



Achieving Confidence While Avoiding Heartbreak:
An Exploration of Plus-Size Apparel Consumption Experiences Among Mothers of Young Girls

Youngji Lee and Nancy Hodges, Ph.D.
University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA

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According to the American Heart Association (2016), childhood obesity is a primary health concern in the US. Nearly one in three children in the United States is identified as overweight or obese, with the occurrence of obesity in children more than tripling from the 1970s to the 2010s (American Heart Association, 2016). The marked increase in childhood obesity creates an obvious need for apparel that addresses the concomitant increase in plus-sizes among children (Lesonsky, 2016). To this end, the number of fashion retailers offering children's plus-sized apparel is growing, including such retailers as JC Penney, Target, and Old Navy. However, most of the present plus-size offerings are simply larger sizes based on standard measurements (Romeo & Lee, 2015). According to Lesonsky (2016), the lack of product availability has resulted in an overall dissatisfaction with the plus-size apparel options currently available for children. Obesity among children can contribute to premature development (e.g., precocious puberty), which, for girls makes for fit challenges that cannot be met by larger standard sizes alone (Brock, Ulrich, & Connell, 2010). At the same time, at least one study suggests that being forced to wear "special" sizes in clothing may lead to higher instances of negative body image among children (Reddy-Best & Harmon, 2015).

Despite the notable increase in children who wear plus sizes, there has been little research on the needs of this group, and particularly among those of early (3-5 years) and middle childhood (6-11 years) (CDC, 2017). Although research on plus-sizes among adolescents is on the increase, the difficulties of conducting research with younger children in general have likely resulted in a gap in knowledge about their plus-size apparel needs. However, insight may be gained by talking with parents, as these individuals tend to be the household consumption decision-makers. Moreover, the literature indicates that mothers are particularly important, in that, as consumption gatekeepers, they typically function as intermediaries between social forces and their children's developing perceptions of self (Maor & Cwikel, 2016). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore experiences with shopping for apparel among mothers of plus-size girls who are in early and middle childhood. A framework that builds on the mother-daughter consumption relationship based on the concept of resilience to body dissatisfaction (Choate, 2005) and Goffman's (1986) notion of *Stigma* was used as the theoretical lens through which these experiences were interpreted. According to Goffman (1986), obesity is considered a stigma in society and one which can ultimately have a negative impact on an individual's perceptions of self. The theoretical model of resilience to body dissatisfaction (Choate, 2005) emphasizes support from family of origin in developing a positive body image among females and establishes the importance of the mother's role particularly in regards to young girls.

A qualitative approach was employed to collect data, including netnographic observation and in-depth interviews. With IRB approval from the researchers' university, observation of Facebook discussion groups related to overweight children was conducted over an eight-week period to establish understanding of the topics of importance, including plus-size apparel consumption, among parents. Interviews were conducted with ten mothers of girls between 3 and 11 years old who have experiences with purchasing plus-size apparel for their daughters. Snowball and purposive sampling strategies were used for the selection of interview participants. Participants' daughters were considered overweight or obese based on the body mass index (BMI). Participants were asked to talk about their experiences with shopping for apparel for their young daughters as well as to share their thoughts on their daughters' apparel needs. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed alongside observations by comparing similarities and differences across the data and relative to the theoretical framework (McCracken, 1988). Categories were identified and used to structure three emergent themes: *styles*, *sizes*, and *stigma*.

Styles were important to the decision-making process among all participants and within the online discussions. Participants wanted their daughters to feel confident wearing styles similar to other children the same age in order to ensure that they did not look different from their peers, and in turn, perceive themselves to be "different" due to body size. However, the challenge lies in finding "age appropriate" styles. Often, participants have searched for apparel outside of the children's section, but as Jessica explained, "I started looking in the junior section but then they look too mature." In a similar vein, *sizes* were a major concern among participants. Most sought to avoid garments that were sized to be formfitting in the stomach area, bust line, and legs. Interestingly, several were active online shoppers due to the lack of product availability in stores. As Diane said, "Mostly I have to shop online because there're not a whole lot in stores." Another reason for shopping online stemmed from the *stigma* prompted by the in-store shopping experience. Participants sought to protect their daughters from feeling badly when they found styles that they liked but were unavailable in plus sizes. Consequently, as Sara stated, "I don't take her because I don't want her to feel bad about herself when it doesn't fit." Reflecting a frequent point of discussion online, several participants sought to prevent their daughters from becoming aware of the differences in size categories. As Kate explained, "It's kind of disheartening to buy for plus size and they are always in a separate place." Participants like Kate want stores to deemphasize "plus" so that their daughters have the same shopping experiences as their friends, and to protect them from a "...potentially heartbreaking experience."

Findings of this study reveal the extent to which mothers of overweight young girls face challenges in finding stylish, age appropriate, well-fitting plus-sized clothing for their daughters, despite the number of retailers that offer expanded children's sizes. Mothers play a significant role in their daughters' apparel consumption in terms of selecting appropriate clothing, but also in protecting them from the potential negative psychological effects of the "plus" size designation. Overweight children are more likely to have distinct physical and psychological needs as they go through different stages of growth and because they are stigmatized due to their weight (Goffman, 1986). Results of this study indicate the need for retailers to carefully consider how to best develop and sell products designed to target this vulnerable consumer population.

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