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Barriers to access:
Investigation of plus-size women consumer experiences at fashion events

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Abstract

Recent cross-disciplinary literature in the social sciences has shown that fat women experience weight bias and marginalisation in nearly all aspects of life, including within the fashion industry. This stigmatisation results in exclusion from brand and designer collections, runway shows, and other fashion events. As research in this area and in particular within an event context is very scarce, this chapter draws upon accessibility research, fat studies, and critical events studies to investigate the physical and psychological barriers to access for plus-size women at fashion events along with consumer attitudes with regard to fashion events. Research methods adopt quantitative approaches and include a survey of plus-size women who have attended a fashion event in 2017, which allowed for analysis of their experiences with regard to accessibility obstacles as well as their attitudes regarding fashion events and fashion event managers. Findings reveal plus-size consumers are more likely to attend fashion events if they see their body types represented in promotional event materials. They are also more likely to attend if they believe their needs will be met by the event facilities. Consumer attitudes toward fashion events and fashion event managers were generally negative, but provided several opportunities for growth and improvement.

Introduction

There is a growing body of literature that suggests that plus-size consumers experience exclusion and stigmatisation from society (Carels et al., 2013; Nutter et al., 2016). The fashion industry in particular alienates plus-size women by offering them significantly fewer and less fashionable garments than thinner women, which reinforces society's assertion that "the ideal consumer is a thin one" (Afful and Ricciardelli, 2015: 12). As fashion superstar Karl Lagerfeld of the Chanel design house famously stated, "No one wants to see curvy women" (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013: 276). Along with the negative impacts this prevalent socio-cultural attitude has on plus-size consumers themselves, by under-serving and marginalising the plus-size market, fashion retailers and event managers are potentially losing out financially as well (Tali, 2016). From a purely economic perspective, it would be beneficial to cater to bodies of all shapes and sizes; yet, fashion and events both appear to have a strict limit in terms of sizes served. Fashion has been described by Williams et al. (2014) as an ideal vehicle to investigate the relationships between events and society. Based on this relationship, it may be deduced that society's marginalisation of fat bodies has ramifications for fashion events.

The terms 'fat', 'fatness', and 'plus size' are used in this chapter because these terms are preferred by fat acceptance advocates and fat positive activists (Brown, 1989). This study

uses the terms fat and plus size synonymously and interchangeably. A key argument against medicalised terms, such as ‘obese’, ‘obesity’, and ‘overweight’, is they equate fatness with illness rather than treating fatness as a naturally occurring diversity (Dickins et al, 2011). These widely used terms are not considered suitable because they contribute negatively to weight-based bias and further stigmatisation of fat people (Nutter et al., 2016).

A key problem with defining plus-size fashion is a lack of consistent terminology. Plus size as a term implies something larger than average. Smaller sizes that are not large enough to be called plus size are referred to as ‘straight size’. This terminology stems from queer theory. Plus size represents the queer or aberrant, while straight size represents the normative (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013). This supports Saguy and Ward’s (2011) assertion that straight sizes parallel with normative bodies and plus sizes parallel with so-called deviant bodies. In this context, deviant bodies are those that diverge from what society accepts as average, normal, or ideal, and, therefore, this term is a synonym for fatness. In 2016, the American National Health and Nutritional Examination Survey determined that the average American woman wears a size 16-18, which is equivalent to a UK size 20-22. Thus, it is argued here that garments above the average size should be considered plus size, while garments below that average should be considered straight size. However, popular plus-size clothing brands cater to sizes much smaller than the average. What is perhaps unsurprising is the lack of consistency even among dedicated plus-size brands. For example, the smallest plus-size offered by ASOS Curve is an UK 18; Yours Clothing and Evans both are UK sizes 14+; while Simply Be consider strikingly small UK size 10 and upwards. The sizing is relatively more consistent among plus-size or curve model management agencies, although they are not without exception. Bridge Models state UK size 12+; BMA Models and MiLK Management all primarily represent curve models who wear UK sizes 12-18. The only two known exceptions to this size range are Olivia Campbell (represented by Bridge Models) and Tess Holliday (represented by MiLK Management), who wear UK sizes 22 and 26 respectively. For the purposes of this study, plus size is considered to be UK sizes 12-32+, which encompasses a broad range of this spectrum within the fashion industry (Christel, 2016).

