

## VANITY SIZING: THE MANUFACTURING OF SELF-ESTEEM

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Today's female consumer population is witnessing a strange and remarkable change in the fashion industry as we know it. No, it is not the overemphasis on showing skin, nor the outlandish pricing, nor any particular trend as a whole; it is much more simplistic than even that, yet just as, if not more, important. It is the phenomenon of dropping clothing sizes without losing a single pound. If the scales are not lying, who is? This change is the result of the fashion business's new selling tactic "vanity sizing," or, as NBC News reports it, the scaling down of sizes so that, for example, the measurements of a size 10 are now the measurements of a size 6 ("Your Health: Vanity Sizing"). This may seem insignificant at first; after all, it is only the size of a pair of jeans. However, the size of a pair of jeans now carries much more "weight" than women intended. Assigning a numerical size to a woman, in essence, assigns her a concrete definition of who she is on the outside and, consequently, on the inside as well. Clothing size then becomes a member of the "sign community," as described in Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, based on the belief that "there is an ideological dimension to every signification" (13). These ideologies of size signification coincide with the beauty ideologies, discussed in Naomi Wolf's book, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*, to pave the way for hegemony in the female fashion industry. Thus, sizing in the clothing industry is simply another hegemonic device that exploits ideologies, specifically those concerning beauty.

Sizing in the clothing business is a rather simplistic concept, with each size based on a particular range of measurements. It seems as though standardizing these sizes should be simple, at least at first glance. Eils Lotozo, in "Lack of standard clothing sizes can drive women crazy," reports that for men, clothing manufacturers set in place the first standardized clothing scale "during the Civil War at the urging of the government, which needed to get many men into uniform quickly," a logical and practical reason to create such a scale. Even today, men's clothing is based on their exact measurements, those measurements a man's designated clothing size. However, women's standardized sizing charts were not established until the 1940s after "the urging of the mail-order clothing industry" (Lotozo) and at "about the time department stores stopped offering alteration services" (Campbell). These standards,

set in place by the American Society for Testing and Materials, had a practical purpose, notes Kim Campbell in "That size 8 dress may soon be a 12": society was growing busier and fonder of the shopping time-savers, such as ready-to-wear clothing and catalog shopping. However, since these standards have been set in place, the fashion industry has twisted the numbers that represent these sizes, not only concretely by deviating from these standards, but also ideologically through the changed purpose behind these numbers, which is ultimately to make money. Hence, sizing, like other sign systems, has become "open to a double inflection: to 'illegitimate' as well as 'legitimate' uses" (Hebdige 18). It is more than simply a means for women to find well-fitting pants. It is a hegemonic device used to gain profit by exploiting women and the connection between their pants size and self-esteem.

Since sizing is a relevant issue due to its relation to ideologies through signification, the primary "task becomes . . . to discern the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surface of style" (Hebdige 18), in particular, the codes represented in clothing sizes. Signs "[t]end to represent, in however obscure and contradictory a fashion, the interests of the *dominant* groups in society," and it seems as if "the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force" (15). Therefore, the signification of a size in female clothing is a representation of society's material force, the fashion industry, and the reigning beliefs behind it. "[T]he ideology of beauty," observes Naomi Wolf, "is the last one remaining of the old feminine ideologies that still has the power to control those women who . . . would have otherwise [been] made relatively uncontrollable" (10-11). These ideologies and expectations of female beauty, which change over time but always have ideals in the realms of weight, stature, features, etc., can be considered "destructive" because "[t]he collusion is maintained by directing attention away from the fearsome fact [or ideology], or by repackaging its meaning in an acceptable format" (Wolf 17). Dominant ideologies of feminine beauty are able to simultaneously control women and convince them that these ideologies, such as the idea that female bodies need to be a specific size to be beautiful, are natural and acceptable. However, it is notable to recognize that female body size may not require ideals or, in other words, that "size is just a number" ("Your Health: Vanity Sizing"). Ideologies hide this fact by masking feminine body ideals in slogans such as

“thinness means healthiness,” and, consequently, more women endorse these beauty beliefs by subscribing to these slogans.

