

How Do Institutional Pressures Shape the Experiences of Plus-Size Consumers in the Fashion Markets of Canada and Iran?

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## ABSTRACT

### How Do Institutional Pressures Shape the Experiences of Plus-Size Consumers in the Fashion Markets of Canada and Iran?

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This study investigates the experiences of plus-size consumers in the fashion markets of Canada and Iran, highlighting some of the exclusionary practices within the industry that limit consumer access to fashionable and well-fitting clothes. Through a qualitative approach mix of in-depth interviews and netnography, this research explores how coercive, normative, and mimetic institutional pressures form the experiences of plus-size people within these two diverse markets. This study analyzes these pressures to show how cultural, economic, and political elements combine to exclude plus-size consumers, especially in the non-Western contexts of Iran, where economic sanctions make market limitations even worse. This is important because plus-size consumers face great difficulties in general, and plus-size men often do not get attention when it comes to fashion research. Moreover, this research underlines the role of representation in marketing: the visibility of plus-size models can positively influence the self-esteem and confidence of consumers. This paper adds to the existing literature on consumer exclusion and fashion through a comparative analysis between the plus-size fashion markets of Canada and Iran. The contributions of this research are at once theoretical, in developing the intersection of institutional theory and consumer exclusion, and practical, with implications for fashion brands, policymakers, and advocates of inclusivity. This study highlights the call for body size inclusivity and shows how one-size-fits-all in plus-size fashion cannot fulfill the many needs that plus-size varied shapes may require. It thus advocates for an approach to fashion that is more inclusive and diverse through uptake in custom-designed pieces, increased marketing representation, and policy reforms that will ensure access to these excluded consumers.

**Keywords:** Plus-size fashion, Consumer exclusion, Institutional theory, Body shape inclusivity, Representation in marketing, Iranian fashion market, Canadian fashion market, Fashion industry

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## Table of Contents

<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>viii</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>2. RESEARCH CONTEXT</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>2.1 Canada's Plus-Size Fashion Market</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>2.2 Iran's Plus-Size Fashion Market</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>3. LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>3.1 Marketplace Exclusion</b> .....	<b>9</b>
3.1.1 Gender-Based Exclusion .....	10
3.1.2 Men's Exclusion in the Plus-Size Fashion Market.....	11
3.1.3 Body-Size Exclusion .....	13
<b>3.2 Institutional Theory</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>3.3 Institutional Theory in Fashion</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>4. METHOD</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>4.1 Data Collection</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>4.2 Primary Data</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>4.3 Secondary data</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>4.4 Data Analysis</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>5. FINDINGS</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>5.1 Findings Across the Plus-Size Fashion Market</b> .....	<b>24</b>
5.1.1 Coercive Pressures in Plus-Size Fashion .....	25
5.1.2 Normative Pressures in Plus-Size Fashion.....	27

5.1.3 Mimetic Pressures in Plus-Size Fashion.....	31
<b>5.2 Consumers Experiencing Inclusivity Challenges .....</b>	<b>35</b>
5.2.1 Canadian Market.....	35
5.2.2 Iranian Market .....	38
<b>5.3 Market Accessibility Barriers .....</b>	<b>39</b>
5.3.1 Iranian’s Market Barriers.....	40
5.3.2 Canadian Market Barriers.....	42
<b>5.4 Body Shape Inclusiveness .....</b>	<b>44</b>
5.4.1 Body Shape in Women.....	45
5.4.2 Body Shape in Men .....	47
<b>5.5 Lack of Representation in Models and Influencers .....</b>	<b>48</b>
5.5.1 Men's Perspectives .....	49
5.5.2 Women's Perspectives.....	54
<b>6. DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>57</b>
6.1 Theoretical Implication .....	57
6.2 Practical Implications.....	58
6.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research .....	59
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>61</b>
Appendix A - Certification of Ethical Acceptability.....	62
Appendix B - Recruitment Materials .....	62
Appendix C - Interview Protocol.....	63
Appendix D - Secondary Data .....	67
<b>References.....</b>	<b>68</b>

**List of Figures**

**Figure 1- Institutional Pressures and Experiences of Plus-Size Fashion Markets Across  
Canada and Iran ..... 23**

**Figure 2- Example of Plus-Size Fashion Retail Practices: Torrid's Online Offering And  
Sizing Options ..... 46**

**List of Tables**

**Table 1- Quantify and Qualify Data..... 17**

**Table 2 - Sample of Participants..... 19**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry has been deeply inspired by societies historically known as fashion cities, such as Paris, New York, Milan, and London, which hold the power of fashion futurists. In New York City Approximately \$15 billion worth of retail sales is generated each year. By considering fashion - clothing as well as other means of body decoration – as the essential practice because it is so unstable. Fashion is considered the quintessential post-modern practice because it flickers in its choices. Worldwide, about \$1.2 trillion is invested in the fashion industry (Ruth, 2021). The fashion market pays little attention to plus-sized apparel as it misses and excludes obese consumers. Plus-size or oversize clothing options are not typically given prominence in clothing stores, resulting in a limited selection. Although there has been advancement in the representation of plus-size models—such as their inclusion in high-fashion journals like *Vogue* since Peters's (2014) article—it is important to acknowledge that these instances remain the exception rather than the norm. The plus-size consumer continues to face significant exclusion, both in the availability of clothing and in media representation, which limits their options in fashioning their self-identity.

The market's response has been inconsistent, especially how they acknowledge and overlook these consumers' demands (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Institutional theory creates a valuable framework for analyzing the needs of participants of the market and consumers to gain broader learning. Institutional logic, as envisaged by Alford & Friedland (1985) and further developed by Thornton (2002), points to principles, assumptions, and credence that people use to better perceive their social environments. To better understand the fashion industry, I must study these two crucial factors: the first factor is creativity and the second one is commercial viability

(Bourdieu & Delsaut, 1975; Entwistle & Rocamora, 2006). These principles of logic are what fuel consumers and individuals. They either try to validate the new practices, such as the comprehensive measurements, or degrade the existing ones, such as putting an exclusive emphasis on thinness. In the context of plus-size fashion, consumers are looking forward to having a broader engagement, which can be seen as their pursuit of greater legitimacy in the fashion industry. This journey supports wider social movements promotes equity and ends prejudice and discrimination. Burgess et al. (2017) studied consumer exclusion, highlighting the obstacles that prevent people from engaging in relations and pursuits that are open to most consumers. Households with low incomes, for example, frequently find themselves shut out of the consumer culture (K. Hamilton, 2009). This issue affects the representation of individuals and groups in the marketplace, influencing both their quality of life and social cohesion. Social exclusion is the systematic compliance of people, communities, regions, and centers of power to dominant values, resources, and power structures (Estivill, 2003).

This study explores consumer exclusion from a specific perspective, focusing on plus-size fashion consumers who feel overlooked by the market, with limited options that make them feel less confident. The lack of sufficient market choices excludes plus-size consumers (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). The fashion industry's adherence to the ideal of thin bodies puts individuals who do not conform aside, leading to their exclusion and identification as part of a disadvantaged, overlooked group (Taylor et al., 2018). More than 67% of American women wear sizes 14 or above, prompting leading shops to provide a broad spectrum of sizes (Kan et al., 2024). Approximately 100 million women need sizes larger than 14, which fall outside the typical range offered by retailers. Although \$24 billion was spent on this type of clothing in 2020, it only represents 13% of the overall market for women's apparel (Tovar, 2021). Following

Sandikci & Ger (2010), investigated how a stigmatized consumption practice, like Islamic veiling (tesettür) in Turkey, can transform into an accepted and fashionable choice over time through complex interactions between individual agencies, market forces, and sociopolitical dynamics. Nevertheless, there is a shortage of theoretical comprehension regarding circumstances in which consumers seek greater availability of goods that are valued within an established taste framework, as manifested in the dominant market.

Plus-size consumer's main issues comprise physical and psychological barriers which restrict their involvement, and even more, exclude them in fashion criteria (Taylor et al., 2018). The connection between body politics and fashion has been thoroughly examined, and it has been inferred how societal norms and aesthetic standards would help the plus-size exclusion (LeBesco, 2004). Previous studies have delineated that excluded consumers, in particular the plus-size fashion fans, who are called Fatshionistas, try to enhance their involvement and options in established markets (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). They use various methods such as utilizing institutional logic, promoting desirable innovations and persistent obstacles, and forming alliances with more influential actors. This shows how crucial customer involvement could be for market transformation. And also demonstrates the impact of consumer segment legitimacy in shaping market dynamics (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013).

A few researchers have examined the fat acceptance movement and its effect on market dynamics, particularly in Western contexts. However, an evident section remains untouched in understanding these dynamics in non-Western countries like Iran. Studies have shown that plus-size consumers, particularly women experiences, face limited clothing options, yet research on male plus-size consumers is lacking, especially in non-Western markets like Iran. This shortage

of participation in the fashion industry has contributed to the continued exclusion of plus-size individuals, especially men. It is worth mentioning that men's frustrations in this subject may differ greatly from those of women. Based on the variety of choices and availability of clothing for these consumers, a gap in the literature can be inferred. Another issue that fortifies these difficulties is the lack of scholarly investigation into their purchasing experiences.

This research gap was addressed in this study, which researched the retail experience of male plus-size consumers in Canadian and Iranian marketplaces. The research also offers a cross-cultural comparison that discloses cultural and market-specific challenges. It is regarding this that comparative methodologies establish the cultural contradictions. Such methods address the significant oversight in the available literature, given the influence of the market dynamics. The study addresses the gaps identified above by pursuing the following general question: How do institutional pressures shape the experiences of plus-size men compared to women across different markets?

This study uses a qualitative method by conducting in-depth interviews with plus-size consumers in both Canada and Iran. This technique has gathered detailed insights into their shopping experiences, perceived barriers, and strategies for navigating the fashion market. The research method used in this study enables a richer understanding of plus-size consumers' lived experiences. Also, the cultural and market-specific factors that influence their interactions with the fashion industry will be reviewed better in this work. Through surveys and interviews, the study reveals the obstacles plus-size individuals face, examines market accessibility, and provides insights into how the fashion industry can better serve this underrepresented group. Based on my findings plus-size women and men experience different experiences based on gender and geographical market conditions western and non-western. In Canada, for instance, the market might

provide more options for women, but still, lack of the size and fit consistency excludes men, resulting in fewer customized designs for plus-size men. In Iran, cultural pressures make both men and women experience exclusion, though women face stronger pressures due to societal expectations around body shape and diversity. This suggests that men, especially in more conservative markets, are more likely to be excluded due to perceived lesser demand or visibility. More Brands should enhance consistency by providing more fit and size options across multiple markets to enhance inclusivity. They have to develop culturally sensitive designs and marketing that reflect regional norms while representing diverse body types. Moreover, partnering with plus-size influencers and ensuring affordable, quality products will help address both accessibility and representation issues. The study improves the discussion on consumers, including by showing how changes in institutional practice, the fashion industry can promote and answer the consumers' requests for credibility and inclusion. This could result in broader societal changes in which plus-size fashion is advised. It is about advancing a just, inclusive, and egalitarian society that honors and embraces diversity. This research emphasizes how the fashion industry's shift towards inclusivity is not just a trend but a significant realignment of institutional practices that contribute to social equity. By analyzing these developments, this study highlights the critical contributions that marginalized consumers make to the evolution of market practices and the broader cultural landscape.

## **2. RESEARCH CONTEXT**

Fashion Before Plus-Size discusses the early 20th century when over one-third of American women were considered “overweight.” During this period, while there was less overt weight bias compared to today, the constraints of mass-produced clothing alongside the rising ideal of

slimness had already marginalized larger women in the fashion realm (Reynolds-Clay, 2024).

The fashion industry defined by Bourdieu & Johnson (1993), is the relationship between multiple subfields with diverse power dependencies. The insight discloses that there are status differences between market segments and that larger societal forces variably impact the actors in the market.

