

Grand future for plus-size* fashion

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Grand future for plus-size* fashion * size 18 and above

With slender Kate back on the front of every fashion magazine, latest research from MINTEL finds British women's vital statistics rising and almost one in five (19%) British ladies or some 4.9 million women taking a size 18 and over. MINTEL predicts that if sizes change as much as they have done since the 1950s demographic shifts alone will mean that by 2011 as many as 6.4 million women will be a size 18 and above. This is an increase of almost 40% on 2006 figures. What is more, Britain spent a massive Â£2.3 billion on plus-size clothes in 2005, accounting for as much as 17% of the total Â£13.5 billion womenswear market. With such huge increases expected in the number of women taking plus-size clothing, this sector of the fashion market is expected to see unprecedented growth.

"The plus-size clothing market has now come into the limelight for a number of reasons. Despite a recent shift towards healthier lifestyles, there is little doubt that Britain is experiencing an obesity epidemic. The number of obese and overweight people is rising year on year, making the need for plus-size clothing ever greater. The fact that younger consumers, who are the key targets for the majority of fashion retailers, are seeing their weight rise has generated an even greater need for plus-size clothes. The ageing population has also played its part as there tends to be a strong correlation between age and weight - as people get older they tend to take a larger dress size," comments Katy Child, senior retail analyst at MINTEL.

MINTEL questioned over 1,000 women aged 15 and above about what size clothes they normally buy. The average emerged as a size 14, with age proving to be the key determining factor. For women in their early twenties 8% are a size 18 or above, but by the time they reach the 35 - 44 age bracket this rises to some 19%. Meanwhile, the proportion of size 10s falls from 30% amongst those aged 20 - 24 to just 10% for women aged 45 to 54 years old. Although the average size comes out at 14, MINTEL's exclusive consumer research also shows that frustratingly over one in three (36%) women say that the size that fits them varies from store to store.

"The inconsistencies in sizes from store to store become even more glaring when retailers indulge in so-called 'vanity sizing'™ by adding a couple of inches or more to waist or hip measurements to allow a size 14 customer to fit into a size 12 dress. Retailers do this, however, because of customer demand and for fear that outraged customers, failing to fit into their size 12, will walk straight out and into a competitor store where a 12 does fit," explains Katy Child.

Today, fewer than one in five (17%) women feel that standard sizes fit them well and some 14% of women believe that difficulty in finding clothes to fit well makes them feel that they have the wrong shape and should lose weight.

Retailers sizing up the market

The average price of clothing has fallen by 15% in the last five years, which has caused mainstream retailers to look harder for unexploited, niche markets where competition is not so great and into which they can extend their ranges. In this case plus-size, taller and shorter fittings. But while once Britain's larger ladies were left with little choice but to opt for loose, shapeless clothing in dark colours, they are now looking for something different, more exciting and more fashionable.

"The plus-size clothes market now finds itself in a taste revolution for two main reasons. Firstly, older consumers are becoming more confident and experimenting with fashion in a way they never did before. Secondly, there are increasing numbers of younger customers who need plus-size clothing and still want to wear the same fashions as their slimmer friends. In general, there is a huge desire among non-standard sized consumers to be able to enjoy fashion and to dress well in the same way as those who fit within standard sizes. Allowing them to do this, while making the right adjustments in terms of styling and specifications for plus-sized customers, is the skill required of retailers and brands if they are to be successful in satisfying these consumers," comments Katy Child.

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