This chapter focuses on those who identify as women because weight bias and stigmatisation are disproportionately targeted at women. Compared to other genders, women specifically are expected to adhere to rigid standards in terms of how they physically present themselves (Dickins et al, 2011). These gendered beauty standards are amplified by the fashion industry and, subsequently, by the plus-size fashion industry. Plus-size fashion in particular is a gendered issue because women are held to stricter body ideals of thinness than other genders, leading to disproportionate numbers of women investing tremendous amounts of energy to conform to those ideals (Fikkan and Rothblum, 2011). This, in effect, assigns hierarchical value to women’s bodies, with thinness perceived as more attractive and morally superior.

Events are the primary mode for the dissemination of fashion and related body image messages. Fashion events, such as runway shows, fashion weeks, trade shows, fashion awards, and ready-to-wear showcases, are the primary platforms for those in the fashion industry to set trends and establish prominence. For event venues, high-profile fashion events can bring glamorous reputation benefits as well as financial value. However, these event spaces are often exclusive and designed without considering the needs that various bodies may have (Imrie, 1998). Although most current event accessibility research focuses primarily

on physical disability and wheelchair access (Van Der Wagen, 2007), there are additional physical barriers to be considered. Also, it is important to keep in mind that physical barriers are not the only elements blocking access for event attendees. Representation of only thin idealised bodies in event marketing materials or at the event itself also serves to prevent access and isolate potential plus-size event attendees (Afful and Ricciardelli, 2015). Lack of representation and similar, non-physical barriers are referred to as psychological barriers to access throughout this chapter.

Placed at the intersection of event accessibility research, fat studies, and fashion event literature, this chapter explores the ways fashion events could become more accessible for plus-size women by investigating the existing physical and psychological barriers as well as evaluating plus-size consumer attitudes with regard to fashion events. A self-selecting sample of plus-size women who attended a fashion event in 2017 were surveyed via an online questionnaire. Participants were asked to document their experiences with access issues (both physical and psychological) and share their attitudes and feelings with regard to event experiences as a plus-sized consumer. This work is important for event managers to better understand and cater to the needs of plus-size women, who represent a growing portion of the population.

Stigma and fat identity

Previous studies across several fields of research have concluded that fat individuals are the targets of weight bias (also known as fat-hate, fatphobia[1], and fatmisia[2]) in many different areas including the workplace (Fikkan and Rothblum, 2011), education (Rice, 2007), social and romantic relationships (Dickins et al, 2011), healthcare (Carels et al, 2013), and fashion (Wann, 2009). This stigmatisation manifests in many different forms. For example, within the medical industry, physicians are likely to provide unsolicited weight loss advice or to suggest weight loss by extreme measures such as bariatric surgery to fat women, even if their fatness is not limiting their health in any way (Carels et al, 2013). In the workplace, fat women are less likely to be hired because they are perceived by interviewers as unreliable, undependable, and unable to perform daily tasks (Fikkan and Rothblum, 2011). In education, elite universities and colleges are less likely to admit fat women based on similar assumptions that fat bodies are a result of personal lack of ‘self control’ and signify a ‘weak’ character (Rice, 2007).

Due to its patriarchal roots, anti-fat sentiment and stigma are aimed primarily at women (McHugh and Kasardo, 2011); fat women in particular do not fit within the patriarchal ‘ideal’ of what women should look like and present aesthetically. Thus, a hierarchy can be seen to exist based on weight. In modern Western societies like the UK and the USA, thin women benefit from privileges which make their lives far easier than those of their fat peers, such as being perceived as healthy, moral, and high class based solely on their size (Fraser, 2009). In this context, thin women experience privilege through a vast array social advantages (Donaghue and Clemitshaw, 2012). While fatness is equated with ugliness, thinness is equated with beauty (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013).

