DRESS RULES AND BODY PERCEPTIONS OF MATURE PLUS SIZE WOMEN

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in The Department of Textile Science, Apparel Design, and Merchandising

by
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**LIST OF TERMS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Aesthetic Labor</td>
<td>the act and process of not only display and performance in the workplace but also is a reproduction of the worker for employment that involves longer term commitment to bodily projects (Entwistle &amp; Wissinger, 2006, p. 777)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Mass Index</td>
<td>“BMI”, is an index of weight-for-height that is commonly used to classify overweight and obesity in adults. BMI is defined as a person’s weight in kilograms divided by the square of height in meters (WHO, 2016, p. 1).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Call to Action</td>
<td>a report released by the US Public Health Service in order to “focus the Nation’s attention on important public health issues”, specifically on obesity (Mitchell &amp; McTigue, 2007, p. 392).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress</td>
<td>“a long list of possible direct modifications of the body such as coiffed hair, colored skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as equally long list of garments, jewelry, accessories, and other categories of items added to the body as supplements” (Roach-Higgins &amp; Eicher, 1992, p. 1).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dressed Body</td>
<td>a personal collection of different supplements that make up dress for an individual (Roach-Higgins &amp; Eicher, 1992, p. 1).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deviant Bodies</td>
<td>a body that does not fit in to the dominant ideal at a given time in society. (Klepp &amp; Rysst, 2017, p. 82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat Acceptance Movement</td>
<td>a movement that accelerated largely due to the internet which brought attention to injustices that are faced by individuals who are overweight and obese. (Afful &amp; Ricciardelli, 2015; Scarboto &amp; Fischer, 2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatosphere</td>
<td>a “loosely interconnected network of online resources aimed at creating a safe space where individuals can counter fat prejudice, resist misconceptions of fat, engage in communal experiences, and promote positive understandings of fat” (Gurrieri &amp; Cherrier, 2013, p. 279)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatshionista</td>
<td>fashion lovers who wear plus size clothing (Scaraboto &amp; Fischer, 2012, p. 1234).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature Market</td>
<td>defined as a person aged 55 years and over (Nam, et al., 2006).</td>
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Obese excessive fat accumulation that can impair health, obese is classified as having a BMI greater than or equal to 30. (WHO, 2016, p. 1)

Obesity Epidemic a phrase made popular by the 2001 Surgeon Generals “Call to Action” which was used to bring attention to rising body weights (Mitchell & McTigue, 2007, p. 396)

Overweight excessive fat accumulation that can impair health, overweight is classified as having a BMI greater than or equal to 25. (WHO, 2016, p. 1)

Plus Size according to industry standards plus size women are those who are a size 14 which equates to a woman is about 160 pounds (Bogenrief, 2012, p. 4)

Stigma applies to any “mark or attribute that sets some people apart from others because it conveys the information that those people have a defect of body or character that spoils their social identity (Chrisler, 2010, p. 206).

Suitable Clothes apparel that abides by the sanctions of certain social spaces. (Entwistle, 2000 p.8)

Front "part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situations for those who observe the performance" (Goffman, 1959, p. 22).

Settings refers to the locations in which social interactions occurred including the front region which is "the place where the performance is given" (p.107) and the back region which is "where the performance of a routine is prepared" (Goffman, 1959, p. 238)
ABSTRACT

Due to western societies continued obsession with youth, thinness, and fitness it is no surprise that mature women and plus size women alike are still highly stigmatized and widely ignored by the fashion industry. Past studies related to mature women and plus size women’s dress and body perception have been conducted, however, there is a severe lack of research related to mature women who are also plus size. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to understand the dress rules and body perceptions of mature plus size women (MPSW) over their lifetime. This exploratory study consisted of 16 semi-structured interviews with mature women between the ages of 52 and 72 who were currently plus size. Additionally, all of the participants were also plus size between the ages of 15 and 25. Data was analyzed using the constant comparison method with which three major themes emerged. First, past clothing experiences included the participants’ memories of shopping for plus size clothing as young adults, as well as the individuals who shaped their style. The second theme, current clothing experiences, included the MPSW’s opinions toward shopping, who influences them, and the styles, colors, patterns, and fit of clothing which they liked and disliked. The final theme, favorite clothes, encapsulated the participants’ favorite outfits from the past and present.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Background

The bodies of plus size women over 50 are not the same as those under 50. Younger plus-size women still have their curves in all the right places. Thanks to diminishing hormones, our waists are gone or merged with our hips, our rears have flattened and our midsections tend to bulge. Our underpinnings look more orthopedic than erotic, so peekaboo bras under spaghetti strapped sundresses and camisoles can't happen. And the lovely mature models in the photographs are not representative of most post-menopausal bodies (Baraldi, 2017).

As indicated in the above quote, mature plus size women are not the same as younger plus size women. Researchers have claimed that two of the largest untapped and unsatisfied consumer groups are plus size and mature women (Kim et al., 2007; Nam et al., 2006). Both of these groups are continuously underserved by the fashion industry. This has created angst among both types of consumers.

One movement that has attempted to address the social angst of plus size women is The Fat Acceptance Movement, which began in the early 2000’s has brought nationwide attention to the plus size population (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Plus size individuals, who are defined by industry standards as being a size 14 or higher (Bogenrief, 2012; Czerniawski, 2012), have taken the opportunity to publicly denounce fat shaming and advocate for “health at every size” (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; “Tess Holliday”, 2015).

Even though it is not explicitly stated, the societal shift toward “size acceptance” seems to be geared heavily toward a younger demographic. While young plus size women still struggle to find suitable clothes, they have gained a sizeable amount of recognition from both the fashion industry and main stream markets, which has resulted in an influx of plus size options. In the blogosphere, 20 something plus size fashion lovers like: Chastity Valentine owner of “GarnerStyle” and Ragini Nag Rao owner of “A Curious Fancy” discuss anything from what
plus size women should wear for date nights to dressing professionally for work (Valentine, 2017; Nag Rao, 2017). Most of the plus size clothing stores that these bloggers support are also aimed at a younger market segment. For example, plus size fashion store “Torrid” has a demographic of women ages 15 to 25, which closely aligns with the age of many bloggers (“Torrid”, 2011). This indicates a younger consumer perspective on ideas of dressing a plus size body. It also begs the questions, are there mature plus size women? And how should they dress?

Mature women 55 and over have also made a place for themselves in the online world of fashion blogging. Similar to the plus size women’s posts, many of these blogs advocate for inclusive styles that are both trendy and comfortable for women over the age of 55. One blogger, Lyn Slater who operates “Accidental Icon” describes her blog as being for women who are like her, are, “not famous or celebrities but are smart, creative, fashion forward, fit, thoughtful, engaged related and most importantly clear and comfortable with who they are…” (Slater, 2017). Another blogger, Patti, the owner of the “Not Dead Yet Style” blog describes herself by saying:

I am a sixty-something woman, wife, professional, auntie and crazy cat lady. Though pressured by society to recede gracefully, I prefer to burst out with love of fashion and style. We are not dead yet, so let’s enjoy every sandwich and gild the lilies (Patti, 2017, para. 1).

These women are part of the Baby Boomer consumer group, this consumer segment is estimated to control half of all discretionary income (Moody & Sasser, 2012) and comprise almost a fourth of the population, making it one of the most affluent consumer segments (“AARP,” 2011).

Clearly, fashion bloggers understand that there are consumers who are over 55 and interested in fashion. There are also plus size women who are highly involved with fashion. However, there was a noticeable gap in both academic literature and popular press when it comes to mature women who were also plus size. Approximately 35 fashion blogs were analyzed and
only one fashion blog was found that catered to mature women that were plus size. The blog “Grown and Curvy Woman,” which is run by a 40-something year old woman advocates for age and size inclusive styles; however, the images of women throughout most of the posts appear to be only in their early to mid-forties (“Grown and Curvy Woman,” 2017).

No fashion blogs were found that related to the present study involving mature (over 55) plus size women. Possible reasoning for the lack of attention to this specific demographic will be discussed later in depth; however, worth mentioning is the notion that plus size Baby Boomers have not, until recently, been exposed to the idea of size acceptance. Unlike young plus size women who have been exposed to the Fat Acceptance Movement from a young age, most of the mature women who participated in the present study were teenagers in the late 70’s and early 80’s when youth, fitness and the thin ideal were the epicenter of societal thoughts on beauty (Rubinstein, 1995). The way in which plus size women now view and dress their bodies is completely different from how plus size women dressed 20 to 30 years ago. Due to the lack of research relating to mature plus size consumers the present study aimed to shed light on this often ignored demographic group.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to examine dress rules and body perceptions among mature plus size women over their lifetimes. The researcher explored the theory of dramaturgy developed by Erving Goffman (1959) as well as Alison Guy and Maura Banim’s (2000) conceptual categories of *the woman I want to be, the woman I fear I could be,* and *the woman I am most of the time.* The study aimed to better understand the dress rules and body perceptions of mature plus size women throughout their lifetimes.
**Research Questions**

To explore the purpose statement, the following research questions were developed for this study:

1. What are the dress rules and body perceptions of mature plus size women?
2. How do dress rules and body perceptions relate to the theory of dramaturgy?
3. How do dress rules and body perceptions relate to the categories of Guy and Banim?
4. How do dress rules change over the lifetime of a mature plus size woman?
5. What influences dress styles for mature plus-size women?

**Specific Objectives**

The following objectives were developed based on the purpose statement and research questions:

- To explore the dress rules and body perceptions of mature plus size women.
- To determine how the dress rules and body perceptions of plus-size women changed over their lifetime.
- To explore the major influences on the dress styles of mature plus-size women.
- To determine how the dress-rules and body perceptions of mature plus size women relate to dramaturgy and the categories purposed by Guy and Banim.
- To contribute to the literature surrounding mature plus size women.

**Assumptions**

The following assumptions underlie the study and will be taken into consideration during the research:

1. Participants will be plus size females between the ages of 55 and 70.
2. Participants will have been plus size between the ages of 15 and 25.
3. All declarations of weight and height by the participants will be considered factual.

4. All images or visual materials provided by the participant will be considered factual.

**Scope and Limitations**

The following scopes and limitations have been identified for the present study:

1. As a female who has been plus size since the age of 12, the researcher acknowledges that she brings past experience and potential biases to the present study.

2. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, the researcher acknowledges that the data collected cannot be applied to all women who meet the sampling criteria.
CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to examine dress rules and body perceptions among mature plus-size women over their lifetimes. This chapter will include an overview of the dressed body as it pertains to plus size and mature bodies, the obesity epidemic and fat acceptance movement, plus size and mature women in the public eye, as well as past and current dress rules for both plus size and mature consumers. A theoretical framework of dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959; Stone, 1975) will be highlighted, as well as Guy and Banim’s conceptual categories of the woman I want to be, the woman I fear I could be, and the woman I am most of the time which was built from Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgy.

The Dressed Body

The researcher recognizes that dress and the research surrounding it spans far and wide, in relation to the current study, dress will be discussed in terms of mature bodies and plus size bodies. Clothing and the symbols and signs that make up appearance have been studied by social scientists and theorists for years (Goffman, 1959; Stone, 1959; Veblen, 1953). The term “clothing” or “dress” can be defined in a variety of ways. Clothing itself has the ability to alter, change, and reinvent the body (Klepp, 2008). Clothes can affect not only how wearers feel, but also how others view individuals (Klepp, 2009; Stone, 1975). The preferred academic term from the field of Clothing and Textiles is “dress.” Dress is defined as, “a long list of possible direct modifications of the body such as coiffed hair, colored skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as equally long list of garments, jewelry, accessories, and other categories of items added to the body as supplements” (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992, p. 1). The dressed body can be
defined as a personal collection of different supplements that make up dress for an individual (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992, p. 1).

How an individual dresses can convey information about their social status, role in society, gender and other aspects of their identity and background (Goffman, 1959; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992; Stone, 1975). Dress can also convey a person’s age, economic class, school loyalty, or religion (Higgins-Roach & Eicher, 1992). Entwistle (2000) expressed that, “when we dress we do so to make our bodies acceptable to a social situation” (p. 81) and that dress marked, “the boundary between self and other, individual and society” (p. 81). The same researcher also stated that dressing the body is a complex concept that begins with determining the kind of body you have, she stated that “what is demanded from the clothes or how strict the clothes norms are depends on how tabooed the body is, together with the social situation” (Entwistle, 2000, p. 81). The dressed body is highly symbolic and surrounded by cultural standards and rules. However, when a body does not conform to cultural standards or rules, then it becomes a deviant body.

**The deviant body.** Deviant bodies and appropriate clothes are discussed in the next section as they relate to the current research topic of mature plus size women. A deviant body was defined as a body that does not fit into the dominant ideals of “slimness and fitness” in modern society (Klepp & Rysst, 2017, p. 82). Those whose physical appearance “deviated” from the norm were considered to have bodies that are a challenge to put in suitable clothing (Klepp & Rysst, 2017). The term “suitable clothes” is defined by Entwistle (2000) as apparel that abides by the sanctions of certain social spaces (p.8). Suitable clothes are ones that fit the body and are appropriate depending on the context that the body is being viewed (Klepp & Rysst, 2017).
Another aspect of deviant bodies are those with social disabilities or social handicaps as they have been referred to by some researchers (Klepp & Rysst, 2017). One researcher believed that there are two ways to understand disabilities; medically and socially (Lamb, 2001). While medical disabilities required professional attention and care, social disabilities were seen mainly as a “socially constructed problem” (Lamb, 2001, p. 135). The concept of a handicap is referred to as a “social barrier” and is something that made it difficult to reach particular goals (Lamb, 2001, p. 138) as opposed to a disability that is a physical restriction (Klerk & Ampousah, 2002).

Similar to those with a physical disability, those with a social disability or handicap are largely stigmatized by popular culture (Lamb, 2001). In a marketing sense, a handicap refers to a “person who does not easily find suitable clothes in the ordinary market dominated by mass-produced items” (Lamb, 2001, p. 138). Relevant to the present study is the notion that overweight or plus size individuals have a social disability or handicap because of the unavailability of suitable clothes and the stigmatization that follows them (Klepp & Rysst, 2017).

We can assume that since plus size and mature women are ill represented, ignored by the mass market, and have characteristics of a deviant body, they are “tabooed” bodies to dress. The following section will discuss the dressed plus size and dressed mature body.

**The dressed plus size body.** As previously discussed, the plus size body can be seen as a deviant body. Discrimination and stigmatizing are not new developments when discussing overweight and obese individuals (Klepp & Rysst, 2017). Researchers across a vast range of academic disciplines agree that contemporary society prefers a slender and lean appearance and condemn those who do not adhere to this ideal (e.g. Bordo, 2004; Gruys, 2012; Klepp & Rysst, 2017). Goffman states that “fatness” is not only a discrediting quality, but a physical stigma as well (Goffman, 1986). Individuals who are classified as “fat” are often seen as ugly, disgusting,
pathetic, lacking self-control, lazy, unwanted, incompetent, and unhealthy (Hill, 2009; Thomas, 2005).

Clearly, society is particularly harsh on plus size individuals. Women, especially, are stigmatized for being overweight (Bordo, 2004; Klepp & Rysst, 2017). Due to the societal pressures on plus size women it comes as no surprise that there is a booming diet industry, in fact it is estimated that by 2019 the weight loss industry will be valued at $9.6 billion (LaRosa, 2015).

For overweight individuals, especially women, there is a strong drive to camouflage or hide their figures with dress (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011; Klepp & Rysst, 2017). This could be better understood by Flugel (1969), who suggested that when an individual is in a threatening, unwelcome, or hostile environment they adopt defense mechanisms in order to protect themselves. An individual can use style, color, and other characteristics of dress to shield, distance, and protect themselves from their surroundings (Rubinstein, 1995). Protection can take shape in multiple ways, an individual can opt to become “invisible” by wearing dark, loose fitting clothes that draws little attention from those around them (Rubinstein, 1995). The concept of plus size individuals using clothing to conceal and manage their body is not a new development (Chrisler, 2011; Entwistle, 2000; Klepp & Rysst, 2017). For example, multiple plus size participants in a past study discussed their almost constant use and reliance on black and loose fitted clothing to cover and hide their body from others (Klepp & Rysst, 2017). Plus size bodies are not the only ones that have been heavily stigmatized by society.

**The dressed mature body.** For generations mature women’s bodies have also been scrutinized, judged, manipulated and altered in order to conform to societal norms (Bordo, 2004; Rubinstein, 1995). Prior to the 1950’s, mature women were expected to have a mature figure and
to wear appropriate, mature clothing (Dinnerstein & Weitz, 1994). However, acceptance of the mature figure shifted in the late 60’s, largely due to the emphasis placed on the youth ideal (Rubinstein, 1995). By the 70’s and 80’s aging and the characteristics that accompanied getting older were denounced by popular culture. The introduction and acceptance of the youth ideal has lead to many mature women drastically altering their physical appearance in order to appear younger (Dinnerstein & Weitz, 1994). Clothing is one way to achieve a younger appearance.

Researchers have studied the relationship between mature women and their clothing (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011; Jankowski, Diedrichs, Williamson, Christopher, & Harcourt, 2016; Szmigin & Carrigan, 2006). A study of age and body image suggested that many mature women strategically chose age appropriate apparel that made them appear healthy, independent, and to hide any changes in their shape and size, wrinkles, and “sagging skin” (Jankowski et al., 2016). Motivations for dressing shift as women age, researchers suggested that older women no longer dressed their body to attract the opposite sex, they instead wanted to look good for their families and friends (Szmigin & Carrigan, 2006). Similar to plus size women, mature women also had in-depth knowledge of how clothing could be used to cover and hide parts of their body that they did not favor (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011; Thomas & Peters, 2009).

**Public Views on Overweight and Obesity**

Within the last 30 years the topic of overweight and obesity has gained enormous amounts of both negative and positive attention. First, the obesity epidemic, which seemingly accelerated the “war on fat” will be discussed. Followed by the alternative viewpoint of fat acceptance. Finally, current views of plus size women will be detailed.
Obesity epidemic. In 2014 over 1.9 billion adults worldwide were defined as being overweight (BMI 25+) and of those, 600 million adults were classified as being obese (BMI 30+) (WHO, 2016). As of 2014, 13% of the global population were obese and 39% were overweight (WHO, 2016). Body mass index or BMI is an index of weight-to-height that is used to classify overweight and obesity in adults, it is comprised of a person’s weight in kilograms divided by their square height in meters (WHO, 2016, p. 1).

A “Call to Action” was issued in 2001 by the Surgeon General, the report was created to bring attention to and supply possible solutions for the rising rate of overweight and obese individuals (General, 2001). A Call to Action was a report released by the US Public Health Service in order to focus the Nation’s attention on important public health issues (General, 2001). The term “obesity epidemic” was used in a metaphorical sense frequently throughout the call. The term was analyzed by researchers who questioned its use in the report suggesting that, as a metaphor, its purpose was to sound the social alarm bell over rising body weights (Mitchell & McTigue, 2007). The call, which was addressed to the general public, caused an uprising among critics who believed that obesity and weight gain is an individual issue, not a public matter (Mitchell & McTigue, 2007).

Fat acceptance. The call to action from the surgeon general publicly accelerated the “war on fat” and lead to a backlash from individuals who began to challenge the stigma of being overweight and obese (Boero, 2006). A self-proclaimed “fat” population vocalized acceptance of their bodies and encouraged others who were stigmatized by the call to accept their bodies as well (Cooper, 2009). The basis of the Fat Acceptance Movement is to bring awareness and attention to the injustices and discriminations faced by overweight or obese individuals (Brown, 2015). Though the official beginning of the Fat Acceptance Movement predates the internet, it
was suggested that the movement gained noticeable force and popularity when the plus size population began publicly writing blogs and posting online about size acceptance (Cooper, 2009). Over the past 20 years, size acceptance has gained more and more recognition by the mainstream media through online social networks such as personal blogs and Facebook (Brown, 2015).