As more and more women subscribe to and internalize these beliefs, the more engrained into society these beliefs become and the more difficult they are to eradicate, especially when those who are being oppressed through this process are the ones who are also perpetuating it. Ideologies in beauty certainly function under the same conditions as ideology as a whole, as Hebdige defines it, and yield the same consequences: hegemonic power that is virtually undetectable. The reigning ideals of beauty lead to “situation[s] in which a provisional alliance of a certain social group can exert ‘total social authority’ over other subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by the direct imposition of the ruling ideas, but by ‘winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural’” (Hebdige 15-16). In other words, beauty ideologies are used for hegemonic purposes; and by creating standardized beliefs surrounding beauty that seem perfectly legitimate, and, in fact, almost infallible, the prevailing force gains control over the subordinate group by manipulating its members and their beauty belief system. In this case, it is the fashion industry that exploits the many beliefs surrounding beauty, such as attractiveness defined by thinness, upon which so many of its female consumers base their clothing opinions.

Clothing is directly related to beauty, making power in the clothing business almost exclusively based on ideologies of beauty. In her book *Beauty Bound: Why Women Strive for Physical Perfection*, Rita Freedman asserts that “[f]emale beauty has been hung on a clothesline of fashion. . . clothing is as important in defining a woman’s world as the body beneath it” (85). Since clothing and body image are so intimately related, considering that a woman’s clothing size is related to the size of her body, it is logical to assume that the size of her clothing will affect how beautiful a woman feels, a result of the beauty ideologies regarding size which are elicited by the fashion world. Since the “clothes make the [wo]man,” the ideologies in beauty and in clothing size are gaining even more influence in women’s level of self esteem as beauty ideals become even more difficult to attain.

Since the average American woman is gaining weight while the average American fashion model, in recent fashion trends, is being scaled down to nearly nothing, the difference between the average woman and her “representative” is growing further and further apart (Campbell). This dissonance creates a space for

beauty ideals to flourish, pushing the average consumer even further away from her ideal. With this evidence, it is logical to believe that the emphasis on size as a marker of beauty is rising, due to the fashion industry's newfound interest in underweight models, and that its influence on women's self-esteem is rising as well. The smaller the model, the more unattainable an ideal body type becomes; the larger women grow, the more self-conscious they become for not being able to resemble these models with the ideal thin body. Overemphasis on size during a time when the average woman is becoming more aware of her so-called "sub-standard" body size creates a new measure of identity for women: their pants size. As Jackie Walker, author of a book on the psychology of clothing, stated on NBC News, "[W]omen, a lot of times will tie their self-esteem onto a number sewn into the back of their pants" ("Your Health: Vanity Sizing"). Each size has a specific connotation, and causes a woman's self-esteem to be defined according to her number, now a concrete manifestation of herself and her beauty. As Naomi Wolf points out, "Women's identity must be premised upon [their] 'beauty' so that [women] will remain vulnerable" (14). Ideology and hegemony are clearly at work when women are assigned these numerical identities. The assignment of a woman's size through one single number allows the fashion business access, in Hebdige's words, to "*particular* ways of organizing the world [which] appear to [consumers] as if they were universal and timeless" (14). The clothing industry manufactures sizes and, with those sizes, certain connotations that seem entirely natural to the everyday consumer. The significance of this numerical value to women has increased in such a way that "10% of all women cut the size tags out of their clothes so they don't have to see the number on a daily basis" ("Your Health: Vanity Sizing"). The emphasis on size is a deep-seated concern of women due to the clothing manufacturer's exploitation of beauty ideals.

