

Why Big and Tall Men's Clothing Is So Hard to Find

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'You Can't Shop Here'

Men are spending more money on their clothes than ever before, and more men than ever are plus-sized. So why haven't brands figured out how to create something they actually want to wear?



By [Arianna Rebolini](#) Published: Jul 24, 2017

Brandon Coates is used to being stopped on the street. On the subway, too. And at coffee shops, and parties, and on the job. He's lost count of the number times men have tapped him on the shoulder, asking a variation on the same question: *Where did you get your outfit?*

"My clothing has always been a conversation piece," the thirty-year-old Coates told me. When we met in Union Square one chilly March evening, I could immediately see why: Coates arrived in a dark denim jumpsuit, black felt fedora, and a pair of diamond stud

earrings big enough to sparkle noticeably under Panera's fluorescent lights. It would be a striking look on anyone, but Coates is a member of a group most fashion brands dismiss as uninterested in or unworthy of style: plus-size men.

So when people asked for his fashion secrets, his responses were never as simple as a brand name. That blazer someone loved? He'd likely tailored and embellished it on his own. The tee shirt? Maybe he'd cut it up, reworked it, and put it back together. His pants? An unassuming pair from a big-box retailer, which anyone else would've breezed past, upgraded with a flashier zipper or new trim. Coates knew what those other men knew: High-fashion brands didn't make clothes for men their size. He just also knew how to get around that.



Brandon Coates. Jacket by Brandon Kyle Collection, brandonkylecollection.com; sweater by Uniqlo, uniqlo.com

"It took a lot of digging, a lot of trial and error," Coates said of his early efforts to transform the dregs of men's fashion into outfits he was excited to wear. (He currently wears between a large and extra large, what he calls "slim-thick," but he has worn up to a 3X in the past.) "The lucky thing for me is that I have an eye for it. I know how to take pieces and make something out of nothing."

For ten years Coates honed his fashion instincts while designing for women's plus-size brand Monif C. But in 2016, motivated by the lack of options for men his size, he created his own line, Brandon Kyle, which debuted at New York Fashion Week last September. Now, when

men stop to ask about his clothes, he directs them to his site. The launch felt personal, a mission born of deep-seated frustration—not only as a consumer, but also as a designer working in an industry that has been reluctant to cater to him.



Jacket by Engineered Garments; engineeredgarments.com; T-shirt and jeans by Uniqlo, uniqlo.com; sneakers by Converse, converse.com

As of 2014, the average American male's waist measured 40 inches, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Yet even mainstream stores like Forever 21, Unif, and Urban Outfitters don't make anything above a 38-inch waist. A few companies—Gap, Eddie Bauer, American Eagle—sell some pants with 48-inch waistbands, but often not in stores, and not using larger models to display them. An XXL shirt, meanwhile, is often a medium scaled up without accounting for a longer torso or broader shoulders.

None of these issues are specific to men: women have been fighting for inclusivity in the fashion industry for years. Efforts to diversify men's fashion are much newer, however, and they come with their own unique stigmas. The women's plus-size industry is built on overt body positivity. But that kind of defiant self-love is often seen as outside the bounds of mainstream masculinity—especially by big brands and ad firms wary of striking the wrong tone.

Men are spending more money on clothes than ever, and more men than ever are plus-sized. The end goal of making more clothes for them seems fairly simple. Now the industry just has to figure out how to get there.

In 2016, the women's plus-size clothing market was worth an estimated \$20.4 billion; for three years prior, growth outpaced that of women's clothing sales overall. (There is significantly less tracking of the size of the plus-size men's industry; one research group estimated it totals about \$1 billion.) Plus-size women are more visible than ever, with models like Ashley Graham, Tess Holliday, and Nadia Aboulhosn leading the charge on catwalks, magazine covers, and online.



Nick Paget, senior menswear editor at trend forecasting company WGSN, doesn't see similar energy around men's clothing. Men's plus-size options (or extended size, or big and tall; there's no agreement on one label yet) are growing, he said, but not quickly, and not very publicly. "Maybe it's something that people just are doing but don't really chat about, but people aren't really talking about plus-size, which I think is a big miss, really," he told me. "I can't really get my head around why this isn't happening at the same rate that it's happening within women's wear."