However, academics and activists assert that claiming fat as an identity can enable individuals to reclaim power and remove former shame and stigma (Nutter et al, 2016). Claiming the fat identity has been paralleled to coming out as a queer person. By coming out as fat, individuals

repudiate society's thin beauty ideal (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013). Reclaiming terminology that has been used in hate speech is another parallel between fatness and queerness. Reclaiming the term 'fat' is considered empowering because it removes any previous sense of embarrassment, shame, or guilt, and reframes the term as a neutral bodily descriptor, such as short or brunette (Dickins et al, 2011). Some individuals proceed one step further and use the term as a positive descriptor rather than a neutral or negative one (Saguy and Ward, 2011). By claiming a fat identity and participating in fat spaces online, individuals can experience empowerment, increased social connectedness, and improved mental and physical wellbeing (Dickins et al, 2011). This also is the case with fashion spaces, which traditionally ignore if not marginalise fat women; thus, there has been a surge of interest in plus-size fashion online. These fat-friendly online spaces highlight and celebrate fat women as stylish, beautiful, and confident, which is not often how they are portrayed – if they are portrayed at all – in the mainstream world of fashion.

Thus, many diverse plus-size women have created their own spaces online in which they might participate in fashion. "Fatshionistas" are those whose interest and participation in fashion or "fatshion" (fat fashion) actively challenges the stereotype that fat people cannot be fashionable or attractive. Many fatshionistas run fatshion blogs where they share outfit photos, styling tips, and recommend places to shop for clothing (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013). Fatshion is recognised as a form of activism whose goal is to challenge the idealised feminine physique and to encourage those with marginalised bodies to participate in fashion as a means of liberation. For example, the Fatshion February initiative provides a space across social media platforms to emphasise that "fat people are interested in fashion and need greater opportunities to find clothing that will fit them and designers that have their body sizes in mind" (Lupton, 2016: 5). The initiative was widespread around the world, and at the time of publishing, there are 6,065 public posts on Instagram utilising the #fatshionfebruary hashtag.

Fashion events

Since it first aired in 2009, the award-winning fashion competition television show, *Project Runway*, has been credited for increased public interest in and awareness of the fashion industry and subsequently fashion events (Marcketti et al., 2009). Fashion themed events may take many forms, such as fashion exhibitions in museums, runway events, product launches, fan events, and fashion auctions (Williams et al., 2014). Fashion events play a vital role in fostering relationships between organisations and consumers. Because of this relationship, it is important for fashion event organisers to understand the needs of attendees. Fashion Week is a biannual fashion event which includes a vast programme of runway shows and is staged in New York, London, Paris, and Milan. During each fashion week, the media turns their eyes to the respective host city to see the latest runway releases as well as street style trends. The host cities have been labelled the fashion capitals of the world because of their industrial ability to manufacture clothing and possession of the image and style required to promote fashion (Williams et al., 2014).

In her seminal book, Orbach (1978) highlights how the fashion industry both creates and enforces the fat-thin binary that positions thinness as aspirational. However, because modern trends in fashion are ephemeral, the industry must constantly transform to match what is currently on trend as well as what is socially conscious. This includes race, size, age, and

gender diversity. While great strides are being made toward diversity at fashion week, some host cities, designers, and brands are fixed in their ways and seem reluctant to change. Milan has consistently hosted the least diverse fashion week, and some brands, like Commes des Garçons, featured absolutely no models of colour (Tai, 2017). However, it is apparent that the fashion events industry is becoming less tolerant of those who are not diverse or inclusive. For example, James Scully, a prominent casting director in the fashion event industry, acted as a whistleblower and named designers and brands, who, similar to Commes des Garçons, preferred to only hire models who adhere to traditionally Eurocentric beauty standards (The Fashion Spot, 2017).