Much of the Fat Acceptance Movement has taken place online through what is referred to as the “fatosphere”. The fatosphere is defined as a “loosely interconnected network of online resources aimed at creating a safe space where individuals can counter fat prejudice, resist misconceptions of fat, engage in communal experiences and promote positive understandings of fat” (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013, p. 279). The bloggers in this domain rebuke the weight loss industry and instead promote the notion that there is health at every size (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013). Among others, the fatosphere is a place for women to publicly post pictures, discuss how they dress, and promote or advertise for clothing companies that they wear (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013).

Prominent in the fatosphere are fatshionistas. The term “fatshionista” was defined as “fashion lovers who wear plus size clothing” (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2012, p. 1234). Fatshionistas have been some of the most influential participants in the fat acceptance movement, many of them use blogs and social media sites to openly discuss their distaste and dissatisfaction with the plus size market (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2012). Apart from discussing plus size fashion, fatshionistas are front runners in promoting size acceptance (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2012). Many fatshionistas publicly (oftentimes aggressively) denounce the fashion industry and the rules for dressing, one woman expressed:
I’m going to wear horizontal stripes, tight skirts, short dresses, weird textures, a blunt fringe, high heels, skinny jeans, small florals and whatever else takes my fancy, even if a fashion editor would vomit with disgust on sight. I have the choice and I choose to be fat and fucking marvelous, not one or the other. I am fat. That is fine. (Marsh, 2013, para. 28).

The effects of the Fat Acceptance Movement have changed the ways in which plus size individuals are viewed by society.

**Plus Size Women in the Public Eye**

Researchers and theorists agree that mainstream America has consistently favored slender bodies over larger ones (Bordo, 2004; Stearns, 1997). The lack of plus size clothing and contempt for plus size bodies in the media could be attributed to the historical distaste towards those that do not represent the western ideal of thinness (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). “Fatness” has been widely stigmatized (among other characteristics) as unattractive, undesirable, unappealing and ugly (Bordo, 2004; Goffman 1986). As previously discussed, plus size women are considered to have deviant bodies because they do not represent the appearance of thinness and fitness (Klepp & Rysst, 2017).

Many of the societal feelings toward plus size bodies are largely influenced by the fashion industry (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Fashion trends cater to and enforce the traditionally thin and fit female form that has dominated western culture (Rubinstein, 1995). If an overweight woman does not succeed to cultural norms and attempt to disguise her body while in public she can be seen as an object of amusement and a target for discrimination (Chrisler, 2011).

**Plus size models.** Clearly, there is a lack of plus size women in the public eye. And those plus size women that do appear are often idealized forms of plus size. In a study of plus size models in the media, the typical commercial plus model is tall, wears a “women’s size 10 to
16, and portrays a conservative style of appearance” (Czerniawski, 2012 p. 128). Many of the plus size models used are chosen based on the thinness of their face and waist, these smaller models then use body padding to portray the appropriate size (Czerniawski, 2016). The padding method has led to an illusion of seemingly perfect plus size proportions that make up an hourglass shape (Czerniawski, 2016). To achieve this shape, employers (or models) will pad their hips and bust to give the illusion of a plus size figure on a much smaller model (Czerniawski, 2016).

Surprisingly, the typical size for plus models is consistent with the average American woman who is a size 14 (Binkley, 2013). This implies that plus size models are actually the same size as an average woman, they were not representative of actual plus size women. Due to this misrepresentation, women who are over a size 14 (one was a size 26) have been making their debut in mainstream advertising and reclaiming what a “real” plus size woman looks like (Czerniawski, 2016). One suggested leader in the plus size model industry is Tess Holliday. Holliday, who is 5’5” and a size 22, was the first model of that size to be signed by a major modeling agency (Czerniawski, 2016). In 2013, she coined the phrase “effyourbeautystandards” when posting a picture on a social media site and the tag, which supported size and body acceptance, immediately gained popularity among plus size women everywhere (“Tess Holliday,” 2015). In an interview, Holliday expressed the importance of equal size representation stating, “It shows they can do something they want regardless of size. We need to have diversity in mainstream media. Everyone should feel beautiful regardless of size” (Waterflow, 2016, para. 16).

Both thin (ideal) models and plus size models agreed that the fashion industry has extreme expectations of body/beauty standards (Czerniawski, 2012). Like their thin counterparts,
plus size models are under constant pressure to maintain or form their body into the shape an employer needs, which is referred to as “aesthetic labor” (Warhurst et al., 2000; Witz et al., 2003). Aesthetic labor is the act and process of not only display and performance in the workplace but also is a “reproduction of the worker for employment that involves longer term commitment to bodily projects” (Entwistle & Wissinger, 2006, p. 777). Models were seen as major participants in aesthetic labor because the fashion industry uses bodies as currency for market exchange (Czerniawski, 2012).

**Plus size consumers.** As previously stated, the average American woman is 5’4”, weighs roughly 160 pounds, and wears a size 14 (Binkley, 2013; Silverman, 2009; Vesilind, 2009). Typically, plus size clothing in the apparel industry is classified as sizes 14 and above (Bogenrief, 2012). Therefore, a large majority of women today fall within the size range of plus size apparel (Gruys, 2012). In 2008, plus size women spent 18.6 billion on apparel (Kurt Salmon Associates, 2010). However as of 2010, only 17% of apparel in the marketplace catered to plus size females, which does not satisfy the large percentage of the population that is currently defined as plus size (Clifford, 2010).

The shopping environment and buying behaviors for plus size women have been discussed by researchers (Bickle, Burnsed, & Edwards, 2015; Birtwistle & Tsim, 2005; Lozano, 2005). Along with having fewer options in brick and mortar stores, plus size consumers have noted issues with hostility from store employees, unwelcoming store atmospheres, and a lack of attention from sales associates (Lozano, 2005). Many times retailers will carry limited plus size styles in store and a majority of styles are sold online, which displeases plus size consumers (Alexander, Pisut, & Ivanescu, 2012; Clifford, 2010). A study of shopping environment satisfaction for plus size women revealed that friendly and helpful sales associates were one of
the largest influencers of customer satisfaction with a retail store (Bickle, Burnsed, & Edwards, 2015). Despite past research that indicated the need for more plus size clothing in the marketplace, retailers continue to underserve and ignore plus size consumers’ requests for a wider selection of apparel styles (Alexander, Pisut, & Ivanescu, 2012). Popular press authors have also stated that the amount of people categorized as overweight or obese experience a significant lack of clothing options making it the greatest market for potential growth (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2012). Though descriptions of plus size buying habits vary from person to person, many studies have shown that unlike their misses sized counterparts, plus size consumers not only spend more in store, they buy full-priced items that oftentimes are more expensive overall (Kurt Salmon Associates, 2010).

Some retailers have attempted to justify the inadequacies in terms of in-store plus size offerings. One noted reason is issues with increased costs, special machinery, and complicated construction techniques have held back retailers from offering plus sizes (Clifford, 2010). Another common misconception made by retailers is that plus size women are not concerned with fashion as much as they are concerned with concealing the body, this has led to many plus size garments being plain and ill-fitted (Bickle, Burnsed, & Edwards, 2015). Several plus size fashion bloggers have expressed that, when looking through merchandise, misses’ sizes offer a wider selection of styles, color ways, and print options but in the plus size section the same garments will be offered in baggy and monotone colors (Scaraboto & Fisher, 2012). In an article about fashion choice one fatashionista states:

bigger women don’t want massive black tunic tops. They want tight things. They want little shorts they can wear with leggings. They want crop tops. They want to wear what everyone else does (Marsh, 2013, para. 7).
Past dress rules for plus size. Women with bodies that deviate from the cultural norm have been under pressure for generations to dress, maintain, and establish their appearance in ways that popular society deems appropriate (Bordo, 2004; Flugel, 1969). For the following section, “past” is in reference to the time prior to the Surgeon General’s “call to action” in 2001. Past dress rules for the specific silhouette, color, and print for plus size women’s dress will be discussed.

Silhouette. In terms of silhouette for plus size bodies, individuals were advised to wear clothing that either made the form appear slimmer or covered the body to the point of making any “unflattering” shape unrecognizable, all in the pursuit of normalizing the form. (Klepp, 2011). Garments with long sleeves, high necklines and a loose fit were seen to aid in covering undesirable parts of the body (Klepp & Rysst, 2017). Popular press stated that plus size women should not wear skinny jeans or crop tops or sleeveless shirts or anything too fitted and to also stay away from anything too loose, skirts above the knee (Marsh, 2013). Plus size women in the past were advised to stay conservative, classic, and mind their body shapes (Marsh, 2013).

Color and Print. In the past, plus size women were not directed to wear white because it made the figure look large; loud prints and bright colors were seen to draw negative attention to the figure as well (Ratledge, 2017). Plus size women were also told to not wear stripes, and they should stick to the basics, baggy clothing to hide flaws, and no garments with extra fabric like ruffles (Ratledge, 2017). “Bigger” girls should stay away from obnoxious colors, loud prints, and anything shiny or eye catching (Marsh, 2013).

Current plus size dress rules. With the Fat Acceptance Movement and the recent popularization of plus size women, dress rules pertaining to the plus size body have gone through a noticeable change. The dress rules/restrictions for plus size women have decreased
significantly, however, there are still guidelines that bloggers and the popular press suggest following when dressing. One blog about dressing the plus size body stated that an individual should dress in a way that makes them feel comfortable; comfort was the number one priority because when comfortable in your clothes your confidence and self-esteem increase (Ratledge, 2017). In an interview with NPR, *Project Runway* host, Tim Gunn, expressed his understanding for the frustrations that plus size women endure when shopping. He stated that the rules for dressing were consistent whether you were a 2 or a 22, fit and proportion were essential (Gunn, 2016). Other fashion bloggers agreed, fit and well-balanced proportions were essential to creating a flattering shape (Ratledge, 2017; Villaruel, 2013).

*Silhouette.* Consistent across multiple blogs was the popularity of “flaunting your curves”, one blogger stated that you should avoid adding bulk and instead should focus on smoothing out any lumps or bumps to appear sleek and curvy in all the right places (Ratledge, 2017; Villaruel, 2013). Tim Gunn suggested staying away from one piece items, such as jumpsuits and instead focusing on well fitting two piece sets (Gunn, 2016). When buying plus size clothing a goal was to “create a trimmer silhouette that makes the eye go up and down instead of side to side” (Villaruel, 2013, para 3).

*Color and Print.* Several bloggers claimed that bright colors, which previously were avoided, should be worn proudly by plus size women (Ratledge, 2017). Tim Gunn agreed that the use of color was important, pastels could wash someone out while vibrant colors could be more flattering (Gunn, 2016). While large prints were recommended, small prints were discouraged because they drew attention to parts that were not flattering on the body (Villaruel, 2013). Additionally, small prints could appear infantile, too big of a print was also unflattering, but a medium size print proportional to the body was perfect for plus size women (Gunn, 2016).
Mature Women in the Public Eye

A definition of “mature women” could not be found in the academic literature, however, for marketing mature consumers have been defined as those who are 55 years of age and older (Nam et al., 2006). Additionally, baby boomers are considered to be anyone born between the years of 1946 and 1964 (Moody & Sasser, 2012). Therefore, for this research, mature women were defined as being between the ages of 55 and 70. Past studies on seniors express that mature women often view themselves as younger than their chronological age (Szmigin & Carrigan, 2006). Despite their physically aged appearance, many mature women seek clothing that represented their “cognitive” age, which was typically about 20 years younger than their chronological age (Birtwistle & Tsim, 2005). Women who aim to dress their “cognitive age” were also more likely to reject negative stereotypes often associated with being “elderly” (Birtwistle & Tsim, 2005).

Throughout the lifespan women’s bodies go through a plethora of change. First puberty as a young teen, possibly child bearing in the years following, and later menopause, all of which can lead to an increase in fat retention for women (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985). Not only can a woman’s weight change, but her overall shape, height, skin, and other physical characteristics will all most likely alter over her lifetime (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). Compared to earlier generations of mature women, obesity rates are highest among Baby Boomers (Trust for Americas Health, 2010). As this demographic grows and transitions into retirement, so does their demand for more plus size apparel options (Alexander, Pisut & Ivanescu, 2012).

Mature women are often perceived as docile, fragile, weak and even “crazy” (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011). In an issue of AARP on marketing to seniors, participants expressed
that the over-50 population does not want to see, “a gray-haired woman using technology to learn about arthritis” (“AARP”, 2011). Boomers want to be represented in a way that they feel and can relate to (“AARP”, 2011). Researchers agree that mature women are not well represented in mainstream media (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011; Tiggermann & Lynch, 2001).

**Mature models.** Unlike other consumer groups, the figures that represent mature women in the media are not typically labeled as models. Anyone can quickly flip through a fashion magazine and notice the absence of mature women as trendy and stylish fashion figures. Instead, researchers have found that mature women were more likely to relate to women such as professional media figures, former first ladies, and past fashion icons that were prevalent during their youth (Thomas & Peters, 2009). While several mature women noted being influenced by figures who were a similar “chronological” age, others were influenced by women much younger than themselves which aligned more closely to their “cognitive” age. (Thomas & Peters, 2009).

Another researcher suggested that women who compare their bodies to those of models may shift as they age (Grogan, 1999). For example, when a woman was young they related to models who were similar to themselves, and as a woman aged she looked to models who were aging with her (Grogan, 1999). A previous study also that found as a person aged and become heavier, so did their ideal figure in the media (Lamb et al., 1993).

**Mature consumers.** According to the World Health Organization, population estimates suggest that one in four people in North America and other Western countries will be 60 years or older by the year 2020 (World Health Organization, 2015). Due to their growing population, boomers control almost half of the discretionary income in the United States (Moody & Sasser, 2012). Despite the negativity that surrounds aging, older consumers are interested in fashion,
appearance, and have the monetary means and desire to participate in mainstream markets (Solomon & Rabolt, 2004). In a study of mature consumers, researchers found that unlike their younger counterparts, mature consumers were willing to try new brands and they tended to make purchases more compulsively (Birtwistle & Tsim, 2005).

According to a study of body perceptions and mature women, researchers found that even though opinions toward the body stayed relatively consistent across the lifespan of participants, the importance of the body decreases as women get older (Tiggermann & Lynch, 2001). A study of body image revealed that clothing played an important role in how mature women viewed themselves (Liechty, 2012). Many of the women in the study expressed that although they might be dissatisfied with their mature body, they could use appropriate clothing to present themselves to others and feel positive about their appearance (Liechty, 2012).

Retailers and apparel companies have largely ignored their mature customer base due to the pursuit of a younger customer (Solomon & Rabolt, 2004). Despite their financial position, marketers and retailers often overlook the “boomer” population, the attention they do pay is typically made up of ads for age specific financial and health products (“AARP,” 2011). Retailers have expressed that many brands stay away from marketing to boomers in order to avoid “aging” their brand (“AARP,” 2011). When discussing fashion companies and retailers that target her age group, a boomer in AARP stated that “fashion is hopeless” (“AARP,” 2011 para. 8). She felt that the brands and labels she was loyal to for much of her adult life seemed to no longer be interested in her business because of her age (“AARP,” 2011).

Few research studies have been conducted on dissatisfactions with clothing retailers among mature consumers (Birtwistle & Tsim, 2005). However, researchers have found that mature women respond positively to amiable store employees, accessible and comfortable
changing rooms, and pain free returns (Birtwistle & Tsim, 2005). Mature women noted that they avoided chain stores for several reasons; distaste towards overfilled merchandise racks, narrow aisle ways, unhelpful staff, and poor sizing kept them from purchasing (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011). In the same study, all participants felt they were “too plump” for many of the styles in the marketplace, they were also dissatisfied and confused by sizing guides (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011).

**Past mature dress rules.** For plus size women, a noticeable shift can be seen between past (20 years ago) and present dress rules. However, for mature women the sanctions or unwritten rules that governed dress in the past have not gone through a drastic change. Since the present study is geared towards women who are members of the Boomer generation, the following section will discuss the dress rules many mature women follow.

Even though specific dress rules were not found; overall modes of dressing and the images women aimed to create through dress were discussed by researchers (Thomas & Peters, 2009). Almost all of the mature participants in Thomas and Peters (2009) study expressed the importance of always being put together. This oftentimes extended past the use of clothing and also encapsulated the importance of “wearing high heels, hosiery, and jewelry in addition to having their hair, make-up and nails done” (Thomas & Peters, 2009, p. 1032).

**Current mature dress rules.** As a woman ages and her body changes, so does her preferences for clothing. Multiple participants in a study of mature women and clothing identity expressed that although they still wanted to be stylish, they did not follow the most current fashion trends closely because “trendy styles” seemed to be for young girls, they were not targeted at mature women (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011). Several noted dress rules for mature women emphasized: high quality construction, flexible fit, flattering shape, a wide
variety of sizes, and organic fabrics that are soft and breathable (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011). Similar to dress rules for plus size women, emphasis was placed on comfortable clothes that felt good and made individuals feel well dressed (Klepp, 2008). An article in AARP’s Style and Beauty section provided some insight into how women 50 years old and older should dress (Grufferman, 2013). The author stated that older women should fight frump and instead look intelligent, “energetic, youthful and appropriate” (Grufferman, 2013, para. 3).

**Silhouette.** Mature women in a study of clothing identity expressed that clothing should make one look leaner and taller, the overall design could aid in hiding or disguising less desirable parts of one’s body (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011). It was suggested that women over 50 should wear knee length skirts and dresses, they should define their waist, and keep silhouettes classic and tailored (Grufferman, 2013).

**Color and Print.** Several participants in a study of maturing body image expressed that colored clothing has gained importance as they aged, the overall consensus being that certain colors can elicit positive responses from those around them (Liechty, 2012). In another study of clothing identity, participants agreed that color played a large role in terms of purchasing apparel (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011). Many of the participants stated that color was more important as an older woman than it was as a younger woman, they expressed that while vibrant colors were preferable, “black and brown” were more appropriate for older people (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011). An article in AARP suggests that solids should take the place of loud and distracting prints for women 50 and over (Grufferman, 2013).

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study consisted of two theories. First, was Erving Goffman’s dramaturgy (1959). Second, was Guy and Banim’s (2000) conceptual categories of
the woman I want to be, the woman I fear I could be, and the woman I am most of the time. Both theories aided in understanding the topic at hand.

Dramaturgy

Dramaturgy grew out of the theory of symbolic interaction which, aimed to understand both verbal and nonverbal communication through the use of symbols and signs in social environments (Blumer, 1969). “Dramaturgy,” a term used by many scholars, refers to the theory brought forth by Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1959). Goffman (1959) interpreted human behavior as a type of “performance” that occurred in an individual’s everyday life. Goffman (1959) believed that, depending on the social environment in which a person exists, different identities were created by the individual to “perform” their role. The dramaturgical approach has two keys factors that contributed to an individual’s constructed identity: settings and fronts.

**Setting.** The “setting” was the area in which a performance occurred (Goffman, 1959). Goffman (1959) discussed two major areas in which social interaction took place: the “front region” and the “back region”. The front region is “the place where the performance is given” (Goffman, 1959, p.107). In contrast, the back region is where all the tools and items used to construct an individual’s identity are stored, this is also where “the performance of a routine is prepared” (Goffman, 1959, p. 238). In the back region an individual can be their “private” self, they are not acting or performing a role for a specific audience.