### ***2.1 Canada's Plus-Size Fashion Market***

Statistics Canada reported that 61.3% of adult Canadians were classified as overweight or obese in 2015. The proportion of individuals classified as obese increased to 26.7%, rising from 23.1% in 2004 (Vogel, 2017). American women of various races and ethnicities typically wear sizes 16-18, equivalent to Women's plus-size 20W. Therefore, it is recommended that revising Plus-size clothing guidelines be a primary focus (Christel & Dunn, 2017). Plus-size exclusion of consumers inside the fashion business not only shapes the market segmentation but also affects consumer behavior in the selection of clothing. For instance, when it comes to clothing preferences in the Canadian market, appearances such as style and color often be more important than functional aspects like fit, durability, and facilitation of maintenance (Wall & Heslop, 1989). Likewise, the results from the research conducted by Rahman et al., (2017) presented that many consumers about body size prioritize aesthetic attributes over functionality, which is particularly relevant in understanding the behavior of plus-size consumers today. Over the past few decades, plus-size fashion has grown in popularity, and rates have increased. A report from Canada Plus-Size Women Clothing Market Size & Forecast 2032 (2024) the sizeable Canadian market for women's plus-size clothing is anticipated to expand from USD 5,987.63 million in 2023 to USD 9,886.42 million by 2032, indicating a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5.73%. Although many plus-size consumers comprise a significant part of the market and have shown their loyalty to brands, they remain underserved. The issue remains, as fashion brands have focused on

the prioritization of exclusivity and brand image over inclusivity (Kim et al., 2007). Although the requirement for plus-size has increased over the years, the options remain limited, and consumers often experience being excluded and have experienced this as a social stigma (Dion & Tachet, 2020). Since our cultural ideologies for attractiveness have changed and are more out of reach for the average individual, body image concerns have become notable in the industry and Western countries (Gillen & Markey, 2023). Most of the plus-size individuals who feel socially rejected will end up having mental health issues. These psychological effects can lead to severe problems, including but not limited to increased risk of depression and anxiety, particularly among those who do not fit societal norms of attractiveness (Merino et al., 2024). What is less obvious is how individuals with negative effects approach social exclusion (Wan et al., 2014). Nevertheless, various studies have shown Social marginalization may result in aggressiveness and reduced empathy, which is the opposite of conformity (Baumeister et al., 2007; Twenge et al., 2001).

## **2.2 Iran's Plus-Size Fashion Market**

Recently, the Iranian fashion industry faced various challenges, particularly economic and social considerations, unlike its rich historical background (Yaghooti et al., 2020). In the Islamic fashion market, some elements influence consumer behaviors, such as societal and legal factors, including Shariah, governmental politics, and national culture (Hanzaee & Chitsaz, 2011). These factors, lifestyle, demographics, and personal religious constructs - significantly shape fashion preferences (Hanzaee & Chitsaz, 2011). These several factors are required for marketers and researchers to be conscious of when trying to understand the intricate landscape of Iranian demographics and fashion markets. The Muslim consumer clothing industry is dominated by Iran, succeeded by Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, according to the 2022 State of

Global Islamic Economy study (5 Growing Modest Fashion Markets To Tap On, 2024). Additionally, this report presented Iran, by value, US\$50.7 billion is at the top of the chart, in the global moderate fashion market. Through the historical stories in fashion, the country's political upheavals have changed the narrative of women's fashion.

In both the Western and Eastern fashion markets, fit, style, and comfort are more important than brand name and country of origin (Rahman et al., 2017). Rahman and colleagues' study provides meaningful insights for fashion academicians by examining a broader range of important evaluative cues. The exclusion of plus-size consumers is not limited just to Western countries. Still, it is a global problem, Lewis (2019) shows how Muslim women across different cultural contexts, such as non-western, struggle to find clothing that accommodates their larger bodies. These areas have been largely overlooked in previous studies, with the focus instead on the experiences of plus-size women in Western contexts (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013).

The two Western and non-western countries, Canada and Iran, are investigated in this research for their plus-size fashion markets, focusing on exploring the variability between them. They were aiming at the main factors that affect the plus-size fashion market in each cultural context. The differences between Western and non-Western in the context of the fashion market dynamics have been highlighted in this research. This contributes to a more global understanding of consumer inclusivity and market growth. As a part of the Canadian and Iranian context, this study seeks to inform about the plus-size consumers' requirements and the market gap regarding gender variance and market conditions. The remains of this thesis are structured as follows. First, the literature review explores the Marketplace, Gender-Based, and body-size Exclusion, framing the gap this research aims to fill, particularly within the Canadian and Iranian context. The next section highlights the methodology for data collection before the findings are revealed. Finally,

After the study's effects in theory and practice are talked about, its limitations and possible future research directions are brought up.

### **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **3.1 Marketplace Exclusion**

Marketplace exclusion describes structural mechanisms of exclusion, where specific groups of consumers are excluded from the marketplace. This can include plus-size consumers who lack access to goods and services that address their needs. These conditions reinforce the marginalization of such groups within consumer culture, as reflected in the frustration expressed by “Fatshionistas” at the lack of fashionable clothing options (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Moreover, luxury brands do not break this circle of exclusion by maintaining their brand exclusivity to protect their elite image (Dion & Arnould, 2011; Kapferer, 2014).

Diversity in marketing recognizes sociocultural differences among individuals and is about equity: fairness in treatment, opportunity, and inclusion for fostering belonging in the face of marginalization. Without it, consumers are excluded. Generally, the term “excluded” refers to an individual or group not welcomed in mainstream culture (Hamilton, 2009). Exclusion is based on issues such as poverty, age, race, gender, location, and job status. Consumer exclusion occurs when people cannot participate in the consumption patterns of society because of a lack of financial resources. This exclusion is indicative of broader issues within society, where consumption is not only a daily activity but also a social indicator of engagement and placement (Williams & Paddock, 2003).

Social exclusion significantly impacts individuals' physical and mental well-being, often leading to feelings of isolation and rejection (Baumeister et al., 2005). It also affects social behaviors, such as conformity or differentiation, depending on individuals' cognitive evaluations of themselves (Wan et al., 2014). Another definition of social exclusion comes from Burchardt et al.'s (1999) view, in which he describes social exclusion as being geographically present in a society despite not being able to engage in its normal activities. Pavia & Mason (2012) also confirm this definition by emphasizing the factors that make socially excluded people deprived of involvement in what is considered the standard or norm of society's behaviors.

### ***3.1.1 Gender-Based Exclusion***

Class plays a critical role in determining entitlement and exclusion, as asserted by Brah & Phoenix (2004). Socio-economic status intersects with gender to shape consumer experiences in the marketplace. Exclusion in consumer markets reflects a structured imbalance, where economic and social barriers prevent certain groups, particularly plus-size individuals, from participating in mainstream consumer culture (Baumeister et al., 2005). While body positivity movements have improved in representing plus-size women in Western markets, challenges remain. According to Bordo (1993) and LeBesco (2004) note, the fashion industry often excludes many bodies deemed less attractive according to societal beauty standards. Designers and retailers have traditionally sidelined plus-size women, citing business and artistic concerns (Bellafante, 2010).

In a consumerist culture, exclusion comes with an inability to practice on a social minimum consumptively. As Bauman (2005) has said, "Consumption is the very characteristic of modern life, in which people are after pleasurable sensations. Inclusion and exclusion from this circle of consumption mirror more general social issues related to inequality and stigmatization

of people's wish to socially assimilate." A fact underlined by (Rawat et al., 2022). This kind of exclusion underlines the need for holistic policies, inclusive public spaces, and cultural changes in integrating all people, irrespective of their financial or mental capabilities, into socio-economic systems (Pavia & Mason, 2012).

These processes have also, on the other hand, made consumer complaints and reviews, engagement in brand communities, and boycotts develop the potential of challenging such practices and contribute to the reshaping of market relationships in the name of inclusiveness (Chevalier et al., 2018; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013).

### ***3.1.2 Men's Exclusion in the Plus-Size Fashion Market***

The exclusion of plus-size men in the fashion market is an underexplored issue, compared to the increasing focus on women's plus-size fashion. While the feminist perspective has extensively highlighted how societal and structural inequalities have marginalized women in fashion (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Hill Collins, 2010), research on the experiences of plus-size men remains sparse. According to (Owen & Smith, 2024), clothes shopping for plus-size men is generally described as a chore. This is because of the limited variety, poor availability, and poorly designed clothing lines that do not meet the needs of men's body shapes.

Owen & Smith (2024) indicate that shopping experiences among plus-size men are often characterized by frustration and dissatisfaction. Men describe a lack of inclusivity, with most brands focusing on mainstream sizing while neglecting the specific needs of larger male consumers. The absence of proper clothing designs and limited access to well-fitting apparel leaves men

feeling excluded from mainstream fashion. Keist (2022) further develops how the thin ideal segregates plus-size bodies in fashion, while this bias is highly male-dominated since men rarely see their body types represented in marketing or advertising campaigns.

Another critical challenge is the lack of male plus-size influencers and models. Representation is one of the most vital means through which consumer identity and confidence are cultivated, yet the fashion industry has sidestepped male plus-size figures in their advertising and promotional campaigns. Keist (2022) explicates that the thin-ideal adherence of the industry sidelines plus-size bodies and props up unattainable beauty standards for which plus-size men have no role models. That lack of representation is made worse by the fact that marketing strategies are predominantly directed towards women, which further excludes men from body-positive campaigns.

Meanwhile, previous research into fashion consumption exclusion has often centered on female consumers (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), and less research has been conducted concerning men's experiences. Owen & Smith (2024) contend that the lack of attention to plus-size fashion for men mirrors a generalized lack of interest in male body image issues. This is a clear research gap that indicates a need for studies focusing on the problems plus-size men go through, including emotional impacts, self-esteem issues, and lack of visibility in fashion media. This gap underlines the need to explore plus-size men's unique experiences; future research will help in normalizing body diversity and fostering inclusivity within fashion, and so will the representation of male plus-size influencers.

Intersectionality offers a critical lens for understanding consumer exclusion, examining how overlapping factors such as gender, class, and ethnicity shape individual experiences (Hill

Collins, 2010). Feminist scholars have extensively studied women's marginalization in various contexts, emphasizing the compounded disadvantages created by intersecting inequalities (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). This perspective highlights the embedded nature of structural inequalities in shaping exclusionary practices (Lynam & Cowley, 2007).

In the fashion industry, gender-based exclusion is particularly pronounced. The industry often overlooks plus-size individuals, associating ample bodies with reduced aesthetic and economic value (Bordo, 1993 LeBesco, 2004). Designers frequently exclude this demographic due to their artistic vision and business interests, resulting in limited options for plus-size consumers (Bellafante, 2010 Clifford, 2010).

### ***3.1.3 Body-Size Exclusion***

In the fashion industry, the size of the body has been excluded, which is a problem that a lot of researchers have inquired about. Scaraboto & Fischer (2013) note that the mainstream fashion market does not often meet the requirements of overweight clients, leaving few varieties that are appealing to most women. Scaraboto & Fischer (2013) confirm that most of the time the fashion industry treats the needs of the plus-size consumers as marginal—mostly economic.

In particular, the fashion industry has maintained a preference for slender body types, which has been encouraged by retailers and fashion designers. Designers and retailers often do not consider the plus-size segment because both their artistic vision and business interests drive them, thus leading to exclusion and few options within the market (Bellafante, 2010; Clifford, 2010). Such as Karl Lagerfeld points out that his designs target slim persons only, suggesting that individuals with big bodies cannot find fitting attire from his collection lines (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Not only is this banishment a result of style choices, but it also signifies societal

condemnation of body-sized individuals due to their perceived unattractive physical appearance. Customs in the fashion business, like those based on beauty and economic gain, frequently exclude ample bodies that appear less attractive (Bordo, 1993; LeBesco, 2004).

Economic challenges are often used to explain limited offerings for plus-size customers. Plus-sized clothes demand special patterns and more clothes, leading to higher production costs for retailers (Clifford, 2010). Many mainstream retailers have not been increasing their offerings even though there is big market potential, with 40 percent approximately of the female populace in America needing plus-size clothing (Peters, 2022). A limited variety of clothing for plus-size customers is more than a business issue. Most people who need larger sizes feel that this type of clothing is not for them, and they assume that fashion industries do not consider their demand (Lucia De Castro, 2020). High-end fashion prioritizes aesthetics over consumer requirements in its production, while mass production continues to be profitable (Collins, 2001). The logic of art and commerce in the fashion industry reinforces a sense of exclusion (Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993; Entwistle & Rocamora, 2006).

### **3.2 Institutional Theory**

Institutional theory provides a framework for understanding how external pressures shape organizational behavior, leading to structural similarities across organizations, a phenomenon referred to as institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 2004; Tate et al., 2022). According to DiMaggio & Powell (2004), three mechanisms drive isomorphism: coercive pressures, which arise from legal mandates and societal expectations; mimetic pressures, where organizations emulate successful or legitimate practices under conditions of uncertainty; and normative pressures,

shaped by professional standards and educational influences (Tate et al., 2022). Institutional theory has been well portrayed in the work of Dacin et al.'s (2002); focusing on its application in understanding the dynamics of institutional change. They postulate that institutions, defined by established norms, rules, and participants, make a strong impact on organizational behavior. Yang & Su (2014) further, extend the interplay between institutional theory and marketing by proposing a conceptual framework that applies institutional theory to business marketing. They indicate how institutional forces, such as regulatory environments, industry standards, and cultural norms, shape marketing strategies and business practices.