However, pants size is not the only aspect of bodily image with which women wrestle. Breast size and, consequently bra sizing, are of particular concern as well, and since bra size compares to clothing size in its ideological signification, the clothing industry is free to exploit it as a form of control for profit as well. Bra size, like pants size, affects women's body image and their self-esteem. A study done by Elissa Koff and Amy Benavage which surveyed Caucasian and Asian-American college women found that "small breastedness was associated with . . . lower breast size satisfaction" and, furthermore, that "there are clinical and anecdotal data linking

breast dissatisfaction with psychological distress, including feelings of embarrassment and self-consciousness, lack of self-confidence and diminished self-esteem" (670, 657). Curiously enough, although there is a desire for smallness and thinness in the overall body, there is also a desire for larger breasts. Koff and Benavage state that "these results can be viewed as reflecting the ambivalence that exists in the larger society, which promulgates several body ideals simultaneously. One of these ideals is extreme slenderness; another is relatively large breastedness" (670). As a result, two competing beauty ideologies are at war with each other..

Every ideology has competitors and it is generally the "dominant discourses" or "dominant ideologies" (Hebdige 15) that are engrained into our common sense as truth. However, in this case, two opposing dominant ideologies of the ideal feminine body have merged into one. The danger of this is that "these standards will be difficult if not impossible for most women to achieve" (Koff and Benavage 656) since the combination of large breasts on a slender body "is relatively uncommon . . . since breasts are largely composed of fat tissue, which is related to overall levels of fatness" (670). The integration of these two competing ideologies has made the ideal female body virtually impossible for the average female to attain. This leads women to have overall body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem, which feeds the fashion manufacturers' marketing tactics, such as vanity sizing.

Vanity sizing is based on the manipulation of the everyday female through beauty ideologies that tell her that size matters. As defined previously, vanity sizing is the scaling down of clothing sizes so that what was once a 10 is now labeled a size 6. The logic behind this is that, assuming a woman prefers to be a smaller size, she will be willing to pay more for a pair of pants labeled a smaller size than she normally wears. However, when discussing vanity sizing, the very basics of clothing size must first be examined. First, it is noticed that currently "[t]here's no set standard for clothing sizes in the U.S. or Europe" because those standards set in place over fifty years ago have become so radically transformed by each individual designer that there is no agreement between them anymore ("Your Health: Vanity Sizing"). This allows the clothing manufacturers full flexibility when designing patterns for specific sizes, essentially giving designers the freedom to exploit beauty ideologies without restriction. This may explain why each of ELuxury.com's thirty-one, ready-to-wear women's brands provides its own sizing chart for women to determine their size from designer to designer (ELuxury). In addition to the issue of a lack of standard sizes for

women, it is curious that men's "sizes" are simply their actual bodily measurements, which clearly cannot be subjected to manipulations such as vanity sizing. Why are women's sizes not based on measurements? Why are women assigned an arbitrary number by which to define themselves? As seen previously, it is because the clothing industry has redefined these sizes in order to create signs with ideological meaning, thereby creating symbols. As Volosinov explains in Hebdige's book, a "sign does not simply exist as part of reality—it reflects and refracts another reality. Therefore, it may distort that reality" (13). From this viewpoint, specific connotations are "sewn" into the new sizing chart, ready to be exploited. In addition, it is clear that the occurrence of vanity sizing is, in essence, the fashion industry's chance to distort reality, or what was once defined as reality "from measurements that date back to at least World War II" when the sizing standards were set in place, through a signifying number (Campbell).