**Fronts.** A “front” which is defined by Goffman (1959) as, “part of the individual’s performance, which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situations for those who observe the performance” (p. 22). An individual wears a “front” when they appear in public spaces (i.e. front region). When an individual is in the front region they are aware of the
expectations and norms of the audience; therefore, since they are being watched, the individual will act or “perform” accordingly. The individuals who do not perform in accordance to their audience often receive a negative response. Fronts can also include, “insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like (Goffman, 1959, p. 22).

**Appearance management.** Gregory Stone (1975) attempted to broaden the interpretation of symbolic interaction by studying in depth the symbols that create an individual’s appearance. His work was primarily focused on appearance management. Goffman, (1959) defined appearance simply as the, “identification of one another” (p.80). Appearance is typically communicated by non-verbal symbols such as, “gestures, grooming, clothing, location, and the like (Stone, 1975). Elaborating on Goffman’s definition, Stone (1975) stated that appearance “is the establishment of identity, value, mood, and attitude for the one who appears by the coincident programs and reviews awakened by his appearance” (p. 81). Stone (1975) believed that dress greatly contributed to the construction of identity and the “development of a sense of self”. Acquisition of identities can occur through social interactions in social, biological, and physical settings (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992).

Dress and the symbols surrounding it play a vital, non-verbal role in an individual’s appearance management and interaction with their environment. Stone (1975) suggests that there are two types of audience responses for an individual’s dress. First, “responses made about the wearer of clothes by others” which are referred to as “reviews” and second, “responses made about the wearer by the wearer”, referred to as “programs” (Stone, 1975, p. 81). Positive responses to both reviews and programs can lead to an individual (the wearer) feeling “validated
or established” however, when the responses are negative, the individual can feel challenged which in turn can lead to a lowered sense of self for the wearer (Stone, 1975).

**Past research.** Past research has utilized the theory of dramaturgy and symbolic interaction; however, in relation to the current study, examples of both plus size and mature women will be discussed in terms of settings, fronts (Goffman, 1959), and appearance management (Stone, 1975).

An example of plus size women related to settings may be found among participants in a study by Klepp and Rysst (2017). A 30-year-old participant stated that she preferred clothing that made her feel “thinner than usual,” but what she wore always depended on who she was going to see or “hang out with” (Klepp & Rysst, 2017, p. 91). This participant discussed that when she dressed herself, she constantly considered the social environment she would be apart of that day (Klepp & Rysst, 2017). Multiple participants also discussed their attraction to “black, loose fitted” clothing because it could hide the size of their body from others (Klepp & Rysst, 2017).

An example of fronts could be drawn from participants in a study of modest dress by Lewis (2015). A Muslim participant discussed that post 9/11 America was not kind to those that donned the hijab in public, so in order to “perform” in accordance to societal norms and expectations, she chose to not wear her hijab outside of her “private” space (Lewis, 2015). Another participant also discussed that, in order to elicit positive responses from her audience, she wore her head scarf when attending Muslim conferences but removed it when participating with non-Muslims (Lewis, 2015). Additionally, plus size participants in the study by Klepp and Rysst (2017) always dressed in accordance to their body. For these participants, their deviant bodies were suggested to be the fixed aspect of their performance and the concept of “beauty ideals” was the public space in which they dressed accordingly (Klepp & Rysst, 2017). The plus
size participants used clothing to hide the parts of their bodies they knew were not viewed as socially acceptable in an attempt to stave off negative responses from their audience (Klepp & Rysst, 2017). Because of the participants innate knowledge of what society valued, it was suggested that the, “women with deviant bodies are actually very competent in dressing their bodies according to dominant bodily ideals” (Klepp & Rysst, 2017, p. 93).

An example of appearance management can be drawn from participants in a study of mature women by Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa (2011). Consistent among most of the interviewees was the notion that, since they were aging, clothing became one of the most important (controllable) factors in managing their appearance (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011). In this study, age appropriateness was one of the biggest factors in determining what to wear. Even though some cognitively felt 10-15 years younger, they consciously chose to wear clothing that they knew the public eye would perceive as “age appropriate” (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011).

**Application of Dramaturgy to Present Study.**

Dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959) has been used to analyze and interpret critical information about motivations between the self and dress. In the present study fronts and settings were analyzed by determining how mature plus size women used dress in the public and private regions of their life. In front regions, participants may have opted to dress in more conservative, loose fitted, or black clothing. In the back region, participants may have been more inclined to wear whatever they felt comfortable wearing. In this study, the aspects of fronts, which included characteristics of appearance such as age, gender, and the body itself, were analyzed in relation to the participants' mature plus size bodies. In relation to the current study, appearance
management was used to better understand how mature plus size women viewed, adjusted, and managed their identity through clothing throughout their lifetime.

**Women and Dress Conceptual Categories**

The work of Guy and Banim (2000) is also rooted in symbolic interactionism. In this study, three categories were developed to describe women’s relationship with clothing and appearance management behaviors. The first was “*the woman I want to be*”, this section described how clothing was identified and used to “enhance or project a positive image” (p. 316). Conversely, the second category, “*the woman I fear I could be*” was created to describe when clothing had failed to create, “a desired look or unintentionally reflected a negative self-presentation” (p. 319). The last category, “*the woman I am most of the time*” was comprised of ideas about “general appearance and how women thought about themselves in their everyday relationship with their clothes” (Guy & Banim, 2000, p. 323).

**The woman I want to be.** In this category, women discussed clothing that could create an image of successfulness. Women who felt positively because they “looked good” perceived their image as successful. *The woman I want to be* consisted of two subthemes: making a good impression and useful clothes and favorite things (Guy & Banim, 2000).

Of high importance was making a good impression through clothing, women discussed the ability to create an image that “attracted a degree of attention but without detracting from the overall aim of creating a positive impression” (p.316). Women agreed that, while the desired image should be distinctive, it should also be “appropriate to the situation” (p. 316). Social contexts, such as formal events and professional environments were discussed in terms of clothing use. In social environments the women’s underlying goal was to create a good impression and maintain their individuality. In the work place, women desired clothing to
convey “qualities about themselves which were valued in the work environment” such as competence, intelligence, and ability (Guy & Banim, 2000, p. 316).

Secondly, the subtheme “useful clothes and favorite things” discussed the items or elements of clothing that women could depend on for creating the “the woman I want to be”. Useful clothes was comprised of the pieces that women were confident would “look good on them” and which also were “easily managed” by the wearer (p. 318). In discussing this subtheme one participant expressed her love of “white t-shirts”, she knew exactly what the item looked like on and she recognized the ease and comfort of wearing it (p. 318). In these cases, past experience with the quality of clothing, as well as, specific colors and styles were considered by women when determining which pieces were useful in creating the identity they wanted to display (Guy & Banim, 2000).

**The woman I fear I could be.** In this category women discussed clothing or items they recalled being anxious about or dissatisfied with wearing. This category also encompassed, “the woman I don’t want to be, the woman I want to hide from others or, at its worst, the woman I fear I really am” (p. 319). This discourse also consisted of two subthemes, unintentional reactions and concealing or being constrained (Guy & Banim, 2000).

In “unintentional reactions” women discussed how their clothing had failed at providing the kind of reaction they expected from those around them. The unwanted responses caused them to feel misplaced, out of control, and judged. More specifically, women discussed how their particular clothing choices lead to unwanted sexual responses from men leading to many of the participants feeling “sexually objectified” (p. 319). When recalling past memories of clothing, several women stated that negative reactions during childhood and adolescence from others caused them to be more “clothes conscious” (Guy & Banim, 2000).
In the second section, “concealing or being constrained”, women described times when they used clothes to try to “conceal parts of their body that they were dissatisfied with” (p. 320). Many of them discussed how, over time, they recognized what styles or types of clothing to avoid when dressing their particular body. Although many of them were not dissatisfied with their weight, when discussing changes in body shape and “fit,” several women stated that when they were having a “fat day” they deliberately chose clothes that could conceal or “hide” their body (Guy & Banim, 2000).

The woman I am most of the time. The final category, “the woman I am most of the time”, discussed women’s relationships to the clothing they wear everyday. This discourse had two subthemes, images in transition and history through clothes (Guy & Banim, 2000).

The first subtheme, images of transition, revealed that women’s interactions with their clothing did not create a singular “image of themselves” (p. 323). Instead the participants discussed a need for balance between “images they found acceptable and the practical demands they faced in their daily lives” (Guy & Banim, 2000, p. 323). Clothing choice was more related to the availability of clothing and the situation or context in which a woman may encounter and need to create an appropriate image (Guy & Banim, 2000). An example could be seen in a participant who expressed that since she has aged she has become more interested in comfort and service as opposed to style. However, in relation to style she expressed, “that does not mean that style doesn’t matter. It does but the style must follow comfort and purpose now, whereas I can easily remember a time when style came first” (p. 321). For many of the participants, there were several “shifts” that occurred throughout their life that caused the relationship between their image and their clothing to be questioned. One major shift was that of “radical changes in their
body shape” (p. 321). For example, one participant discussed how child bearing and general aging of her body caused her to readjust how she used clothing (Guy & Banim, 2000).

In the second subtheme, “history through clothes” women expressed how their clothing “traveled” through their closet (p. 322). The clothing was typically bought for a certain purpose and after serving that purpose the items were either replaced with something new or worn in a different context. When asked to describe an article of clothing that now serves a different purpose one participant recalled a floral dress saying, “I used to wear it for the weekend. Now it’s sort of demoted for going to work because I feel comfortable in it” (p. 322). This section also shed light on the emotional attachment to certain clothing. Women discussed how an outfit could be invested with past memories of themselves and by holding onto that item, a women felt able to maintain her old identity while also constructing a new one (Guy & Banim, 2000).

**Relation to Past Research**

Women and their relationships with clothing has been studied (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011; Lewis, 2015; Klepp & Rysst, 2017). For the current study, research which lends itself directly to the three categories stated above will be discussed. In the sections to follow, mature women and the three categories will be discussed followed by plus size women and their potential relation to the three categories.

**Plus size women.** Results from a study of plus size dress by Klepp and Rysst (2017) can provide examples for each Guy and Banim (2000) category. In relation to “the woman I want to be” plus size women discussed how they created a good impression and what clothing they perceive to have useful elements. Many of the participants discussed that they felt most comfortable in loose fitting and black clothing. One woman in particular stated that she used loose clothing because, as an intellectual, she wanted to display herself as “only a head” which
she realized forced others to ignore her body (p. 92). In doing so, this participant felt successful because she was able to manage the kind of impression she was conveying (Klepp & Rysst, 2017). Another participant discussed her preference for clothes that make her feel thinner than she actually was, which made her feel confident and in control.

Most of the examples for “the woman I fear I could be” found are in direct reference to “being constrained or concealed.” Consistent among all participants in the study was the knowledge of the color black and its ability to make the body appear smaller. One participant stated because of her large stomach and arms, “I have a very simple and easy style of clothing, I have only black shirts and black trousers and black socks…it saves me from too much work” (p. 92). While other plus size participants simply wore loose and dark clothing, one woman avoided social situations all together because of her size. She chose to forgo others’ gaze completely by choosing to “not participate in certain events” such as large parties or gatherings (Klepp & Rysst, 2017, p. 94).

The last category, “the woman I am most of the time” can be seen by the participants' suggested “acceptance” of their body. Interestingly, many of the participants discussed how, as their weight has increased, they put less of an emphasis on appearance in general. In “downplaying appearance,” participants expressed that they, “ignore the body as an important part of themselves” (p. 89). Similar to the mature women discussed previously, the plus size participants used clothing as a way to cope with a shifting body shape. Also consistent with mature women was the importance of comfort in clothing. Comfort was synonymous with “confidence” however for plus size women “social comfort” was actually the underlying goal as opposed to “physical comfort” (Klepp & Rysst, p. 93).
**Mature women.** Examples from the participants in a study by Holmlund, Hagman and Polsa (2011) were directly related to the three Guy and Banim categories (2000). First, examples of “the woman I want to be” are discussed. Several of the participants stated that they were very interested in keeping up with the latest fashion trends because “new fashionable clothes could cheer them up and make them feel better about themselves” (p. 111). One in particular, stated that, “following fashion keeps me alert and makes me a modern representative of a mature group- it gives me a sense of individuality at distinguished occasions and at work” (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011, p. 111). Thus, these mature women utilized clothing to help them become “the woman I want to be.”

In terms of, “the woman I fear I could be” many of women agreed that they deliberately chose clothing styles or colors that they knew could “hide” or disguise one or multiple aspects of their body that they did not like (p. 112). One participant discussed how awareness of her body has changed over time stating that:

> several years I bought something I didn’t wear at all. When I was younger I often made that kind of mistake, did not notice what colors or styles suited me. But it doesn’t happen anymore, I know what suits me and what doesn’t” (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011, p. 115).

In this case, these women expressed clothing items that created “the woman I fear I could be”.

For the final category, “the woman I am most of the time”, several mature women discussed that, with the changes in their body shape, they have been forced to form new ways of dressing their body. Fluctuation in body weight and replacing a worn-out item were seen as the main reasons for purchasing new clothes. In relation to the section of “history through clothes”, many of the participants stated that they have kept certain items for many years because, even though their current identity does not align with their past ones, the memories they have with the clothing are critical in maintaining their current self (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011).
Application of Guy and Banim to Present Study.

The categories brought forth by Guy and Banim (2000) were used to better understand the relationship that the participants had with their clothing. For participants in the present study, “the woman I want to be” aided in understanding the types of dress mature plus size women used to elicit positive responses from those around them. It was also used to determine what kinds of dress rules including silhouettes and colors were seen as being “successful” for mature plus size women. For “the woman I fear I could be” section, responses from the participants were used to discuss areas of the body (if any) mature plus size women actively used clothing to “conceal” or cover. It was also useful in determining how participants used certain clothing to cope with “unintentional” responses. Finally, in reference to “the woman I am most of the time” participant’s responses shed light on how plus size women managed dressing their body as their shape changed over their lifetime.

Conclusion

As both a consumer group and subject of research, mature plus size women are largely ignored. However, they should be treated as valuable contributors to the fashion industry and academic literature. The present study aimed to understand the dress rules and body perceptions of mature plus size women.
CHAPTER 3. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to examine dress rules and body perceptions among mature plus size women over their lifetimes. More specifically, the current study aimed to closely examine and understand dress rules and body perceptions as they pertained to mature (55-70) plus size (at least a size 14) women. A theoretical framework of dramaturgy from Erving Goffman (1959) was utilized, as well as the conceptual categories developed by Alison Guy and Maura Banim (2000), *the woman I want to be, the woman I fear I could be, and the woman I am most of the time*.

The current research was explored using the following research questions:

1. What are the dress rules and body perceptions of mature plus size women?
2. How do dress rules and body perceptions relate to the theory of dramaturgy?
3. How do dress rules and body perceptions relate to the categories of Guy and Banim?
4. How do dress rules and body perceptions change over the lifetime of a participant?
5. What influences plus size styles for mature plus size women?

Specific Objectives

The following objectives were developed based on the purpose statement and research questions:

- To explore the dress rules and body perceptions of mature plus size women.
- To determine how the dress rules and body perceptions of plus-size women changed over their lifetime.
- To explore the major influences on the styles of mature plus-size women.
• To determine how the dress-rules and body perceptions of mature plus size women relate to dramaturgy and the categories purposed by Guy and Banim
• To contribute to the literature surrounding mature plus size women

Pilot testing

A pilot study was conducted to ensure that the data collected was appropriate to explore the research questions and objectives of this study. The pilot study was used to test the pre-interview survey (Appendix B) and interview schedule (Appendix A) as well as the researcher’s interviewing skills to be better prepared for data collection (Orcher, 2005). One mature plus size woman participated in the pilot study. After the pilot test was concluded, the data were analyzed. After analysis of the pilot interview, several of the questions in the interview schedule were adjusted to be more understandable.

Sample Selection

The researcher aimed to gather a sample of 15-20 plus size participants between the ages of 55-70. In addition to currently being plus size, participants must have also been plus size (overweight¹) as a teen/young adult (ages 15-25). Participant selection was not geographically specific; the researcher aimed to collect multi-regional data in the hopes of possibly discovering any cultural/geographical differences among participants. However, all participants were residents of the United States.

In order to attract potential participants several steps were taken. A call or flyer (see Appendix C) was posted on popular plus size and mature style forums on the social networking site www.facebook.com. This method of eliciting participants was found to be successful by other researchers (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Snowball sampling was also employed. Snowball

¹ The term “overweight” will be used for the past body size of the participants as the term “plus size” is relatively new and may not be recognized in relation to the past experiences of the participants
sampling is a method of participant selection that can be used when a research topic aims to study, “hard-to-find types of individuals” (Orcher, 2005, p. 118).

**Data Collection**

Data collection began after IRB approval from the Human Research Subjects Committee at Louisiana State University. Upon approval, the researcher posted flyers which asked potential participants to email if they were interested and met the sample qualifications. The researcher sent interested participants the pre-interview survey to determine if they met the sampling criteria, then an interview time was set. Since the participants were multi-regional, the researcher conducted the interviews through Skype, FaceTime, and phone calls depending on the preferences and availability of the participant.

The study began with an emailed pre-interview survey to identify body shape and gather other demographic information. Since sizing scales, weight to height ratio, and general interpretations of plus size, overweight and obesity are subjective and not easily defined (Romeo, 2013; Alexander, Pisut & Ivanescu, 2012) the participants were asked to choose a silhouette that best resembled their body shape as a young adult and one that most closely matched their current shape.

Next, semi-structured web based interviews were conducted with each participant. The researcher recognized that discussion of weight and size could be a sensitive topic, therefore the researcher began the interview with several questions to establish rapport with the participants, this hopefully ensured that participants felt comfortable and confident (Orcher, 2005). Due to the exploratory nature of the study, additional questions and discussion were permitted if they were deemed beneficial to the research objectives. The researcher also asked the participants to share
any photos of favorite outfits after the interview concluded. The participants were asked to email the photos to the researcher following the interview.

**Data Analysis**

Three sources of data were gathered as part of this research including information from the pre-interview surveys, semi-structured interviews, and photos of the participants. The written comments from participants were analyzed using constant comparison method. The quantitative survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and frequencies generated with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS™). The photos were used as a supplementary source of data to aid with the participants' discussion of favorite clothing from the past and present.

Transcripts were generated for each participant. Each interview was individually labeled with a designated code for each participant. The researcher read each transcript multiple times to familiarize herself with the data prior to analysis. All data collected was analyzed using the constant comparison method, which is defined as one which involves the “researcher identifying incidents, events, and activities and constantly comparing them to an emerging category to develop and saturate the category” (Creswell, 2007, p. 238). Constant comparison consists of three types of coding, each assisted in identifying, examining, and organizing the data into specific units.

The first step is concept identification through open coding, this consists of the researcher identifying data that focuses on a similar phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 516). Then, larger categories will be produced by grouping similar concepts together (Strauss & Corbin, 2009). A code book was produced with instructions and criteria that apply to each code (Gibson & Brown, 2009).
After open coding, the researcher utilized axial coding, which is the process of making connections between categories and subcategories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 516). During this stage larger, abstract and more encompassing categories will be created that are responsive to the social context of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To successfully accomplish axial coding, the researcher identified linkages between categories and subcategories and then examined consistencies or patterns within the linkages (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The third and final step in the constant comparison method is selective coding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Selective coding involves identifying core categories and comparing them to other categories, which will validate relationships as well as determine if any category is in need of further development (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

These three forms of coding enabled the researcher to identify emergent themes. The researcher compared these emergent themes to the chosen theoretical framework.

**Validity and Trustworthiness**

Though many strategies to increase validity exist, the researcher chose to use triangulation. Triangulation refers to using multiple data sources in order to build a solid justification of themes within a similar data set (Creswell, 2009, p. 191). The use of multiple data sources enables the researcher to establish validity and trustworthiness by showing commonalities over a variety of sources (Gibson & Brown, 2009).