The dynamic nature of institutional environments is also highlighted, noting that shifts in regulatory or technological landscapes often prompt organizations to adapt their marketing strategies to maintain or enhance institutional legitimacy (Grewal & Dharwadkar, 2002). Institutional theory has benefited marketing strategy research, with some studies using the theory to indicate the potential for improving the role of marketing in the firm's strategy formulation process (Varadarajan & Jayachandran, 1999). Moreover, the theory has been used to explore marketing's power within the organization, and these findings suggest that institutional factors are substantial contributors to variance in marketing's power beyond those contingency factors considered traditionally (Homburg et al., 1999). This contribution solidifies the relevance of institutional theory in marketing by linking broader institutional influences to specific business marketing strategies and outcomes.

### **3.3 Institutional Theory in Fashion**

Institutional theory provides valuable insight into fashion market dynamics. Research indicates that marginalized consumers may mobilize for greater inclusion by deploying change

strategies challenging institutionalized practices while reinforcing existing logic (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). In the fashion industry, various actors (consumers, industry, and governing institutions) create environmental impacts, and institutional logic such as dress codes and planned obsolescence resist sustainability (Karpova et al., 2022). Engaged consumers can relieve paid actors of some institutional work and, in so doing, force the emergence of new categories of actors and consumer-oriented institutional logic, thus driving unintended market-level changes (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). These studies together reflect the complex interaction of institutional forces, consumer behavior, and market evolution in the fashion industry. Institutional logics also vary between sectors. For example, Alvarez et al. (2005) differentiate between “art logic”, focusing on originality and innovation, and “business logic”, where the focus is on conformity and efficiency. The nature of this logic guides and gives rights to different fashion industry players, including designers, retailers, and consumers of fashion. Today, nonprofessional active members of online fashion communities take on tasks that were once considered the domain of professionals. These roles include assembling outfits, taking fashion photos, and sharing fashion-related content. The consumers influence and inspire each other to maintain and continuously develop the industry Dolbec & Fischer (2015). Their actions align with established industry principles while introducing new methods and broadening institutional efforts (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015). These dynamics illustrate how consumer engagement strengthens and reshapes institutional logic, highlighting the interaction between conventional and emerging practices within the fashion industry (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013).

In the fashion industry, institutional theory also helps explain how brands maintain their identity and status while adapting to changing market conditions and consumer expectations (Dibben & Wood, 2024). Brands strategically mobilize different logics, such as art, heritage, and

domesticity, to navigate tensions between exclusivity and inclusivity (Dion & Borraz, 2017; Joy et al., 2014). For example, Debenedetti et al. (2024) demonstrate how luxury brands use domestic components to balance these conflicting imperatives in their retail strategies. By blending domestic and market logic, brands create inclusive luxury experiences while preserving exclusivity (Bardhi et al., 2020; Turunen et al., 2020). By balancing tradition and innovation, institutional theory uncovers how consumer behavior, market dynamics, and institutional logic interact to drive market evolution.

## 4. METHOD

### 4.1 Data Collection

This research utilized qualitative methodologies to investigate consumer perspectives and assessments of the contemporary plus-size apparel options accessible in the market. The analysis was conducted using two primary methodologies: in-depth interviews and netnography. Over one year, I collected data focusing on the experiences, preferences, and challenges faced by plus-size individuals in the fashion industry.

**Table 1- Quantify and Qualify data**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Data Description</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
<b>Interviews</b>	Primary	Plus-size consumers	15 interviews (8 Men and 7 Women)	In-depth observation of the problems plus-size shoppers face and the fashion market's gaps

<p><b>Nethnography</b></p>	<p>Secondary</p>	<p>Online Reviews and social media comments on websites like Lane Bryant, Torrid, Reddit, and Temu clothing retailers</p>	<p>125 reviews on 10 posts</p>	<p>More information about what plus-size shoppers go through in the current clothes market. Consumers, who have a lot of followers and influence in the plus-size fashion community and online shops, can tell us a lot about how people think about and rate plus-size clothing choices.</p>
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#### 4.2 Primary Data

The interview methodology followed the semi-structured, in-depth technique recommended by (Arsel, 2017). The online interviews varied in duration, ranging from 17 minutes to 90 minutes. The recordings were transcribed using Happy Scribe, an AI-powered service chosen for its rigorous data privacy protocols. Only the research team had access to the encrypted and securely stored data, in adherence to the Tri-Council Policy requirements. Ethical approval was received from the members of the university Human Research Ethics Committee before the research commenced. The certification is provided in Appendix A. This methodology ensured that the research was able to capture nuanced and intricate perspectives without compromising the genuineness or impartiality of the study. Pseudonyms were used for all participants to protect their confidentiality. Before conducting the interviews, written consent was obtained from all participants to ensure adherence to ethical standards. I conducted the interviews according to the participants' preferences, and they all expressed a preference for online meetings. I used Zoom as the platform to facilitate and document the online sessions.

**Interview Procedures:** The interview data collection took place between August 2023 and July 2024. This was in line with finding a better understanding of the experiences of participants regarding plus-size clothes. In interviews, the participants explained the ethical considerations that determine what they wear, from their society to personal preferences. I recruited participants from LinkedIn and Instagram because both sites are very popular with twenty- and forty-somethings. These were the platforms for targeting and sampling participants in my research study, as it is shown in Appendix B. The informed consent form elaborated on the purpose of this study, with no compensation to be offered to ensure the genuineness of the participants' experiences. I prepared 12 main questions for the interviews with possible follow-up questions up to 35 depending on the response by participants. The interview questions can be found in Appendix C, providing a comprehensive and thorough overview. Additional ones follow on participant responses. The questions covered various topics, including demographic information, clothing shopping behavior, perceptions of plus-size clothing options, brand and retailer perception, fit and sizing concerns, price and value, marketing and advertising, and suggestions for improvement and conclusions regarding the ideal world. The goal of the dialogue was to give participants a chance to address their feelings and offer suggestions regarding the plus-size fashion industry. To obtain more specific information about the characteristics of the participants, please consult Table 2.

**Table 2 - Sample of Participants**

Name	Duration	Gender	Age	Nationality	Residence
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Ahmad	1:01	Male	28	Iranian	Iran
Masood	57:50	Male	31	Iranian	Iran
Shayan	55:40	Male	28	Iranian	Iran
Hossein	1:11	Male	29	Iranian	Iran
Mohsen	1:37	Male	29	Iranian	Canada
Pooria	54:43	Male	34	Iranian	Canada
Mohammad	55:30	Male	28	Iranian	Canada
Keyvan	50:37	Male	39	Iranian	Canada
Yasaman	34;33	Female	30	Iranian	Canada
Nahal	55:45	Female	35	Iranian	Canada
Narges	54:43	Female	34	Iranian	Canada
Nazi	29:49	Female	34	Iranian	Iran
Roya	17:00	Female	33	Iranian	Iran
Maliheh	26:44	Female	-	Iranian	Iran
Marjan	1:00	Female	37	Iranian	Iran

### 4.3 Secondary data

The secondary data in the report included customers' remarks and assessments found online at plus-size retailers. Specific websites were chosen according to their importance and conformity to plus-size fashion. Lane Bryant, Torrid, Temu, and Reddit were selected for two reasons: they first had come up in the Google search results with the help of words like "plus-size clothes" and "plus-size fashion," and then these platforms are well-known for producing and showcasing plus-size clothing, making them highly relevant to this research. For websites to be

included in this stage, I looked at the diversity of their stock of plus-size items and checked their models of plus-size individuals.

There was a total of 123 reviews and comments used for the analysis. The items used in the set were found both by random sampling and by picking the most-reviewed products to give a full representation. The product categories were leggings, dresses, jeans, sports bras, skirts, and blouses, so they together constituted the whole picture of the buyers' tastes.

For data collection, I manually copied the reviews and saved interesting ones in a screenshot. Each review was placed in a Word document on a systematic basis. The necessary screenshots and the product links were both used to enable clear reflection and easy usage during the process of the analysis. Regarding consumer feedback relevant to the study, I simply omitted spam and otherwise meaningless comments, strictly focusing on sensitive topics such as quality, fit, and overall satisfaction with the product.

#### **4.4 Data analysis**

I securely transferred the audio files from the interviews to a Dropbox folder for safe-keeping after the interviews were complete. The audio data were transcribed using Happy Scribe, a transcription software that has strong privacy settings and is highly accurate. I then imported the transcripts into Atlas.ti, a program for the analysis of qualitative data to facilitate the coding and analysis process.

The analysis process started with a thorough look at all the previous studies that had been done on the problems plus-size fashion customers face, and it is still going on. The open coding process commenced by thoroughly analyzing the interview transcripts, with a specific emphasis

on identifying recurring themes and patterns while also accounting for the challenges and emotions expressed by the consumers. The analysis was continuously refined through repeated review and engagement with the data, incorporating insights from existing literature on consumer challenges. This holistic approach facilitated a more profound understanding of the deficiencies in the fashion industry when it comes to catering to plus-size customers and provided valuable perspectives to assist marketers in effectively meeting these requirements. After the initial coding phase, I used theoretical and axial coding to extract and conceptualize the identified themes into broader categories. These conceptual categories included different aspects of plus-size consumers' experiences.

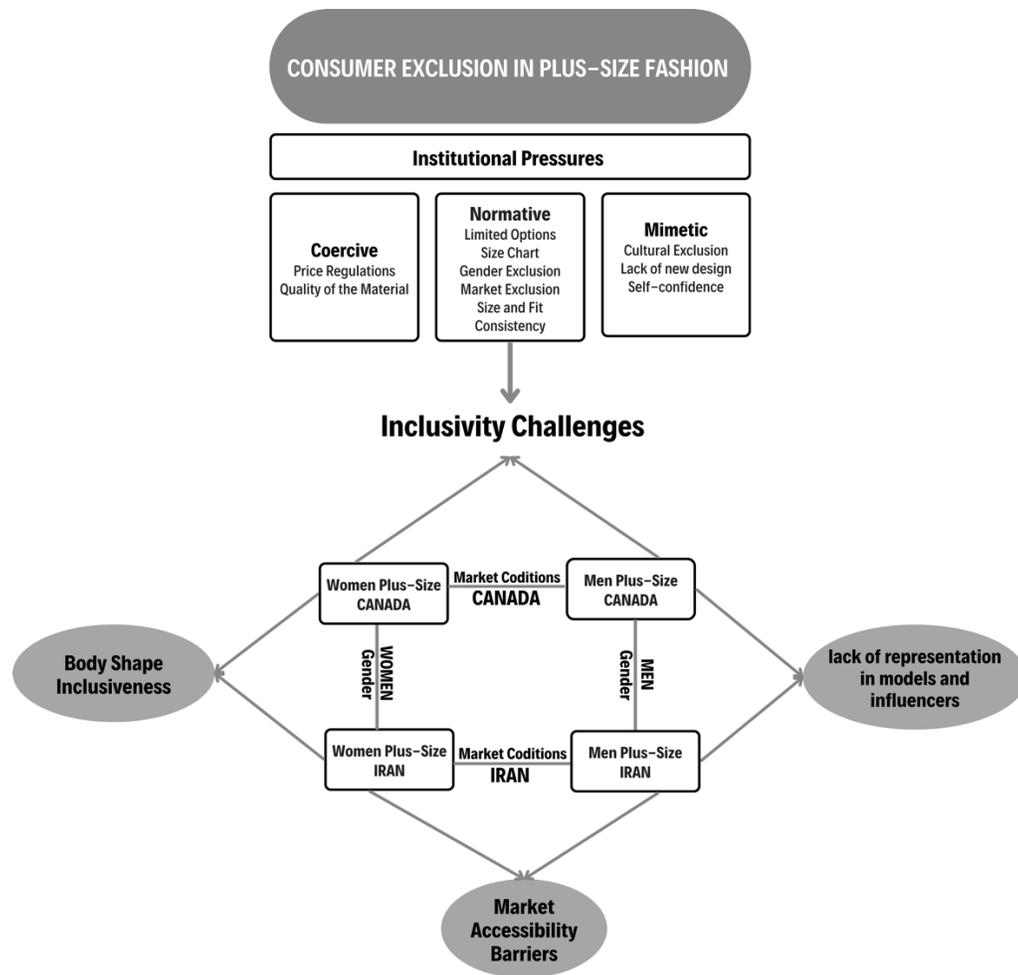
I used triangulation by combining interview data with data from secondary sources. These sources gave us more information and different points of view on why plus-size customers aren't included in the fashion market. After a careful analysis of the interview data to fully understand how customers felt, the focus shifted to analyzing archival data to better understand the patterns of plus-size challenges. After analyzing the interview data, I uploaded the archival data to Atlas.ti, following the analysis of the interview data. The open-coding process started by identifying recurring themes and patterns. I subsequently examined the data to establish comparisons with the current body of literature. The analysis process evolved from open coding to axial coding to identify overarching themes and connections within the dataset.