The industry's tepid response may be in part the result of the hesitation to sell plus-size clothing to men as a cause. Launching a new line always requires a PR push, but brands have failed to home in on what the message should be.

American Eagle assumed men would bristle at a body positivity campaign directed at them. In late March 2016, the company released a video announcing #Aeriemán—the male counterpart to Aerie, its lingerie and intimates line, which is marketed with inclusive beauty and love-your-body messages. The video featured four men—two traditional models, two bigger guys—doing yoga, dancing, taking selfies in their underwear while talking about the sexiness of confidence. It was silly and joyful and many people were excited about it. Then, a week later, American Eagle admitted the video was an April Fools joke.



[youtube.com / American Eagle Outfitters](https://www.youtube.com/AmericanEagleOutfitters)

The backlash was loud and swift. Before the reveal, Aerieman coverage had largely been positive. Mic praised Aerie for "[giving] plus-size men the underwear campaign we've all been waiting for;" Fashionista called the message "empowering." By taking it back, American Eagle seemed to be saying that a man expressing body confidence makes a good punchline—especially if that guy is plus-size. American Eagle released a statement insisting the sentiment was real, and that the video was simply "a lighthearted, creative interpretation of the #AerieReal message," but the damage was done. Today, the video has been rebranded with no mention of AerieMan, and the accompanying blog post has been deleted. (Asked for comment on AerieMan, American Eagle responded, "Since 2016, American Eagle has ceased to retouch any men's underwear and swim images, and has been using more models with diverse body types. In addition, American Eagle does offer sizes extending to XXXL, and continues to explore additional sizes for its customers.")

No one felt the anger more than Kelvin Davis, the model and blogger behind the popular "body-positive" men's fashion site Notoriously Dapper, and one of the plus-size men featured in the video. Davis had been told the video was part of a real campaign, and when he repeated the tagline—"The real you is sexy"—he meant it. On April Fools Day, his followers felt betrayed by someone they'd come to admire. Davis was on a plane when American Eagle announced Aerieman was a prank, and he turned on his phone to find a torrent of angry and disappointed messages about a controversy he didn't even know he was complicit in. "I was just getting torn up," he said. "People were like, 'How dare you make fun of male body positivity?' and I had no idea what was going on." It felt like a bad dream; at first, he was certain his career was over.

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Davis genuinely believes that men, given the opportunity, would embrace body-positive messaging. "Brands think men wouldn't take a serious ad seriously, but I think they would," he told me. "If they did a Dove beauty for men, men would stop and think about themselves,

and understand that it's okay to have insecurities."

But American Eagle's instincts weren't totally off-base. Coates argues that messaging to men *is* more difficult than women, an idea I heard repeated several times. "With guys, we're not super emotional, not super touchy-feely, so you've got to walk a fine line. That's the nature of men," he said. "It's our ego, our bravado." But as a designer, Coates can't understand why he would even suggest his customers not take him seriously. "I have a certain sensitivity to this, because I was also that customer, but to me, when you start poking fun at yourself, you negate what you're doing. It's about showing your best self, bringing all your positivity and creativity to the table, and empowering other guys to do the same."



From left, Coates, Zach Miko, D.J. Terrell, and Daniel Franzese

Some men distance themselves from the language of body positivity because they think it's unmasculine, but others feel uncomfortable encroaching on a movement they believe women deserve to own. Every guy I spoke to offered a caveat: I know women have it worse. "For women, the plus-size movement is great," said artist Danny Brito, who wears a 2X and frequently complains online about his limited options. "I don't want to be like, 'What about men?' Women's rights, to me, are more important. Just kick us some plus-size stuff now and then is all I'm asking."

Bruce Sturgell, who founded the plus-size men's fashion site Chubstr, observes a kind of willful silence among many men when it comes to talking about what it feels like to be plus-size. He has found the best way to reach plus-size men is to be as straightforward as possible, with no pandering. "It's not so much about saying, 'We're fat and deserve to be loved,' as it is about showing you can put a bigger guy into an awesome outfit and show that he can look great," he said. "It has the same effect without saying it: these people are worthwhile and deserve the same options."