This study utilized three forms of data for triangulation. The first source was the pre-interview survey emailed to participants prior to the interview. The second source was the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews with the participants. The third and final set of data came from supplementary pictures of outfits provided by the participants. The photos were
utilized primarily as a recall device but they also served to visually highlight the favorite outfits of the participants.

When analyzing data from the interviews, the researcher utilized a secondary audit-coder to help establish reliability. After the researcher (first coder) analyzed the data using the constant comparison method, intercoder reliability was calculated by having a second coder examine the interpretations and conclusions made by the first coder (Creswell, 2009). To indicate reliability in qualitative research, 80% consistency is expected between the two sets of codes (Creswell, 2009). The calculation for consistency between coders is:

\[
\frac{\text{Agreements} - \text{Disagreements}}{\text{Agreements}} \times 100 = \text{Reliability}
\]

For the present study, the one interview transcript was utilized for calculating intercoder reliability. The researcher (first coder) coded two interview transcripts and created a code book. Next, the audit coder with a similar research background utilized the codebook to code the same transcript. The two sets of coding were compared and then intercoder reliability was calculated. For this study, 85% consistency between the coders occurred, therefore reliability was reached.
CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

The purpose of this research was to understand the dress rules and body perceptions of mature plus size women (MPSW). Three sources of data (pre-interview participant survey, semi-structured interviews, and pictures of past outfits) were analyzed in an attempt to understand the dress rules and body perceptions of MPSW. Sixteen MPSW participated in the pre-interview survey and semi-structured interview, and four of them provided past pictures of outfits. Results will be displayed in the order of which they were collected. First, demographic data and frequencies of past and present body shape will be displayed. Next, the major themes and subthemes from the interviews will be discussed. To conclude, pictures of past outfits from the participants will be examined.

Participant Demographics

The pre-interview survey (see appendix B) was distributed via e-mail prior to the semi-structured interview and collection of past outfit pictures. Sixteen MPSW completed the survey. Data collected was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS™). Both demographic information and body shape identification were examined using frequencies and descriptive statistics. Since a goal of this research was to understand MPSW over their lifetimes, the pre-interview survey was used to gather demographic information from both the past and present. The “past” referred to the period when participants were between the ages of 15 and 25.

Demographics of the participant sample are shown in Table 4.1. The participants were between the ages of 52 and 72 years old. The participant age range was broad, with the highest reoccurrence of age being 66 (n=3, 18%). The current region in which participants resided varied as well, with a majority (n=6, 37%) of the women living in the central states, four (25%) living in the southeast, four (25%) living in the northeast, and two (12%) living in the northwest.
Regions in which participants lived between the ages of 15 and 25 were similar to where they lived currently. Compared to their current location, three participants lived in different regions in the past. The majority of participants resided in central states (n=5, 31%) in the past.

Current average income was diverse, with a majority (n=6, 37%) making an average of $50,001-$75,000 per year and five (31%) making an average of $35,001-$50,000 per year. Participants’ past income differed with five (31%) being between $20,001-$35,000 and four (25%) falling between $50,001-$75,000. All of the participants had at least some college education (n=4, 25%), with five having a master’s degree (31%). One participant (6%) was fully retired, while three other participants (18%) were officially retired, but were working or volunteering at various places.
Table 4.1  
Demographics of participant sample of MPSW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants (n=16)</th>
<th>Region (n=16)</th>
<th>Income (n=16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (n=16)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Current</strong></td>
<td><strong>Current</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Northwest</td>
<td>&lt;$20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>12% (n=2)</td>
<td>0% (n=0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>12% (n=2)</td>
<td>$20,001-$35,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>12% (n=2)</td>
<td>$35,001-$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>6% (n=1)</td>
<td>$50,001-$75,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>12% (n=2)</td>
<td>$75,001-$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>6% (n=1)</td>
<td>&gt;$100,001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>6% (n=1)</td>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>18% (n=3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>6% (n=1)</td>
<td>Past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>$20,001-$35,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>$35,001-$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>$50,001-$75,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>$75,001-$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;$100,001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Education (n=16)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Employment (n=16)</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>25% (n=4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>18% (n=3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>31% (n=5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Degree</td>
<td>6% (n=1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral Degree</td>
<td>18% (n=3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information was also gathered using the pre-interview survey about the past and present body shape of each participant. Six body shapes, shown in Figure 4.1, were provided ranging from one (smallest) to six (largest). First, participants were asked to choose the shape that represented their body between the ages of 15 and 25. Next, participants were asked to identify the shape which most accurately represented their body now. Results, which are displayed in Table 4.2, indicated that the current body shape of the participants varied with a majority (n=8, 50%) of the women classifying themselves as body shape five. The past body shape differed
substantially from the current shape, with a majority \((n=7, 43\%)\) of the women classifying themselves as shape three and six \((37\%)\) classifying themselves as shape two. One participant fluctuated between a three, two, one and smaller between the ages of 15-25 due to a medical condition. In general, the participants indicated that they were smaller in the past then they were in the present.

![Figure 4.1](image)

**Body Shapes Scale**

**Table 4.2**

Classification of body shape for MPSW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past Body Shape</th>
<th>Current Body Shape</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0% ((n=0))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>37% ((n=6))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>43% ((n=7))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6% ((n=1))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>12% ((n=2))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0% ((n=0))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interview Data**

Data collected from the interviews was analyzed using the three stages of coding that are part of the constant comparison method. The three major themes which emerged from the data were: past clothing experiences, current clothing experiences, and favorite outfits. Due to
unforeseen complications with video conferencing technology, the semi-structured interviews were conducted in a variety of ways. Five interviews were conducted over the phone, eight were conducted using video conferencing software (Skype, FaceTime, Zoom), and three were conducted in person. Despite technological difficulties, all interviews were recorded and transcribed with an equal amount of precision. Each interview lasted an average of 25 minutes, with 35 minutes being the longest and 14 minutes being the shortest. Each interview yielded approximately 7-9 pages of single spaced transcription with a total of 115 pages of transcribed data. Additionally, each participant was given the option to include photos of their favorite outfits. Of the 16 participants, four provided multiple pictures which resulted in 12 photographs, three of which were analyzed and shown in the following section.

Due to the nature of the research, the themes were separated and discussed into two areas which included: past clothing experiences, and current clothing experiences. First, past clothing experiences, which included: style influences, shopping, and unsuccessful clothing will be addressed. Next, current clothing experiences which included: good clothing, bad clothing, style influences, and shopping will be described. Third, descriptions of favorite outfits and supporting photographs will be analyzed. Finally, participant’s perceptions of the media which included: society values, media and plus size woman, and media and mature women will be addressed.

**Past Clothing Experiences**

All of the participants discussed the experiences they had with clothing between the ages of 15 and 25. First, style influencers will be addressed. Then participants’ recollections of past shopping experiences and clothing availability will be described.

**Style influences.** MPSW discussed a variety of factors that influenced the ways in which they dressed while between the ages of 15 and 25. Over half of the participants expressed that
their mother was their biggest style influence in the past. Friends and cost of clothing were also discussed frequently as being influential during this time. Other influences such as: celebrities, school uniforms, and fashion magazines, were mentioned.

Though a large number of participants described their mother as influential, opinions were split among the MPSW who recalled them being either a positive influence or a negative influence. For some, their mother’s opinions and advice was perceived as valuable and important. One participant discussed her mother’s personal style. She recalled, “she did a lot with color… so I think my love of color came from her” (Participant 5).

However, most of the MPSW agreed that, though their mothers probably meant well, they often did not offer the best advice or give the most positive evaluations of dress. One participant explained, “my mom taught me how I shouldn’t dress because she told me I couldn’t wear certain things” (Participant 4). Other participants also commented on ways they felt their mother “taught” them to dress. As one mature plus size woman recalled, “I had a lot of coaching from my mother. She was always coaching me as to what looked youthful… and what she thought looked youthful, I usually thought looked matronly” (Participant 13). Several participants recalled instances in which they did not follow their mothers’ style advice. One participant joked:

I do remember in high school that I did choose a dress that was red and white. It was a pattern and my mom was like, ‘I wouldn’t wear that if I were you’, and I said, ‘well…ok, but you’re not me and I think it looks nice so I’m going to wear it’ (Participant 10).

Another participant simply stated she, “wore whatever mom said” (Participant 6).

Several participants discussed friends and peers as being notably influential during this time as well. Many of the participants who discussed friends as influencers usually did so in regards to “fitting in” during their middle and high school years. Participant 16 recalled, “I was
more interested in looking like the others girls but I would have been interested in that no matter what they were wearing. It had more to do with fitting in than with a particular look” (Participant 16). Another participant explained that, even though her friends influenced her, she did not usually care what they told her. She explained:

   you always had your friends and you always got opinions and went shopping… and you thought, ‘oh what do you think’, but you know I bought what I thought looked good even though they might not have but I probably bought it anyways (Participant 2).

Clearly, some of the participants had strong memories of shopping with friends and as discussed in the next section, shopping in general.

Shopping. Two participants expressed that they did not recall any overly negative experiences as a teen or young adult in terms of shopping. However, a majority of the MPSW interviewed remembered specifically what was available, and what it was like to shop as an overweight young woman in the 60’s and 70’s. Many of the participants who recalled past shopping experiences typically agreed that the act of buying clothing was usually disappointing and oftentimes close to impossible.

Two of the most popular locations for being able to find clothing was Sears and JC Penney’s. As one participant recalled her experience, “as a child...we had chubettes at Sears, and talk about offensive… I mean I’ve always been overweight and my mother was not so she was horrified by the whole prospect, so we did a lot of chubbette shopping” (Participant 15). Another participant joked as she reflected on her Sears experiences, “The size ranges had names. I remember my brother’s sizes were called Huskies and then the girl’s sizes were called chubbies” (Participant 13). The theme of offensively named sizing was not restricted to Sears. Two other participants recalled sizes having a “W” (woman) placed at the end of the number. Another recalled a shopping trip as a pre-teen to a store called “Catherine’s Stout Shop”. She explained,
“I remember feeling embarrassed to go into a place for people designated as stout, and unfortunately the clothes were very matronly looking which only added to my discomfort” (Participant 8).

Additionally, almost half of the participants also discussed “custom” clothing as being a large part of their childhood wardrobes. While most of these participants recalled their mother making or altering clothing for them as children, a few others discussed making their own clothing as young adults. Reasons for making clothing was different between all the MPSW interviewed, however most frequently discussed was the lack of clothing options in the marketplace.

While one participant suggested it was a generational characteristic, she stated, “I made most of my own clothes. You know, I’m of that generation and I like to sew” (Participant 6). Several others discussed feeling more forced into handmade clothing. Participant 12 illustrated, “when I was in grammar school I was wearing women’s clothing and there were no options, so my mother and I made clothing” (Participant 12).

Two more participants expressed that the lack of options sparked their interest in learning to sew. One participant recalled:

my proportions were not the kind of thing where I could just go into a store and easily find something that would fit me well… which is why I learned how to sew and I started designing on my own (Participant 7).

Another participant expressed that she learned to alter clothing to fit her better. She expressed, “I would often buy things and then modify them… so buy bigger and sculpt it down” (Participant 3).

A majority of participants went into detail about the clothing available to them as children and young adults. Finding clothes that fit properly and was not “matronly” was most
frequently discussed among participants. Additionally, almost half of the participants also suggested that industry sizing has changed from the past.

Many of the MPSW recalled that finding clothing in the children’s or juniors department was never an option. One woman expressed, “I would have to go into the women’s section if we went into a department store. I was never in what would be considered the area that most people would go to, even as a teen” (Participant 8). Another discussed that she was forced into the women’s section, not solely because of her weight, but because of her drastic proportional difference. She explained:

When I was in grammar school I was taller and larger than everybody else and there were few children’s clothing stores that carried, as my mother would say ‘junior plenty’ sizes, and I know that in 5th or 6th grade we were shopping in the women’s section because I was already wearing a 38E bra (Participant 12).

Several participants described available clothing as “dowdy”. Though specific descriptions of clothes that qualified as dowdy were vague, usually participants referenced dull colored and “grandma” or “matronly” clothing. Participant 1 described them as, “’please no body look at me’ kind of clothes” (Participant 1). Another woman stated, “I guess there was this perception that only older people would be plus size, therefore, there were more grandmotherly fashions” (Participant 8).

Though most clothing was difficult to find, several garments, namely jeans were mentioned multiple times by participants as being more difficult, if not impossible to find. Participant 10 recalled, “Levi’s were a big deal when I was growing up and those were a real challenge to find” (Participant 10). Another woman expressed that, between the ages of 13 and 14, “I was at the point even in my early teens that if I wanted jeans, I was having to go in the men’s section to find jeans that would work for me, I was definitely not in the cute section” (Participant 8).
Though most shopping experiences were negative, two participants made a point to discuss times in which they actually enjoyed shopping. One participant recalled participating in a hair and makeup class at the local mall. After the class there was a fashion show, and she was nervous because she did not think they would have anything for her to wear. However, she explained:

they [store employees] found a very nice outfit for me, it wasn’t dowdy at all, it wasn’t fashion forward but it was nice and I felt very proud to go on the runway with it. I felt like I fit in with the thinner girls that were taking the class… and I kept the outfit and I wore it all the time (Participant 5).

Another mature plus size woman recalled a time when she had lost weight and she enjoyed shopping more than ever, she explained, “the summer before I was an undergrad senior in college, I lost about 20 or 25 pounds…and for the first time I was able to buy regular sizes and that was the thrill” (Participant 13). Despite these two exceptions, typically shopping experiences for a majority of the mature plus size participants were negative.

**Current Clothing Experiences**

MPSW’s current experiences with clothing will be detailed in the following section. First, *good clothing* which included: style, color, fit, and pattern will be discussed. Second, *bad clothing* which included: style, bad fit plus size, bad fit mature, color, and pattern will be addressed. The last two areas of discussion will be style influences of MPSW followed by current shopping preferences of MPSW.

**Good clothing.** Throughout every interview, participants discussed elements of clothing that they expressed as desirable not only for themselves, but for other MPSW as well. The subtheme of *good clothing* will be discussed in categories including: style, color, fit, and pattern. 

*Style.* Participants discussed various kinds of desirable styles, however consistent among every woman was the notion that comfort was synonymous with good style. The concept of
comfort meant anything from softness of fabric to ease of movement. A majority of women discussed that, as they aged, overall comfort had become of utmost importance when choosing what clothes to wear. This point was illustrated by one woman who explained, “I believe that when we get older we tend to… we like to look nice but its more comfort I believe” (Participant 2). Being able to move easily throughout their day was also discussed frequently, one woman explained:

I’m kind of like the body in motion, I like to go places and move and walk and do things and my shoes are practical and I can out walk anybody because I can make it work that way. So it’s kind of like being a body in motion… that’s my style and it always has been (Participant 3).

Versatile clothes were commented on by almost every participant as being good style choices. For some this meant favoring “separates” over sets, which usually enabled them to mix and match tops to multiple different bottoms. For others, versatility in clothes meant being able to wear an outfit to multiple events during the day. While describing a versatile colorful top, one women expressed, “it fits in with black, and I can wear it in the studio and to a special event and I feel quite unique” (Participant 3).

In terms of specific styles, the most controversial was tunic style tops, which are simple non-fitted tops that extend from the shoulder to about knee. While one woman described them as being, “basically two pieces of fabric slapped together” (Participant 15). Many others claimed tunics as their favorite style. One woman expressed, “I like tunics because I have this enormous fat pad and because they fall from my shoulders over my bust line, they don’t cling to that and they don’t show it” (Participant 12). Peplum style tops, typically a top with a short skirt extending from the waistline, were also addressed by several participants as being attractive, versatile, and feminine. One woman expressed:
My favorite style top is, I know it as a peplum top, it kind of fits broad across the shoulders, slimmer in the waist and then does a little flare out. For me personally I love that, it looks good on me, it makes me feel good and it’s stylish and you can do anything with it! You can put it with jeans, or with skirts, with whatever so to me it’s like the Holy Grail (Participant 9).

Specific elements of favored styles were discussed by most of the participants. Almost every women commented on the importance of sleeves. One woman expressed, “I’ve never been someone who goes sleeveless… I don’t think I ever have gone sleeveless actually” (Participant 14). While many participants discussed ¾ length sleeves as ideal, others simply stated that, as long as they were comfortable, specific sleeve length was not important. A majority of the participants made a point to say they never go sleeveless, and if they do, it is only when they are at home.

**Color.** Participants also varied greatly in their preferences for color. All of the participants discussed specific favorite colors to wear, and most offered some kind of reasoning as to why they were attracted to certain colors. For some, color reflected aspects of their personality. For example, one woman recalled a top worn to her daughter’s birthday. She elaborated:

> It was gold, which I mean like gold, gold. It was bright and you know… I am an LSU mom so I try to stay in that vein of purple and gold things, and this was like gold, gold, and I was like, ‘oh my gosh I look so good’ (Participant 9).

Most participants noted being highly attracted to bright and bold colors. One woman expressed, “that’s kind of my signature, people who know me know that I am attracted to color” (Participant 14). While another simply stated, “I’ll wear whatever I want, I love bright colors and so the brighter the better” (Participant 6).

Several women noted other aspects like the time of year as well as their skin and hair color as influencing their choice in color. This was illustrated by one women who expressed that,
“I have dark hair and olive skin… I’m not fair complected so I think there are some colors that I can wear better and some wash me out” (Participant 2). Another woman explained, “I have gotten to where I like jewel tones, earth tones, and a lot of times it depends on what season of the year it is” (Participant 8). Various shades of blue were identified by a majority of participants as being a favorite color. One participant seemed to justify this preference by expressing that, “shades of teal and turquoise are everybody’s color, and everyone regardless of coloring, looks good in some shade of teal or turquoise” (Participant 13).

Black was mentioned by all participants, however it seemed to be the most controversial color. While almost all of the participants mentioned that they wore black, many expressed that they typically limited the amount of black they wore. One woman explained, “I do tend to go for colors more than just black, I find too much black depressing” (Participant 1). Another woman joked as she expressed why she kept black to a minimum. She explained, “If I wear black I look like a corpse because I am very, very pale skinned, so I don’t wear black unless I have color with it” (Participant 12). However, another woman expressed her love for black by saying, “it’s just such a straight forward great color, and it makes me look as tall as I could possibly be” (Participant 3). Another participant expressed that she loved bright colors but she felt that, because of her weight, she should not wear them. She explained, “I love pink, but since I’m as big as I am…I’d love to wear a big pink sweater but I know that would just be awful so I usually wear darker colors” (Participant 11).

*Fit.* Elements of good fitting clothes were fairly consistent among all participants. Many participants expressed that they favor a more tailored and fitted look, however they emphasized that “fitted” should not be confused with “tight.” This concept was illustrated by one woman
who explained, “I don’t like super fitted things because it’s just so constricting, but that doesn’t mean I don’t like things that are fitted. I like fitted, I don’t like tight” (Participant 9).

Other women explained that they were more attracted to loose clothing. One participant elaborated on how she preferred dresses to fit, “I like them to fit looser, I don’t like anything really tight or form fitting to my figure. I like them to fit loose and comfortable” (Participant 4). However, even though these participants favored a looser fit, they did not want clothes to be too baggy. A few participants suggested that baggy clothing made them feel or look bigger than they were.

Knit clothing was highly regarded among several participants, mostly because of its softness and ability to not cling to the body. One woman explained, “I like knits a lot, really anything knit I will wear” (Participant 15). While another explained that her love of knits has not changed over the years, she explained, “when I was younger I was a jeans person, I wore jeans a lot and knit tops and now I’m wearing knit tops and yoga pants” (Participant 3). Overall, all of the MPSW valued clothing which fit their body comfortable and did not restrict their movement.