The iterative analysis process facilitated a thorough examination of the complex interactions depicted in both the interview transcripts and the archived reviews and comments. This study enhances our understanding of plus-size consumers and the fashion market by thoroughly examining the data, which includes analyzing various types of codes, abstraction levels, and theory building.

## **5. FINDINGS**

The institutional pressures and market forces that have been built around the plus-size industry led to many dimensions of exclusion for consumers. Such exclusions are reflected in multiple ways, and this ultimately creates challenges for plus-size consumers in finding brands that cater to their needs when finding fashion items that are fit for purpose. Leveraging the normative, mimetic, and coercive pillars of institutional theory, this research analyses the complex interplay of forces that combine to create a climate of consumer exclusion in the plus-size fashion sector. The results illustrate several forms of institutional pressures that marginalize consumers in the plus-size fashion space, as shown in Figure 1. The industry systematically demonstrates the workings and the effects of coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures on plus-size customers.

**Figure 1- Institutional Pressures and Experiences of Plus-Size Fashion Markets Across Canada and Iran**



## 5.1 Findings Across the Plus-Size Fashion Market

My findings show how institutional pressures influence the fashion industry-especially around plus-size consumers and practices. When exploring how fashion brands and retailers interact with the plus-size consumer, one can see that formal rules, informal norms, and market-driven changes pose impressive challenges. As it were from my findings, frequent problems that plus-size consumers usually face include the limited availability of options and exclusions due to industrial standards and norms favoring only slim body types. In relation, my findings indicate legitimacy pressures where brands are compelled to be in line with ideal body standards rather than solve the needs of all their consumers.

Indeed, these respondents most frequently expressed a lack of representation and uniform sizing, which implies that coercive pressures emanate not only from social expectations but also from industry practices that are unsupportive of inclusion. Finally, normative pressures are also manifest when brands selectively promote preferred body types rather than others, making plus-size consumers feel marginalized. This is well-illustrated, for example, in the Iranian market, where access is even more complex because of sanctions; consumers depend on local brands that have few options, unsatisfyingly low in quality. On the contrary, despite improvements in inclusiveness, frustrations were still easy to find because of inconsistent sizing and token inclusivity, which means normative and mimetic pressures push plus-size offerings even in Western markets.

These examples from my data illustrate how institutional pressures configure practices within the fashion industry, creating an environment that routinely ignores the needs of plus-size consumers. Appreciation of these pressures provides a backdrop against which the difficulties of developing a truly inclusive industry are highlighted, with both the remaining barriers and the areas where potential for movement is realized.

### ***5.1.1 Coercive Pressures in Plus-Size Fashion***

Participants frequently remarked how price and quality were interrelated issues for plus-size consumers. This comes from the coercive demands of market standards that place profit before satisfaction. The pressure generally sees the use of low-quality materials and low durability that adds to the struggles faced by plus-size consumers. In this respect, Marjan as an active woman, said:

But about the quality, as I told you, I'm not sure if it's a problem of quality or the need for plus-size people to wash their clothes more than normal people. For example, I must

wash my jeans every week due to sweating and constant wear. As a result, they deteriorate significantly more quickly than a typical pair of jeans or even underwear. Also, the plus-size products are not good at all.

The case of Marjan further shows that low quality, in addition to limited availability, presents further challenges insofar as frequent wear accelerates deterioration and increases the costs for replacement. In this perspective, there is an interplay between quality and affordability: it creates a vicious circle whereby coercive market standards put profit before consumer satisfaction and compound any access and durability problems.

Narges also points to another layer of punishment the plus-size consumer seems to encounter: a big difference in prices and promotions between regular and plus-size clothes.

Narges indicates a significant difference in the prices and promotions for regular versus plus-size clothes. As she says, though base prices are often the same, any promotional discounts are given only to regular sizes, therefore forcing plus-size consumers to pay more. In institutional theory, this discrepancy is attributed to coercive pressures, which involve external forces such as regulatory bodies and market leaders, which shape organizational behavior (Sarkis et al., 2011).

As Narges has mentioned:

Difference between regular sizing and sizing. But the problem that I solve most of the time, for example, when I go through the Old Navy website, I see that the promotions, the perfect promotions that are available on the website for different products are only for regular sizes. So, for example, when I see that, okay, I want to buy pants with a specific price, and then when I click on plus-size for that pant, I see that the promotion disappeared, and the price would become twice. So, in the first place, maybe they have the same prices, but for the promotions, there are not so many promotions for this life-size clothing.

Ahmad is a full-time employee; during our interview, he gave an overview of the pricing that occurs within the plus-size market:

I've noticed that plus-size clothing is often priced higher than standard-size clothing, which I found unfair. The price should reflect the quality and design, not the size. When purchasing a price as clothing, price plays a significant role in my decision-making process. I look for good value, meaning that the clothing should be made durable, and the price is fair. I consider a fair price for plus-size casual wear to be around the same as standard-size clothing. I'm willing to pay a bit more for formal wear or special items.

Ahmad is annoyed that plus-size clothes are more expensive than regular sizes. He finds this unfair because the price, in his opinion, should depend on quality and design rather than on size. The value is what matters to Ahmad; he likes garments that will last long and at a good price. Ahmad expects plus-size casual wear to be similarly priced to regular-sized clothes. However, he is willing to pay more for formal wear or special items. His perspective reflects a rather practical approach to buying plus-size clothing, where affordability and value play significant roles in his decision-making.

### ***5.1.2 Normative Pressures in Plus-Size Fashion***

As will be seen, my findings detail ways in which the normative pressures of society influence the plus-size consumer experience, such as limited options, incomplete size charts, etc. The limited variety of plus-size clothing was frequently viewed as a reflection of societal bias, causing frustration among participants.

This fits with the idea of normative pressures in institutional theory, which says that social rules and values affect how organizations act to keep their legitimacy (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). The findings speak to changes in consumer expectations where today's shoppers want to see inclusive brands rebel against traditional conceptions about body image sentiment of self-acceptance and body positivity voiced within the "Fatshionista" communities (Farrell, 2011).

Therefore, normative pressures increasingly create a compelling case for brands to engage in inclusivity and diversity that, based on my data, would have a positive resonance with plus-size consumers.

Mohsen from Canada highlighted the market's limited availability, emphasizing the ongoing struggle for inclusivity in fashion:

I don't think they have that much about different body types. Their main goal is to maximize profit, as I can see. Overall, my experience is negative. I sometimes ask if they are going to have my size for this style anytime soon, and they are I don't think so. They are, hey, you are designed for only this season, or we got only this size. I don't think they are going to add something specifically for your size. But you can check in a few weeks and see if, in our new collection, we can find something for you. But it's something that I feel, as I said, left out. You need to check on the availability every time. It's not like a normal shopping experience. When you're there you just check. If you're a medium, you just find the medium from the style you like. For example, if they are out of that medium, you ask when they are going to charge the medium size again, and then you come back. But here, no, it's always uncertainty. You cannot know that they are going to ever have this size for this style, or you don't know if they are going to have your size for the next new collection.

Mohsen's experience reveals how institutional pressures, such as the prioritization of profit over inclusivity, impact plus-size consumers' shopping experiences. He feels consistently "left out" due to the uncertainty surrounding the availability of his size in desired styles. Unlike standard-size consumers who can expect regular restocking and more predictable shopping experiences, Mohsen must frequently check for new collections, with no guarantee that his size will be available. This reflects an industry norm that marginalizes plus-size customers, suggesting that the fashion market views extended sizing as an afterthought rather than an integral part of their offerings.

This uncertainty and lack of commitment to plus-size consumers contribute to a feeling of exclusion, which Mohsen describes as not having a “normal shopping experience.” This insight points to a broader pattern of coercive pressures within the fashion industry, where brands focus on meeting the demands of mainstream consumers (such as those with medium sizes) to maximize profitability while neglecting the needs of niche segments like plus-size. The absence of clear information about sizing availability, combined with the need to “check every time,” underscores how institutional priorities shape Mohsen’s experience, making him feel less valued as a consumer.

In continues Massod mentioned his experience:

Most of the time I shop online because we have limited availability of plus-size options in stores in Iran. Also, because of international sanctions, many global brands do not have branches in Iran, which again, limits my choice. Mostly, I buy clothing online from online stores in other countries sometimes, which adds to the overall cost because I sometimes have to pay a premium for shipping fees, etc.

On the other hand, regarding the size chart, when I asked about inconsistency sizes between brands, Masood frequently purchases clothing from online stores in different countries, which can incur additional costs due to shipping fees:

The biggest challenges are the limited availability of plus-size options, lack of variety in styles and fashions, and inconsistent sizing across different brands. Many stores, especially local ones, do not carry plus-size options, and those that do often have a very limited selection that is not fashionable. Also, this inconsistency in sizing makes it difficult to find clothes that fit well without drawing multiple sizes and asking the seller to just bring another one. I sometimes have to return items if I shop online.

The inconsistent sizing across different brands presents similar challenges to Masood in a more complicated manner. He must buy several sizes online due to inconsistency, which results in higher shipping and return costs. The lack of diversity and fashion that is offered to him fur-

ther underlines the dominating exclusionary practices within the industry, where normative pressures reinforce the marginalization of plus-size people by not meeting their needs satisfactorily. This is mainly concerned with the problems faced by Mohsen and Masood as plus-size consumers in buying fashionable clothes to satisfy our needs, which shows how societal norms devalue plus-size bodies.

Moreover, Hossein, another plus-size man, articulated his experience with gender exclusion within the fashion industry.

Interesting aspects of my identifier, such as being a plus-size man living in Iran, significantly affect my experiences with clothing, shopping, and fashion. As a man, there are often fewer plus-size options available compared to women's plus-size fashion. Let me give you an example. The impact of sanctions limits the availability of international brands, and high-quality clothing for the restructuring might choose us. Socioeconomic factors also play a role, as clothing is often more expensive and can be a financial burden. This is interesting. Interesting factors make a shopping experience for challenge, and I highlight the need for greater inclusivity and affordability in the fashion industry.

This quote epitomizes the greater problem of gender exclusion in Iran's plus-size fashion industry. Plus-size men may feel especially left out of the market due to this disparity in availability. In comparison with women, who have some options, some variety, and some representation, men are completely left out. These experiences shared by models in the fashion industry show just how urgent it is for the industry to make attempts at bridging these gender gaps and creating a space for inclusivity across demographics so that plus-size consumers of any gender will finally find access to clothes that will satisfy both body and soul.

This increase in the scope of inclusiveness in the market is vital for plus-size consumers who feel ignored by fashion trends. This issue gets more serious when it comes to places like Iran since limited options often affect both quality and style requirements. The fashion industry

can have better potential to provide a more efficient service to varied body forms, genders, and cultures if it adopts a more inclusive approach.

### ***5.1.3 Mimetic Pressures in Plus-Size Fashion***

The findings in this section show how mimetic pressures within the fashion industry impact the availability and diversity of options that are available to plus-size consumers. Mimetic pressures happen when brands replicate the practices of perceived industry leaders, often at the expense of mainstream trends. This is reflected in the stories of participants like Marjan, who explained that plus-size fashion is still lacking, even within more specialized categories, such as formal wear or culturally adjusted design. The experiences of participants like Narges, Ahmad, and Masood in their everyday interactions with different brands show how companies do not extend design diversity to plus-size clothing.

For example, Marjan from Iran mentioned how much time and effort it takes to adjust the clothes to fit the body shape, which indicates that brands are simply not prepared for various body shapes depending on ethnicity and region.

Plus-size clothing is a challenge for Marjan to order with customizations. The cultural complexities involved in designing for different body types across various ethnicities are highlighted by her. She notes:

I think the problem with ordering is that when you order, it's going to take you at least twice the time of a regular order because they have to customize it for you. If they even accept something like that, maybe they must consider rescheduling or, I don't know, redesigning their production line or, I don't know, maybe preparing more plus-size patterns for females, even in different ethnicities. For example, Africans' bodies are so much different than ours in Iran or other countries. So maybe they must design some patterns for plus-sizes. South African plus sizes, American plus sizes, and others.

Narges further commented that barely any party clothes are fashionable and well-designed for plus-size women, and that further shows exclusion by the branding trying to follow the mainstream, without adopting these trends for diverse body sizes. She notes,

As I mentioned for clothing, or especially for example, party clothing, not casual clothing, there aren't many in terms of design, colors, and styles, there aren't many options available in the market. For example, I remember that last time I was looking for special, for a specific color in a dress and I didn't find anything in my size. When I see the other sizes, colors, styles, and products, I like them and I want them, but most of the time they are not available.

