Plus-Size Fashion: A Comparative Study of Southern vs. Northern European Perspectives on Fashion

Papadopoulou Constance, Bazaki Eirini[*]

Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, Winchester, United Kingdom

Email address:
e.bazaki@southampton.ac.uk (B. Eirini)
[*]Corresponding author

Abstract: The study compares contemporary perspectives on plus-size fashion in northern and southern Europe, currently an emerging trend and yet controversial and under-researched topic in the fashion industry. The study follows a mixed method approach. Qualitative interviews with fashion professionals (i.e. fashion designers, fashion stylists, trend curators and fashion marketers) and quantitative methods (i.e. questionnaires with fashion consumers) are used to explore the state of the industry, contradicting perceptions of fashion in southern and northern Europe, and the exploring the root of these perceptions and market development opportunities for plus-size fashion. The study presents significant implications for practitioners who wish to overcome consumer cultural barriers, design products that meet the needs of a diverse set of customers, and create successful marketing campaigns with consideration of various cultural dimensions.

Keywords: Plus-size Fashion, Hofstede and Schwartz Cultural Models, Europe and UK

1. Introduction

Throughout history, women have been closely connected with the idea of beauty [21, 23, 39]. In ancient Egypt (c.1292–1069BC), Princess Nefertiabet's slender figure was a symbol of divine beauty and female sexuality; in ancient Greece (c. 500–300BC), full body and pale women were a symbol of beauty and fertility; in the Han Dynasty (c. 206BC– 220AD), a slender figure with small feet was a symbol of aristocracy; during the Italian Renaissance (c. 1400–1700AD), the full-bodied woman was a symbol of good health and wealth; and in Victorian England (c.1837–1901) the full-bodied woman with a small waist was a symbol of beauty and attraction [21]. The dawn of the 20th century and the First World War signified a change in women's position in society and brought to life the androgynous body shape and style of the 1920s. The hourglass figure followed this in the 1930s and 1950s. In the 1960s, long and lean beauty standards were pronounced. The strong and fit woman was the ideal in the 1980s, while today we are witnessing a postmodern amalgamation of beauty standards [21].

Although perceptions of beauty ideals were continuously changing throughout history, pressure from society to pursue the ideal body image was always strong [23]. Pressure on women to conform to specific body standards has reportedly been found to have a damaging effect on women's psychology and to cause high levels of anxiety and distress [5, 29]. In their study of images of thin and plus-size models [33], found that exposure to images of thin female models increases body image dissatisfaction and anxiety, while exposure to images of overweight models improved body image perceptions [33]. Similar research on self-discrepancy [3] and female appearance satisfaction [57] suggests that exposure to thin models can make one dissatisfied with their self-image and induce low self-esteem and a lack of confidence [11].

Paradoxically though, women around the world support a multibillion-dollar fashion industry that caters for the well-accepted, stereotypical body standards of this era [47]. Therefore, perceptions of beauty have a relationship with the fashion industry. Fashion creates what society wants, and society forms the image of fashion. In the past decade, the ideals of fashion demanded a slimmer image of the woman's body with perfect proportions [26, 28, 60]. The sizes were, therefore, becoming smaller and everything larger than the sample size was generally criticised [28, 60]. Women who could not meet these standards were intentionally ignored and indirectly pushed to become something they were not.

The need for bigger sizes, or plus sizes as they are commonly known, is growing rapidly with statistics suggesting that over 50% of women today wear a size 14+ [8]. Plus-size fashion is gaining ground and might even overtake currently commonly available fashion sizes [8]. Women who belong to the plus-size market seek the same opportunities to purchase fashionable clothes as women who belong to the current size market [14]. Luxury fashion brands, such as Elvi and Premme, have already started to address the needs of the plus-size market while high-street fashion brands have extended their lines (e.g. Asos Curve, River Island Plus) [6]. In 2018, the World Health Organization reported that 40% of women around the world could be classified as overweight [58], thus highlighting the need for further research on plus-size fashion.

In the last five years, several small but important steps have been made towards the acceptance of plus-size fashion. The movement, called body positivity, originally created and promoted by many bloggers, vloggers, models, and celebrities, contributed to the global increase of awareness about diversity in fashion [17]. This movement encourages and empowers women to love and accept their bodies, to create their beauty standards, and not conform to society's and the media's beauty ideals.