*Pattern.* While almost all participants expressed at least one pattern they liked, most had opposing opinions of what they felt looked good on mature plus size women. Most participants were not specific with the patterns they favored, many gave vague explanations such as, “I like fun patterns” (Participant 5). Of the patterns specified, floral prints were favored by about half of the participants. Those who did not like floral prints, typically preferred geometric and abstracted prints or they stuck with solids.

Though it is not typically considered a print, worth noting is the repeated mentioning of embroidered garments. Several participants described embroidery as being a distinguishing and unique element of their clothing. This was illustrated by one women who explained, “I take T-
shirts and I embroider them or I put things on the neckline because we do have a dress code at work” (Participant 12). While several others discussed embroidered details as being a favorite characteristic of clothing.

**Bad clothing.** Participant’s discussed what they perceived as unsuccessful clothing for both themselves and other MPSW. This theme was further categorized into bad style and fit, color, and pattern. Unlike the discussion of “good clothing,” the MPSW interviewed noted multiple styles that plus size women and mature women specifically, should avoid, therefore bad style for mature and bad style for plus size will be discussed separately.

**Style.** The subtheme of bad style included a variety of styles that the MPSW interviewed considered to be unflattering and unattractive on others and themselves. Almost every bad style that was discussed was usually a garment that fit poorly, therefore bad fit was considered to be synonymous with style in the following sections.

Most participants discussed a strong dislike for “short” clothing, no matter who was wearing it. As one woman explained, “I don’t like to see miniskirts on much of anybody because not that many people have pretty knees” (Participant 15). Another participant agreed adding that, “you know, most people’s knees aren’t pretty. They don’t even look all that good on fashion models” (Participant 3). Interestingly, a total of six participants discussed knees as being unsightly and unattractive.

**Bad style plus.** Most participants discussed overall looks that were unattractive for plus size women, as opposed to particular clothing items. Leggings and varieties of “tight” or “stretchy pants,” were the only garment that all but two participants discussed. In general, participants typically stated that plus size women should not look “frumpy” or wear clothing that
made them “bigger than they are.” Moo moos, kaftans, and oversized clothes were usually those that were viewed as unflattering for the plus figure.

Clothing that was too tight or too showy was discussed frequently by the participants. A majority of which agreed that tight clothing or ill fitted clothing was undesirable, unattractive, and even unprofessional. Although they felt most people regardless of size did not look acceptable in tight clothing, tight clothing was most commonly referenced as being a style that plus size women should avoid. One woman expressed her opinion by saying:

Clothing is made to abstract the body and flow… so all these things where they are gripping and all this exposure and the body is oozing out of the clothes… it’s not pretty on anybody and it’s even less pretty when you have more to ooze (Participant 3).

More specifically, the participants who discussed “leggings” generally felt that they were not something a plus size figure should wear. One mature plus size participant laughed as she explained:

Not too long ago, I don’t know if it was on T.V., but someone made a comment that leggings look good on all women. Then you see a woman of plus size fashion walking down the street in really tight leggings and you think ‘oh, how wrong they were! (Participant 13).

While another, who was fairly blunt in her opinion of leggings, explained, “I don’t want to see cottage cheese thighs on very skin-tight pants” (Participant 8). Others tried to be more supportive, like one women who expressed, “I think if they wore something that fit their body type a little better, it would look better” (Participant 4).

Despite voicing their distaste for leggings, three participants admitted to wearing them. However, those who wore them typically stated that they do so exclusively at home or as one women described, “I always wear them with a really long sweater that’s coming down to the knee, or a tunic top because the knee is not so pretty” (Participant 11).
Interestingly, while most women interviewed agreed that tight clothing is unattractive on plus figures, several seemed to suggest a “double standard” in terms of plus size bodies. One woman detailed her opinion:

I think that if you’re real curvy you may be able to pull off some of the really slinky, tight fitting things. In fact, I was standing by a woman in the store and she was wearing something very conforming… it was tight, but she carried it off and it looked great! But then I’ve seen other people in stretch pants that are so…and it’s like, ‘oh please put something over that’ (Participant 8).

This sentiment was shared by those who expressed that more ideally shaped (hourglass) plus size women, usually those who were “tall with a small waist” could pull off certain looks that others could not.

Bad style mature. Bad styles for mature figures were also discussed in depth by participants. All but one of the participants, in some way or another, agreed that mature women should not dress too young. As one woman illustrated, “I think we need to be cognizant of what looks good on us when we are 55, not 21” (Participant 9). Most participants gave similarly broad statements, one woman added, “mature women in general shouldn’t try to emulate those styles that are shown for much younger women, it’s just not attractive” (Participant 13).

Two participants gave specific examples of styles they felt looked poorly on mature figures. One referenced an outfit worn by her office mate. She recalled, “she always wore suits and skirts that were too short, I mean she was a bit more slender, but they were too short anyways… she was too old for them” (Participant 11). Another woman discussed a professor she had that wore crop tops to class which she described as, “totally inappropriate for her age” (Participant 6).

In contrast, one participant felt that she does not see mature women dressing younger as much as she does dressing older. She explained by saying, “I think I have seen clothing on
women that makes them look too old… I’ve seen that more so than I do someone wearing something that’s too young” (Participant 8).

Similar to plus size styles, the notion of “double standards” was also prevalent for mature women’s styles. The participants who discussed double standards always did so in relation to the women they see in the media. While describing styles that women with mature figures should not wear, one woman stated, “there’s a lot of women my age on T.V. that have the figure and can get away with it… so I guess we are kind of dealing with double standards here” (Participant 6). However, most agreed that nobody can escape aging, so you should dress accordingly. This was illustrated by Participant 1, who joked:

Even someone who has kept their figure and they exercise and everything… when you hit a certain age that skin sags and there is nothing you can do about. You are going to get the marks of aging and it just doesn’t look attractive (Participant 1).

Color. The term bad color was chosen to describe colors in which the mature plus size participants typically described as ones they do not wear, ones they wear but know they should not, and ones that they do not wear but still like. A majority of participants shared a mutual distaste for yellow and orange clothing. Several of whom discussed these as simply being colors that they do not like and do not wear. One woman expressed, “orange is not in my color wheel. I never wear orange or yellow…I’m just not a big fan of yellow” (Participant 10). However, most participants expressed that while they actually liked shades of yellow and orange, they do not wear them personally. Participants’ reasoning for not wearing these colors was usually that they did not compliment their skin tone or hair color. One woman expressed, “I cannot wear yellows and oranges, even though I love the colors, I can’t wear them” (Participant 16). Another participant, who described her hair as blonde, also agreed that the colors did not go well with her hair color. Only two participants discussed that, even though these colors were not the best on
them, they wore them anyways. This point was illustrated by one woman who explained, “they’re not good colors on me, but I will wear them just because I like the color” (Participant 12).

Though yellow and orange was discussed most frequently, several participants also expressed not liking white and red. While only two participants explicitly stated that they did not like white presently, almost half of the participants recalled garments that were white as being some of the most unsuccessful they had worn previously. One mature plus size woman who wore some white expressed, “I’ll do a little bit with white… but not much” (Participant 5). While another participant described a past outfit, she explained, “it was a white pleated wool skirt and an orange sweater…they were not my colors and the white skirt was a huge mistake” (Participant 11).

Several participants discussed that they did not typically wear much red, however only one participant gave a detailed reason as to why she did not wear red. This participant was quick to recall how she was taught to dress as a young adult. She explained, “I was raised with, ‘big people don’t wear red’, so I don’t wear a lot of red” (Participant 10). Interestingly, the same participant also expressed, “but…when I do wear red I get complimented so that’s kind of contradictory, but that’s one of those things that’s kind of ingrained” (Participant 10).

Pattern. The only pattern that was somewhat consistently referred to as unfavorable was horizontal stripes. However, though most of the participants did not like to wear stripes, several expressed owning and wearing striped garments. Reasons behind wearing or not wearing striped patterns differed from one participant to another. One mature plus size woman who did not like stripes simply stated, “I don’t wear things with horizontal stripes, I never have” (Participant 10).
While another woman, who seemed to suggest an old dress rule concerning plus size women and stripes expressed:

“if I find a shirt I like that has stripes on it…and I mean I am a bigger woman, I’m a size 18 used to be a size 22, but if I found a shirt that I liked and it happened to have stripes on it but it looked nice on me, I still wore it” (Participant 4).

In a similar vein, five participants also seemed to acknowledge the old dress rule of “plus size women should not wear stripes.” One of whom made an interesting point about striped garments, she explained, “if you look at plus size, I just got my Land’s End or Eddie Bauer plus size catalog, and it’s like, ‘oh look at that perfectly good T-shirt, covered in horizontal stripes’” (Participant 15). Though participants addressed multiple patterns which they personally did not wear, in general, the MPSW felt that patterns were subjective to the individuals wearing them.

Overall, the participants opinions of bad clothing was extensive in comparison to the their opinions of good clothing. Next, participants discussed a multitude of things that influenced their personal styles currently.

**Style influences.** Current influencers of mature plus size women’s style varied considerably from one participant to another. Half of the participants were influenced by some type of media, namely online sites and celebrities. The other half of the participants said their style was not influenced by the media in any way, instead they discussed being influenced by a variety of other sources such as their family members, medical disabilities, and styles of clothing.

In terms of media, online blogs and social media sites were referred to as good sources for style inspiration among several participants. Several participants used the internet purely to keep up with what was current and available. One participant explained, “I have a number of trend blogs and I tend to flip through to look at what is happening in a large visual sense”
Several others used the internet as inspiration for creating certain outfits. One participant discussed the social media site, Facebook™. She expressed:

seeing things online, seeing things where designers are trying different things…it gives me ideas like I might not do just exactly that but I can do elements of that and play with it (Participant 5).

Celebrities, which included a variety of individuals such as designers, models, and actresses, were also discussed by participants as style influencers. One participant stated, “I do things like watch the Oscars to see what people are wearing to award shows or things like that” (Participant 14). Another mature plus size participant discussed how her view of celebrities had changed from the past, she expressed, “everybody aspired to be like them, but nowadays my opinion is just like, ‘put on what you want to put on, and roll how you want to roll’” (Participant 9). While most of these participants’ interpreted media influences positively, several others suggested negative stigmas that celebrities created or reinforced. This point was illustrated by one woman who expressed:

You know, Bill Blass can be quoted as saying, ‘I’m only interested in the women that fit my clothes’ and we have an awful lot of that in our industry where we’re only interested in what we’ve isolated as being the target (Participant 3).

Another commented that, “even Michelle Obama frowned on sleevelessness [for plus size]” (Participant 14).

The remainder of the participants who were influenced by the media discussed mature models or actresses that they saw on television. They often discussed being inspired by the positive presence of mature women on television, as opposed to specific styles. One mature plus size woman expressed, “I am very inspired by the spade of older models… I really can’t remember her name but she has long silvery hair and she just looks terrific, very glamourous” (Participant 15).
While the participants discussed what influenced their styles currently they also discussed the media's influence on current styles and how they perceived both plus size and mature women in the media. Two main areas were addressed by MPSW while discussing the media. First, participants detailed how plus size women were portrayed in the media currently as opposed to in the past. Second, the participants discussed portrayal of mature women now as opposed to in the past.

**Media and plus size women.** Perception of how plus size women were displayed in the media today differed greatly among participants. A majority agreed that there has been significant improvement from the past in terms of showing plus size women in the media. While one woman expressed that, “there is a lot more embracing of the plus size woman as existing and as deserving clothes” (Participant 3). Another stated, “It’s gotten better I think. There is a realization that not all women are a size 2… and the media is accepting of that” (Participant 7).

However, for most it seemed that while they are seeing more plus size women in the media, it is not necessarily positive coverage. One explained that:

> “in my younger days it really was more negative, hidden, ‘you don’t show that you just want to show the perfect body type thing’ but nowadays it’s more prevalent in the media for plus size women but not that it’s all positive.” (Participant 9).

In discussing her point of view plus size women in the media, Participant 12 expressed, “I think they either glamorize them to a point that most plus size women can’t aspire to, or they do a program like ‘My Big Fat Fabulous Life’ that seems to make it okay to be plus size” (Participant 12).

Another considered plus size in the media more a false sense of improvement saying, “It’s more positive, which has probably been brought about by a lot of the stars like actresses and
singers that are curvier or bigger who have embraced it, so I think maybe on the surface people think its better but it really isn’t.” (Participant 1).

Despite suggested improvement, well over half of the participants felt that plus size women are still largely stigmatized and misrepresented in the media. One woman expressed that the media displayed plus size women as, “fat, frumpy, and almost like you don’t fit into society if you aren’t thin…we just don’t care about you.” (Participant 6). This notion was shared by another woman who stated that plus size women are, “generally portrayed as clowns or slovenly” (Participant 14).

Well over half of the participants felt that plus size women in the media has improved significantly with the past 10 or so years. However, the general opinion of participants was that plus size women are still predominately portrayed negatively in the media.

**Media and mature women.** The participants also commented on their views of mature women in the media. Perceptions of how mature women were portrayed in the media today was significantly different among those interviewed. Most agreed that the image of mature women in the media had changed significantly from the past. As one woman described how media has changed from the past:

> It is certainly a big change from Aunt Bee on the Andy Griffith Show… Like the actress who does the Prolia Ads! Now, she’s no spring chicken, but she looks gorgeous and she’s active and she’s vibrant and I think that’s important and a really good role model for most old people (Participant 12).

Several participants felt that mature women were represented more positively by the media currently. Among the participants who felt positively, many stated that mature women today were portrayed as wise, classy, refined, and lively. One woman expressed, “mature women are more present and more acknowledged for their wisdom and life experiences and what not… not

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2 Prolia is a medication used to treat osteoporosis in women after menopause.
so much for their looks” (Participant 13). However, these participants also recognized that the women they referred to probably have professional makeup and hair teams that make them look good, as well as having the monetary means to buy expensive clothing.

Several participants had a different interpretation. One woman agreed that media coverage had improved, but she also stated that, “I still think the media is young and pretty… young, pretty, and thin. I don’t see that… I don’t really see that has changed that much over my lifetime” (Participant 6). Three others also highlighted the notion that society still valued youth and beauty over everything else. One of whom suggested that youth driven media had continued to segregate mature women by only showing two distinct “types” of aging. She commented, “you have the mothers, the homely type or you have the cougars… there is no nice median, there is no array of personalities out there” (Participants 1).

One participant was blunter, she suggested that the media had actually become more negative surrounding mature women. She reflects that in the past it seemed to be more acceptable for women to be “grandmas” and to dress “matronly” when they approached a certain age. However, now she feels that the media has set an unattainable image for women to strive for by commercializing the “right” way to age. She explains that:

“There’s just a refusal to age… at least in the media. It shows you taking vitamin and walking on the beach and doing all these active things as opposed to just sitting and knitting, which would just be completely unacceptable. You know, you can’t just age that way, you’re not allowed to” (Participant 15).

As indicated by this quote there were many participants who believed that the portrayal of mature women in the media was not all positive. Overall, less than half of the participants believed that mature women were portrayed more positively today than in the past.

The other half of the participants who were not influenced by any type of media most commonly stated medical conditions, specific styles, family members and themselves as the
biggest influencers of their current style. Various medical conditions were discussed frequently as being influential considerations of certain clothing. One participant expressed:

I like skirts but I don’t wear them and the reason I don’t is because you have to wear dress shoes and I have problems with my feet so it’s not really a style that I would never wear…it’s just one that I can’t wear (Participant 4).

Another mature plus size woman made a broader statement about medical disabilities. She explained:

I think some plus size women have disabilities, either rheumatoid arthritis or something like that…that makes it difficult for them to wear certain clothes. For instance, I can’t wear anything that zips in the back because my arms don’t go that way (Participant 12).

Several participants said they were influenced by particular elements of dress such as accessories, and the garment itself. One participant discussed her inspiration of a certain style. She explained, “I tend to look at ethnic styles and incorporate a look like that in some way…and by ethnic I mean hand embroidered or hand woven” (Participant 16). Another mature plus size woman stated, “I love textiles and so usually that’s kind of a deciding factor for me” (Participant 14). Other participants discussed planning an entire outfit around one element such as shoes or jewelry. This was illustrated by one participant who expressed:

I happen to have a lot of Egyptian jewelry and sometimes I’ll say, ‘I really want to wear that, what goes with that’ and then I think about what choices I have to wear with it (Participant 12).

Family members, namely husbands and mothers, were discussed by most of the participants as influencing their style. Interestingly, even though they discussed them as being influential, most of the MPSW seemed to be influenced more by their family members’ reactions, rather than to their actual advice. For example, in terms of her style one mature plus size woman expressed, “I don’t think any person influences me, my husband certainly doesn’t have an opinion” (Participant 12). However, for most of the participants, husbands were usually
referred to as supportive, encouraging, and even comical. One participant recalled past shopping experiences with her husband, she explained:

“It’s funny, I don’t know if this matters but my husband will go shopping with me and he’ll say, ‘oh man, this is kind of nice,’ and I’ll say… ‘yeah if I’m 90 years old’” (Participant 6).

While another mature plus size woman expressed, “if I think it looks good or if my husband thinks it looks good… he’s very encouraging” (Participant 10).

Many of the participants mentioned the influence from their mother at least once throughout the interviews. Unlike the past, mothers' opinions and advice usually were no longer considered when deciding what to wear. One participant, who described her 100-year-old mother as “very with it and very opinionated”, laughed as she recalled:

“...times that she would say, ‘oh you’re showing too much cleavage’ and I would think…well first of all, ‘I’m not’ and second of all, ‘I’m old enough and it’s not wrinkled yet… so what’” (Participant 11).

Another participant, who described her mother as “encouraging,” explained, “sometimes she’ll say, ‘I don’t know what you bought that skirt for cause man it looks terrible on you’…but you know at least she’s honest” (Participant 5). It appeared that as the participants aged, the opinions of their mothers became less crucial. Overall, the MPSW interviewed have been influenced and inspired by a variety of different people and information sources.

**Shopping.** MPSW discussed a variety of ways in which they acquired clothing currently. While buying online was the most frequently discussed form of shopping, opinions differed between those who preferred it, and those who felt it was the only way to buy. Several participants expressed that they would only go into physical stores if they needed something quick, otherwise they only shopped online. For example, one woman explained:
If I need something quick I will go to the store, if not I will go online because I like to look and really get a sense of colors and really pick something. If I have time I will buy everything online (Participant 5).

In contrast, another woman expressed that she felt forced to shop online, “I have started to buy online because as they have talked more about plus size and how important it is, major retailers like Macy’s have completely shut down that department” (Participant 3).

Others explained that they only shopped online if they were familiar with a particular store and how their clothes fit. One woman felt indifferent towards online shopping saying, “I tend to purchase clothing online…mostly from JC Penney’s because they can fit me” (Participant 7). Though most participants felt positively towards online shopping, one woman expressed her distaste saying, “I don’t want to buy on a website because things fit so weird. I want the hand, I want to touch it, feel it and try it on” (Participant 6). Other reasons to avoid online shopping included: clothing that looked different in real life as opposed to on a screen, issues with sizing charts, and having to send clothing back if it did not fit.

In terms of physical stores, Dress Barn was discussed by almost every woman interviewed. Most participants said they enjoyed Dress Barn because of its availability, diversity of clothing, and trustworthy sizing. Participant 5 explained:

Dress Barn has been pretty good because you can actually walk in there and half the store is the thinner sizes and the other half is plus and a lot of styles you can see the same patterns and the same colors in both sides of the store. (Participant 5).

However, several participants noted that, while they like Dress Barn™, it was very expensive.