As a result of vanity sizing, shopping has become a headache for most women, due to the vast range of sizes made to fit one particular body with one particular set of measurements for one particular manufacturer. In an informal study, done only due to the lack of information on this relatively new topic, one woman's exact measurements were input into Fitme.com's database where over four-hundred clothing designers have provided their size charts. The results were telling. The input measurements resulted in a size 4 at Abercrombie and Fitch, a size 6 at Bebe, size 9 at Target and a size 9 at JCPenny (Fitme.com). This study supports not only the occurrence of vanity sizing but the hypothesis that more expensive brands such as Abercrombie and Fitch and Bebe are more inclined to use vanity sizing. These results also support the findings of a survey done by SizeUSA, which utilized three-D body scanning on over ten-thousand people around the country, which also uncovered rampant use of vanity sizing, finding that "fewer than 10 percent of women who should be a size 8 actually were, based on their measurements" (Campbell). Furthermore, the same arbitrary sizing that encouraged vanity sizing also created the inclusion of 0 and 00 on the sizing chart. These new sizes are a direct result of vanity sizing: if women who were wearing a size 6 are now wearing a size 2, what will the size 2's wear? The fashion industry was forced to create additional smaller sizes to make up for the effects of vanity sizing. However, this is not the only issue arising from these new sizes. The 0 and 00 effectively suggest that these women are simply nonexistent—that the space taken up by women wearing a size 0 is slim to none.

These connotations point to the established reality behind clothing size: there is a clear desire to be slim to nothing and vanity sizing has made that possible.

Interestingly, however, the fashion industry has only limited control of the sizing of lingerie, particularly bras, due to the way in which bras are labeled, with the chest measurements, in inches, paired with the cup size. So, assuming manufacturers are not distorting the size of an inch, the cup size is the only subjective component in the sizing of a bra. Although bra sizing cannot be fully manipulated by the fashion industry, the connotations that each size carries are still just as great as those of pants size. It is clear that the fashion industry has the opportunity to exploit ideologies of bra sizes as well. Although the signs point towards the occurrence of this tactic in the bra business, there is limited research on vanity sizing in relation to bras. For example, just the fact that “[t]he majority of women have difficulty finding bras that fit well” (“Women Want Comfort and Durability in Bras”) shows that the extreme variation in sizing of bras is clearly an issue. The suggested solution to this problem is to be measured by a professional; yet, the mere existence of the position of a bra measurer as a career option articulates and accentuates the fact that the definition of one’s size is not easy to determine and may fluctuate greatly. In addition, surveys “indicate that the average sized woman is getting larger, with the average size bra at 36C, from 34B” (Monget), which may show that vanity sizing is at work, this time, in the opposite direction. It is possible that bra manufacturers are labeling their bras higher in order to flatter their customers and, as a result, the average bra size has increased. Although it is simply speculation, it seems that what is under the clothing is also an exhibitor of vanity sizing.

Vanity sizing, in bras as well as pants, is not the only issue in the fashion industry that promotes the beauty ideal—even the availability of sizes demonstrates a control over women. For example, some women find it troublesome to find pants in their size, perhaps not due to vanity sizing, but simply due to the lack of availability of larger sizes. Since “the average size for a woman has been considered an 8” (Campbell), it then seems that if the sizes run from 0 to 16 then there should be as many size 0s as there are size 16s in order to accommodate the half of the population that is above the average. However, in viewing sizing charts on ELuxury.com, the average largest size is a 12, only two sizes up from the average (according to the even numbered sizing which most designers use), with only three out of the thirty-one brands offering a size 14 (ELuxury). Therefore, it is curious to note that although

designers develop their own measurements for sizes based on the fit of their customers, they are not necessarily targeting their full audience—or are they (Campbell)? Perhaps, even with vanity sizing taken into account, designers are targeting only those who they desire their customers to be, those who they choose to represent their brand: the female with the stereotypical supermodel body. This would then force women in the “above average” category to lose weight to fit into this stereotype in order to buy the brand of jeans they prefer. Although this is simply speculation, it does provide room for questioning the fashion industry and its tactics, not only in its selective offering of sizes, but also in its motives as a whole and what it chooses to accomplish.