Europe represents one of the biggest markets in the world. Understanding how societies are facing new trends in the world of fashion and new movements is essential [49]. The number of plus-size bloggers, models, and celebrities is increasing rapidly [46]. Plus-size models, such as Ashley Graham and Tess Holliday, have a strong presence on magazine covers and give empowering and inspiring talks on body diversity and acceptance around the world [41]. The body positive movement is gaining followers; however, they are not equally distributed across Europe. Thus, it is important to know from where these followers come and why some societies still have controversial reactions to the term 'plus size' [59].

The study presented in this paper aims to explore the contradicting perceptions of northern versus southern European cultures towards plus-size fashion. It unravels the roots of these perceptions and recommends best practices for entering new markets and promoting plus-size fashion. The findings present significant implications for practitioners who wish to overcome consumer cultural barriers, design products that meet the needs of a diverse set of customers, and create successful marketing campaigns for different cultural dimensions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Plus-Size in the Fashion Industry

The first known use of the term plus-size can be found in 1942 and it is widely used in clothing industry for people that have bodies that are proportionally bigger than average sizes [31]. The range of sizes that make up the plus-size and are above the 'straight' sizes, as they are most commonly referred, are for UK 16 to UK 28, but this may differ around the world. The plus-size women's clothing industry has

outperformed other industries in the retail sector by recording an annual growth rate of 4.6% over the five years through to 2018-19 [20]. The plus-size sector appears to be constantly gaining ground and has come here to stay. The forecasts for the future are even more positive, owing to the improved public perception of plus-size women supported by celebrities such as Adele and plus-size models such as Ashley Graham, who encouraged women to embrace their plus-size image and demanded fashion to adapt to their size. An overall review of the plus-size sector suggests that there is much space and many opportunities for brands to expand and new labels to enter this sizing range.

2.2. The Body Positive Movement

The customers of plus-size clothing are nowadays demanding fashionable and modern garments, effortlessly accessible for the bigger sizes [12, 13, 14, 50]. They are expecting evenly good quality and value for money pieces that are attractive and long lasting. They don't want to get thinner, they love their body image and not necessarily want to change it. The body positive movement fights for those values and aims to bring change to the plus-size industry and its community. The body positive movement that first emerged in the 1960s in US and aimed at highlighting the challenges and health risks fat people face when trying to conform with the standardized body shapes, now supports and celebrates diverse body types [22]. Plus-size supermodels have an active role in fashion adverts and promotional campaigns and a strong presence in covers of well-known magazines centering on women related issues, such as Vogue, Cosmopolitan, Elle and Glamour [14, 41, 51]. However, plus-size supermodels are still considered to be abnormal and atypical [27, 35, 37, 53]. The body positive movement aims to change those perceptions. In the 2016 Straight/Curve documentary, plus-size is referred to as 'curvy' and aims to become absolute normality as sample size [51, 60]. Eventually, there will be no discrimination in the fashion world describing some body types as plus-size, 'curvy' or 'straight', rather there will be 'beautiful unique bodies' [51]. Following models' and celebrities' steps, plus-size women, have become an inspiration for the fashion world. Many curvy women globally have created blogs, YouTube channels or many other social platform pages, embracing the body positive movement and creating their own personal stories to motivate and influence the rest of the women facing similar problems with their body image [25, 30]. Many of the vloggers and bloggers are having many followers targeting a wide audience, without ethnicity or geographical limitations and borders. Through their pages and channels they are also promoting brands that support plus-size fashion and have clothing ranges that include their sizes. Brands are gaining great popularity and loyalty by followers through these types of promotional moves and endorsements.

2.3. Northern European Societies Perceptions

The northern part of Europe includes a group of countries such as United Kingdom, Sweden, Latvia, Denmark, the

Netherlands and Germany. These countries as one entity, share common culture, features, approaches, manners and behaviors [24]. Body structure is seemingly similar, with a weight and height typically bigger than that in the south part of Europe, and with the average size of women to fluctuate between UK 14 and UK 16 [1]. Consumers in those countries also share the same way of life and everyday routine [55]. Plus-size fashion appears to be well accepted in that part of Europe. Almost all of the plus-size models, celebrities and bloggers, are coming from the northern European countries, while their fame, publicity and recognition is huge and has been growing firmly during the past five years [1, 7]. Various world famous brands are supporting and are being supported by these bloggers, asking for cooperation, endorsement and other creative and active ways to promote their plus-size products through blogs and YouTube channels [7]. Generally the societies of these countries are very open, less judgmental and tolerant with body figure and appearance matters [36, 38], and the acceptance of different beauty standards seems to be the norm.