While discussing where they shop currently, many of the participants made a point to address the stores they did not like, or have had a bad experience with the clothing or store employees. Target was discussed by four participants as being a “bad” place to shop. One woman recalled, “I don’t go to places like Target because there is a tiny little plus size section
that you can never find and I’m kind of embarrassed to ask it I can’t find it so I don’t go there” (Participant 5). Another felt that the small section Target did have, was catered more toward the “under 30 crowd” (Participant 12).

General opinions toward shopping were discussed interchangeably throughout the interviews. A majority of women discussed their overall dislike and even fear toward going shopping currently. Negative shopping experiences and lack of clothing options in the past were the most noted reasons for this. However, the same participant went on the express, “…but I still don’t like shopping because I feel like I’m going to have my arms full of clothes that look good on the rack but once they get on my body they don’t work” (Participant 8). Others shared a similar feeling, one woman bluntly stated, “I hate shopping, I mean like…I hate it, I despise it. I mean I love clothes, but I hate shopping” (Participant 14). Another voiced that she never went shopping unless her husband made her, she laughed as she explained:

Really, I wouldn’t be dressed as nicely as I am if it wasn’t for my husband. He says ‘okay, it’s time for us to go freshen up your wardrobe and get some things; you’ve had that a few seasons now, let’s go find something else to wear, I’m kind of tired of look at you in it’ (Participant 10).

Several others simply described shopping as more of a chore. One participant explained, “I have gotten to the point in my life where shopping is no longer fun it’s just taking up time that I could be doing something else” (Participant 1).

Several participants discussed that they preferred to shop at thrift and consignment stores, while others noted them as being among the places they never go. One woman who loved thrift shopping expressed, “I do a lot of consignment and used clothing shopping, not because I’m poor and have to, but it’s like a treasure hunt!” (Participant 13). In contrast, one participant disclosed that she never found anything to fit and, “so I don’t even try” (Participant 5).
Catalogues such as Ulla Popken, Catherine’s, and Romans were discussed by multiple participants. One woman who favored Ulla Popken specifically expressed:

Now there’s quality! The fabric is good and the price is three times as much and you know… I have to say, I only buy three things every three months and sometimes I’ll go six to nine months without shopping! (Participant 3).

While most were in favor of catalog shopping, a few participants did not prefer it over other forms of shopping. The only noted dislike toward catalogue shopping was having to send items back if they did not fit. However, this was not the case for one woman who, after struggling to find a dress, explained, “I was looking for a dress and I couldn’t find one that I liked in a store and I get a lot of nice catalogues in the mail, I think I ordered 15 dresses and I sent 14 back, so I was thrilled when I finally found one!” (Participant 13).

Interestingly, a good amount of participants also discussed personally making, altering, or having clothes made for them. Generally, personally making or having something made was in addition to regular shopping. Only one participant did not discuss further shopping behavior. She expressed that, “I purchase as little as possible because I sew” (Participant 14). The participants who made their own clothing, or had it made for them typically did so because their proportions did not align with clothing that was readily available. Participant 12 explained, “I have very thin legs, very thin arms, and very narrow shoulders so I will remake some of my clothes so that they fit or I will just make clothes that fit” (Participant 12). One woman, who earlier described her arms as “un-proportional” to her body, expressed that she generally did not buy anything in stores unless it was casual attire. She explained that, “if it’s anything dressy then I am more inclined to make it” (Participant 7). Another participant, who had clothing custom made, recalled a conversation with her patternmaker, “I told her I would be hard to fit and she said, ‘oh no, no,
no’ and then she’s like, ‘oh well…yes, actually you are’ so…but she did successfully make me a dress for my daughter’s wedding” (Participant 15).

Multiple participants also discussed buying or making clothing that could be easily altered. One participant described her favorite style for a dress as, “a princess seam because I can alter to fit where it needs to fit and then it isn’t clingy either” (Participant 12). While another participant broadly expressed that, as long as the fabric and design was good, she took the time to alter it.

Participants discussed in depth their opinions of clothing that was available for them currently. Interestingly, participants seemed to suggest a difference between clothing accessibility and the actual styles that were available. The participants’ opinions were split between those who felt options and accessibility had improved significantly, and those were felt accessibility had improved but options had not. Though opinions differed, a majority of participant consistently recalled past experiences with clothing that might have influenced how they perceived clothes now.

Five of the MPSW felt predominately positive toward the clothing options currently. These participants discussed style, color, and availability changes most frequently. One participant, who felt overall styles had improved stated, “I think there actually a few more options now, and it’s a little easier to get things that are more, what I would consider, stylish…rather than house dresses” (Participant 16). While another mature plus size woman provided a more specific explanation. In discussing plus size catalogues, she reflected on how different clothing used to be, she explained:

The plus sizes have the same amount of colors, they’ll list everything and there will be yellow jeans and I’m like, ‘wow, there was never stuff like this when I was younger… and you know, there will be different colors and styles and it’ll be in plus size and thinner sizes all the same colors a lot of the time…not everywhere but a lot of places and that just
blows my mind, I don’t think young people today know that we didn’t use to have choices like that, so that’s pretty exciting (Participant 5).

Surprisingly, even though these participants felt positive overall, several of them expressed that they still struggled to find clothing.

In contrast, the remaining two-thirds of participants discussed that, while they felt overall accessibility of clothing had improved, they did not favor most of what was available in the marketplace. These participants often discussed differences between sizes, issues with fit, and distaste towards overall styles.

Several participants suggested seeing differences between how plus size and “thin” clothing looked. While shopping in a sports store, Participant 15 described being interested when she saw a rack of “plus size leggings”.

She recalled:

I was like, ‘wow, they’ve got plus size leggings for women!’… then I look at them closely, and they had ordinary bound seams not flat felt seams like the ones you would find in a set of leggings for a smaller woman (Participant 15).

Typically, differences between plus sizes were mentioned in regards to overall quality, as opposed to color and style.

Multiple participants also discussed issues in regards to sizing and proportion. Almost every MPSW felt that clothing today was made for tall women. This was perceived as problematic because a majority of MPSW interviewed identified themselves as “short”, most of whom expressed that they were between 5’ and 5’5” tall. One participant, who joked about her height stated, “they have made clothes all my life for the small tall people, the small-tall-no curves people” (Participant 3). Sizing issues, specifically those pertaining to height, will be discussed in depth during discussion.
Numerous participants expressed a general distaste for overall styles that were available. One participant described a decrease in overall quality of clothes. She explained, “You know, the fabrics have just gotten icky, there is just not as much good quality so even if you like it, it probably snags and pills or one wash and its different…like a lot different” (Participant 3). The same participant went on to discuss that, while more fast fashion companies are focusing on plus size, their priorities seem skewed. She stated, “for plus size they are not worried about being flattering, they are just worried about being big enough” (Participant 3).

Another participant described more specifically what she sees in the marketplace. She discussed that:

Most of the options I see are sheaths or straight skirts… and they are almost always sleeveless, which I don’t know one plus size woman that wants to wear anything sleeveless…but at the same time, if they do put a sleeve in its some dinky little cap sleeve that cuts you in the wrong place (Participant 15).

One woman expressed that she felt slightly better about shopping now, “If I need to find something, I have a better chance now of finding it as opposed to in the past I would not…I had to start 6 weeks before to find something or have it made for me, but now I have a pretty good chance” (Participant 8). In general, though most agreed that plus size clothing is more accessible today, a majority of the MPSW still felt unsatisfied with what the mainstream market had to offer.

**Favorite Clothes**

Participants’ discussion of favorite outfits from the past and present revealed a greater understanding of how they have dressed and perceived themselves over their lifetime. The following section will consist of the descriptions and reasoning’s behind participants’ favorite clothing from both the past and present. Every participant was given the option to include photos
of their favorite outfits. Four MPSW provided pictures which will be displayed throughout this section.

The MPSW’s favorite outfits varied greatly, however for every participant their favorite clothes were comfortable and made them feel confident. Two distinct types of outfits reoccurred for MPSW. In terms of both the past and present, participants discussed specific outfits worn to special events such as weddings, business events, and parties. The second type was described as “ordinary” every day clothing.

In relation to the past, a majority of participants recalled specific outfits worn to specific places, namely weddings, work, and other events. Three participants described their wedding dress, all of which were custom made, as being their most memorable favorite outfit. For instance, “I absolutely adored my wedding dress… I had it made and the lady just did a phenomenal job of making suggestions and incorporating what I wanted” (Participant 10). Many others described outfits worn to school, around their friends, or to work. Though many of the participants described “fitting in” as important as a young adult, many of the MPSW suggested that, if they loved the outfit and felt great in it, they did not care what others thought of them. Participant 4 stated:

I had my favorite pair, and I know this is going to sound funny nowadays, but I had my favorite pair of bright orange hip huggers, and an orange and green smock top that I wore all the time and I loved it. I loved the way I felt in it and I thought it was cute… I don’t know if anyone else thought that, but it was amazing (Participant 4).
Participant 8 recalled several dresses that she loved to wear to work. Before she described the dresses, she stated that, “I was still plus size but I had lost a significant amount of weight” (Participant 8). Participant 8’s favorite dress can be seen in figure 4.2. She described them as having, “big floral patterns…they had a sleeve to them, they were rather form fitting but they had a drop waist, more like an a-line (Participant 8). When she described how the dress made her feel she stated, “those were the ones I felt best in…and I was probably as a time in my life that I felt best about myself too” (Participant 8). This participant also mentioned that she would still wear these dresses if they were made in her size which is consistent with five other participants who also suggested that they would still love to wear their favorite past outfits. For almost all participants, favorite outfits in the past were fun, comfortable, matched their personality, and made them feel included.

Unlike the past, a majority of the MPSW’s favorite outfits currently were worn on a day to day basis. While only one participant stated that she could not think of a favorite outfit currently, the remainder of participants recalled outfits which were comfortable, dependable, and
easy to wear. Many participants discussed that their favorite outfits perfectly created the image they wanted to convey. These outfits oftentimes received positive responses from themselves and others, as well as made them feel included, intelligent, and confident. For instance, Participant 9 provided several pictures of outfits which she felt great wearing. Displayed in figure 4.3 was the memorable top and pant she wore for her daughter's birthday party.

Figure 4.3-Gold Top (Participant 9)

The outfit made her feel “sassy” and “ohhhh look at me” (Participant 9). She also explained, “I was able to move and dance at her [daughter’s] party and visit people, I didn’t feel stuffy…I looked nice, I didn’t look frumpy, I didn’t just have on jeans and a t-shirt” (Participant 9). She also stated that this outfit was out norm for her. It was a bright color and slightly tighter fit than she was typically comfortable with, however, she was thrilled that it worked out and she felt more confident in it as a result. Several other participants also noted that their favorite outfits were outside of their regular comfort zone.
Many participants described outfits they wore that received positive responses from others. For example, Participant 14 described a drapy swing jacket which she wore frequently. She stated that, “I feel very comfortable in it…and it always gets compliments so I often wear that” (Participant 14). Another participant described her favorite top, shown in figure 4.4, as her “victory” shirt. She stated, “when I wear it, it’s like I’m wearing a celebration…and everybody would say, ‘oh that’s really nice’” (Participant 3).

![Embroidered Top](Participant 3)

Comfort was one of the most frequently discussed aspects of all favorite clothing for participants. The participants stated that when they were more comfortable their confidence was higher and they even performed better throughout their day.

In conclusion, this chapter discussed the major themes found in the interview data which included: past clothing experiences, current clothing experiences, and favorite outfits. Additionally, the data collected from the pre-interview survey was also discussed. The
participants discussed the experiences they have had over their lifetime in relation to good and bad clothing, shopping, and style influences. Finally, the participant's discussion of past and present favorite outfits was discussed. The following chapter will discuss the findings in relation to past research.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

The research was conducted nationwide in order to better understand the dress rules and body perceptions of mature plus size women (55-70). The researcher utilized Goffman’s (1959) theory of dramaturgy and Stone’s (1975) appearance management, as well as the conceptual categories of Alison Guy and Maura Banim (2000) to analyze mature plus size women’s body perceptions and dress rules over their lifetime. Demographic information and pictures of favorite outfits were also collected.

Pre-Interview Data

Demographic information was generated from the pre-interview survey; analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS™). Participants’ ages ranged from 52 to 72 years old, with the average age being 66. Of the 16 participants, only two fell below the definition of “mature consumer” which is defined as anyone aged 55 and above (Nam et al., 2006). The participants also fell within the baby boomer parameters of individuals born between 1946 and 1964 which would be 54 and 72 years old respectively (Moody & Sasser, 2012). All participants had at least some college background, with a majority having a master’s degree. Participants were collected nationally, with a majority in the central and northeastern regions of the United States. Most participants worked full time or part time, with only one being fully retired. Two participants were officially retired but continued to work part time. The lack of fully retired participants is consistent with researcher on boomers in the workforce which suggested that unlike the generation before them, boomers are staying in the workforce beyond the age of 65 (“AARP,” 2011). A majority of participants reported their annual income around $50,000-$75,000 per year. This income is consist with the gross yearly income of boomers between the ages of 55-64 which was between $67,000 and $70,000 (“AARP,” 2011). The researcher chose
to not ask for specific weight or clothing sizes from participants. Instead, participants identified their past and present body shape using a six-shape scale created by the researcher. Past research on body shape identification has suggested that overweight individuals identified body shape most accurately when looking at a body outline compared to their thinner counterparts (Swami, Taylor, & Carvalho, 2011). Therefore, it was assumed that all participants were able to fairly accurately identify themselves as plus size for this study. The data collected from the body shapes scale revealed that a majority of participants identified themselves as shapes two and three when they were between the ages of 15 and 25. Currently, all of the participants identified themselves between shapes four, five, and six.

**Interview Data**

Data collected from the interviews was analyzed using the three stages of coding that are part of the constant comparison method. The three major themes which emerged from the data were: *past clothing experiences, current clothing experiences, and favorite outfits*.

The first major theme was *past clothing experiences* which represented the ways in which MPSW perceived their body over their lifetime. The theme included recollections of experiences both past and present with clothing and shopping, as well as influences from family, media, and others which has shaped the way participants perceived their bodies currently.

The second major theme was *current clothing experiences*. This theme was comprised of the experiences MPSW had with their clothing and their body currently. Current clothing experiences included their views of shopping, style influences, and opinions of good and bad clothing for both mature and plus size women.

The third major theme, *favorite clothes*, represented clothing from both the past and present that which MPSW felt created the image they wanted to convey. *Favorite clothes*
encompassed design elements, styles, colors, and patterns which MPSW felt best in. In this theme, pictures of past and present outfits were analyzed.

**Research Questions**

Five research questions were identified. For this study the following research questions were explored:

1. What are the dress rules and body perceptions of mature plus size women?
2. How do dress rules and body perceptions relate to the theory of dramaturgy?
3. How do dress rules and body perceptions relate to the conceptual categories of Guy and Banim?
4. How do dress rules change over the lifetime of a mature plus size woman?
5. What influences plus size styles for mature plus-size women?

**Research Question One**

What are the dress rules and body perceptions of mature plus size women? Research question one was addressed by the data gathered during the in-depth interviews. Due to the nature of the data collected, dress rules and body perceptions were typically discussed collectively for all MPSW. Therefore, research question one will be answered by discussion of body perception changes over the participants’ lifetimes as well as the role the body plays when determining dress.

**Body perceptions.** The MPSW discussed various ways in which they perceived their bodies now. The overarching concept of *accepting your body* was suggested by every participant. The MPSW’s experiences both aligned and challenged past research related to body acceptance. At a basic level, the MPSW discussed knowledge of specific clothing that could disguise the parts of their body they did not want to show such as their stomach, arms, legs, and
chest. The participants also acknowledged changes with aging, such as appearance of wrinkles, as being a factor in how they perceived their body presently. Past studies have suggested that individuals whose bodies deviated from social norms seemed to “forcibly accept” their body more as it moved further away from societal ideals of youth and thinness (Holmlund, Hagman & Polsa, 2011; Klepp & Rysst, 2017; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). For instance, mature women “accepted” their bodies appearance when they could no longer hide the signs of aging (Holmlund, Hagman & Polsa, 2011), while overweight individuals seemed to accept their body by downplaying the importance of their body all together (Klepp & Rysst, 2017).

Since all of the participants were considered to be plus size between the ages of 15-25 (and younger) and were plus size presently, many of the MPSW suggested two instances of body acceptance they experienced throughout their life, all of which impacted the way they viewed and dressed their bodies presently.

The first instance seemed to take place when MPSW realized they were overweight as a child or young adult. Many of the MPSW cited instances in which their mothers discussed their body and weight directly or indirectly. For example, “she [mom] had me wearing a girdle when I was in 5th grade. She was always very concerned because I have a big behind and she just did not want that to be seen” (Participant 14). Those who cited positive responses from their mothers typically discussed the lack of attractive clothing in stores as being a direct indication of their body size. Due to these experiences, it was observed that MPSW developed a heightened sense of body awareness which usually resulted in a keen sense of what clothing could hide their body.

The second instance occurred as mature women aged. Generally, the MPSW expressed that, as they aged, their values changed and they became more comfortable with their body. The relationship between aging and body acceptance has been studied by past researchers (Liechty,
However, past studies revealed that for their participants the process of aging seemed more difficult typically because, compared to their “old” body, their “new” body no longer aligned with societies definition of ideal beauty (Liechty, 2012; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). Interestingly, though all the participants discussed physical changes associated with aging, none of the women described this process as being “difficult.” In fact, many of the MPSW discussed a sense of relief that they had aged. This was possibly due to participants’ perception that at a certain age one no longer had to be concerned with the perception of others (Montemurro & Gillen, 2012). It could also be suggested that aging might have been “easier” for the MPSW because they personally had little to no experience with a body that did align with societal beauty ideals. Therefore, since most learned from a young age to cover up certain parts of their bodies, the physical changes that occurred with aging (i.e. wrinkles) were typically viewed as another part of the body they had to disguise. The observation that mature plus size women, specifically those whom have been overweight for a long period of time, appear to view aging differently than other women, is a significant finding of this work and should be investigated further.

**Dress rules.** The MPSW consistently addressed the body itself as being the most critical consideration when choosing clothing. Every MPSW discussed the styles, colors, and fit they felt looked best on them and others, however most also specifically stated that what works for them, may not work for someone else. Interestingly, worth addressing was many of the participants’ reluctance to make generalizations or suggest “rules” about how someone should dress. Therefore, when the MSPW stated specific traits of unsuccessful clothing such as color and fit, they usually disclaimed their statements as “personal opinion.” The overarching concept,
*knowing your body: dressing accordingly,* was developed to address the ways in which MPSW viewed dress.

**Know your Body.** *Knowing your body* included not only being aware of one’s body shape, but dressing in a way that improved confidence and represented oneself in the best way possible. Comfortable clothes were described as being highly desirable by all participants. MPSW expressed that comfortable clothing increased self-confidence and boosted their self-esteem, which aligned with past research related to the importance of comfort in plus size clothing choice (Ratledge, 2017). For instance, “I think the most important thing about being plus size is feeling comfortable and confident in what you’re wearing” (Participant 12). Additionally, many of the participants also emphasized the importance of looking neat and put together as one aged (Thomas & Peters, 2009).

Interestingly, MPSW also suggested that *knowing your body* meant recognizing how society and the public might also *know your body*. As a result, being aware of societal ideals was specifically discussed in relation to mature women dressing younger than they were, as well as plus size women dressing thinner than they were. MPSW agreed that, due to wrinkles and other marks of aging, mature women should not attempt to dress in clothing that is obviously intended for a younger audience. This concept seemed to be in contention with past research which expressed mature women typically attempted to use clothing to maintain their youth (Holmlund, Hagman & Polsa, 2011; Liechty, 2012).