Size availability and reality distortion are not the only problematic aspects of the clothing business when it comes to vanity sizing. The real problem lies in the fact that vanity sizing exploits beauty ideologies in order to gain a profit. “Research shows that the smaller the size, the better the woman feels, and the more she’s willing to pay” (“Your Health: Vanity Sizing”). This is seen in the results from Fitme.com when the more expensive brands, such as Abercrombie and Fitch and Bebe, were labeling one particular woman as a size 4 and a size 6, respectively, as compared to a size 9 at both Target and JCPenny, less expensive stores. It is the higher-end fashion that is making most use of this selling tool. Not only are consumers paying for the brand to use more materials in order to make the smaller sizes bigger, but they are also paying for a boost in self-esteem. As a result of this exploitation, retailers are scaling down their sizes and scaling up their profit. The fashion world, with beauty ideologies firmly in hand, manipulates female consumers into paying extra to feel beautiful. The bigger picture of vanity sizing is that “[b]eauty’ is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact” (Wolf 12). The clothing business is using beauty ideologies to place women as the victims of commodity in a political hierarchy which acts as an economy based on beauty. Wolf continues by saying that beauty ideologies “[are] a result of . . . today’s power structure, economy, and culture” (13). Beauty as a whole, including the issue of vanity sizing, is used as hegemonic leverage to perpetuate the “total social authority” (Hebdige 15-16) over women.

The underlying issue in beauty beliefs is that women are unable to define not only their own sizing standard, which is created by designers, but that their own

image of beauty rests in the hands of capitalistic, patriarchal, hegemonic industries. Currently, feminine beauty is seemingly a quality that is given to a woman, not one which she inherently possesses; a woman is not beautiful unless someone, in this case the fashion industry, deems her to be so. Rabindranath Tagore is quoted in Freedman as saying: "O woman, you are not merely the handiwork of God, but also of men; these are ever endowing you with beauty from their own hearts. You are one-half woman and one-half dream" (18). However, women are somehow expected to consciously turn this definition of beauty into something fully realistic—they must merge the dream and reality—which is something entirely impossible. Wolf states that "[a]s long as the definition of 'beauty' comes from outside women, [they] will continue to be manipulated by it" (277). The problematic nature of beauty ideologies is in the hegemonic intentions of those who define them and may be corrected only when women themselves define their own beauty.

Unfortunately, the ideologies of beauty are continuing the vicious power struggle. However, to simply start scaling up sizes to combat vanity sizing is merely putting a bandage on this societal wound. The deeper issue lies within the emphasis of beauty or, in this case, size. The obsession with female body size is what led to vanity sizing and the real issue that must now be addressed is the overemphasis on reaching the ideal feminine size and changing who is determining that ideal. Once the women wearing the clothes are able to define beauty for themselves, they will be able to reduce size to nothing more than what it is—a number. As a result, the clothing industry's use of vanity sizing as a source of exploitation will be erased and, with it, the effects of these beauty ideologies.

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COMMENTARY: Stacy Straczynski

I, along with millions of other Americans, went shopping at the mall last weekend. As I walked into my favorite brand-name clothing store and tried on a pair of jeans, I was ecstatic to discover that I was finally able to squeeze myself into a size 2. All that exercising for the last month had paid off, or had it? I had to take a break from my joy as my thoughts turned to Holly Ennis's "Vanity Sizing: The Manufacturing of Self-Esteem." I had always been aware that ordering and buying clothes in the right size from different manufacturers was complicated and, at best, a shot in the dark as to how the clothes would really fit; but I had never known that the sizing of women's clothes had become such a "madness [with] method in 't" (Hamlet II.ii.206).