Fashion brands that focus in this area of Europe, even though they might not have yet achieved their desirable goal, are establishing rapidly in this new market [6, 8, 45]. They understand the needs and wants of the plus-size market and provide them with suitable products. For example, famous high street fashion brands like River Island, New Look, H&M, Phase Eight and Primark and well-established e-retailers such as Asos and Boohoo have already expanded their size ranges or included individual plus-size lines to their collections [13, 15]. Lately, a new trend, raised from the body positive movement, led many brands to create and launch new lines of active wear [25] for bigger sizes (up to 3XXXL) such as Nike in the United Kingdom with the motto "She is an athlete, period. And having helped fuel this cultural shift, we celebrate these athletes' diversity, from ethnicity to body shape" [44].

2.4. Southern European Societies Perceptions

Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal are some of the most representative societies and countries in the southern part of Europe. Similarly to the countries of the northern Europe, these countries share common lifestyle conventions, beliefs and beauty ideals [35, 38, 55]. In comparison with the northern countries the societies of the south tend to have strict standards for body-figure [24, 36]. The average height and weight in these countries is generally lower than that in the northern part of Europe and the most typical sizes for women are between UK 10-12 (EU 38-40) [48]. The mentality of the plus-size and the movements that support body positivity and differentiation are still not popular in these societies, especially among young population [1]. Even though the average weight of people in southern Europe has increased during the last decade, the fashion industry continues to ignore it [55]. For example, Inditex, a well-known fashion group in Spain, that includes many well-established labels such as Zara, Bershka, Massimo Dutti and more, doesn't have any plus-size lines [32]. In addition, the

size range of these labels barely goes up to size UK 12 (EU 42). Furthermore, according to a recent interview of Inditex's representative, the group doesn't plan to expand their size range of the existing brands [1]. Lately, a very controversial commercial by Zara, presenting two extremely thin models with the title 'Love your curves', brought big dissatisfaction and strong reactions to fashion consumers and editors in the United Kingdom [34]. However, the same promotional campaign hasn't caused any negative opinion and reactions in the southern part of Europe. There are only a few signs of a slight progress in the countries of the south. A couple of brands created collections for bigger sizes and complementary plus-size labels, but none expanded its sizes. Mango, the well-known Spanish label from Barcelona, created the sub-brand, called Violeta, with bigger sizes of up to UK 26, while MaxMara, the famous Italian luxury brand, was the first brand in the luxury market that launched a plus-size collection [1, 13, 14]. A popular Greek brand, named Pink Woman, in January 2017, became the first high street label in Greece that launched a plus-size collection along with its 'straight size' line. However, the absence of plus-size models in the promotional campaigns and the lack of plus-size bloggers and supporters of the body diversity [16], is still noticeable in the societies of southern Europe.

2.5. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions and Schwartz's Cultural Model

The Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions is a scheme for cross-cultural connections. It defines the effects that are mirrored by the society's culture and tradition to its members' beliefs and behavior [42]. The countries of northern Europe score high in 'individualism' and 'indulgence', and low in 'uncertainty avoidance' and 'power distance' (appendix, figure 1a). Their members are highly interdependent, they have a strong self-esteem and willingness to accept their impulses and desires [2, 40]. Societies of the north are not threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and they support a view that inequalities amongst people should be minimized [2, 40, 52]. The countries of the southern Europe score high in 'uncertainty avoidance' and 'power distance', and low in 'individualism' and 'indulgence' showing a clear difference compared to the countries of northern Europe (appendix, figure 1b). In other words, these cultures, strongly unified, cohesive in-groups and people, generally try to control their inclinations and impulses [2, 40]. People may not usually be comfortable in uncertain situations and believe that hierarchy should be respected while inequalities between individuals are acceptable [2, 40, 52]. Studies that have applied Schwartz's Cultural Model, which is also used to describe the major characteristics of a country's society, have found that countries that are in the same continent will generally have positions close to each other [4, 9, 54]. However, in Europe, cultures are largely differentiated [4, 9]. Studies have found that the western and northern European countries are predominantly in the area around intellectual autonomy and egalitarianism, projecting creativity, curiosity, a general transcendence of selfishness

and great equality [4, 9]. On the contrary, eastern and southern European countries are showing a propensity towards embeddedness, forming a culture driven more by 'status quo', trying to avoid natural tendencies of individuals that might disorder the traditional regulation and system [4, 9]. Based on the above theoretical background we generate the following research propositions:

1. P1: Plus-size fashion is perceived differently in different areas of Europe.
2. P2: Plus-size fashion has many opportunities to expand in both northern and southern European countries.
3. P3: Perceptions of body image differ between northern and southern European countries.
4. P4: The level of social susceptibility over physical appearance differs between northern and southern European countries.