Overshirt by Steven Alan, stevenalan.com; shirt by Polo Ralph Lauren, ralphlauren.com; jeans by Levi's, levis.com; sneakers by converse, converse.com

If you browse the big and tall sections of popular brands online, you will see a lot of Zach Miko. He's disarmingly handsome—six-foot-six, 42-inch waist, dirty blonde beard—and he's ubiquitous in online plus-size campaigns. Target, Old Navy, Levi's—there he is, usually in a stylized splash. Insofar as there is a face of the men's plus-size industry, he is it.

Miko made headlines just over a year ago when he became the first plus-size male model ever to be signed to a major U.S. agency. But when he first moved to New York in 2009, modeling wasn't remotely on his radar. After two years at New Haven's Albertus Magnus College, Miko enrolled at the American Academy of Dramatic Art in Manhattan to train as a classical actor. From there came bartending while attending casting calls. Directors repeatedly told him he was too big to be a leading man, so he took roles as bouncers, security guards, construction workers. When he finally landed a larger role on a miniseries, he quit his bartending job, flew to West Virginia, and sat through hair and makeup, only to be unceremoniously fired by an executive producer wondering why they'd hired a guy who was "so big." "I was supposed to work for a *month*," Miko told me. "It was rough. It was very, very rough."

Shortly thereafter, his acting manager saw a Facebook post from a friend looking for men with at least a 40-inch waist, and she knew exactly who to contact. That same day, Miko did a test shoot for Target; within hours, he'd booked his first gig. Though the learning curve was steep for all involved—Miko had been in front of the camera before but was "terrified" about modeling; Target had sent medium-sized shirts that had to be split up the back and held in place—the shoot went well enough that Target booked Miko again. When his first campaign went live, the plus-size guys noticed, and they were pleased.

"Did Target sneak in a plus-size model?" Sturgell wrote on Chubstr, excited but skeptical about something he'd never seen. Usually, plus-size guys had to rely on their imagination when shopping online, guessing how a shirt would stretch over their bodies based on the way it fell on a model with a 32-inch waist. Would this be the beginning of a bigger change? And who was this guy?

Miko reached out to Chubstr, and interview requests began pouring in. *People*, *Mic*, *Huffington Post*, and *Good Morning America* were among the many outlets eager to celebrate. Among those most excited by Miko's shoot was Ivan Bart, president of IMG Models, who emailed him personally, invited him for a meeting, and signed him on the spot. How could he not? Miko was the all-around package, a potential poster boy for an industry with no clear stars, an Ashley Graham for the guys. "When he came in he was so charming, so interesting," Bart told me. "I said he'd be great on camera, he could talk, he was articulate, handsome. He just exuded great health and vibrancy, and I thought he'd be a great role model."



Jacket by Loro Piana, loropiana.com; sweater and jeans by Polo Ralph Lauren, ralphlauren.com; sneakers by Adidas Stan Smith, adidas.com

Since then, Miko has slid seamlessly into the role, with appearances on *Access Hollywood* and *Entertainment Tonight*; last month, he joined actor Daniel Franzese as faces of plus-size men's subscription service The Winston Box, of which Franzese is also creative director. But he remains the only plus-sized male model signed with a major agency—and even he still has a hard time shopping. "People ask, 'what's your number one goal for the men's industry?' and, honestly, it's to be able to walk into a store that I like, try something on, and then buy it," he said, shrugging. "I've never done it. It seems so simple, but it's not an option."

For Miko, shopping was a "dreaded thing" throughout most of his life, especially in his early teens. "I would get so embarrassed," he said. "I would be in the dressing room, my mom waiting outside, and I'd be getting more and more angry as she kept handing my stuff. I was like, 'Can't button it, can't do this one, too short, next.'" What resulted was a wardrobe consisting of a handful of reliable items that fit but that he didn't necessarily like or feel good wearing. And because shopping didn't get easier as he got older, these were the items he held onto.



