The Push for Plus: How a Small Part of the Fashion Industry Hopes to Make Big Changes to the Plus-Size Women's Fashion Market

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A group of fashion designers, fashion students, stylists, professors and boutique owners are sitting in a room at the Lubin House on 61st street in Manhattan. It’s a rustic, elegant old brownstone building owned and used by Syracuse University as an alumni outpost and gathering space. These people have congregated on a Wednesday evening in the fall 2015 to listen to Jeffrey Mayer, Associate Professor for Fashion Design at Syracuse University. They’re listening carefully, because the topic at hand is a radical proposal for shaking up the fashion industry.

“We’ve scouted every fashion school in the world”, Mayer says. “And there’s no design course for plus-size clothing.”

Mayer is launching an initiative called “Fashion Without Limits” in conjunction with a key Syracuse student alumnus, the top-paid plus-size model Emme, a.k.a. Melissa Aronson. (She was to have been a guest at this evening but was unable to attend due to a scheduling conflict.) Together, the professor and the now-famous former student hope to ignite a spark in fashion students to pursue the creation of more and better plus-size clothing for women something Mayer identifies in the talk as a surprisingly neglected task. The initiative was launched over a year ago when Mayer introduced and taught the first-ever university class in the country to focus specifically on designing plus-size clothing. Emme serves as a mentor to the students as well as a sort of stand-in prospective client on whom the students can base their collections. The students used Wolform dress forms in sizes 16, 18 and 20 to create their designs throughout the course; one design had to be red carpet gown for Emme. Emme then chose a winner from the class and wore it to an event.

Mayer says the situation is urgent because designing plus-size clothing for women is frequently neglected by the fashion industry. Too often, he and others say, it’s treated as a sort of runt of the fashion litter the seemingly more glamorous task of designing the smallest sizes for models who resemble twigs. Statistics on women’s clothing paint a picture of a gross imbalance. According to research done by the Plunkett Research Group in 2014, the average American woman is a size 14, and plus-sized women who wear 14 or larger (up to a size 34) account for 67 percent of the American female population. And yet, plus-size clothing only accounts for 15 percent of overall women’s clothing sales. How is it that 67 percent of U.S. women have no chance of trying on 85 percent of the clothing sold in the country?

That’s the kind of question that more and more people, led by innovators like Mayer, are asking. Plus-size women, designers, models and bloggers are all fighting back. Lane Bryant, the first plus-size mass retailer, has spearheaded campaigns such as #PlusIsEqual and #ImNoAngel – a campaign featuring plus-size models in lingerie analogous to the slender Victoria’s Secret Angels. Celebrities Melissa McCarthy and Rebel Wilson are creating fashion lines for Lane Bryant and Torrid, respectively (the latter is a plus-size retailer for the twentysomething demographic). Full Figured Fashion Week, created seven years ago as a response to the lack of plus-size designers featured in New York Fashion Week, has in just the
past few years become a higher-profile, more celebrated event, with days and events added to keep up the celebration going. Full Figured Fashion Week also has some major fashion brand sponsorships that included Lane Bryant and Fruit of the Loom – with whom the event coordinators work with for their plus-size model castings (There’s still room for more progress, though, as the event is held in June instead of during the official Mercedes-Benz Fashion Weeks in September and February).

All of these movements are having an effect on the fashion world. From 2013 to 2014, the women’s plus-size clothing industry grew five percent and took in revenue of about $17.5 billion dollars. And the category’s profile is growing in media depictions of the fashion world, too. The winner of this season’s Project Runway’s, Ashley Nell Tipton, featured her first plus-size women’s collection in Full Figured Fashion Week in 2012. Tipton, a 24-year-old from San Diego, is a plus-sized woman herself, and wants to design more clothing for others like herself. Her goal is to create fun, vibrant fashion for plus-size women in their twenties and thirties. It took 14 seasons for the reality show to finally feature a plus-size designer, and when they did, she won.

Though the overwhelming focus on smaller sizes is beginning to change, a lot of the historical forces that caused that imbalance in the first place remain—Lauren Downing Peters, a former professor at The New School’s Parsons School of Design and a current PhD candidate at Stockholm University, believes plus-sizes are put in a separate market because of the negative connotations that come with the term. According to Downing Peters the term “plus-size” didn’t come into usage until 1942 when Merriam-Webster Dictionary defined the term as, “Extra large – sometimes used of a person.”

“I think the fashion industry’s neglect of the big woman has a lot to do with a general disdain of larger people, and what they stand for, in American culture,” says Downing Peters. “The bodies of larger people are perceived by the wider culture as failed projects, and big people are therefore symbols of bodily neglect, laziness, stupidity and ill health. The fashion industry is an appearance-based industry, and many designers have outwardly expressed contempt for plus-size consumers, fearing that if plus-sized women wore their garments, it would bring the overall value or exclusivity of their brand down.”