3. Methodology

The study follows a mixed method approach. An online questionnaire was designed and distributed on social media to test several parameters i.e., consumers shopping habits in different counties, awareness and familiarity with plus-size brands, shopping in-store experience, consumer behavior and overall perceptions over body image. The questionnaire was first pilot-tested with 10 respondents from the northern and southern countries, 2 men and 8 women, representing the likely imbalance of the interest of this topic to different genders. The age groups that the questionnaire was addressed to were the Baby Boomers (1946-1964), the Gen X (1965-1979) and the Millennials (1980-1995), all generations highly affected by technological advancements, the internet and social media [18, 56]. Following the questionnaire the researcher carried out five semi-structure confirmatory interviews with professionals in the fashion industry.

The interviews allowed the researcher to probe where needed and receive specific and detailed information in order to develop a holistic understanding of different perspectives on the matter. The interview sample consisted of four women and one man. The interviewees professions were the following: Fashion Designer, Fashion Stylist, Trend Curator & University senior Lecturer, Fashion Marketer and Member of UKFT London. The interview questions were focused on four key themes in each respondent's country, i.e., the representation of plus-size fashion from existing brands, the importance of fashionable appearance, the influence of bloggers and body positive movement supporters and consumer demand for plus fashion. Two of the interviewees were based in the northern Europe, precisely in the United Kingdom and the others were based in southern Europe, in Greece and in Portugal. One interesting fact was that one of the professionals, based in United Kingdom, was born and raised in northern Europe creating a worth considering combination. The age range of the professionals had a big variation starting with age of twenty-three and up to sixty years, covering all the active generations. The interviews

were completed using the online Skype connection platform.

4. Findings

4.1. Questionnaire Findings

A total of 234 questionnaires were completed and used for statistical purposes. The majority (87,6%) were completed by women and only (12,4%) was completed by men. The two most represented countries of residence in the questionnaires were United Kingdom (54.3%) and Greece (36,8%). The two countries were chosen as the observed environments of northern and southern Europe. In terms of the age band the highest was the 18-25 age category (44,4%), followed by the 25-35 category (31,6%), the 35-45 category (17,9%) and the two categories of 45-55 and 55-65 years old holding together the remaining (6,1%). The first two questions examined the availability of plus-size fashion brands and stores in each country. In United Kingdom the percentage of people that were aware of (1 or less) plus-size brands was (69,3%), while in Greece (49,4%). The percentages of people that had never been to a plus-size fashion store in United Kingdom were (60.6%) and (52.9%) respectively in Greece. These results are in contrast with the actual presence of plus-size brands in each country. According to recent studies by Gonsalves (2015) and Fernandez (2017) plus-size brands have a strong presence in the UK market. A potential reason for this bizarre outcome is that the term plus-size is not commonly used in northern Europe. Rather the term 'curvy' lines is preferred. Another reason might be that in northern Europe most of the brands launching 'curvy' lines are not selling exclusively bigger sizes, but also 'straight' sizes. Therefore, cannot be considered plus-size only brands. In contrast, in southern Europe brands that sell plus-size fashion tend to be 'plus-size – only'.

The next set of questions examined consumer reactions towards a plus-size model in the cover of a fashion magazine. The percentage of people who were positive to the idea of a plus-size model in the front page of a magazine was (87.1%) in Greece and (83.4%) percent in the UK, but with the absolute positive replies in Greece being (13.2%) higher than in UK. From these findings it becomes evident that both northern and southern European societies support the promotion and advertising of different fashion ideals. However, findings also reveal gender differences on beauty standard ideals. Specifically in the southern societies, the percentage of women that was positive to the idea of plus-size fashion was (87.8%) while the equivalent percentage in males was (67.8%). Although the numbers indicate a significant difference in perspectives it is important to note that both percentages are high and show a general positive approach to the subject.

