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Laurel D. Romeo

Louisiana State University, ldromeo@lsu.edu

Delisia R. Matthews

North Carolina State University, drmatthe@ncsu.edu

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Exploring the Relationship between Self-esteem and Wearing Plus-size Apparel

Laurel D. Romeo, Louisiana State University, USA
Delisia R. Matthews, North Carolina State University, USA

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It is estimated that 70 percent of adult females in the US wear apparel sized 14 or larger, which is considered plus-size by the apparel industry (Murray, 2013). Plus-size clothing is designed for individuals whose girth measurements are greater than average for their height (Keiser & Garner, 2012) and is frequently associated with the person being obese. The media often portrays overweight individuals negatively (Heuer, McClure & Puhl, 2011) and promotes the cultural ideal of thinness. Not surprisingly, apparel size has been shown to influence one's self-esteem and be related to body dissatisfaction in some young women (Reddy & Burns, 2011). However, few studies to date assessed self-esteem among plus-size women across ethnicity. Moreover, limited academic research has implemented quantitative methods in tandem with qualitative methods to gain knowledge about plus-size consumers. Thus, this study fills a gap within the current literature.

This mixed-methods study used Rosenberg's 10-item self-esteem scale to explore the relationship between being a plus-size woman and self-esteem among African-American, Caucasian, and Latina women. Thirty-one women completed in-depth interviews, a 35 item survey, and received a 3D body scan. ANOVA and Chi-square were used to examine quantitative data. To supplement the quantitative data, qualitative data were transcribed verbatim and examined for patterns and inferences.

Significant differences regarding self-esteem and being a plus-size woman were observed among ethnicity, income, education, relationship status, and whether or not the participant had children. Specifically, African-American participants communicated high self-esteem as a plus-size woman in comparison to Caucasian women. Participants in the middle-income range, those with only a high-school education, divorced women, and those with no children, were found to be the least satisfied with being considered plus-size. In-depth interviews revealed ethnicity and its associated cultural values and have a significant impact on how a plus-size woman views herself. Additionally, since a larger majority of the participants were dissatisfied with current plus-size apparel offerings, participants provided advice to the apparel industry regarding styles, prints, colors, and cut of plus-size apparel currently on the market. They suggested improvements for apparel fit, evaluated the marketing and apparel offered from various national

retailers, and highlighted the ethnic and cultural differences which need to be considered when marketing plus-size apparel.

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