Track jacket and T-shirt by Polo Ralph Lauren, ralphlauren.com; pants by The Winston Box, thewinstonbox.com; sneakers by Nike, nike.com



Jacket by Levi's, [levi.com](https://www.levi.com); polo shirt by original penguin, [originalpenguin.com](https://www.originalpenguin.com); pants by the winston box, [thewinstonbox.com](https://www.thewinstonbox.com); sneakers by converse, [converse.com](https://www.converse.com)

"I had like three outfits I wore forever, because I knew they fit," Miko said. "Then one day, before I got into modeling, my wife and I were looking at photos at my mom's house and she saw a picture of me as a junior in high school, wearing these plaid shorts that she hated, that I still wore every summer, with the same rip in the pocket. She was making fun of me. She was like, 'You *need* to switch it up.' And I was like, 'Find me a place to find clothes, and I will.'"

Though the industry is slowly changing—Miko and Davis say they find clothes they like at places like Target, ASOS, Chubbies Shorts, and Frank and Oak—I heard the same tone of resigned weariness whenever I asked a plus-sized guy about his shopping experiences. Davis launched Notoriously Dapper after falling in love with a red blazer in Express only to find out it wasn't available in his size, neither in stores nor online. "It didn't make any sense,"

Davis recalled over the phone. "Do they just not want people to wear their stuff? I remember feeling insecure about it, kind of down about myself. It's like a sales rep telling you, *you can't shop here. You don't fit our body type.*"

My goal is to be able to walk into a store that I like, try something on, and then buy it.

Coates had stories of his own. During a semester he spent at Oxford, he and three other guys left class and headed to High Street to shop at some menswear boutiques. Each of his classmates ("all skinny, of course") picked up shirts and blazers. Coates left with a pair of sunglasses. It was the only item that fit. "Those experiences kind of piqued my insecurities," he said, adding that in general, he is confident in his image as the "big boy who can dress." But those experiences also piqued his interest in the plus-size industry. He knew, intimately, how underserved the market was.

At a little table in the back of Panera, Coates pulled a pair of high-waisted camo-print pants out of his seemingly bottomless luggage. He told me to grab the fabric—"beautiful, heavy cotton"—so I took it between my fingers. It was substantial, sturdy. He laid the pants along his lap and reached down for the next item: a ponte (think: softer, thinner scuba suit) bomber jacket, black with epaulets and gold buttons.

Next up, a tuxedo shirt with an intricate sequin bib, a pattern of blue, black, tan, and white stripes and zig-zags. Then a fishnet long-sleeve crewneck; convertible joggers that zip off into shorts; a lightweight blue and white tee with an attached skinny scarf. The t-shirt, Coates was surprised to find, was the first of his collection to sell out.

Coates prides himself in the quality of his construction and the uniqueness of his designs. He knows plus-size men aren't usually desperate for basics; they can find loungewear at the big and tall shops and discount retailers. What they can't get are trends and high fashion, the kind of clothes that express personality. And if brands are assuming plus-size men aren't looking to get experimental with clothes, that they wouldn't appreciate a wider variety, that they don't want to invest in their appearance, Coates is out to show them they are wrong.



Jacket by Brandon Kyle Collection, brandonkylecollection.com; sweater and jeans by Uniqlo, uniqlo.com; boots by H&M, hm.com

His first year in business has been proof. His line debuted at New York Fashion Week last year; since then, the Brandon Kyle newsletter—Coates's main marketing tool—has grown by about thirty percent. He had to increase his size range to include large (it began at XL-4X) because non-plus guys were demanding it. In addition to his mini-collections, which come out monthly, he launched a resortwear collection for summer, comprising three trunks and coordinating dusters. Sales have risen steadily, and Coates expects the company to reach its break-even point by year two.

"This is a viable market, and it should be treated as such," he said. "I'm giving you the most creative, avant-garde things that I can give you. I want to break down these misconceptions about what plus-size guys can and can't wear. I'm pushing the envelope slowly to let the market know it's possible — you can do it, and you can do it well."