Another set of questions focused on the personal perception and acceptance of the participant's body figure and body image when buying new clothing. In Greece people are widely more often dissatisfied with their body image when they try a new clothes (61,6%), while, in the UK only

(52%) are dissatisfied with their body image when, they try new cloths. The findings suggest that people in Greece think more often of having a slimier figure in order to fit in the cloths they like (52.3%) in contrast to (44.1%) in the UK. This finding is also in line with research that argues that people in southern countries tend to focus more on the outer appearance [10]. Although past studies have shown that people in the northern and southern parts of Europe [24, 55, 35, 38] have different lifestyles and eating habits this study has found that the gap between the different lifestyles has narrowed over the last decades.

The last question focused on the society's susceptibility over people's appearance, body image and perceived level of criticism on the way people look. The results reveal that people in the UK are in fact more critical of others (36.2%) in comparison to (20.9%) in Greece. However, a higher percentage of people in Greece (96.5%) compared to the UK (86.6%) seems to believe that the society they live in is critical and judgmental over their body image. It is important to note here, that responses from different genders do not present remarkable differences. Both in the southern and northern European countries people believe that the societies they live in are critical of their body image. In line with Hofstede's and Schwartz cultural models both southern and northern European societies have strong bonds to their roots, established norms and ideals that define them.

4.2. Interviews Findings

The first question was about the level of expansion of the plus-size industry in the specific country. All three interviewees from Greece and Portugal had a very negative image of the plus-size market in their countries.

"Generally the Plus-size fashion industry it's not expanded in Greece. There are mostly some small boutiques and shops, 90% with woman's clothing with bigger sizes. There are only a few foreign brands with plus-size like Ulla Popken (German brand) and a couple more for men. But the promotion and advertising of these brands is usually non-existed and if there are any ads they usually have a bad and negative impact" – Trend Curator, Greece

"Unfortunately, plus-size fashion is not very expanded, especially in swimwear and lingerie. We have some ready to wear brands, but with bad quality materials" – Swimwear Fashion Designer, Portugal

"Sometimes when I'm walking on the city streets I see some small shops with XL numbers but these kinds of shops are not a lot!" – Fashion Marketer, Greece

In contrast with these responses, the answers of the two experts from the United Kingdom had a more positive note.

"The plus-size market has always been well represented on the high street with most of the major chains going up to a size 18 or beyond" – Fashion Marketer and Member of UKFT, London

"The Plus-size industry is expanding rapidly in London. As I recall 12.5% of UK brands are exclusively plus-size and many other massive production brand, such as H&M, Forever 21 etc., have exclusive lines from size 16 and up. We are talking about more than 5 billion pounds profit from clothing only. I believe England is the capital of plus-size brands in Europe. Most importantly you can find both electronic and physical stores in the UK and they are not hidden and small. They share the same space with major brands in very popular areas, like Oxford Street and Marylebone" - Fashion Stylist, UK

From the interview responses above, it is evident that northern Europe is much more expanded and rich in fashionable plus-size brands while the southern Europe lacks in noteworthy plus-size choices and suitable, successful promotional strategies.

The following group of questions referred to the importance of the fashionable appearance and the body figure in the interviewee's country, as well as, the role and presence of the body positive movement and fashion bloggers in the society. Generally, all the experts supported the view that both body image and fashionable look are important in their countries, however, professionals from southern Europe seemed more passionate and concerned with this matter.

"At school, little girls and teenagers are getting more and more bullied", because of their body figure …. I can't feel the presence of the "Body Positive Movement". People are very influenced by skinny bloggers and famous actresses" – Fashion Designer

"The image for the Greek society is extremely important. I would describe 90% of young Greeks generally as "Fashion victims". They mostly follow the trends from all the celebrities, in Greece or abroad, mostly through television or social media platforms. The thing is that they don't usually do a more in-depth analysis of the trends and they chose only the hot pieces so that they can look alike to their fashion icons, even if the whole style doesn't fit to their personal style. Image is generally a very important subject in every part of Greece not only in the big urban cities" – Trend Curator, Greece

"In my country the body figure and the appearance is playing a very important role in almost everyone's life" – Fashion Marketer, Greece

"Speaking about women, almost all of them are caring a lot about their appearance and are almost always well dressed and appropriately prepared. Also they love looking fabulous and they are respecting their body type, they love it.

The fashion bloggers are playing a very important role in Greek's everyday routine and the women are copying the bloggers ways of leaving. In Greece women love fashion and because they are loving fashion, so much are trying to look always chic, sexy and fabulous. That's why I believe that the most Greeks are having a huge problem with their weight, they love staring themselves every morning at the mirror and feeling confident and free" – Fashion Marketer, Greece

The two experts from United Kingdom agreed to the fact that UK people in general choose to look fashionable and want to be good-looking although the Fashion Marketer and Member of the UKFT mentioned that "looking fashionable and stylish in the UK is less important than dressing in the right brand."