Fashion event accessibility

While some research has been carried out on physical event accessibility, much of the current literature concentrates on access solely in terms of physical disability (Van Der Wagen, 2007). From a legislative perspective, the European Union law states that fatness alone does not qualify as a disability and is, therefore, not protected under discrimination laws. However, fatness may be considered a disability if accompanied by physical limitations (Cathaoir, 2015). American legislation differs regarding fatness and disability; in 2008, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was broadened to include a greater scope of medical conditions. It is believed that under the revised ADA, fatness is considered a disability, which makes it protected from workplace discrimination (Shinall, 2016). However, even after the amendments to the ADA, it does not appear that fatness is considered a disability in America by default. Further contributing to inconclusiveness, a key study found that while there is correlation between fatness and disability, causation is not concrete. The study is does not establish whether fatness causes disability, vice versa, or neither (Shinall, 2016).

One similarity between fatness and disability from a social perspective is that the deviant bodies involved are considered impaired and in need of repair (Rice, 2007). While both fat and disabled people experience harsh instances of discrimination, Fikkan and Rothblum (2011) found that discrimination is more prevalent for fat people. This mirrors the findings of Klaczynski et al. (2009), who found that fat people are the most negatively stigmatised of any social group. Indeed, denying individuals physical access to the built environment further feeds stigma attached to deviant bodies (Imrie and Hall, 2001). Many public and private spaces have been designed and constructed without catering to bodily differences (Imrie, 1998). While this discussion of access is usually regarding physical disabilities, it can theoretically be applied to other bodily diversities such as physical size. Because event management depends on the infrastructure of the host city, this is relevant to the events industry. Common infrastructural access issues include, but are not limited to, seating, stairs, lifts, ramps, transportation, and toilets (Asmervik, 2002). These issues may be a potential risk for plus-size fashion event attendees with the addition of runways and staging if an event includes plus-size models, hosts, or performers.

The experiences of living in a fat body in a world built for thin people not only has physical implications, but there are also psychological dimensions related to marginalisation. In their analysis on representation, Afful and Ricciardelli (2015) found that visibility and representation serve to normalise marginalised bodies, such as fat bodies. This normalisation has benefits for those who are marginalised as well as for those who are privileged. Repeated exposure to bodies that deviate from societal norms may have an impact on how those who read as having

abnormal bodies are perceived, and it is argued that increased exposure to fat bodies in fashion media might result in a more positive perception of fat people (Oliver and Barnes, 1998). In a compelling study of varied body sizes in fashion media, Aagerup (2010) found that thin women identify with similarly thin models and dissociate from fat models. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he found that the converse is also true; fat women identify with similarly fat models and disconnect from thin models. Based on these findings, fashion brands create a psychological barrier when they use models in campaigns, runways, and fashion media that do not reflect the brand's clientele. If consumers sense a disconnect between their looks or personality and that of the brand, then they will actively avoid the brand. Alternatively, if consumers sense a match, then they will develop a connection with and seek out that brand. This theory is referred to as self-image congruence, and it is applicable to the fashion industry (Aagerup, 2010). Additionally, both fat consumers and fashion brands can benefit from using larger models who represent their clientele. Seeing so-called deviant bodies similar to one's own may lead to self-acceptance, and therefore increased participation in self-expression via fashion (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013).

Research Methods

This research utilised critical social theory to understand, analyse, and criticise the structures and phenomena which oppress, dominate, and exploit plus-size women within the context of fashion events. Quantitative approaches were adopted in the form of an online survey. Discussion of bodies can be an uncomfortable subject due to the stigma and shame often attached; therefore, the participants' comfort and wellbeing was considered paramount. As such, the research was approached from an ethics of care and acceptance (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998). When designing the survey questions, there was mindfulness of language used, such as those terms referring to body size. This enabled the promotion of inclusiveness and avoidance of negative connotations, which also aided the elimination of the potential for bias (De Vaus, 2002).