In relation to plus size dress rules, MPSW consistently stated that plus size women should not dress in clothing intended for thin individuals. For example one participant stated, “what looks good on a skinny person may never look good on a plus size person so they need to break away from that and just focus 100% on what a plus size person should wear” (Participant
Surprisingly, the participants frequently discussed young plus size women’s clothing today more than mature women’s. The MPSW frequently expressed that, while they were happy plus size women had the confidence to wear certain clothing today, they still felt young plus size women today should monitor what they wear. The suggestion of “monitoring” ones body could be similar to the concept of dressing for the male gaze. The male gaze refers to a woman’s awareness that her body is being watched and monitored by men. Therefore, the participant’s opinions toward young women today could have possibly been related to their innate knowledge of the male gaze through their experiences of living with a deviant body in a culture that valued thin bodies (Klepp & Rysst, 2017; Liechty, 2012; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013).

For example:

there is still the cover it up mentality and I add to that because I have the similar thought… and there are some nasty names that are given to the younger girls with the things showing when they are still seriously overweight so I think there is still quite a stigma associated with that (Participant 1).

Interestingly, another participant also suggested that, while she wanted to be supportive of young plus size women, her past experiences have forced her to be more conservative. For example, Participant 5 discussed certain styles that she sees young plus size women wearing today, she stated:

I’m like, ‘you know if you can pull that off bravo’, but I’m not sure… I hate to say that though I feel like I’m being loyal to my group… I should say “whatever you want to wear, wear it” but I’m not sure if that’s the best thing to wear (Participant 5).

The idea that MPSW’s past experiences with their bodies and dress influenced the way they perceived others was a significant finding within this research.

**Research Question Two**
How do dress rules and body perceptions relate to the theory of dramaturgy? Research question two was addressed by the in-depth interviews. The dress rules and body perceptions of mature plus size women aligned with traits of Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical theory and Stone’s (1975) appearance management. Goffman (1959), who interpreted human behavior as a type of “performance,” claimed that an individual or “performer” created different identities according to their roles within different social environments. This “performance” was broken into separate factors including: fronts and settings (Goffman, 1959). Stone (1975) elaborated on this theory with his discussion of appearance management.

**Settings.** The “setting” is the area in which a performance takes place (Goffman, 1959). According to Goffman (1959) social interactions occurred in two places: the front region, which is the place where an individual performs; and the back region, which is the area that an individual prepares for their performance. In both of these settings, individuals were aware of their surroundings and they dressed accordingly.

The front regions most participants in the current study discussed were: professional environments and special events. In general, the MPSW discussed that, with the exception of their homes, they dressed to a certain level of appropriateness anytime they would be viewed by others no matter the location. In public situations the MPSW consciously chose clothing which they were familiar with and comfortable wearing. However, professional settings and special events were two specific front regions which participants discussed as requiring more consideration. While in the public sphere, the MPSW were aware of who would be watching them and they typically dressed accordingly. The notion that individuals dressed with others in mind has also been studied extensively by researchers (Klepp & Rysst, 2017; Liechty, 2012; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). In relation to work and social settings, the participants specifically
discussed the importance of dressing appropriately so as to not draw unwanted or negative attention from those around them. Dressing appropriately typically meant wearing more conservative clothing that covered the parts of their body they did not want to be seen. For example, one participant discussed a suit she often wore to work, “If I need to be comfortable in a business setting I often gravitate to that outfit” (Participant 14). The concept of covering ones body for certain settings was seen in the tattooed participants in a study by Mun et al., (2012) who described that they hid their tattoos with clothing when they were in certain public spheres.

The back region was the location in which an individual prepared for their role. Typically, the back region occurs in areas that are private and secluded such as an individual’s house. Almost none of the participants described an area which would be considered part of the back region. Only one MPSW discussed clothing she only wore in her home because she knew, with the exception of her husband, no one would be observing her. It seemed that back region was more abstract for most of the participants. It could be suggested that the participants’ preparation for shopping and purchasing clothing was a part of the back region. However, in general, the participants did not discuss back regions often.

**Fronts.** Goffman (1959), defined fronts as: “that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situations for those who observe the performance” (p. 22). Personal fronts, which are a component of fronts, included demographic characteristics such as age, gender, size and appearance (Goffman, 1959, p.22). The most commonly noted “front” that MPSW considered when dressing was age. Many participants expressed that, while they still dressed nicely, they usually wore “conservative” clothing that covered the parts of their bodies. The notion that clothing could be used to cover undesirable parts of the body has been studied by multiple researchers (Jankowski et al., 2016;
Holmlund, Hagman & Polsa, 2011; Thomas & Peters, 2009; Klepp & Rysst, 2017). Therefore, age was considered to be a fixed component that made up the MPSW’s personal front.

**Appearance management.** Gregory Stone (1975), attempted to build upon the interpretation of symbolic interaction by continuing to analyze the symbols that created an individual’s appearance. Built from Goffman’s (1959) definition of appearance, Stone (1975) claimed that appearance is, “the establishment of identity, value, mood, and attitude for the one who appears by the coincident programs and reviews awakened by his appearance” (p. 81). Stone (1975) believed that there were two types of responses the wearer considered when constructing ones identity. The two responses included: *programs*, which were an individual’s personal response to what they were wearing; and *reviews*, which were responses from others about what they were wearing. Both of these responses could either validate or challenge an individual’s construction of identity.

Several of the participants discussed clothing they wore which resulted in a positive *program*. When the participants felt positively toward their clothing, they felt validated, successful, and confident about their overall appearance. For instance, “I like suits that are not a skirt and top, I like when it’s like a shift dress and a jacket...it feels comfortable and I think it looks neat” (Participant 5). In contrast, when the participants felt negatively toward their clothing they recorded lower self-esteem and ultimately felt poorly about their appearance. For example:

The last dress I wore to one of my sons weddings...it was a time when I was extremely heavy and it was uncomfortable and I felt very self-conscious it. Because I was so heavy I had to buy a bigger style, it was one of that I felt was too old for me to be wearing...I just looked way older in it that I thought I would (Participant 4).

MPSW typically discussed scenarios in which negative reviews challenged the way they perceived themselves, which often times resulted in reconsideration for how they dressed.
For instance:

When I was in grad school I had a real pretty little white wool dress with blue and green embroidery on it…it fit me rather snugly and one of my classmates asked if I was pregnant and I was not. So I didn’t ever wear that dress again (Participant 7).

Due to the negative reaction from her peer, the MPSW managed her appearance in an extreme way. Past research has also suggested that negative reactions towards an individuals clothing can result in avoidance of certain clothing all together (Klepp & Rysst, 2017). The concept of “appearance management” was observed frequently throughout the data, however, due to the variety of findings they will be discussed more in research question three. While dramaturgy and appearance management were utilized to understand dress rules and body perceptions, neither were as successful for describing the data as the conceptual categories by Guy & Banim (2000).

Research Question Three

How do body perceptions and dress rules relate to the conceptual categories of Guy and Banim? Research question three was addressed by the information gathered from the in depth interviews and the pictures of favorite outfits. The three categories created by Alison Guy and Maura Banim’s (2000) were used to better understand the relationship between the mature plus size participants and their clothing. The first category, the woman I want to be, was used to analyze clothing that participants perceived to “enhance or project a positive image” (p. 316). Next, the woman I fear I could be, was utilized to understand clothing that failed to created, “a desired look or unintentionally reflected a negative self-presentation” (p. 319). The final category, the woman I am most of the time, was analyzed to understand the mature plus size women’s “general appearance and how women thought about themselves in their everyday relationships with their clothes” (Guy & Banim, 2000, p. 323)
The woman I want to be. The overarching theme of this category was the discussion of clothing that participants viewed as successful. MPSW recalled outfits from the past and present that elicited a positive reaction, enhanced their confidence, created the image they wanted to portray, and made them feel included. All of these characteristics closely aligned to the two subthemes of the woman I want to be which included: making a good impression; useful clothes and favorite things (Guy & Banim, 2000). The data collected also revealed a distinct conflict in terms of creating the woman I want to be for participants which will also be discussed.

Though only half of the participants detailed specific outfits, almost all of the participants revealed a conflict which seemed to occur when they discussed clothing from the past. It was interpreted that as a result of their body size, the participants had a difficult time creating the woman I want to be. Many suggested that, due to the matronly and dowdy clothing which was oftentimes available during their young adulthood, they were not able to fit in easily with peers or find clothing which made them feel confident which seemingly restricted them from fully becoming the woman I want to be. Young plus size participants in a study by Romeo (2013), also felt restricted by the unavailability of certain clothing. However, several of the MPSW discussed clothing they wore despite the possibility of negative reactions from others which was in contention with the subtheme of making a good impression. These outfits, which were typically fashionable, stylish and described as being “with the times”, were memorable to the participants largely due to the implied unavailability of fashionable plus size clothing during this time. Therefore, when a stylish outfit was found, the participants recalled feeling overwhelmingly included and confident which resulted in creating the woman I want to be.

For instance:

When I was between 15 and 25 I had my favorite pair of bright orange hip huggers, and an orange and green smock top that I wore all the time and I loved it. I wouldn’t wear it
today…or maybe I would but I don’t know… I just loved the way I felt in it and I mean I thought it was cute, I don’t know if anyone else thought that but I thought it was amazing (Participant 4).

The concept that clothing can make an individual feel included, particularly young adults, has been studied (Romeo, 2013). For the MPSW, the clothing which created the woman I want to be in the past was treasured, kept, and reflected upon frequently.

Presently, the woman I want to be was created by clothing which made MPSW feel confident, included, and accurately conveyed who they wanted to be. In relation to making a good impression one participant recalled a blue dress she wore to a Vietnam Veterans exhibit which was held at her work place. She stated:

…and if you wore it with a bit of white jewelry and red shoes it was just perfect, it was red, white and blue…so patriotic. It was a load of fun to wear and I got a lot of compliments…I still think about that dress” (Participant 5).

This participant and multiple others experiences aligned perfectly with the participants in Guy and Banim’s (2000) study who discussed that successful clothing allowed them to maintain their individuality while also appearing appropriate in social settings such as work environment. This concept also aligned to a study by, Holmlund, Hagman, and Polsa (2011) whose mature participants expressed that their certain clothing improved their confidence, and provided a sense of individuality.

Within the subtheme of favorite clothes and useful things the MPSW’s present experiences also aligned with the participants of Guy and Banim (2000). Similar to Guy and Banim’s study, the current participants recorded a heightened awareness of colors that would compliment their skin tone and hair color. Several of the MPSW also discussed their reliance on clothing made by specific companies which they trusted to consistently provide clothing which could create the woman I want to be. Successful clothing has also been described by participants in past studies as playing a major role in enhancing an individual’s feelings toward themselves.
(Klepp & Rysst, 2017; Lewis, 2015; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). The participants’ innate knowledge of clothing which worked also lended itself to the previously stated concept of knowing your body.

It is worth addressing the conflict which occurred frequently for the participants currently when creating the woman I want to be. Despite the implied success of clothing, many of the MPSW suggested that they still had a difficult time creating the image they wanted to convey. Compared to the past, the participants now felt more restricted by their age than by their actual body shape. Most the participants expressed their overall excitement toward the plethora of clothing available in today’s market. However, they often felt they could not wear most of the clothing because it was not age appropriate. In fact, several of the participants seemed to even be disappointed that they were not able to wear the new and fun plus size clothing that was available today. For example, “I see something and think, ‘oh maybe too old to wear that’, but I love looking at it…and if I was 25 I would probably wear it” (Participant 5).

Additionally, 14 of the participants stated specific styles and colors that they would love to wear, but felt they could not. Many of the participants mentioned that they wanted to wear sleeveless dresses or tops but they did not because they felt their arms were not attractive. For instance, “I admire a sleeveless look on other women… but I just have never done that, I know I never will” (Participant 14). While color was worn more freely by participants currently, several discussed that they are more conservative with color now than in the past. For example, Participant 4 reflected on her past clothing and she stated, “I guess back then I wore bright bold colors and now I don’t so much” (Participant 4). The styles and colors of clothing which the MPSW described as wanting to wear were interpreted to be an aspect of the woman I want to be that they were not able to reach currently.
Several of the participants also suggested that the mature women they admired or were inspired by created an aspirational image of *the woman I want to be*. Most frequently discussed were the positive images of mature women in advertisements, as well as the women who ran certain style blogs. For example, one participant described mature women in the media, “I think they portray them as being very vibrant, very alive, doing things, being proactive about their health and I think that’s a good thing” (Participant 12).

Overall, when *the woman I want to be* was created, the MPSW felt an overarching sense of *knowing their body*. Though *the woman I want to be* was realized for the MPSW through a variety of experiences with their clothing, it was not talked about as frequently as the category of *the woman I fear I could be*.

**The woman I fear I could be.** In this category, women discussed clothing that they felt failed at creating the image they wanted to portray. The two subthemes which made up this category were: *unintentional reactions* and *concealing or being constrained* (Guy & Banim, 2000). The concept of being *stitched up* will be lightly discussed in relation to the overarching concept of *being constrained*.

In the past, *the woman I fear I could be* occurred for most of the MPSW when they discussed clothing that they felt forced to wear. Lack of availability usually resulted in clothing that was dowdy, matronly, unattractive, and uncomfortable. As a result, the MPSW suggested that it was oftentimes impossible to avoid becoming *the woman I fear I could be*. For example, one participant suggested a time in which she seemed to accept *the woman I fear I could be*, she stated:

*I think I was maybe in 6th grade, we went to sears and I was looking for an outfit and I could look over and see the thinner sizes…but this is what I could wear. And I thought, ‘oh well’, and we’d [mom] find the best thing on the rack that was my size, so I felt*
disappointed but more accepting I suppose. Just like… this is the way it is and that’s that (Participant 5).

Due to limited size options in the past, the participants felt constrained or stuffed up when they dressed. For example, Participant 15 stated, “I dressed as an old woman as a child, so I haven’t aged any going forward”. This was also seen in a study by Klepp and Rysst (2017) whose 36-year-old plus size participant explained that, due to lack of options, she felt forced to, “dress in clothes for a 60-year-old” (p.94) thus creating a discrepancy between, “the girl she experiences herself to be on the inside and the one she must dress up outside” (p.94). Both examples support the notion that, since the fashion industry has set strict bodily ideals which affects retail availability, women whose bodies deviate from these societal ideals will continually feel stuffed up and therefore unable to create the image they desire.

In relation to present experiences, the concept of knowing your body materialized and was built upon by several of the MPSW’s discussion of the woman I fear I could be. For instance, two MPSW described outfits they loved initially, but later changed their minds completely upon seeing a picture of themselves wearing it. They still loved the outfits, but the appearance their bodies had in the clothes was powerful enough to never wear the outfit again. Another MPSW suggested that she had body dysmorphia because she consistently believed she looked, “thinner than I do” (Participant 12). However, her knowledge of this notion has lead her to avoid having her picture taken all together. By doing so, she felt she was successfully able to avoid becoming the woman I fear I could be.

Consistent with the subtheme of unintentional reactions, several MPSW addressed reactions from others in their past that influenced the way they dressed. For instance, one participant recalled receiving unwanted sexual attention during her early twenties. She explained:
I really learned to hide myself. I think that made my styles a lot less, ‘hey look at me’, and I probably started maturing much more than others. My style became much more professional and mature to keep people out of my personal space. (Participant 3).

This was consistent with many of the women in Guy & Banim’s (2000) who expressed that receiving negative reactions during their childhood or adolescence caused them to become more conscious of their clothing.

The woman I fear I could be was also realized when the MPSW discussed outfits which they viewed as failures. For this section, clothing that failed were those that the participants bought but did not wear. For instance:

I bought a suit that I wanted to wear to interviews because I’m applying for jobs right now, it’s a skirt and a jacket and when I first tried it on in the store I was like, ‘oh yeah, this is perfect’. And a little while back I tried it on and…even just the skirt and it felt awful, it felt too tight, it felt like it didn’t fit, it was binding and stuff and so I said to my husband, ‘I can’t believe I spent that much money and I probably will never wear it (Participant 6).

Several of the MPSW stated they rarely made mistakes when buying clothing currently, largely because they had extensive knowledge about what clothing worked and what clothing did not work. This phenomenon was also presented by past research whose mature participants discussed that they had become more aware of what clothing to wear as they gained life experience (Holmlund, Hagman & Polsa, 2011).

When clothing failed, many of the MPSW described an overall sense of failing to know their body. For example, “I can’t wear it…cause I feel stupid in it. I don’t want to be bigger than I am, nobody does really…I buy a lot of stuff and I alter it, but sometimes I don’t get it right” (Participant 3). Failed clothing resulted in many of the MPSW questioning their relationship with clothing and it was interpreted as a much larger sense of failure related to knowing their body. This was somewhat similar to the mature participants in Guy and Banim (2000) who discussed that they were, “able to identify types or styles of clothing they had learned to avoid” (p. 320).
However, unlike the MPSW who had always dealt with dressing a deviant body, the participants in Guy and Banim’s (2000) study experienced a greater amount of stress when considering what clothing to wear typically because their aging body brought forth changes they did not know how to manage. Therefore, it was suggested that their participants were more fearful of “losing the ability to know how to dress, to know what clothes can and cannot do” (Guy & Banim, 2000, p. 320).

In relation to being concealed and constrained, the MPSW discussed multiple body parts currently which were undesirable such as the: arms, knees, chest and any areas that showed the “marks” of age. The participants felt that when these body parts were covered others around them were more likely to focus on their face and not be “distracted” by their body. One participant claimed, “I don’t like to wear sleeveless and it’s because I’ve developed bat wings and I don’t like people...automatically if I move my arms there is motion and I don’t want that distraction happening, that distraction being my arms “(Participant 8). The concept of clothing as protection and attention deflection has also been observed by other researchers (Chrisler, 2011; Entwistle, 2000; Klepp & Rysst, 2017). As discussed in the past in relation to the participants’ weight, the MPSW continued to feel stitched up by societal ideals of beauty related to aging. As a result, it was still difficult to avoid becoming the woman I fear I could be.

The woman I fear I could be was the most frequently discussed discourse among the MPSW participants. This category revealed interesting insights into the ways in which the MPSW have dealt with the woman I fear I could be over their lifetime.

The woman I am most of the time. In the final category, the relationship that women had with their clothing today was discussed. Similar to the other categories, all of the MPSW discussed the ways they achieved the woman I am most of the time in both the past and present.
In the past, the woman I am most of the time was not realized as frequently as it was presently. Similar to the participants in Guy and Banim’s (2000) study, almost all of the MPSW cited clothing availability as playing a major part in creating the woman I am most of the time. Most of the MPSW discussed that the woman I am most of the time was also largely influenced by their mothers, usually because of the role she played with buying and “approving” clothing. The MPSW seemed to suggest that in the past, the woman I am most of the time was in a sense, created for them inadvertently by their mothers and the clothing which was available. One participants discussed that, she learned to dress a certain way when she was younger and as she has aged those specific styles of clothing have, in a way, turned into the clothes she likes.

Presently, the MPSW discussed that the woman I am most of the time was realized through ordinary everyday clothing. In alignment with the participants in Guy & Banim’s (2000) study was the MPSW’s constant discussion of function over form. While most of the participants discussed the importance of looking neat and put together, overall comfort and functionality of the clothing took precedence over style. This concept was also suggested by past research related to changes in mature women’s style choices as one aged (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). Similar to Guy & Banim (2000) was also the participant’s choice to wear clothing which they knew was appropriate for the situations they may encounter throughout their day. For many MPSW, this oftentimes was referenced when choosing what to wear to work. Participant 15 discussed an outfit which she wore to certain business meetings, she stated, “it just is like… ‘okay, I’m well dressed nobody can criticize me’, and I don’t look sloppy, I can just go about my business and body is going to say anything about what I’m wearing” (Participant 15).