"I think Londoners, who love fashion, are very stylish regardless their body image. Of course the beauty standards are the same in the UK and skinny is considered ideal, but I have met many plus-size boys and girls that are more stylish than the average Londoner. I believe the body image is still very important to the society, since we are still have certain jobs and activities that are limited for some, based only in the appearance. I strongly disagree that a model-size girls will sell me luxury cosmetics easier than a size 14 one.

I think London is more aware about body positivity than other cities in the UK. We have various bloggers such as Georgina of www.shemightbeloved.com, Danielle Vanier and Gemma of Pink Gemma. They have a very tight community and they are sharing different taste in fashion and lifestyle. As I can observer in my working environment women tend to loop up to these girls, not only for the choice of their outfits, but also for their perspective of life. Be positive about life instead of just our figure" – Fashion Stylists, UK

"In the lingerie industry, fit is the most important factor. From training bras for youngsters to large sized and backed bras for ladies with a generous bust, the UK market caters for this market well.

In women's ready to wear, in the UK celebrity endorsement and brand are the number one brand motivators for most of the market.

Again, looking at M&S's advertising using larger ladies and older models as well as younger and more petite models, the UK's largest retail hopes to cater for all areas of the market.

Looking fashionable and stylish in the UK is less important than dressing in the right brand. This is why the larger brands tend to invest in working with celebrity as the cult of the celebrity is everywhere in the UK.

Fashion bloggers are important here, but they cater mainly to the mainstream market and not specifically the market interested in plus-sizes. In addition, some TV shopping channels like QVC have a gap in the market for clothes which are not specifically outsides, but are flattering for all body shapes.

The body positive movement is not as well established as it is in the US in the mass market of, indeed, in southern Europe, but there is growing interest in the middle market about fashions, which can be flattering and affordable as women (and me) reach middle age. TV programmes like Lorraine on daytime TV tap into this part of the market bringing viewers tips on how to dress well on a limited market and eat more healthy

It is also worth mentioning that the corollary of this is the Psychological Sizing, which is especially prevalent in the UK. Some retailers purposefully make their sizes more generous as this creates an important feel-good factor with consumers. For example, if a woman knows that she is a size 14 in Marks and Spencer or a 16 or 18 elsewhere, she is possibly more likely to start her shopping at M&S." – Fashion Marketer and UKFT Member.

On the contrary, in southern Europe people are mainly influenced by 'skinny bloggers' as it was stated by the Swimwear Fashion Designer, while the Trend Curator University Lecturer said that "The Greek body type is generally «voluptuous» "and that Greeks "are used to the image of a fuller body". However, she skeptically added that "Greek society is used to this image but does not accept it".

The findings are complying strongly with the culture models of Hofstede and Schwartz [42, 43]. The Hofstede's framework of some representative countries of southern and northern Europe (appendix, figure 1 a&b) shows the scores in 'individualism', 'uncertainty avoidance' and 'power distance'. Societies like the Greek and Portuguese are less open to changes, such as the changes brought by the body positive movement. Members of the society are more influenced by each other. On the other hand, in the northern societies people are more independent and less influenced by public opinion, more open to unknown situations, such as new upcoming beauty ideals of diverse body standards. Cultural differences, among the countries of the north do however, exist. For example, the UK scores higher in masculinity/femininity than Demark and Sweden and low in avoidance uncertainty, which suggest that well established brand names are very influential as well as well-known and successful celebrities.

The last question of the interview explored the need for more plus-size clothing options and brands in each country and the consequence of their absence. In general, all interviewees had a positive attitude towards the expansion of the plus-size industry.

The UK experts were supportive and positive to the further expansion and development of the sector.

"Since the UK is at the Top 5 obese countries" the need of "bigger" fashionable and affordable fashion garments is crucial while there is an important "opportunity to grow to million dollar businesses" - Fashion Stylist, UK

"Body shapes change, especially with younger people" and it is likely "the designer community may start to look at this market in more detail" – Fashion Marketer and UKFT Member

The professionals of Greece and Portugal underlined the prominence of the plus-size sector absence and the negative effects to the society. They were also very positive and eager to see a development in the industry and confident that the change will come eventually to their countries' markets.

Fashion designer in Portugal pointed out that the last summer over thirty people came to her atelier because they could not find swimsuits their size.