The mimetic pressures in the fashion industry cause brands to replicate successful mainstream designs but fail to extend these innovations to plus-size ranges, resulting in this experience. Plus-size consumers, like Narges, are presented with limited choices, particularly in specialized categories like formal wear, despite smaller sizes having a broader range of styles to select from. Plus-size consumers get marginalized by brands as they keep prioritizing mainstream trends over inclusivity, resulting in a lack of design diversity. Peters (2014) plus-size consumers' self-esteem is negatively affected and reinforced by the exclusion of mainstream fashion options. When people do not see themselves represented, or their needs are not met by mainstream fashion, that just reinforces this societal message that maybe their needs are somehow devalued or less worthy. In this way, it affects confidence and self-perception, making it difficult to be satisfied with their bodies and feel good about their choices in fashion. Ahmad, a participant from Iran, eloquently captured how social expectations and norms influence his perception of his body and clothing choices. He expressed:

Social expectations and norms have a significant impact on my perception of my body and my clothing choices. There is a lot of pressure to conform to certain body standards, which can affect my confidence and make me feel self-conscious about my size and my body. This pressure influenced my clothing choice as I tried to find clothes that not only fit

my build but also helped me feel more accepted and less judged. The lack of the presentation of plus-size bodies in social media and advertising also helps this feeling, making it challenging to feel positive about my body and my fashion choices.

Masood, another participant from Iran, shared a recent experience that further illustrates the exclusion faced by plus-size consumers:

A recent experience that stands out is when I visited a local store in Tehran [capital city of Iran] that claimed to have a new plus-size collection. That's what they claimed. When I arrived there, I found that their largest size was still too small for me. The store's selection was extremely limited, and the few plus-size items they did have were hidden in a corner, not even visible to other customers. Almost as if they were afterthought. That's at least how I felt [now]. The staff seemed uncomfortable and unhelpful when I asked for assistance, making me feel like an outsider who did not belong there. This experience made me feel excluded because it highlighted how the mainstream fashion industry neuron often overlooks the needs of plus-size individuals.

Masood repeats throughout his narrative how emotionally exhausting these experiences are, since the general lack of attention to plus-size fashion not only limits choices but works in ways that make feelings of otherness reinforce each other. These are feelings that, in themselves, already go against feelings of increased, as noted before, by sensations of discomfort and lack of support, even from store staff. It just makes the plus-size consumer feel so unwelcome, like Masood, in places that should welcome them. Ahmad from Iran expressed how social norms shape his body image and clothing choices. He said: “Additionally, cultural aspects play a role as there is less emphasis on body diversity and inclusivity in Iranian fashion.”

Masood also shared how cultural attitudes within Iran, which favor the slender, shape his shopping experience as a plus-sized consumer. He feels the effects of limited acceptance and visibility of plus-size individuals within Iranian media and fashion, which pushes him to seek clothing that can minimize attention to his size. His intolerance of judgment and mockery says much about the burden he must endure at the hands of local cultural biases. It also presents a pressure

that might constrain his choices within the options available to him from local shops and encourage him to shop online, where options may be more inclusive, and the chances of uncomfortable social interactions reduced.

From the outsider's perspective, Masood shares a story about how Iranian conventions make life hard for plus-size individuals, as fashion is limited in accommodating different body shapes. Such cultural preferences reveal greater social prejudices that supply breaks to diversity in the fashion world, which then segregates those consumers who do not match up to the prevailing body image. This invisibility and the lack of acceptance of the plus-sized individual within public and commercial spaces elevate the need for more inclusive practices within the Iranian market.

In Iran, [cultural attitudes towards body size emphasize a preference for slimmer physiques]. [This often makes shopping for plus-size clothing very challenging]. The limited acceptance and visibility of plus-size individuals in media and fashion in Iran [pushes me to look for clothes that draw less attention to my size]. I don't want to get mocked—sometimes people are mean. This cultural bias [leads to fewer fashion options for me], especially in local stores. [That's why I sometimes prefer to shop online].

While Ahmad and Masood both provided valuable insight regarding their experiences, such contributions serve only to illustrate how deeply embedded cultural attitudes are within Iranian society regarding the approach of the fashion industry toward body diversity. The dominant desire for a slim body type leaves plus-size consumers marginalized while creating a lack of inclusivity in the field. This is also one of the most pressing issues that plus-size males, such as Ahmad and Masood, must face. Unlike women, who at least have started to find representation and acceptance in a few circles, plus-size men in Iran are invisible, both in media and fashion. This means very few role models or representations to normalize their body types, making it even more difficult to find clothes that fit well and provide a sense of confidence.

This complete lack of plus-size male representation adds to the cultural stigma that views male bodies of larger size as deviating from the ideal. In this manner, plus-size men are excluded from fashion availability and expected to live up to a standard that does not make allowance for their needs or identity. Such lack of visibility and acceptance further affects the self-image of plus-size men, who often must look for alternatives in online shopping or customized clothes just to find something to wear. This example frames how cultural and industrial prejudice come together and creates a context where plus-size men are facing multiplied challenges to find fashion that fits and represents them.

## **5.2 Consumers Experiencing Inclusivity Challenges**

By examining how the plus-size fashion industry excludes customers, my study looks at the different kinds of institutional pressures that make a big difference in the lives of plus-size people. These pressures affect and vary market conditions, particularly regarding gender and regional markets such as Canada and Iran. Understanding such institutional forces requires, first and foremost, an investigation into how these forces define access, representation, and inclusion of plus-size fashion to shape consumer and brand strategic responses subsequently. This section examines the interaction between gender and market conditions, highlighting different challenges experienced by plus-size men and women in different markets, specifically Canada and Iran. The experiences of participants have uncovered four themes, which I will elaborate on in the subsequent parts.

### ***5.2.1 Canadian Market***

I found that for consumers who reside in Canada, Maliheh talks summarily of what toll shopping plus-sized clothes can take: “It’s frustrating; It’s disappointing! You feel exhausted, and

you feel you're not part of this world when options become restricted for your size. You can shop a lot more easily when you're thinner because you have all these options.” This feeling underlines the exclusion plus-size women often feel within a market that still targets mainly smaller sizes.

Furthermore, Pooria reflects upon his experience as a plus-size man in Canada. He said that previously, he used to be very irritated with the mainstream advertising where fit men are shown wearing all the good clothes. He admitted feeling awful each time he saw those pictures where the representation was just not him: “You see all the ads with fit guys in great clothes, and you think, 'Okay, let's try that on.' But when you do, it makes you feel like you're not good enough.” His experience reveals the impact of unrealistic body standards in advertising, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy among plus-size men.

Pooria's story is, however, underlined by a broader issue within the Canadian fashion industry: men's plus-size representation stands virtually nil, promoting unattainable body ideals that are discouraging plus-size men from participating in fashion. My research underlined how a lack of plus-size representation in marketing and advertising leads to disconnection among men, who feel alienated by brands failing to acknowledge even their presence, let alone their needs. This exclusion is none other than a breeding ground for feelings of inadequacy; it even works to the extent of discouraging plus-size men from participating in the fashion market due to a consumer culture that celebrates ideals they cannot achieve.

I also found that consumers are becoming more aware of a gradual shift towards inclusivity in society, recognizing that diverse body types are being accepted more. Mohammad, a plus-size man in Canada, mentioned: “The society is more inclusive, and plus-size people are being

more considered than before. However, there's still a huge amount of work to do to reach a place where plus-size people feel like shopping is just like it is for normal-sized people.”

Mohammad’s view suggests that Canadian consumers are seeing gradual improvements in plus-size inclusivity, likely influenced by societal movements toward body positivity. However, his statement indicates that the current level of inclusivity is not yet sufficient for plus-size consumers to feel entirely comfortable and accepted in mainstream fashion spaces. My research has shown that while plus-size consumers have become more recognized, the representation and accommodation of their needs within mainstream fashion are still lacking. This partial inclusivity often makes plus-size individuals feel less valued and disconnected since their unique body types and preferences are still not well catered to; thus, there is still much to change on the systemic level for true inclusivity in the fashion industry.

Yasaman, another participant in Canada, adds insight into the demand for more diverse sizing options:

I can tell you a couple of more important ones that I had this for not all the brands offer a wide range of sizes within their plus-size collections, so some still provide a limited segment of the plus-size population. And it's kind of like frustrating for us because we don't have that kind of variety in our model. And the sizing between brands and even between the same brand can be frustrating because it makes online shopping kind of difficult for us. And you're never entirely sure if an item will fit as you expect. There has been an increase in trending plus-size clothing, but there is room for more diversity in the style. It's not uncommon to find limited choices for specific occasions or fashion-forward looks.

This quote shows the central frustration of plus-size consumers, both Iranian and Canadian, in terms of lack of size consistency, variety, and style. However, the context and severity differ drastically between the two countries. Canadian consumers still face inconsistencies in sizing between and within brands, even though some brands have expanded their size ranges. This

complicates online shopping and reduces convenience for Canadian consumers (Nestler et al., 2021).

### ***5.2.2 Iranian Market***

In Iran, these are mixed with economic restrictions and cultural mores that make even the basic availability of plus-size clothing limited. Most consumers, especially outside of large cities, lack access to fashion options in their communities and rely on unreliable online sources, which reflects the significant gap in fashion inclusivity between restricted and open markets.

Ahmad, an Iranian man, describes the difficulties of finding well-fitting clothing for formal occasions due to limited options in the Iranian market:

One specific instance was when I was preparing for a friend's wedding, and I needed a formal suit. [Most stores didn't carry suits] in my size. I found a [store] that had a limited [selection] of formal suits, but the [sizes available were not suitable], and the [fits] weren't flattering. I had to [settle] for a suit that wasn't my first [choice] and then pay extra to have it altered. This whole process was time-consuming and frustrating, [highlighting] the significant difficulty of finding suitable clothing, especially for special occasions like a friend's wedding.

It gives a very fair example of the problem overweight people are facing in Iran, whereby options are limited, especially regarding formal wear. Ahmad's case is but a reflection of stringent market constraints in Iran-forced to make do with limited retail options, plus-size consumers must compromise on fit and style.

I also found that economic sanctions and an absence of international brands make matters worse, which only serves to keep consumers underserved and often, in need of paying extra for alterations. A recent experience by Masood, a participant from Iran, spoke volumes about the exclusion faced by plus-size consumers:

A recent experience that stands out is when I visited a local store in Tehran that claimed to have a new plus-size collection. That's what they claimed. When I arrived there, I

found that their largest size was still too small for me. The store's selection was extremely limited, and the few plus-size items they did have were hidden in a corner, not even visible to other customers. Almost as if they were afterthought. That's at least how I felt at [that] moment. The staff seemed uncomfortable and unhelpful when I asked for assistance, making me feel like an outsider who did not belong there. This experience made me feel excluded because it highlighted how the mainstream fashion industry neuron often overlooks the needs of plus-size individuals.

Masood's narrative reveals how Iranian retail spaces are part of the exclusion processes of plus-size people through a lack of stock and the presentation of plus-size lines in unwelcoming ways. Lack of visibility and lack of support for plus-size consumers reinforce alienation; thus, Iranian retailers should pay more attention to the issue of inclusivity on physical and organizational levels. As I could find, most participants have faced some sort of problem concerning market barriers. While both Canada and Iran have problems with their plus-size fashion markets, Canada's more developed economy and the lack of sanctions make the situation comparatively better. In contrast, the Iranian market remains more bound, with fewer options, with additional challenges of economic sanctions that do not allow getting international brands or high-quality clothing. Though the Canadian market also seems better compared to Iran, still something can be done to improve it further as there are no barriers like in Iran, yet the majority of customers are still not happy with the range of available things.

### **5.3 Market Accessibility Barriers**

Where plus-size consumers must overcome barriers to market access, Iranian consumers reported the most significant challenges. The confluence of economic constraints, cultural influences, and international sanctions renders the availability of plus-size apparel alternatives in Iran virtually impossible.

### ***5.3.1 Iranian's Market Barriers***

This section presents the experiences of Iranian participants in comparison to those of Canadian residents to shed light on specific challenges plus-size consumers experience in Iran. Their stories indicate how cultural prejudice, logistic barriers, and economic limitations jointly marginalize the plus-size community. This analysis therefore carries implications for urgent systemic reform within the Iranian fashion market to bring about effective remedy to such blatant inequalities.