Overall, the MPSW discussed that as they have aged, they have adjusted to and accepted the woman I am most of the time. For many, this was discussed when the participants described
that they have ultimately accepted their body and they dress it how they see fit. For instance, one participant described herself by saying, “I am never not going to be a plus size woman…and it has taken me a while to not be ashamed of that but I am not anymore. I am plus size and that is completely ok” (Participant 9). Mature participants in past studies also described that with age they have accepted their appearance (Holman, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013) and thus are similarly able to create the woman I am most of the time. Three of the MPSW also specifically described that the appearance of a disability brought on by aging directly influenced the woman I am most of the time. For instance, Participant 4 discussed her medical condition, she stated:

“I like skirts but I don’t wear them…and the reason I don’t is because you have to wear dress shoes and I have problems with my feet so it’s not really a style I would never wear…it’s just that I can’t really wear it” (Participant 4).

Similarly, Guy and Banim’s (2000) study revealed that presence of a disability also affected the ways in which several of their mature participants dressed. For both studies, the disability was always the most important consideration.

Overall, the conceptual categories of Guy and Banim (2000) proved to be a valuable way to analyze how the participants dressed and perceived their body over their lifetimes.

Research Question Four

How do dress rules change over the lifetime of a mature plus size woman? Research question four was addressed by the data gathered during the in-depth interviews. The only overarching change that every MPSW discussed were the inherent changes which occurred with aging. In general, specific dress rules were not clearly identified, therefore, similar to the discussion in research question number one, research question four will be discussed in terms of the participant’s reiteration of dressing according to the situation.
The participants all described changes in their body which directly influenced their current choice in dress, which is consistent with the discussion of *knowing your body*. The physical, mental, and emotional changes that occurred with aging was the most frequently discussed among the participants, which was also seen in mature women in past studies (Guy & Banim, 2000; Jankowski et al., 2016; Klepp & Rysst, 2017; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013).

Most of the MPSW felt that age had afforded them a sense of freedom to wear whatever they wanted. The concept that with age comes freedom was also highlighted in past research (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). However, the MPSW stated that while they felt more free when they dressed, they still expressed the importance of looking neat and appropriate which was also consist with mature participants in a study by Jankowski et al. (2016) who expressed the importance of maintaining a put together appearance.

Interestingly, many of the women interviewed expressed being more interested in fashion today than in the past. In the past, participants felt restricted and unable to participate in “fashion” because of the significant lack of stylish clothing for plus size women. However, with the plethora of available clothing presently, participants discussed feeling encouraged and willing to take more “risks” with clothing that they were previously unable to wear. For many women this seemed to suggest a “reinvention” of their personal style as they matured. For instance:

I would read the Sears and Penney’s catalogue and they would have the thinner sizes with like 12 colors and for the plus sizes they had brown, black, maybe navy… and I mean you had a choice but not many and you kind of blamed yourself like, ‘if I was thinner I could wear the yellow and the pink pants’ and stuff. But now I look and I think, ‘yeah maybe I will buy the pink jeans or something’ just because I can, because you know years ago I had to take whatever there was (Participant 5)

Several of the MPSW also discussed that accessories enabled them to reinvent their style currently. Participant 12 described her elaborate collection of jewelry, she stated, “if I get a new
piece of jewelry I’ll want to find something that showcases it” (Participant 12). This was also seen in a mature participant in Guy and Banim’s (2000) who shared that she used scarves to accessorize her daily appearance because it, “helps to [me] see a difference and change in what I wear” (Guy & Banim, 2000, p. 322).

Similar to the discussion of accepting one’s body addressed in research question one, the participants frequently discussed the importance of dressing according to the body you have. All of the MPSW made a point to not make blanket statements about what others should wear, they instead continually stated that their opinions might not apply to everyone. It was of the upmost importance that one should dress their body so that they felt as comfortable and as confident as they could be. An example of this can be seen in Guy and Banim’s (2000) study One participant explained, “I mean, I can look at something and not think that it looks good…but if they’re comfortable in it and happy then that is all that should matter” (Participant 10).

**Research Question Five**

What influences plus size styles for mature plus size women? Research question five was addressed by data gathered from the in-depth interviews. Since the MPSW all discussed that they were influenced by a variety of sources, generalizations of what influenced MPSW styles were not easily made. The media will be discussed as well as the multitude of ways that the aging process influenced the MPSW’s styles.

First, the MPSW who discussed media as being a form of influence presently was an unexpected finding. It was unexpected largely due to the notion that media is typically a reflection of societal ideals in terms of a thinner body size (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013; Liechty, 2012). However, influence from the media occurred in a variety of ways for the MPSW. Most frequently was the MPSW who expressed being inspired by the newer presence of mature
women in multiple forms of media which were not necessarily always celebrities. For example, four participants discussed specific women whom they saw online who they felt were particularly inspirational. Participant 5 stated:

There was a video that I just saw a while ago and it was like a woman in her 60’s and she has a blog and she’s very fashionable and I admire that because she’s wearing some really wonderful clothes (Participant 5).

Past studies have also expressed that, as women age, they begin to identify less with media figures largely because their bodies begin to move further from the ideal (Jankowski et al., 2016; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). The MPSW’s opinions both aligned and contended with this concept. While they did feel mature women were still poorly represented in the media and most did not identify with specific figures, almost half of the participants seemed to feel more connected to the women they saw in the media today than in the past. This could possibly be attributed to the notion that many of the participants in past research described a time in which their bodies closely aligned with individuals they saw in the media whereas the MPSW did not. (Guy & Banim, 2000; Jankowski et al., 2016; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013) Therefore, it was possible that the MPSW felt more connected to mature women in the media now because they perceived their body to align more with those figures.

The media, family, and friend influences all resulted in the perception that mature women should dress a certain way. The MPSW usually alluded to societal representations of women in the past as influencing how they felt they should dress currently. Most commonly discussed was appearing “age appropriate”. Dressing age appropriate contended and aligned with past research. Consistently, the MPSW discussed that one should not dress younger than they are. For example:

I think there should be a certain amount of space between your body and the world… and I think some mature people learn that, you know, that’s part of what you expect [as you age] so I think the expectation for mature people to be a little more tasteful, that’s the word, tasteful is high that young people (Participant 3).
Compared to past research which recorded that mature women typically participated in activities such as dieting to maintain their youth (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013) the current participants cited that mature women should embrace their age and not try to appear younger than they were.

Many of the MPSW also frequently discussed observations of how their friends and others around them dressed as being influential of style. However, compared to the past when other’s opinions mattered to the participants, now they are more influenced by what they themselves perceived to be acceptable and attractive. Past studies have similarly revealed that as one ages, she becomes less concerned with others opinions and is more concerned with her own personal needs (Guy & Banim, 2000; Klepp & Rysst, 2017).

As discussed in research question number one, the participants cited their aging body as being a major influence in how they dressed currently. They reiterated the importance of appearing put together (Holman, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011; Jankowski et al., 2016; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). In particular, many participants discussed specific body parts that influenced their clothing choice. For instance, participants described their chest, arms, stomach, and knees as being areas they dressed to cover. Mature participants in past research also felt similarly about covering certain body parts (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polsa, 2011). Even though the physical signs of ageing were discussed as playing a role, almost all of the participants explained that they had covered these body parts most of their lives.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this chapter described the dress rules and body perceptions of MPSW and how they have changed over their lifetime. The results of this research related to the theory of dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959) and appearance management (Stone, 1975). However, the conceptual categories of Guy and Banim (2000), revealed a larger breadth of understanding in
relation to understanding MPSW in the past and currently. The results suggest that overarching
dress rules were not easily identified for the participants. However, the results did show
interesting insight into MPSW’s body perceptions and the aging process.
CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to understand the body perceptions and dress rules of MPSW. The research investigated how MPSW perceived and dressed their body currently and in the past. This research had five research questions to answer and five objectives to investigate. A qualitative approach was utilized. The constant comparison method was employed in order to generate themes and categorize the data. SPSS™ (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was also used to analyze data collected from the pre-interview survey. Three major themes emerged from the interview data: *past clothing experiences, current clothing experiences*, and *favorite outfits*. The pictures of favorite outfits, which some participants contributed, were also analyzed and used as supporting material for the research. The results were analyzed using Goffman’s (1959) theory of dramaturgy and the conceptual categories created by Guy and Banim (2000).

A total of 16 participants were identified for inclusion in the research. Participants were recruited through Facebook™ and a costume enthusiasts email listserv. Participants were located across the United States with a majority of living in the Northeast and Central regions. Participants were between the ages of 52 and 72 with a majority being 66 years old. All 16 participants completed the pre-interview survey and participated in the semi-structured interview. Four of the 16 participants included photographs of favorite outfits.

The findings of this research revealed three major themes. The first theme was the MPSW’s *past clothing experiences*. The participants detailed experiences with shopping, clothing availability, and style influencers and the ways in which they affected the participants’ perceptions of their body and dress in the past. In general, shopping was not remembered as being a positive experience. The participants felt that the clothing that was available was
matronly and unattractive. Additionally, the MPSW recalled store sizing labels, such as “chubbettes” at Sears, as being stigmatizing and embarrassing. Most of the participants recalled their mothers as being the most influential individual in terms of shaping their style. For some, mothers of the participants were supportive, however, others felt their mother was not supportive. Largely due to the unavailability of stylish plus size clothing, the MPSW did not feel they were able to create the image they wished in the past. It was also suggested that negative experiences with clothing as children and young adults resulted in the participants being more conscious of the clothing they currently wear.

The second, and most predominant theme, was *current clothing experiences*. Similar to the past, the MPSW explained their shopping experiences and style influences. In addition, they described the styles, colors, fit, and patterns of clothing they felt was successful and not successful. Similar to the past, many of the participants stated that they still did not like shopping. A majority of MPSW agreed that, while availability of plus size clothing has increased greatly, most of the clothing catered to young women. The participants described several media sources that they looked to for ideas, however, most of the MPSW felt that their style was not inspired by any media personality specifically. Preferred styles varied greatly among participants, ultimately, it was determined that what MPSW valued most was comfortable and versatile clothing that made them feel confident and put together. Clothing which was constrictive, showy, and uncomfortable was avoided. Additionally, the participants did not favor sleeveless tops, or bottoms that fell above the knee. Various shades of blue were discussed most frequently as a good color no matter who was wearing it. Colors that were avoided (or worn sparingly) were white, yellow, orange, and red. Stripes were the most controversial pattern with
some participants being in favor and others not. Floral, geometric, and abstract patterns were favored by many participants, however, several MPSW did not wear patterns at all.

The third and final theme was favorite clothes. This theme was comprised of recollections of the participants’ favorite outfits over their lifetimes. The descriptions of favorite outfits revealed interesting insight into how the MPSW have created the image they wanted to convey through the use of successful clothing. This theme most closely aligned with Guy and Banim’s (2000) category of the woman I want to be. The participants provided a wide variety of clothing examples. In the past, favorite clothing oftentimes related to clothing that was comfortable, fashionable and made them feel included amongst their friends and peers. Currently, favorite clothes were practical, comfortable, and made the participants feel relaxed.

**Implications**

Though past research has been published related to plus size women and mature women separately, this research was the first study to purposefully examine mature plus size women’s body perceptions and dress rules over the span of their lifetime. Additionally, while past research has studied mature women over their life span, specific research related to body perceptions and dress rules of mature plus size women over their lifetime was not found. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the research shed light on a specific demographic which has widely been ignored. Therefore, the findings of this research are significant in impacting and extending the literature surrounding both mature women and plus size women.

This research has implications for understanding the aging process of mature plus size women who are part of the baby boomer consumer group. For marketers, implications are related to desirable apparel options for this segment in the marketplace. Due to the growing size and buying power of the boomer consumer group, marketers should place high importance on this
segment by providing a wider range of clothing options. They should also focus on comfortable
clothing that is widely available in store and online in a range of sizes.

This research also has theoretical implications for understanding the impact of dress as it
relates to women and the aging process. A woman’s body, especially one which has aged and is
overweight, is heavily scrutinized and watched by society. Thus, knowledge of dress and its
effect on aging can increase understanding of mature plus size women in society.

**Limitations and Future Research**

This researched was limited by the sample. A majority of the participants were recruited
through an email listserv related to a professional society that centered on dress. Therefore, these
participants possibly possessed a higher level of competence and interest related to the fashion
industry, dress, and the body. Additionally, due to the fairly small size of the sample, the results
of this research cannot be generalized to the wider population of mature plus size women.

There are several areas in which future research should be conducted. First, the current
study could be extended upon by analyzing and comparing the ways in which plus size and thin
women view the aging process. Since participants in the current study were plus size between the
ages of 15 and 25, future studies should include individuals who were not plus size during this
time in addition to those who were, to determine if there are differences in body perceptions
among these groups. Future studies on mature plus size women from a variety of ethnic
backgrounds should also be conducted.

The current study identified only women for inclusion, however, future research should
include male participants to identify body perceptions and dress rules for mature plus size men.
Inclusion of males could reveal similarities or differences in the ways that men perceive and
dress their aging body compared to women.
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APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

So to begin I will ask you a few questions related to media and retailers for both mature and plus size women then I will go into questions that are centered around plus size and mature apparel and I will end with questions relating to your past and present style choices

Questions Related to the Media/ Retailers.
• In general, how do you think the media portrays plus size women? Media can be fashion bloggers, magazines, TV Shows, News Broadcasts, anything media related.
  o For example, are they portrayed positively? Negatively? Think about it kind of in comparison to how the media portrays thin women.
• Does the media have an effect on plus size styles?
  o What kind of effect is it?
  o Has it changed over time?
• Do you follow or try to imitate any particular media figure’s style?
  o Who? What do you like about that figure? What does she represent to you?
• Who’s style did you try to imitate as a teen/young adult?
  o Why? What did she represent to you?
• Where do you tend to purchase clothing?
  o Online? In store? Personal Shopper?
• Do you feel plus size options in the marketplace have changed over time?
  o If so, how?

MATURE WOMEN
• How do you think the media portrays mature women?
  o For example, when you were between the ages of 15-25, were mature women portrayed differently than they are now?
• Does the media have an effect on mature styles?
  o What kind of effect is it?
  o Has it changed over time?
• Do you feel mature women’s options in the marketplace have changed over time?
  o If so, how?

Questions related to plus-size and mature apparel.
• Do you think there are certain styles which look better on plus-size figures?
  o Are there any styles which should be avoided by plus-size women?
• Do you think there are certain styles which look better on mature figures?
  o Are there any styles which should be avoided by mature women?
• Are there any styles or colors of clothing you like but would not wear?
  o Why?
• What do you feel are the societal dress rules for plus size women?
  o Do you think these change as a woman matures?
  o What are your personal dress rules? Do they differ from society?

Questions related to current and past personal style.
• Would you say you were interested in fashion as a teen?
  o Are you interested in fashion now?
  o Has this changed over time?
• Are there any styles of clothing that you are more attracted to?
  o Are there any styles that you avoid?
• Are there any specific colors or patterns that are more attractive to you?
  o Less attractive?
• When is your first memory of purchasing a piece of designated “plus size” apparel?
• Did anyone personally influence the way you dressed or perceived your body?
  o Was there anyone specifically that you felt “taught” you how to dress?
  o How does this effect you in the past and today? For example, does this individual’s opinions or advice still influence you?
• Where do you find ideas for dressing or creating outfits currently?
  o Has this changed over time?
• Can you give me an example of one of your favorite outfits, both past and present?
  o What elements made it your favorite?
  o Was it for a particular event?
  o How did you feel in this outfit? Did it affect the way you performed throughout the day?
• Can you give me an example of an outfit which you felt was not successful?
  o Why was it not successful?
  o How did you feel in this outfit? Did it affect the way you performed throughout the day?
• As a teen or young adult, did you feel you had the same amount of clothing options as your peers?
  o If no, has that had effect on how you view clothing as an adult?
  o What kind of effect has it had? How do you perceive clothing now?
• Do you feel clothing and clothing choice can have a lasting impact throughout someone’s life?
  o What kind of impact can it have?

Do you have anything else you would like me to know?
APPENDIX B. PREINTERVIEW SURVEY

For the following questions, please type your answer in the space provided.

What is your age?

What state do you currently live in?

If different than above, what state did you live in between the ages of 15-25?

For the following questions, please type an “X” next to your chosen answer.

What is your current level of yearly income?
  Less than $20,000
  $20,001 to $35,000
  $35,001 to $50,000
  $50,001 to $75,000
  $75,001 to $100,000
  Over $100,001

What was your family’s annual income when you were between the ages of 15-25? (if you were married during this time, please select your guardians income before marriage)
  Less than $20,000
  $20,001 to $35,000
  $35,001 to $50,000
  $50,001 to $75,000
  $75,001 to $100,000
  Over $100,001

What is your highest level of education?
  Less than a high school diploma
  High school degree or equivalent
  Some college
  Associate degree
  Bachelor’s degree
  Master’s degree
  Professional degree
  Doctorate

What is your current status of employment?
  Employed full time (40 or more hours per week)
  Employed part time (up to 39 hours per week)
  Retired
  Unable to work
  Prefer not to answer
Other:
The image below displays different body shapes. First, choose the shape that best describes your current body. Second, choose the shape that best describes your body when you were between the ages of 15 and 25.

Present:

Past:
APPENDIX C. FLYER

Calling all Mature Plus Size Women

Plus size mature women are needed to participate in a study about dress rules and body perceptions.

The study will be conducted by Megan Romans, a graduate student at Louisiana State University and her advisor, Dr. Casey Stannard.

Participants are needed to better understand the dress rules and body perceptions of plus size mature women.

The study will consist of an online (virtual) interview, and all information collected will remain completely confidential.

Please contact: Megan Romans to schedule your interview or ask questions
E-mail: mroma16@lsu.edu

- Participants will be asked how they dress their individual body as well as their perceptions toward the fashion industry both past and present.

- Participants will be asked to share past and present pictures (optional) of themselves in their favorite outfits.

- Participants must be between the ages of 55-70 who are currently plus size and were plus size or “overweight” as a young adult between the ages of 15-25.

- The goal of this study is to better understand dress rules of mature plus size women, and to establish their viable and important role in the fashion industry.
APPENDIX D. IRB APPROVAL

ACTION ON PROTOCOL APPROVAL REQUEST

TO: Casey Stannard
Textiles, Apparel Design, and Merchandising

FROM: Dennis Landin
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: December 15, 2017

RE: IRB# 3983

TITLE: Dress Rules and Body Perceptions of Mature Plus Size Women


Review type: Full ___ Expedited  X___ Review date: 12/7/2017

Risk Factor: Minimal _____ X____ Uncertain ______ Greater Than Minimal________

Approved______ X____ Disapproved________

Approval Date: 12/15/2017 Approval Expiration Date: 12/14/2018

Re-review frequency: (annual unless otherwise stated)

Number of subjects approved: 15-20

Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal: (if applicable)

By: Dennis Landin, Chairman  

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING
– Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:
  1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU’s Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects
  2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.

4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.

5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.

6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.


8. **SPECIAL NOTE:** When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc.

*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://*
VITA

Megan Katherine Romans is an avid lover of patternmaking, sewing, and design. She is a first generation student who earned her Bachelor of Science in Clothing, Textiles, and Design from the University of Idaho (UofI). While attending Louisiana State University (LSU) her love for teaching strengthened and her curiosity for learning grew as she was introduced to the world of research. During her time at LSU she also became a member of the professional organizations; Costume Society of America (CSA), and International Textiles and Apparel Association (ITAA). Upon graduation from LSU, Megan plans to pursue a doctoral program with the goal of becoming a professor of apparel design.