The funny thing is, sizes are simply a number, not a measurement of health. Body types change depending on a number of influences, including the cultural and physical environments they’re exposed to. There was no standardization with sizing in the United States until 1941 when the government decided to take measurements of 15,000 women on 56 different places around the body. They compiled that information but it was then shelved because of World War II. The research resurfaced in 1953, but there were problems. The 1941 measurements were done on teens and women in their twenties after a period where women were using corsets and binding their bodies. Come post-war, women had been working and they took on a more athletic form, so the standard measurements from 1941 weren’t quite relevant. Incredibly, these are the measurements the current size grading is still based on. And since humans have gotten both taller and larger since then—partly due to good nutrition as well as bad—in many ways, this system
perpetuates a feeling among women that they are always, no matter what their size, larger than they should be. It has created a scale where “plus” means beyond the so-called “normal” scale, when that “normal” scale doesn’t even exist any more.

Plus is synonymous with large and a lot of fashion designers simply, and distinctively, don’t want to put big people in their clothes. Karl Lagerfeld famously told the French television show Le Grand 8 in 2009, “No one wants to see curvy women on the runway.” He took a lot of criticism for this comment, but clearly he was expressing a truism in the industry. Even now, year after year, high fashion designers feature size 0 and size 2 women more or less exclusively on their runways and in their ads. What’s seen on the runways and in magazines in turn trickles down into department stores and mass retailers, and leaves plus-size women with a smaller, much more limited selection.

What’s beginning to change that situation is a booming online market. The NPD Group, a retail industry tracker and research group, found that women’s plus-size sales online have grown 31 percent between 2012 and 2014; so even though Lane Bryant and Torrid stand out as the two major retailers, there’s an even larger selection for the plus-size shopper on the web. In 2011, The Limited, a company based in Columbus, Ohio launched the site Eloquii.com for their brand of the same name. The company has phased the Eloquii brand out of its brick-and-mortar physical stores because they wanted to focus on their core business (meaning standard sizes). A few members of the Eloquii team didn’t want to fully let go of the opportunity to stay in the plus-size market, so they launched the brand as an online retail site separate from the Limited Brand. Eloquii’s CEO Mariah Chase and the company’s sponsor, Greycroft Partners, had to raise $6 million in order to get the site up and running by the end of 2014. The site projects that its sales will exceed $20 million in 2015.

Another major retailer that sparked some controversy is Target when they launched the Lilly Pulitzer collection in January 2015. With other designer collaborations such as Altuzarra and Missoni, the company did not extend the sizes to plus-sizes, so when Target announced they would be including plus-sizes to the Pulitzer collaboration, customers were excited. But when the collection was actually launched, no plus-sizes wound up featured in stores. A lot of customers took to Twitter to ask why. Target’s response was that the plus-sizes would only be sold online, leading customers to complain that maybe Target didn’t want plus-size customers in their stores.

"How are you gonna add plus-sizes to your collaboration & not let the people know? Setting yourself up for failure," tweeted plus-size blogger Sarah Conley about the collection. "They’re really saying we only want 40% of customers to be seen in store."

Target didn’t take the criticism lightly. In late 2015, the company launched Ava & Viv, a plus-size-only collection to be featured in stores.

Catherine Schuller, a former plus-size model and image consultant for the Association for Image Consultants International, says it may not necessarily be prejudice or discrimination that’s at work here—it’s just cautious business practice. Companies play it safe, she points out, by putting plus-size options online because
it’s a way to test the waters before going to the trouble and expense of establishing a physical retail presence.

“They don’t want to spend a whole lot of store real estate and a whole lot of money on something if it’s not going to sell,” Schuller says. “They use the internet as a focus group.”

That may sound in some ways as if larger women are being treated as test dummies, but overall, it’s in fact very good news for them as shoppers. The digital market has become flat-out flooded with plus-size options. ModCloth, an online retailer offering vintage-inspired clothing, announced in 2013 that they would be offering up to size 4X. The choice was made after surveying 5,000 of their customers and finding that 65 percent felt that the retail industry ignores the needs of plus-size women and 74 percent of plus-size shoppers felt frustrated by the options in plus-size clothing. Even more interesting is that 88 percent would buy more clothing if they had trendier options available in their size. ModCloth’s survey highlighted that plus-size women aren’t afraid to shop, but they don’t like the options that are out there for them.

“It’s not just about one size, it’s about the full collection,” says Liza Gutierrez, former Head of Internal Design for ModCloth. “Every season when we go about designing, we really think about both. It’s not like we say, ‘Oh this is great for standard size or this is great for plus!’ We really don’t design that way. We just think it’s a great style and we think it’s good for everyone and then if there’s a certain adjustment for things that we need to make to make sure it fits everyone, we’ll do that ahead of time.”

ModCloth recently announced that they joined the #DropThePlus campaign. The campaign urges companies to stop using the term “plus” and simply incorporate the plus-sizes as a regular size. ModCloth has the sizes listed on their site under the “Extended Sizes” section. Gutierrez says it’s really important for the company to make all of their customers “feel beautiful.” Though the extended sizes have a separate section on the site, the clothing doesn’t differ in design.