In "Vanity Sizing: The Manufacturing of Self-Esteem," Ennis takes a unique, and refreshingly unfrontational, feminist approach to investigating the causes behind one of the newest phenomenons in the female fashion industry, "vanity sizing," helping to discover the reasons why "the size of a pair of jeans carries much more 'weight' than women intended." She begins by noting that sizing is a set of standards, which unfortunately is not too standardized when it comes to women, allowing for the so-called "standard" size to be manipulated at will. Ennis asserts

that clothing size has therefore become much more than a number sewn into the tag of one's pants, now a virtually undetectable "hegemonic device that exploits ideologies, specifically those concerning beauty" to a point where women have accepted these ideals as the dominant societal beliefs and norms. To make matters all the more challenging, society elicits "two competing beauty ideologies. . . at war with each other," the desire for thinness opposed to the desire for large breasts, the possession of both naturally being a near-impossibility for the average woman. It is dark irony that should a female obtain the smaller pants size she desires, she will then subsequently fall from her closer position to the ideal in breast size since breast size partially depends on the amount of fat tissue in the body. It seems to be a never-ending, vicious cycle, leaving the woman in a continual battle with her own self-esteem, as she achieves one goal only to lose another.

What I find to be the most fascinating, and most debate-generating, aspect of the evidences presented by Ennis is the fact that not only have women accepted these ideological beauty "norms," but they will do anything to try and accommodate them to remedy their lack of self-esteem. This "beauty is pain" mentality applies to the wallet as well, and this is where the heart of vanity sizing truly comes into play. A woman will pay \$85 for a pair of designer jeans in a size 6 or 4 like the "thin-is-in" models wear, rather than paying \$30 for the same exact jeans labeled a size 8. When presented so blatantly, the logic behind the woman's decision "to pay more for a pair of pants labeled a size smaller than she normally wears" to feel more beautiful, seems to be invisible; yet, the exploitation by the clothing manufacturers is nothing but apparent. Vanity sizing is the "fashion industry's chance to distort reality, or what was [once] defined as reality." They produce and determine what sizes are "scaled down" to, how many of which sizes to make available to customers, and, ultimately, what sizes are the ideal for female beauty—all to make a profit.

Ennis's work raises questions about what the occurrence of vanity sizing implies about our society and the foundations of our beauty beliefs. Is it really that the "underlying issue in beauty beliefs is that women are unable to define not only their own sizing standard . . . but that their own image of beauty rests within the hands of capitalistic, patriarchal, hegemonic industries"? Although I think that while Ennis places liability upon the beauty ideologies, the clothing industry, and society, I do not feel that she assigns enough responsibility to women themselves in the construction of their own self-esteem. Ultimately, a "size is nothing more than what

it is—a number,” and while the clothing industry can change the measurement this size represents, it is we women who choose to allow that number to affect how we envision our own beauty. She is right in saying, however, that the “deeper issue lies within the emphasis upon beauty,” displayed here on the issues of clothing size. This emphasis, and its acceptance, is seen everywhere in our daily lives, as demonstrated by the popularity of television shows such as FX’s drama *Nip/Tuck* and MTV’s reality *I Want a Famous Face*. What is this obsessive desire in all of us? If we cannot change the hold of the beauty ideologies upon our mentality, what will our futures hold? We already have had to invent the sizes 0 and 00 to adjust for the thinness shift—how much more into nothingness can we delve?

Even being knowledgeable about the occurrence of vanity sizing from Ennis’ work, I still bought those size 2 jeans in that store; I still spent the extra money I did not have to buy those size 2 jeans; I still loved how those size 2 jeans made me feel. The real reason I did not try and find a similar, cheaper pair in another store is that I really did like them for the jeans that they were, no matter what size the label read. However, there is a part of me that subconsciously would not have been as ecstatic if the size was larger, would not have loved them quite so much. Beauty ideologies are deeply engrained in each of us. While Ennis’s essay provides insight into to how our insecurities make us vulnerable to the manipulators of beauty ideologies, it will apparently take much more than awareness to shake women free from their reliance upon these ideals, as I have demonstrated to myself. We cannot “merely [put] a bandage on this societal wound.” The real *nip/tuck-ing* must take place inside, rather than outside, each woman as she learns to define beauty in terms of her own self.