Due to the nature of the research, potential respondents were required to meet three prerequisites for participation. To qualify, they must first identify as a woman, femme, or nonbinary person who wears women's clothing. Second, they should wear plus-size clothing, which was defined as a UK women's size 12-32+ or international sizing equivalent. Finally, they must have attended at least one fashion event in 2017. All cases where these three criteria intersect make up the population for this study. The convenience form of non-probability sampling was used to compile data for this research. Respondents were primarily recruited online via the social networking site Twitter. The questionnaire was comprised of 15 questions of varying styles in order to retrieve the highest quality and most thorough data possible. For questions regarding representation, motivation, and consumer attitudes, a Likert scale was used. These questions utilised a scale of five graded responses from strongly agree to strongly disagree, which has been shown to make questions more attractive to participants in order to improve response rates and reliability (Jupp, 2006). Open-ended questions provided an opportunity to expound about context and provide more qualitative insight into the research narrative. The online survey received a total of 47 responses via Google Forms, and 43 usable responses were admitted. Quantitative data were analysed using Google tools, and qualitative data were coded and meanings were derived by applying thematic analysis. This comprises a snapshot of plus-sized women's experiences at fashion events in order to provide insight into key themes and issues.

Findings and Discussion

The results from this research focused on physical and psychological barriers to access fashion events by plus-size women as well as their attitudes as consumers regarding both the fashion industry and fashion event managers. As Williams et al. (2014) state, fashion events may take many forms; therefore, participants were asked to document what types of fashion events they attended. The different events attended may identify or imply different motives for attendance, which is valuable knowledge for event managers. It was found that the most attended type of event was consumer buying shows, which represented 38.6% of all events attended. Most events were named only once, but there were two events which were repeatedly identified: Simply Be's The Curve Catwalk during London Fashion Week, and The Curve Fashion Festival.

Event facilities are a crucial point of consideration for the majority of potential plus-size event goers, and 83.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they are more likely to attend a fashion event if they believe the event facilities will meet their needs as a plus-size consumer. In terms of plus-size consumer satisfaction with the event's facilities, 51.2% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that event facilities met their needs as a plus-size consumer; however, it is still worth noting that respondents who selected neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree represent 48.9% of all participants. While the majority of respondents were satisfied with the facilities, there is still a considerable amount of room for improvement. For example, a recurrent theme in response to the question, "In what ways can fashion events become more accessible for plus-size women?", was that seating is the greatest physical barrier to access for participants. While the majority commented that seating was an obstacle, several different issues were made regarding seating in general. A few respondents noted that seating was minimal throughout most event venues, which can be problematic when guests are standing for long periods of time. A couple of respondents recalled that the chairs provided were too poor quality to support fat bodies. One participant mentioned cheap plastic chairs and another mentioned low-quality folding chairs. Both of these participants expressed fear of the seats buckling under them, and felt they had no choice but to avoid sitting entirely. Another recurrent issue was the size of chairs. A third of respondents described how the chairs were uncomfortably small and positioned too close together. They used words like *'cramped'* and *'squished'* to express their discomfort with event seating. These were not the only instances of discomfort noted regarding chairs. Many participants described how seats with arms are not acceptable for plus-size consumers. Some participants who mentioned chairs with arms described how uncomfortable and painful the chairs are, and how forcing their bodies into the chairs often led to soreness and bruising of their hips and thighs. Others described how they simply could not fit into armed chairs, so they were unable to be seated at all.

Seating was the most frequently occurring concern regarding physical access, but it was by no means the only one mentioned. Respondents also indicated that walkways, particularly those between rows of chairs, were very tight. A few respondents also described how toilets were *'very small'* and *'uncomfortable'.* This may be an example of a gendered access issue, as women's toilets exclusively utilise restrictive cubicles. The presence of menstrual waste receptacles further limits the amount of space within cubicles in women's toilets. Another respondent described a beach themed party which featured sand floors. This made walking difficult for those who were able and wheelchair access completely impossible.