“We have separate fits,” says Gutierrez. “We have a small size model that we do fits on as well as a plus-size model, so you’ll never see the same exact scale graded up.”

Grading up is something most designers do when it comes to incorporating plus-sizes into their collections. Designers take a standard size 8 or 10 fit model and then grade up or down one or two inches per size. This becomes a problem when larger sizes come into play because weight is carried in different places on the bodies of different women.

“One of the difficulties is that some companies cut their plus-size clothes like they’re just bigger but they’re not meant to fit very curvy bodies,” says Sharon Kornstein, president of the Association of Image Consultants International.

She says when she’s dressing her plus-size customers, their reluctance to buy clothes doesn’t come from the fact that they’re ashamed of their bodies. The real issue is that designers are missing the mark when it comes to plus-size clothes.

“The buttons might not close well on a blouse or the waist doesn’t fall at the right place,” says Kornstein. “You just have to know which designers cut the clothes differently for plus-size women rather than just making them larger.”
This goes back to Syracuse professor Jeffrey Mayer’s initiative. He believes designers either shy away from plus-size clothing because that’s not the customer they have in mind for their brand or they simply don’t know how to create plus-size clothing. When searching for a textbook centered on plus-size design for his class, Mayer said he found one book by Frances Leto Zangrillo called “Fashion Design for the Plus-Size” and it was published in 1990. To teach his class, Mayer had Wolf Form Co. create dress forms in a size 16, 18 and 20 to get the students comfortable with plus forms.

FIT’s Catherine Schuller is taking the same approach as Mayer and worked with Alvanon Forms to create size 22 dress form.

“They don’t even have a design course at FIT that tackles plus-size from the design school level,” Schuller says. She teaches image consulting at the school. “I’m trying to get this dress form into all the design schools. We have to start at the grass roots level. We really do. We have to get to the designers before they become hooked on creating size 4s.”

The modeling industry also plays a big role in how plus is portrayed in the fashion world. One problem that plus-size shoppers have noted in their shopping experience is that when purchasing clothes in their size, they would still notice straight size models were used for the images posted online.

“I used to shop a lot on ASOS, and I still do, and ASOS was getting a lot of flack for models where you can see their collar bones,” says Ingrid Taller, a fashion blogger and founder of Bitchtopia, a feminist site that promotes body positivity. “I can’t see what the dress looks like on my body when I’m looking at someone who looks pretty slinky in a dress. I think that was a big issue.”

One company that has really taken the initiative to erase the stigma that comes with the term ‘plus;’ is JAG Models, founded in 2013 by former Ford Models employees Gary Dakin and Jaclyn Sarka. After Ford axed their plus-size division, the pair decided to create their own company and promote size inclusivity.

“We chose not to use the word plus because we represent models size 6/8 and up,” said Dakin in an email. “We don’t feel that there needs to be any distinction in models based on size. They all do the same job.”

If a company wants to use one of JAG’s models, they simply choose them by their measurements. They promote their approach with the slogan, “The right girl for the right job.” Some of their models have been placed in Calvin Klein lingerie ads, Lane Bryant’s plus-size campaigns, and perhaps most notably in the widely popular Aerie ads, which feature women of all shapes and sizes in un-retouched pictures.

JAG’s concept is refreshing, but while they don’t distinguish their models by size, the fashion industry’s sample sizes are usually size 0 or size 2. So JAG’s practice of not labeling their models is undone when clothing brands choose to call their clothes “plus.”

The Bitchtopia website’s Ingrid Taller believes that the term plus isn’t terrible, but that there is a stigma that people who are considered large are also considered unhealthy. In June 2015, plus-size model Tess Holliday was featured on the cover of People magazine. Holliday is a size 22 and sparked criticism because people thought she was too big and too unhealthy.
“To me, as much as I’m not about body shaming and am about acceptance,” One critic, who goes by the pseudonym ‘Claire,’ told Business Insider. “Holliday is not a healthy size and I think it does encourage those who battle with weight to just say ‘f--ck it’ and not take care of themselves. It’s not a popular attitude, but it’s my humble opinion.”

Though People never publicly responded to the disapproval their cover with Holliday faced, Taller believes otherwise.

“[Holliday] focuses on making sure everyone knows she works out, she hikes, she does her hair all the time and she’s a healthy person,” Taller says. “I think the general consensus about fat women is that we’re fat and we like to wear clothes and that’s the end of the story and you really shouldn’t care about our health. This is fashion we’re talking about. We’re not talking about health.”

As the plus-size fashion industry grows, the issues the industry faces will be tackled and will slowly progress over time. Design students, designers, models, modeling agencies, clothing manufacturers and major retailers all have a hand in enhancing the connotations that that comes with plus-size fashion.

“There are plenty of women who fall between a size 12 and a size 22 that are perfectly healthy, perfectly beautiful, have great lives and just want to look amazing,” says FIT’s Schuller.

The fashion industry isn’t selling health; it’s selling clothes.