When I asked Hossein How do you perceive the accessibility of plus-size apparel in the Iranian market? Hossein mentioned the restricted options in his hometown of Kermanshah:

The availability of plus-size clothing options in the market is quite limited, especially in Kermanshah. Although the city has nice stores with high-quality materials, they often don't carry a wide variety of plus-size clothes. I frequently must travel to Tehran [the capital city of Iran] to find clothes that fit well and are comfortable. Online shopping could be an option, but there are concerns about the accuracy of measurements, trust, and worthiness of online shops, especially on Instagram, where many shops accept money transfers instead of online payments through bank cards. The sanctions have also impacted international brands' availability, limiting my options.

Hossein's experience underscores the significant barriers faced by plus-size consumers in Iran, shaped by limited local availability, logistical challenges, and systemic issues such as international sanctions. In Kermanshah, the lack of diverse plus-size options forces him to travel to Tehran, highlighting regional disparities in market accessibility. Additionally, trust issues with online shopping, compounded by sanctions limiting international brands, leave him with few viable options.

This aligns with the broader challenges faced by plus-size men in Iran, where institutional pressures such as sanctions and cultural biases create significant barriers to access. Hossein's ac-

count illustrates how these pressures manifest in limited local options, distrust in online shopping, and restricted availability of international brands, further highlighting the exclusion of plus-size men in the fashion market.

Also, I observed that in the continues when I asked Masood another man in Iran, about what your hopes and aspirations for the future of plus size fashion in Iran are.

My hopes for the future of plus-size fashion in Iran include greater inclusivity and diversity in clothing options, improved access to high-quality materials and fashion items, and it continued shift toward body positivity and acceptance. Also, I like to see the fashion industry celebrate all body types and provide equal opportunities and prices for everyone to express themselves confidently and stylistically.

Masood's perspective directly points to coercive pressures in the market, whereby economic priorities and cultural norms are given to mainstream body sizes, which leave the plus-size consumer at the margins. In advocating for inclusivity and diversity in clothing options, Masood appeals to the systemic barriers that limit access to fashion for men such as himself.

This finding most closely related to the research question shows how institutional pressures-from cultural biases to economic inequities-influenced and shaped the plus-size men's experiences in Iran. Masood's aspirations demonstrate a dire need for a systemic reform that reduces stigma by way of fostering representation and creating equitable access to high-quality, inclusive fashion. His response brought out the disconnect between current market practices and the expectations of the consumers in the margins, and how addressing these gaps will be crucial to making fashion more inclusive.

Furthermore, I found that plus-size women's challenges in Iran are also similar to those of men, mainly those to do with market-related barriers. Women like Marjan have significant frustrations related to the inadequacy of stock and limited sizing in stores. When asked about her experiences, Marjan revealed:

I rather not avoid it as much as possible because most of the time, most of the stores do not have that size or do not have that many number of their clothes from that size and they are sold too soon. Most of the time things that are on discount or sale, and I would like to participate in shopping them and enjoy shopping them like the others are not available for me at all.

Marjan's case indicates the critical gap in servicing plus-size customers within the Iranian fashion market, where a limited stock and fast sales of larger sizes create big obstacles. She is frustrated because, when sales and discounts occur, she misses a sentiment that indicates just how market practices disproportionately disadvantage plus-size consumers and feed a sense of exclusion.

This illustrates a systemic issue embedded in inventory prioritization and cultural neglect, whereby retailers are unable to accommodate diverse body types. Marjan's story shows that the current reforms should be oriented to grant access to clothing options without discrimination against plus-size people, mainly answering the general call for inclusivity and equity in fashion. It ties directly into the research question and demonstrates how institutional pressures in Iran's market contribute to greater inequalities for plus-size women.

### ***5.3.2 Canadian's Market Barriers***

It is important to note that the Canadian market offers even more developed options for plus-size consumers; however, there are many challenges, especially if one considers a more constrained and sanction-affected market like Iran.

Yasaman's account represents both the developments and continued struggles in the Canadian plus-size fashion market, a far cry from the difficulties posed by Iran. Yasaman recognizes that while slow and small steps are being taken on the aspects of availability and diversity,

more can still be done. This coincides with the research question by showing how institutional pressures, although minimal in Canada compared to Iran, still influence the experiences of plus-size consumers.

I think I can say the availability of plus-size clothing options, the market, it's getting better and it's kind of like gradually improving, but they can still make it better. Over the past few years, I've noticed that there has been positive progress with more brands and retailers expanding their plus-size ranges, which is a great change for us as it provides more choices and style options for those of us who wear plus-size.

This development in the Canadian market points to normative changes pressured by consumers demanding inclusivity from more brands and retailers that have been widening their size range. However, Yasaman's comments untenably demonstrate how these changes do not yet meet the needs of plus-size consumers in representation and access. The discrepancies in this light become even clearer when it is compared with Iran, whose economic sanctions, among other cultural norms, greatly impede market accessibility. In Canada, institutional barriers manifest as more slow-motion adaptation by brands, while in Iran, the systemic neglect of plus-size consumers is compounded by limitations in structural and economic avenues.

Different cultural, economic, and regulatory factors differentially shape the experiences of plus-size individuals across various regions, as shown in this interpretation. Yasaman's case points to a constant commitment toward inclusivity and fighting institutional sluggishness in both developed and constrained markets.

Where Hossein must struggle to find plus-size fashion wear, Yasaman can wear whatever she wants. The experiences between the Iranians and the Canadians show a sharp division in access to plus-size fashion. Economic limitations, cultural factors, and sanctions turn Iran into a restricted environment is very rare that Hossein gets to see or have options in plus-size clothing,

and he is thus forced to travel to Tehran for suitable clothing (Askari et al., 2003). By contrast, Yasaman describes how Canada is slowly improving, with brands increasingly expanding their size ranges as consumer voices for inclusivity and body diversity grow louder. Canadian consumers have a free market with reliable online shopping options that support better choice and access.

Pooria, another Canadian participant, emphasized the lack of variety and new styles available in the market: “I have been stuck with the same sort of style for the past ten years. I would like to experiment with new styles and have them readily available for purchase. I would like new coloring to choose from and new textures that I can try on.”

Meanwhile, the Canadian market, though well on its way to becoming more inclusive, still has a lot to catch up on to satisfy the various needs of plus-size consumers. The case of Iran is much more critical, judging by the frustrations of participants over the limited availability of options, not to mention sanctions and added costs of shopping online from international retailers. These two markets contrast so strongly that they point out how very different the plus-size consumer's accessibility challenges are, and just how far behind Iran is in attending to those needs.

#### **5.4 Body Shape Inclusiveness**

For plus-size women, despite some improvements in accessibility compared to plus-size men, the shopping experience often remains inferior to straight-size women because retailers often segregate plus-size sections and use body-focused language that promotes stigma. Strengthens (Shelton et al., 2023). Also, Body shapes play a critical role in determining the fit and comfort of clothing, particularly for plus-size individuals whose body proportions do not align with traditional sizing systems (Kumari and Anand, 2024). My analysis shows that female customers

exhibit greater worries regarding body shape, attributable to historical institutional forces that have imposed stringent beauty standards and consistent fashion design.

Body shape inclusivity is the prime aspect of plus-size fashion since that means clothes would be designed to fit a variety of body shapes and sizes in plus-size individuals. The body shapes of plus-size people are so different that designs and tailoring should indeed go beyond offering larger sizes.

#### ***5.4.1 Body Shape in Women***

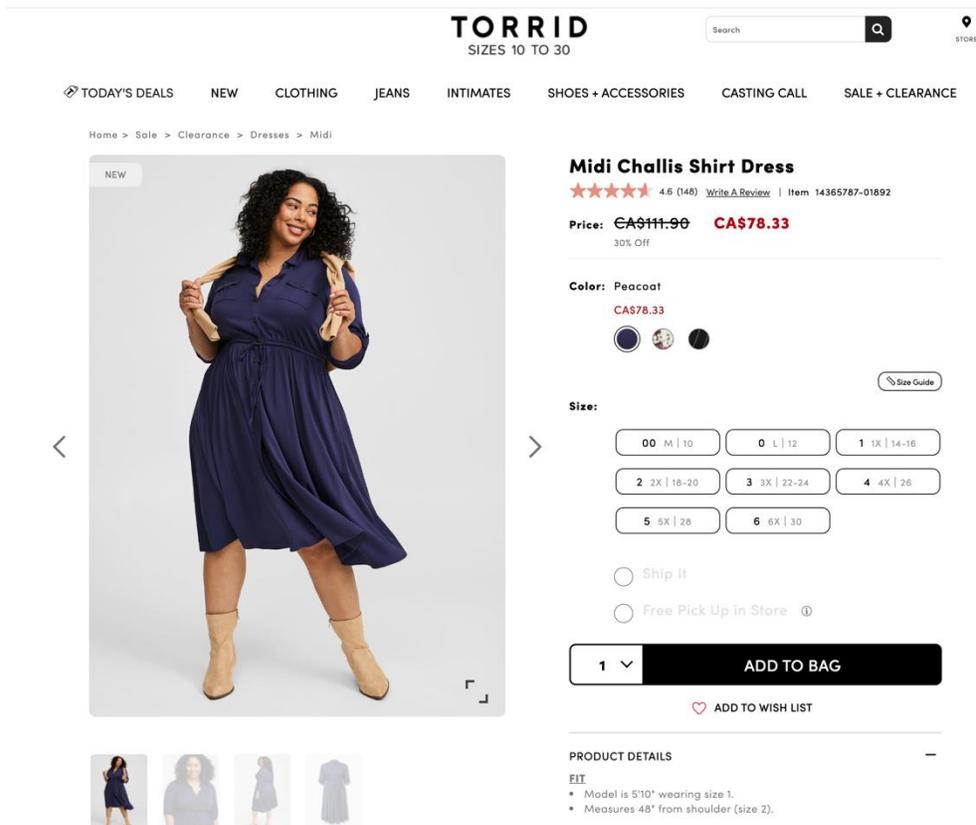
The importance of designing plus-size clothing that accommodates diverse body shapes was highlighted in my research, rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach. Nahal's Perspective on Diversity in Body Shapes a Canadian participant, highlighted the inadequacy of one-size-fits-all solutions in plus-size fashion.

My sister and I are plus size, but we have completely different body shapes. For example, my sister has a larger upper body, but I have a larger upper body. Whenever I buy clothes for myself, I'm sure that those clothes are not suitable for my sister. And both of us, we almost have the same way and almost the same... But we have to choose different designs because we cannot use one clothes for both of us. After all, we have completely different body shapes. That's correct. Yeah. For sure, it's a very good idea for designers to have different designs for different body shapes.

Nahal's account now emphasizes the pressing need for plus-size fashion that is inclusive in terms of body geometries. This is reflected in her real-life situation, where she and her sister, though being similarly sized, require completely different designs. Such is the fallacy of this one-dimensional approach in the present scenario. This shows how institutional pressures overlook body diversity, reinforcing the need for thoughtful, tailored design solutions to Improve the shopping experience for plus-size consumers and cater to their specific requirements.

Supporting this perspective, a user on the Torrid plus-size online website commented in (Figure 1): "I like this dress! I always worry about my stomach area, but this was very flattering, and my tummy looked great. Can't wait for other colors/patterns!" This comment illustrates how certain designs can successfully address specific body concerns, such as a larger tummy, making the consumer feel confident and comfortable.

**Figure 2- Example of Plus-Size Fashion Retail Practices: Torrid's Online Offering And Sizing Options**



Another consumer from the same post shared: “Love this dress! I’m kind of apple-shaped and carry a good portion of my weight in my belly. I bought this for my son’s high school graduation party. I aimed to achieve a polished yet casual look. I accessorized my outfit with Navajo pearls, marble slab earrings, and beige canvas shoes. Did have a slight issue with buttons trying to come undone bustline (I’m not busty by any means; they came unfastened with movement).” This feedback underscores the importance of not only flattering the body shape but also ensuring functionality and comfort in clothing design.

Furthermore, I observed that I observed that height and proportionality play a significant role in the challenges faced by plus-size consumers. Maliheh, a woman living in Canada, added:

Yeah, I think the height, because I am shorter, there's like, a tendency that, oh, if you're plus size, you have to be taller to be plus size. That's something I've noticed. They could be pants that are literally like my size, the same height as me, but it's considered plus size. Yeah, I think that's a challenge. And I think, again, it goes back to the chest area. I find that although it's sometimes considered as plus size, the chest area still doesn't fit you properly or have the support that it needs to have.

These quotes collectively show that designing differently for different body shapes is an important aspect in the case of all plus-sized consumers. Since women are found to possess diverse body shapes, the challenge of creating well-fitting clothing is quite acute, and more tailored design solutions would be necessary to tackle different body geometries and provide a better fit (Shin and Saeidi, 2022). The thoughts and observations of these individuals indicate that body shape inclusivity goes beyond only providing larger sizes; it also includes well-designed, attractive alternatives tailored to various plus-size body types.