"I think Portugal needs more Plus-size brands, urgently. I am on the swimwear area, I have a small atelier and this year more than 30 people, from my friends' environment came to me because they just can't find swimwear for their size. And this is happening with lingerie too and ready to wear brands." – Fashion Designer, Portugal.

Fashion Designer, Trend Curator and Senior Lecturer in Greece found that "there are enough shoppers that are in need of Plus-size options for clothing… The absence of a nice aesthetic in the options in the stores… is driving people to choose the bigger size of the straight lines, even if it doesn't

really suit them, than selecting one of the boring and limited plus-size options that they have".

According to all the answers it is clear that in both cultures there should be an extension of the plus-size industry, with the difference that in the southern Europe its absence is more essential and urgent.

5. Conclusion

The emerging market of plus-size fashion is changing and its presence is becoming noticeably stronger, more solid, and more stable. This study's findings reveal that perceptions towards plus-size fashion differ across Europe and that the market for bigger sizes is at different stages of development in different areas of Europe. The study compares consumer perceptions in northern European countries and southern European countries, based on Hofstede and Schwartz's cultural models. The findings suggest that the distinctive characteristics and perceptions of consumers in these countries influences the progress and expansion of the plus-size fashion industry and the speed of how new beauty ideals expand in society.

Both experts in the fashion industry and consumers confirm the presence of more brands with larger sizes in northern Europe, although, in southern European societies, consumers have more exposure to plus-size brands. Plus-size brands are targeted at obese people. In northern European countries, plus-size brands are more smoothly represented as an extension of a regular size line collection, often referred to as 'curvy lines', for example: Asos, Boohoo, River Island, New Look, and Pretty Little Thing

People in the southern European societies are more conscious of their body image and believe that the society is judgmental over their appearance. Interestingly though, in comparison to the northern European societies, the southern European societies are found to be less critical over others. In line with the application of Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework, the less individualistic environment of the south, with more conservative norms, combined with the high uncertainty avoidance, shapes a society that puts pressure on the individual to conform with certain standards.

In northern European societies, the new body standards are represented through line extensions of existing brands into the plus-size market and the body positive movement supporters and bloggers. Existing brands in these societies still do not offer a full product portfolio for plus-size customers. In southern European societies, plus-size fashion has some negative connotations, and plus-size customers are faced with an intense absence of quality and fashionable options for clothing.

Overall, the plus-size market appears to be in an early stage of growth in both northern and southern Europe. This study presents significant insights to fashion brand managers of how consumers think and behave in different countries as well as fashion industry professionals' opinions towards the current state and future opportunities of plus-size fashion in different markets.

5.1. Implications for the Fashion Industry

Specific implications for the world of fashion can be placed and interpreted by the way plus-size brands are presented and promoted in different countries. For instance, in high uncertainty avoidance cultures, such as those of southern European countries, where people tend to focus more on their outer appearance, are well groomed and well-dressed with matching colours and the correct accessories, prefer to try on products, (the fit is more important than the novelty of the product), advertising a new style using local, high-profile celebrities and even through traditional channels could be the best way of entering these markets and sustaining a competitive advantage. Proactive fashion brands that wish to enter the markets of southern European countries would collaborate closely with key influencers to first improve the general perceptions of plus-size fashion, use traditional and new media to build connotations of diversity and inclusivity around the concept of fashion, and design activities that will allow them to engage with the audience and consumers from a young age. On the contrary, in the northern European countries that are more individualistic, lower power distance countries, were people seek to demonstrate their uniqueness and independence through their clothing, brands can present more novel ideas in clothing through various communication channels. Luxury and premium brands in both northern and southern countries would benefit from offering high-quality and high-end designs in bigger sizes but also extend into lingerie and swimwear product categories.

5.2. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study is largely exploratory and aims to give a holistic understanding of contemporary consumer perspectives on plus-size fashion and market expansion opportunities across Europe. Certainly a more fine distinction between the northern and southern countries cultural characteristics would bring to light more refined distinctions e.g., UK scores much higher in masculinity compared to the Scandinavian countries, therefore, one strategy could not fit it all, rather marketers need to adjust their marketing strategies to the relevant target market. Future research could look at plus-size fashion for men in different parts of Europe, compare northern to southern European consumers perspectives and market potential. Another possible avenue for research would be to examine the effect of plus-size fashion on specific age categories. The age range is likely to be an important differentiating factor in consumers level of acceptance and endorsement of new and modern ideas (e.g., Millennials born between 1977 to 1995 vs. Generation X born between 1965 to 1976). Further research could also investigate any negative effects that the expansion of plus-size fashion had brought to countries that is already well established, like the United States of America (e.g., change in eating habits, lifestyle, behavior towards others), as well as the adverse and unfavorable effects that could create in the future.