In terms of psychological barriers, results found that 93% of events attended by research respondents featured models; yet, only 63.4% of those events featured plus-size models. However, even when plus-size models are present, they still were found to adhere to traditionally conventional beauty standards. The plus-size models reported were still tall, toned, and tended to have an hourglass shape. Participants discussed how plus-size models represent a *'perfect', 'ideal', 'curvy', 'sexy'* standard that the average fat woman may not be able to live up to. Specific physical characteristics that were represented by the audience, but not the models, were recorded by survey participants. These characteristics included large bellies, double chins, stretch marks, shortness, and small bums and breasts. This is perhaps unsurprising because plus-size modelling agencies primarily represent models on the lowest end of the plus-size spectrum, and, to be hired as a model, these women need to conform to conventional beauty standards.

A key issue that was expressed was a lack of women of colour represented by the models. Furthermore, when models of different racial and ethnic backgrounds were present, they were mostly very light in skin tone. While it was not explicitly discussed in the literature, perhaps it should have been foreseen. If both fat people and non-white people are the targets of social inequity (Nutter et al, 2016), then it follows that people existing at the intersection of fatness and non-whiteness would be under-represented at these kinds of events. The paucity of scholarly studies and industry-focused attention to these issues suggests there is opportunity for future research to provide more in-depth information about the diversity of lived experiences.

Consumer intentions to attend fashion events highlights that all but six research participants agree or strongly agree that they are more likely to attend a fashion event if they know that plus-size bodies will be represented by the models. Representation is clearly of paramount importance regarding most participants' intention to spend, and, therefore, it is argued that fashion event managers should cease using exclusively thin, aspirational models (Orbach, 1978) and begin using diverse models in all senses of the word. Perpetuating the psychological barriers to accessing fashion events for plus-size consumers only exacerbates the fat-thin binary which serves to isolate fat women (Wann, 2009). It is unlikely that fat women will want to attend events hosted by a brand that makes them feel unrepresented. As Leischnig et al. (2011) concluded, fashion events have the potential to have a positive impact on the relationship between brand and consumer. However, the converse may also be true, and this psychological barrier to access could have a negative impact on that relationship.

A lack of plus-size representation in promotional materials is another psychological barrier to access for plus-size women at fashion events; for example, it is often the case that no plus-size women are visibly featured in fashion event marketing campaigns. If women sense a disconnect between their appearance or personality and that of the brand, then they are likely to distance themselves from that particular brand (Aagerup, 2010). Based on the findings from the current study, fashion event managers should be particularly intentional when designing the visual media for advertising campaigns. This was also found to be the case with regard to the fashion industry as a whole. An overwhelming majority (86.1%) of respondents stated that they do not see bodies like theirs represented within the fashion industry. These results support Orbach's (1978) assertion that plus-size women are not represented because the fashion industry does not consider their body type to be aspirational. By not representing more

varying body types, designers, brands, and media organisations within the fashion industry are isolating potential clients and customers. If these organisations diversified the portfolio of bodies they featured, a greater number of women may relate to them and become loyal to those brands.

Some survey respondents stated that they only feel represented at fashion events within the plus-size community. One respondent said, they *"only see images of those with a similar body type to [theirs] on Instagram and tumblr, not in the mainstream fashion industry."* Similarly, another participant said their body type is *"only represented by bloggers."* This suggests that fat women feel more valued and visible when co-creating their own fashion content in their own online spaces. By posting photos online, fatshion bloggers and fatshionistas create a sort of vigilante representation to make up for the lack of representation within the mainstream fashion industry (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013). Given the societal stigma, it is understandable that fat women would turn to a community of others with similar experiences. These safe spaces online allow them to create their own representation when it is lacking within the fashion industry.

With regard to fashion event managers specifically, only 27.9% of respondents agree or strongly agree that fashion event managers anticipate, understand, and cater to the needs of plus-size consumers. The majority expressed that plus-size consumers are not seen to be a priority. One respondent said, *"The needs of plus-size consumers are totally ignored, and usually not even acknowledged in most cases."* Another participant said that fashion event managers, *"only cater to their 'usual' audience of thin folks."* This is, once again, likely caused by the fat-thin binary which isolates fat women in social settings, including fashion (Wann, 2009). Aligned with this, a comment from one participant mentioned how they had "*never attended an event where plus-size women were a consideration."* Another participant noted that fashion event managers, "*explicitly avoid us and discourage us from inclusion,"* where *"us"* refers to plus-size consumers. For example, physical barriers illustrate that plus-size needs are not often considered by event management. One respondent explained that this may be the case because *"plus-size in the mainstream is a fairly new concept"* and, therefore, most event managers are not in the habit of remembering that different bodies have different needs.

Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter has investigated the physical and psychological barriers to access for plus-size women at fashion events. Findings concurred with Asmervik (2002), who found that seating, toilets, and wheelchair access were all threats to physical access, with seating being the most frequently occurring complaint. An overwhelming majority of participants (83.7%) agreed that they are more likely to attend a fashion event if they believe the event facilities will meet their needs as a plus-size consumer. This research also concurred with Griffiths (2017), who asserted that fashion events can often leave attendees feeling under-represented or unrepresented, which is a significant psychological barrier to participation. Larger or fatter bodies, non-hourglass shaped bodies, and large stomachs were the three most common characteristics which respondents stated were not represented in promotional materials or by models at events. A clear majority (86%) of respondents indicated that they are more likely to attend a fashion event if they know that plus-size bodies will be represented by the models. Similarly, the overwhelming majority (88.4%) of respondents are more likely to attend a fashion

event if they have seen plus-size bodies represented in promotional materials. Additionally, research data indicated that few (9.3%) participants felt that their body is well represented within the fashion industry. Over half of the respondents (51.7%) felt that plus-size women are rarely represented within the fashion industry, and when they are represented, it is still an unrealistic representation. Several (13.8%) respondents noted that this may be because plus-size models are not representative of most plus-size consumers, and other respondents (13.8%) shared that only plus-size women with hourglass shaped bodies are visible within the fashion industry. Regarding consumer attitudes toward event managers, only 27.9% of respondents felt that fashion event managers anticipate, understand, and cater to the needs of plus-size consumers. Almost half of participants (46.6%) disagreed, and discussed several ways they feel let down by event managers. The most commonly reported issue (42.1%) is that plus-size consumers feel like they are not a priority for event managers. Given consumer attitudes toward fashion event managers were mainly negative, it is evident that there is still much room for improvement.

Therefore, in order to appeal to wider audiences in order to develop more inclusive and diverse event experiences, it is recommended that fashion event managers should be more mindful in featuring models of varying sizes and include more diversity in promotional materials and on runways. While event managers may have less control over diverse bodies at designer or brand product launches, they should make an effort to invite plus-size brands to fashion events rather than inviting brands that exclude plus sizes. Additionally, event managers should consider avoiding low-quality chairs and chairs with arms. If for any reason this is not possible, then alternative plus-size friendly seating options should be available as a contingency. Should an attendee request this seating accommodation, event staff should be thoroughly trained to be sensitive and compassionate in order to assist the guest effectively and without judgement.

This research has made a unique contribution to knowledge by synthesising event accessibility research, fat studies, and fashion event literature. While these schools of thought are all established in their own right, more work needs to be carried out at their nexus. Indeed, there is a necessity for further research with larger sample sizes and more voices to share the breadth and depth of lived experiences. Both the literature and questionnaire data named several specific events which might also be analysed in the future for in-depth case studies, such as The Curve Fashion Festival. Although it was not mentioned in the literature, the issue of photo editing software such as Photoshop was mentioned on multiple occasions by survey participants. There is scope for further research on this topic, and future studies on psychological barriers to access at events may want to include this as a point of discussion. For example, if stretch marks, cellulite, and double chins are not visible on plus-size models in advertising, then what role does Photoshop play in limiting psychological access? As more research is conducted in this area, it has the potential to improve understanding and inclusivity by providing more insight to combat stigma and promote greater accessibility in practice.

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1 Fatphobia does not connote a fear of fat people; rather, it describes the acts of being harmful/hateful to fat people and treating them as deviant in society.

2 Fatmisia refers to biased behaviour targeting fat people.