#### ***5.4.2 Body Shape in Men***

In male participants, similar experiences were experienced, though less frequently than among female participants. Male consumers would more often underline the lack of representation in advertising and media, as opposed to females. This underlines how issues that male consumers complain about tend to be those of visibility and recognition by society, somewhat different from the frustrations regarding products voiced by female consumers.

Masood, a man in Iran, emphasizes that body shape inclusivity is great, but the major problem lies in the general lack of plus-size variety and availability, which consequently contributes even more to the struggle of finding well-fitting clothes: “Yeah, for sure. I have encountered sizing issues. But the main challenge is not the body shape, but the limited availability and variety of plus-size clothing.” His sentiment reveals that while body shape inclusivity is important, in men’s behavior the overall lack of variety and availability in the plus-size market remains a big problem.

Pooria a man in Canada who relocated to Canada, shared his thoughts on how inconvenient it was not to find clothes that fit well because of irregular body shapes.

Well, maybe it's designed to keep us in shape. You have to walk a lot to find a good piece of clothing, so I consider it exercise, but yeah, you have to look for it a lot. One of the things that are going to limit your options is that right now, every brand is focused more on shopping online and increasing their online customers. But when it comes to oversized clothing, you cannot do that because of the body type. For example, they say pants are 33, but for some people, like me, the fat is more accumulated on their feet or in their belly. So, one size doesn't mean that it's going to fit you. So online will be out of the window, but then you're only limited to in-store clothing. And whenever you go there, and even if you choose one piece of clothing that you desire, they might be out of it and say okay, you can go and order online. And again, it's the same thing. It's limited. It's very limited.

## **5.5 Lack of Representation in Models and Influencers**

Representation is a crucial part of fashion because it affects the self-esteem and purchase behaviors of plus-sized consumers. My research shows that while women in the market express dissatisfaction with the absence of plus-size models, this issue appears to be deeper within men. Five out of eight men interviewed, such as Hossein, Pooria, Mohammad, Keyvan, and Ahmad, felt annoyed and underlined the absence of male plus-size representation in fashion, whereas only two out of seven interviewed women, Yasaman and Nakisa, mentioned this issue. This stark contrast underlines the fact that, though for both genders' representation is an issue, the absence of plus-size male models is a much greater and more persistent concern.

### ***5.5.1 Men's Perspectives***

I observed that the lack of male representation or models reflecting plus-size body types increases the difficulty for males seeking relatable fashion inspiration. It's not just insulting to reinforce social prejudices, but it pushes plus-size men further to the margin; there is a desperate cry now for inclusiveness across the board in the fashion industry. Mohammad, considering the disparity in representation within plus-size men's fashion, said:

Well, I think I'd be encouraged to see that [plus-size models] because, right now, they are not doing it in terms of most of the clothing and brands. It would be interesting to see [a dedicated effort with] plus-size models specifically representing a plus-size brand, which I think is lacking.

This comment from Mohammad underlines how deeply institutionalized the neglect of male representation is in the plus-size market. His desire to see male plus-size models representing brands should, in turn, reflect wider frustration with a lack of inclusivity and visibility in the fashion industry. My research emphasizes the demand among plus-size male consumers for a representative model.

Second, I found that representation in fashion marketing acts as a strong enabler in crafting the experience for plus-size consumers; this directly affects their self-confidence and purchase habits. Hossein gives an idea of how male plus-size consumers are disproportionately harmed due to the general lack of relatable models and influencers and how representation influences confidence and inclusivity:

It's very important. Seeing plus-size models helps me visualize how the clothes will look on my body and makes me feel more confident in my purchase. It also reassures me that the brand understands and caters to the needs of plus-size customers. Representation matters because it helps to break down stereotypes and promotes body positivity.

He emphasizes how seeing relatable models would move their emotions with a sense of visibility, legitimacy, and confidence that's currently absent for male, plus-size consumers:

Seeing models who look like me wearing the clothes would help me visualize how they will look on my body and boost my confidence in my purchase. Marketing campaigns would celebrate body diversity and promote body positivity, making me feel valued and included as a customer.

Hossein's experiences reveal both the emotional and practical implications of a lack of representation in plus-size fashion. His focus on visualization further points out that the inclusion of plus-size models or influencers will create a sense of inclusiveness for plus-size men. The representation contributes to men not feeling so alone and helps in enhancing their self-esteem. This visibility, over time, will normalize body diversity in society, building confidence and satisfaction among the plus-size men of society, eventually serving to narrow the large gap in gender representation. By addressing these gaps, the brands will not only solve consumer needs but also contribute to building a more inclusive and equitable fashion industry. This is in line with the greater cause of reducing gender disparities and fostering a sense of belonging among underrepresented communities.

Ahmad from Iran has also mentioned similar feelings as Hossein, his responses show the emotional and practical effects of representation, calling for opportunities in which brands would drive much-needed inclusivity and equity in the fashion industry:

“I think that's very important. Seeing plus-size as a model helps me to imagine how the clothes look on my body and feel more confident in my purchases.”

Furthermore, representation builds confidence, according to Ahmad, but it also serves as a bridge for consumers and fashion brands by allowing consumers to imagine themselves in the clothes. From my participants, men are truly left out of the markets, giving them fewer and fewer role models to look up to. Ahmad elucidated the improvements needed in marketing:

I think that the representation of plus-size individuals in marketing and campaigns has improved over time, but there is a zero for the group. It's very important to see plus-size as models or influencer bloggers representing brands in their marketing campaigns because it helps people like me visualize how they close the look on our bodies, representing Some marketing strategies that present with me are those that use real process models and promote body positivity. Brands and retailers can improve their marketing efforts by being more inclusive and showing a diverse range of body types in their advertisements.

While Ahmad does acknowledge increased inclusivity, he notes that it is far from being near enough. He articulates that visibility through the presence of real plus-size models and influencers in marketing would create a much-needed force against societal stereotypes to fuel greater body inclusivity. My research emphasizes how societal expectations and market demand compel firms to use inclusive marketing strategies. By completely adopting this transformation, firms may enhance consumer trust by promoting inclusivity for the advantage of both customers and the fashion industry as a whole.

I discovered that representation in the fashion business is crucial for fostering inclusivity and enhancing customer experience, particularly for plus-size individuals in marketing campaigns.

Pooria of Canada reflected on the novelty of seeing plus-size models and how representation may influence marketing campaigns. Pooria reflected on the absence of representation that he had observed:

Well, I have never seen it before, but I think it's going to be intriguing. It can make you feel excited about going shopping for some sort of style or a brand. It makes you visualize yourself better in that type of clothing, so it makes shopping easier. I feel that it makes a difference for me to see it in person or even see it somewhere that catches my eye and gets my attention.

Pooria frames this well, pointing to a lack of representation within Canada's plus-size male fashion market. His quote represents how both on an emotional and practical level, it's great to see figures out there that one can relate to through fashion advertisements. The excitement and ease he points out represent how representation could restructure shopping into a much less separated experience. The account of Pooria follows how institutional neglect increases the challenges of men in the plus-size fashion market.

Ahmad's and Pooria's insights bring to the fore common sentiments on this critical question of representation in plus-size marketing. Both eloquently express how exposure to plus-size models and influencers creates belonging by tackling a lack of inclusivity in fashion. Ahmad speaks of representation as an important conduit that breaks stereotypes in society to bring about trust between brands and marginalized consumers. On the other hand, Pooria exclaims that relatable figures in advertisements make shopping closer and more interactive.

Ahmad associates this with broader institutional demands for brands to align with evolving standards to secure customer trust; Pooria characterizes it as both an emotional and pragmatic necessity to cultivate confidence and enhance the buying experience. Consequently, their results collectively underscore how representation operates to foster inclusivity and legitimacy in the fashion industry about the flaws indicated in the study question.

In catering to profitability and wider demographics, brands often fail to capture the interest of niche audiences, such as plus-size men. This invisibility creates a double negative: it not only limits the male consumer in having access to relatable fashion but also propagates through society that larger body types will not do for men.

Additionally, I found that how plus-size celebrities inspire confidence in consumers to thrive outside the industry's obsolete rules. Another participant, Keyvan, an Iranian man who lives in Canada, reflected on the role of plus-size celebrities in shaping fashion trends he reflected on the role of plus-size celebrities in shaping fashion trends: "I think that's important. I like to see plus-size celebrities in advertisements. They define the standards; they define fashion. If I see a celebrity or famous person wearing something, I think that's the trend, and I like to follow that fashion."

As Keyvan mentioned, celebrities influence fashion trends and customer behavior in today's society. For him, plus-size celebrities help legitimize larger body types within mainstream fashion by building a positive identity. In addition, the lack of plus-size celebrities in advertising and media further excludes men by not providing them with role models they can identify with.

Male plus-size celebrities are not well represented in fashion; thus, men do not have role models who would confirm their identity and help orient their fashion choices. Keyvan underlines that such lack of representation makes the usual exclusion for men and greater benefits from body-positivity campaigns for women: fashion industries continue the exclusion of male plus-size celebrities from being role models and leave men underrepresented. Campaigns uplift women through increased visibility and give plus-size models more relatable inspirations, which can be pretty stark in the gender disparity. This thus underlines the importance of representation

in engendering inclusivity, showing how institutional pressures differentially bear upon the experiences of plus-size men relative to women across markets.

### ***5.5.2 Women's Perspectives***

Female participants indicated that women consumers value the influence of plus-size models on their confidence and shopping experiences, yet their concerns are significantly less severe than those of men, who encounter near-total neglect in fashion promotion. Yasaman shared how seeing plus-size models and influencers impacts her shopping experience and mental health:

Plus-size models reflect more realistic body types and make it easier for me to relate to the clothing they showcase. This representation not only helps me visualize how outfits might look on my body but also provides fashion inspiration tailored to the needs of the plus-size community. It impacts my shopping decisions, mental health, and body positivity.

Yasaman's tale showcases developments in a fashion that helps to elevate women's self-esteem and confidence to shop but rather reflects the disproportionate barriers women face compared to men in reaching visibility.

She added:

So, I think plus-size models and influencers also reflect more realistic body types and make it easier for me to relate to the clothing that they showcase. So, this show of the influencer helps me to feel how particular it can be to look and fit the clothes into my body, and I can say they provide fashion inspiration by styling tips and tailors to the plus-size community as well. So, their insight can be valuable when making fashion choices and the wider exploding new styles in our community as well. So, in general, I can say the representation of plus size models and influencers is not just important but also it can be kind of vital because it not only impacts my shopping decisions but also plays a significant role in my mental health and body positive thinking and accepting fashion industry.

Yasaman's experience has shown that representation makes a great difference in self-esteem and body image. Seeing realistic models allows her to illustrate herself in clothes and helps her gain much confidence in showing her fashion sense. Such representation challenges societal body ideals through the validation of larger body types, promoting diversity in a society that already has marginalized plus-size individuals (Tiggemann and McGill, 2004).

Additionally, I found that representation in marketing campaigns also impacts women consumers. Nakisa emphasized how seeing individuals like herself featured in advertising and society impacts her sense of self and shopping behavior:

Besides being important, the best part is increasing self-confidence and self-esteem for plus-size people. When I see a plus-size influencer, model, or advertiser, my self-confidence increases. It also makes me less meticulous in terms of shopping and choosing products. Seeing people like me represented in advertisements or society makes shopping easier and boosts my confidence.

From Nakisa's perspective, brands are said to show acceptance by incorporating all body types in their ads. Plus-sized women feel appreciated in a space meant only for standard-sized customers and not frowned upon because of their body shape. Her experience has thus far helped underscore a critical way in which meaningful inclusion of representation in the fashion industry creates an inclusive culture where every woman is served and welcomed. Both men and women note the importance of representation in plus-size fashion marketing; however, their experiences point to some key differences.

While women like Yasaman and Nakisa see progress in the representation that helps them relate to the clothing and feel confident, men point out a near-total lack of visibility for male plus-size models and influencers. This absence leaves men without relatable figures to inspire their fashion choices or affirm their inclusion in the market. This view underlined that it is

about time for brands to bridge this gender gap in the representation of plus-size male models within advertisements. This would unlock a somewhat neglected but very relevant market segment that would improve consumer loyalty and involvement, demonstrating how the brand embraces diversity and inclusion. The more this demand is met by plus-size men, the more the brands will create trust, increase their customer base, and be at the forefront of changing social attitudes, thus improving their market standing and brand popularity.