Appendix
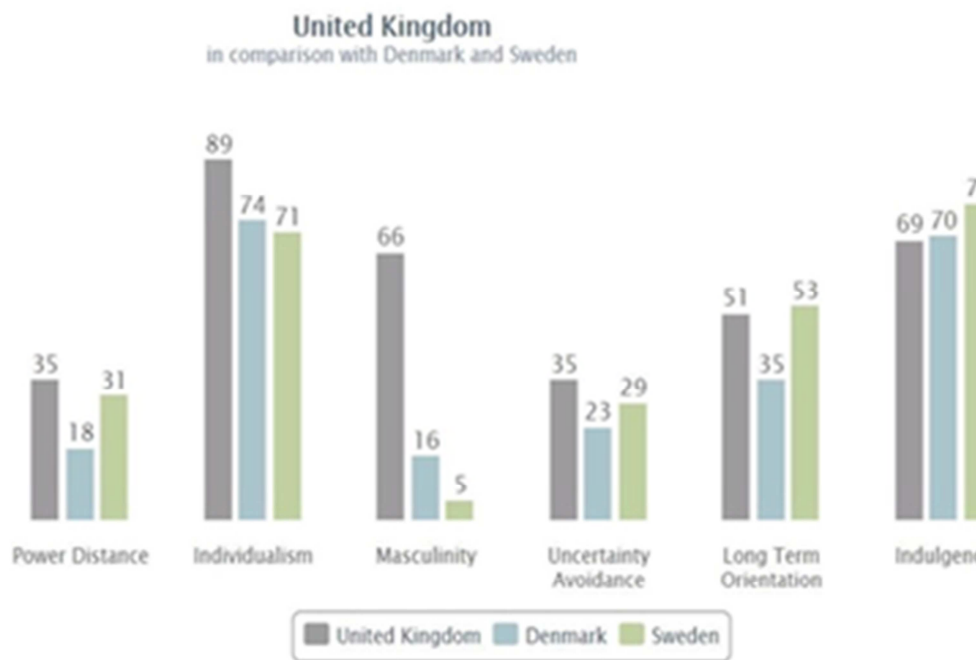
(a)
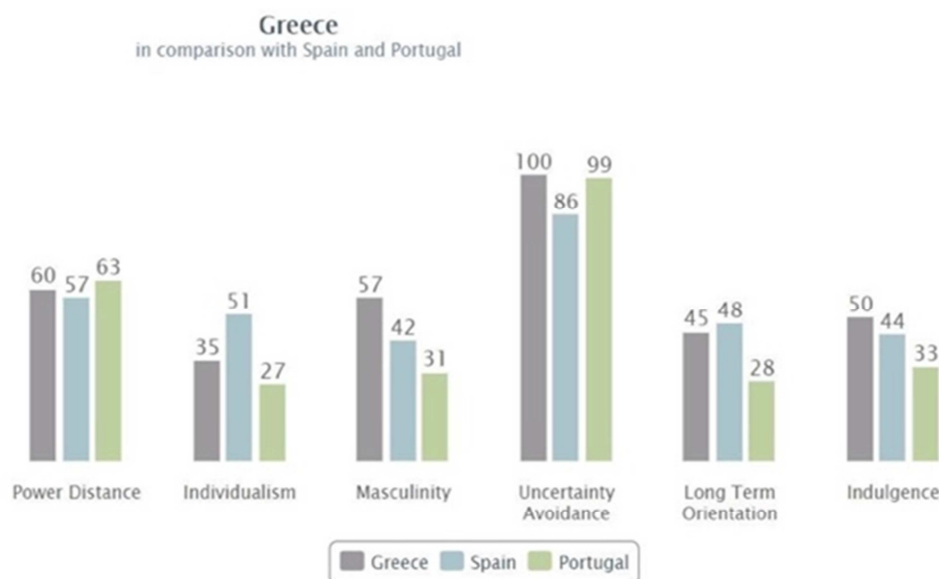
(b)

Figure 1. *(a) Hofstede's Cross Cultural Comparison of the Northern Countries. (b) Hofstede's Cross Cultural Comparison of the Southern Countries. The data values can be obtained at: https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/.*

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