themselves on that one label. If we got rid of these numbers and sizes, much of the population would feel much better about themselves.

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