In conclusion, there have been some positive changes in the fashion industry, particularly with the advent of technology and the digital transformation of manufacturing and retail processes, plus-size consumers still face considerable obstacles when finding clothing that fits and meets their style preferences (Bertola and Teunissen, 2018). Despite these advancements, weight discrimination remains a legal challenge in Canada, suggesting that further advocacy is required to protect individuals from bias (Luther, 2010). These differences become more pronounced about representation and availability since most fashion brands in the mainstream still generally take the side of providing options to smaller sizes, which means very limited options for plus-sized people.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

### **6.1 Theoretical Implication**

This study brings to light a great gender imbalance in the representation of plus-size consumers and puts a specific focus on men's experiences, which are usually not considered. Previous works on consumer exclusion in the plus-size market have targeted women, where recent improvements have ensured visibility and good representation through body-positive campaigns. However, male plus-size representations are barely found, if at all, in advertising and marketing, and it is this study that epitomizes how such lacunars have a strong bearing on the self-esteem and satisfaction of male consumers.

Males complained about the absence of male, plus-size models or influencers in fashion advertising. They noticed how invisible they felt or how their self-worth was taken away by the fact that there were no familiar figures. Fashion advertising does not show the figures that would speak for some, and this again makes them feel insignificant, and not sure of themselves. This emotional impact offers real recognition of gender-specific dynamics within the plus-size fashion industry that must stretch further than addressing women alone to the needs and concerns of men.

By comparing Canadian and Iranian contexts, this study sets out culturally and economically diverse challenges that magnify the exclusion of plus-size men. Despite having a more inclusive market relatively, Canadian participants voiced dissatisfaction with male representation

and size diversity. In contrast, Iranian men experienced intensified problems at the levels of economic sanctions that restricted the plus-size market and cultural contexts that linked shame to larger body types. These findings extend institutional theory by showing how coercive pressures (e.g., sanctions), normative pressures (e.g., body ideals of society), and mimetic pressures (e.g., replication of trends in women's fashion) together sculpt the exclusionary experiences of plus-size men across varied markets.

Addressing gender within the context of plus-size fashion is important because it will reveal unique patterns of exclusion and dissatisfaction that have remained underexplored in the literature. Using an institutional approach to analyze these dynamics, the study provides a framework by which to understand how institutional pressures reinforce disparities in representation and access to gender within the global fashion industry.

## **6.2 Practical Implications**

To create a more inclusive platform for plus-size men, fashion brands will have to implement different methods that acknowledge the unique challenges male consumers face. Whereas women have started benefiting from positive body campaigns, men remain invisible in marketing campaigns. Brands should make it a point to include male plus-size models and influencers in their advertising campaigns; this is a very crucial aspect for the creation of inclusivity, self-esteem, and satisfying the expectations of male consumers, which have been defeated thus far. For example, showcasing male plus-size figures in diverse contexts (e.g., casual, formal, and athletic wear) could help normalize body diversity and expand male engagement with fashion.

In Canada, the better-developed market demands that brands listen to what male consumers are saying about the lack of size variety and relevant ads. Brands can show relatability and

connect deeper with consumers by using local male influencers representing different body types. In Iran, where economic sanctions severely limit fashion options, native brands have a chance to fill this gap by developing affordable, inclusive sizing options with sizing catered to the local market. Policymakers can also play a role in supporting such brands and encourage collaborations that may allow body diversity in advertising.

Meanwhile, this research points to the need to bridge psychological and cultural divides. Male consumers are of the view that failure to represent figures like theirs amounts not only to a gap but also to one-way communication with an underrepresented group. When brand campaigns are attuned to the special emotional needs of males in the plus-size category, it helps them win loyal brands and foster the intent to belong.

Meanwhile, the study speaks to the importance of tailored solutions that consider the intersection of gender with cultural dynamics. While global campaigns may be focused on women, more culturally sensitive efforts should cast their gaze toward men in markets such as Iran, where cultural and economic constraints create a host of additional barriers. By embracing these nuances, fashion can meaningfully move toward shrinking the gap between men's and women's plus-size inclusivity.

### **6.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

One of the study's most significant limitations is, indeed, the demographic composition of my respondents, who were Iranian and lived either in Iran or Canada. It gives an excellent indication of the experiences of Iranian plus-size consumers, but it surely limits the generalization of the findings. Future research should be based on a more heterogeneous sample, including other

cultural and geographic backgrounds to widen the knowledge of how institutional pressures and market conditions influence plus-size consumers globally.

Additionally, it focused more on consumer experiences and did not fully match the views of fashion designers and retailers. In the future, interviews with industry professionals would present a more balanced view of the challenges and opportunities of plus-size fashion markets, at least in non-Western contexts.

Finally, although this research has focused on plus-size men under-explored population within the field of fashion studies-future research could build from this by delving into the intersectional ways in which other identities, including age, class, and ethnicity, are intertwined, to be better able to understand how different marginalized groups experience fashion exclusion. By addressing these limitations, future research can contribute to the deepening and complication of consumer exclusion and inclusivity within the global fashion market.

## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix A - Certification of Ethical Acceptability



### CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

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Name of Applicant: Ms. Mahsa Doorandish  
Department: John Molson School of Business\Marketing  
Agency: N/A  
Title of Project: Consumer Perceptions and Evaluations of Plus-Size Clothing Options in the Market  
Certification Number: 30018533  
Valid From: August 22, 2024 To: August 21, 2025

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard DeMont".

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Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee

## Appendix B - Recruitment Materials

My name is Mahsa Doorandish and I am a researcher at Concordia University in Montreal. I am currently conducting a study on plus-size fashion. If you self-identify as plus-size and have an interest in fashion, I would like to invite you to participate in my research. Your experiences and insights would be invaluable in shaping my understanding of this important topic.

If you agree to participate, I would like to arrange an interview with you to learn more about your experiences related to this topic. The interview would take approximately one hour and can be conducted at a location of your convenience or via a digital platform such as Zoom, depending on your preference.

Please rest assured that your identity and all personal details will be kept strictly confidential and used solely for the purpose of this research. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw at any time.

If you are willing to participate or have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact me at **mahsa.doorandish@concordia.ca** or **(438)3047950**.

Thank you for considering this invitation. Your contribution can significantly impact the development of a more inclusive understanding of fashion.

Mahsa Doorandish

MSc. Marketing Student,

JMSB, Concordia University

Can you tell me about yourself?

Could you provide some background information about yourself, such as your age, gender, and cultural background?

What is your family status? Are you single, married, or in a relationship? Do you have children?

Tell me about your educational background. Did you attend college or university, and if so, what did you major in?

Could you describe your current job or profession and how long you've been in it?

How would you describe your lifestyle? Are you active, do you have any hobbies, or are you more of a homebody?

***Clothing Shopping Behavior:***

How frequently do you shop for clothes?

Where do you usually shop for clothing? Online, brick-and-mortar stores, or both?

How would you describe your overall experience when shopping for plus-size clothing?

Do you tend to shop for clothing only when you need something specific, or do you enjoy shopping as a leisure activity?

Are there any particular stores or websites you prefer for plus-size clothing, and why?

Can you share any memorable shopping experiences, whether positive or negative, related to plus-size clothing?

***Perceptions of Plus-Size Clothing Options:***

How do you perceive the availability of plus-size clothing options in the market?

Are you satisfied with the range of styles, designs, and trends available in plus-size clothing?

What factors do you consider when evaluating the quality of plus-size clothing options?

What is your opinion of plus-size clothing options that accurately represent different body types?

Are there any specific challenges or frustrations you face when looking for plus-size clothing?

How do you think the availability of plus-size clothing has changed in recent years, if at all?

What specific styles or designs would you like to see more of in the plus-size fashion market?

Can you share any experiences where you felt that plus-size clothing options did not meet your expectations in terms of quality or style?

***Brand and Retailer Perception:***

Are there any brands or retailers that you feel cater well to plus-size individuals? If yes, what makes them stand out?

What qualities or practices do you appreciate in brands or retailers that cater to plus-size customers?

Have you had any particularly positive or negative experiences with specific brands or retailers concerning plus-size clothing?

***Fit and Sizing Concerns:***

How do you evaluate the fit and sizing of plus-size clothing options?

What are your expectations in terms of fit?

Have you ever experienced discrepancies or inconsistencies in sizing between different brands?

How do you feel when you struggle to find plus-size clothing that fits you properly?

Can you describe the process you go through when trying on or ordering plus-size clothing to ensure the right fit?

Have you ever encountered sizing issues that have discouraged you from purchasing certain brands or styles?

***Price and Value:***

How do you perceive the pricing of plus-size clothing compared to standard-sized clothing?

What role does price play in your decision-making process when purchasing plus-size clothing?

For what price do you think plus-size clothing represents good value?

Do you believe that plus-size clothing is generally priced higher than standard-sized clothing, and if so, do you find this fair or justified?

Are there certain price ranges you consider reasonable for plus-size clothing, and do you expect different price points for different items (e.g., casual wear vs. formal wear)?

***Marketing and Advertising:***

How do you feel about the way plus-size clothing is advertised and marketed?

How do you think the representation of plus-size individuals in marketing campaigns has changed over time?

How important is it for you to see plus-size models or influencers representing brands or retailers in their marketing campaigns?

Are there any marketing strategies or campaigns related to plus-size clothing that have resonated with you, positively or negatively?

In your opinion, what can brands and retailers do to improve their marketing efforts in this regard?

***Improvement and Suggestions:***

In your opinion, what improvements could be made in the availability, design, or shopping experience for plus-size clothing?

Are there any specific features or services you would like to see offered by brands or retailers catering to plus-size individuals?

If you could suggest one or two key changes that would enhance the plus-size shopping experience, what would they be?

Are there any innovative approaches or initiatives you believe could address the unique needs and preferences of plus-size consumers?

***Conclusion:***

In an ideal world, what's your dream way of buying plus-size clothes?

Can you paint a picture of your perfect shopping experience for plus-size clothing, from start to finish?

Do you have more opinions or insights you'd like to share with me?

Is there anything else you would like to add or any other aspects of plus-size fashion you'd like to discuss?

Appendix D - Secondary Data

<b>WEBSITE</b>	<b>Brand/forum</b>	<b>Link</b>	<b>Reviews Statistics</b>	<b>Product</b>
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Torrid.com	Torrid	<a href="https://www.torrid.com/product/perfect-wide-leg-vintage-stretch-mid-rise-jean">https://www.torrid.com/product/perfect-wide-leg-vintage-stretch-mid-rise-jean</a>	20	Perfect Wide Leg Vintage Stretch Mid-Rise Jean
Torrid.com	Torrid	<a href="https://www.torrid.com/product/midi-challis-shirt-dress">https://www.torrid.com/product/midi-challis-shirt-dress</a>	19	Midi Challis Shirt Dress
Torrid.com	Torrid	<a href="https://www.torrid.com/product/full-length-signature-waist-pocket-legging">https://www.torrid.com/product/full-length-signature-waist-pocket-legging</a>	20	Full-Length Signature Waist Pocket Legging
Lanebryant.com	Lane Bryant	<a href="https://www.lanebryant.com/blouson-sleeve-shawl-collar-faux-wrap-midi-dress">https://www.lanebryant.com/blouson-sleeve-shawl-collar-faux-wrap-midi-dress</a>	9	Blouson-Sleeve Shawl-Collar Faux-Wrap Midi Dress
Lanebryant.com	Lane Bryant	<a href="https://www.lanebryant.com/livi-high-rise-signature-stretch-yoga-pant">https://www.lanebryant.com/livi-high-rise-signature-stretch-yoga-pant</a>	9	Yoga Pants
Lanebryant.com	Lane Bryant	<a href="https://www.lanebryant.com/livi-wireless-medium-impact-wicking-sports-bra">https://www.lanebryant.com/livi-wireless-medium-impact-wicking-sports-bra</a>	9	Sports Bra
Torrid.com	Torrid	<a href="https://www.torrid.com/product/maxi-flat-charm-double-slit-skirt/41115063-00684.html?cgid=WorkAnyWear#start=20">https://www.torrid.com/product/maxi-flat-charm-double-slit-skirt/41115063-00684.html?cgid=WorkAnyWear#start=20</a>	5	Maxi Flat Charm Double Slit Skirt
Lanebryant.com	Lane Bryant	<a href="https://www.lanebryant.com/blouson-sleeve-crew-neck-top">https://www.lanebryant.com/blouson-sleeve-crew-neck-top</a>	8	Blouson-Sleeve
Temu.com	Temu	<a href="https://www temu.com/ca/plus-size-color-block-knot-front-long-sleeve-shirt-dress-womens-plus-high-stretch-elegant-shirt">https://www temu.com/ca/plus-size-color-block-knot-front-long-sleeve-shirt-dress-womens-plus-high-stretch-elegant-shirt</a>	11	Long Sleeve shirt
Reddit.com	Reddit	<a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/PlusSize/comments">https://www.reddit.com/r/PlusSize/comments</a>	13	Plus size jeans

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