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A meta-analysis of apparel-related research for plus-size teens

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Teens are important and influential consumers with an estimated 32 million teens in the United States, spending over \$172 billion per year (Bachlet & Crozier, 2012). Byon (2005) stated that niche markets often provide the most potential for growth of a brand and the plus-size market has been identified as the fastest growing segment in retail. The Center for Disease Control (2011) reported that approximately 17% of the 22,040,340 adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19 years are overweight or obese in the United States alone. Lack of attention has been given to meet the apparel needs of this niche market although it offers an opportunity for significant growth potential to the apparel industry. This study was undertaken to determine what has been known about this niche market and identify areas where research is currently lacking to better understand the issues surrounding the apparel acquisition and consumption for plus-size teens. The results of this study would guide various future research opportunities on this population in the field of textiles and apparel.

Using a meta-analysis referring to the analysis of analyses, previous research studies were collected, coded, and interpreted using statistical methods similar to those used in primary data analysis. This approach was used to synthesize prior data and help to place the new study in an appropriate context. Various search engines (i.e., ABI/INFORM Global, Academic Search Premier, Google Scholar) were used to identify academic research, government publications, books, news media, and consumer journals reporting on issues relating to (1) overweight or obese teens and (2) the apparel acquisition and consumption. The following phrases were used to collect the related studies: overweight (or obese) teens, teen apparel, teen spending, apparel fit, fitting issues, plus-size teens, plus-size apparel, apparel acquisition, apparel consumption, apparel pattern grading, apparel pattern drafting, niche markets, teen fashion, plus-size fashion, and anthropometric study. A total of 130 articles and books were identified as relating to the topic under investigation.

An Excel spreadsheet was used to generate themes reported in the literature. Each article or book was recorded in the first column of the spreadsheet. As an article or book was reviewed a column was created for the theme discussed and an X was placed in the column. As a new theme or area of research was identified, an additional column was added. Fifteen major themes were identified and those are fit, body scanning and CAD, sizing and grading, anthropometric study, patternmaking, obesity and apparel, expenses on apparel purchases, fashion influences, apparel and social interaction, somatotypes, general teen statistics, shopping motivations, shopping habits, apparel deprivation, and availability of plus-size apparel.

A comparison of the literature revealed that considerable research has been conducted on teen spending habits and retail influences, including disposable income available, monthly and annual

spending, influence on money spent by parents and grandparents, preference of their shopping places, shopping for social and hedonic value, and type and amount of items purchased. Within the disciplines of consumer behavior, sociology, and psychology much has been published addressing apparel and teens. Subject matters have included apparel relationship to teen social interactions, self-esteem, psychological development, public image, fashion influences, and the lifelong consequences of apparel deprivation. Likewise, the discipline of food science and nutrition has published a considerable amount of research regarding the medical, psychological and social consequences of teen obesity. In the areas of apparel design and product development as well as merchandising and retailing, however, comparatively little has been researched and published. Of those available studies in the design and product development, most have focused on the reasons for the lack of ready-to-wear apparel available to overweight or obese teens.

This meta-analysis has identified the lack of (1) current anthropometric data for the overweight or obese teens and (2) standardized sizing and grading practices as key issues preventing manufacturers from entering the plus-size teen market. The aesthetic preferences of apparel for plus-size teens, age 14 to 17 years, were only addressed in two articles among those used for the analysis. It is noteworthy that these articles were published in a mass media and not part of an academic research study indicating a lack of research in this area.

The result of this meta-analysis leads to a need for research in the areas of aesthetic preferences of apparel for the plus-size teen, anthropometric data updates accurately addressing the current sizes and shapes of the teen population, creation of an additional category of standardized sizing charts covering the needs of growing plus-size adolescents, and development of new grading practices to accommodate various plus-size adolescent body shapes.

This study only covered the literature written in English, identified by the search engines, and available for review before February 2012; therefore, it is limited to generalize the result of this study. Literature available in other languages or those published more recently may provide a further valuable contribution in understanding issues related to the apparel acquisition and consumption for the plus-size teens. Further in-depth apparel-related research should be conducted with this age group to obtain more specific information of the apparel needs for plus-size teens. As the plus-size teen market offers significant growth potential the apparel industry needs to gain a better understanding of this target market for their future sustainable business.

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