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In the five months between leaving Monif C and launching Brandon Kyle, Coates researched the market and started a massive outreach effort, getting insight from the men who'd been asking him for years what they could do to look cooler. While we chatted, Coates pulled up an Instagram DM from a customer, a selfie featuring a new Brandon Kyle scarf tee and a message saying "Shirt arrived, fits great, I'm really happy with it!"). Coates is grateful for the chance to be in such close contact with those buying his products, even if it means a lot of work—Brandon Kyle remains largely a one-man show. This level of attention, he insists, is a key component of his success. "No one's ever spoken to the customer in this way before," he said. "To actually be able to see men who look like them, happy, confident, in really fashion-forward, well-executed styles—that to me is the most important thing."



Sweater by Polo Ralph Lauren, ralphlauren.com; pants by Levi's, levis.com; sneakers by adidas, adidas.com

Increasingly, larger plus-sized brands are taking the same approach. ASOS released its plus-size men's line last November with barely any marketing other than splashes on their home page. Instead, they focused on outreach and engagement in the community. Ahead of the soft launch, ASOS invited plus-size models, bloggers, and influencers to a dinner party, where they could choose items from the new line. For brands to be successful in the fledgling plus-size market, customer outreach is key.

"We're in touch with these guys, actually getting their feedback, seeing what they're looking for," said James Lawrence, the head of menswear design at ASOS. Lawrence is tall and lean and looks like every model the plus-size guys are tired of seeing, but to his mind, the expansion was a no-brainer. "It can be tricky; there's more variation in bigger sizes, but we're working on it," said Lawrence. "We're going to continue improving it until we get it right."

ASOS Plus has been more successful than its executives predicted. In six months, the company sold 60,000 units. They've had to adjust their rollout plan to meet demand, expanding more styles to the plus sizes, and they plan to triple the number of items on offer by next autumn/winter season. Seeing these numbers, other brands, like Puma and River Island, have created exclusive extended sizes with ASOS.

The trendiness is a huge part of the excitement around the launch. By simply extending the size range of lines the company already makes, ASOS is opening up styles plus-size guys usually don't have access to. One of the best-selling items in ASOS Plus's initial launch was a black tee whose bottom half is floral lace, which sold more in the plus range than in the main range. Close behind were velour tees and oversized borg sweaters. The company is doing separate shoots for the Plus range, using plus-size men to model the clothes—something plus-size guys agree is crucial for e-commerce brands. "Shoppers start to see specific models on the site for long enough, they start to trust them," Lawrence said. "We see it with the women—they know, if it suits her, it will suit them."



Coat by Comme des Garçons Homme Plus, comme-des-garcons.com; T-shirt by Polo Ralph Lauren, ralphlauren.com; jeans by Carhartt, carhartt.com; sneakers by Vans, vans.com

And since ASOS relied mostly on street casting, its models are noticeably more diverse than other brands'. DJ Terrell, a twenty-two-year-old recent Howard University graduate and plus-size model who has worked for Coates' line, says he is thrilled by the mainstreaming of plus-size men but is eager to see diversity in size but also in race. (Brito echoed this sentiment, lamenting the fact that plus-size men "got one major model and he's literally a white guy with a little bit of a gut.") Terrell described the ASOS Plus line—its trendiness, affordability, and diverse representation—as "a blessing." "When ASOS came out with their line, I was like, *oh my God, I love y'all, I'm going to buy everything*," he said, laughing. "My mom's like, 'You just bought something from ASOS; why are you buying something else?' But I just love it."

For someone who's spent his whole life grateful just to find an item of clothing that fits, the introduction of variety, and the creative expression that variety makes room for, can feel luxurious. By using models diverse in size and race, brands can go a step further, allowing customers to see themselves in the clothing, how they might style it, how it might fit. "People are missing a trick here," said Lawrence in a hushed voice, as if sharing a money-making secret no one else had caught onto. "We've had more press for this than we've gotten in a very long time. No one else is doing it, at least in terms of trend and fashionability. We should've done it sooner."

For the moment, IMG is banking on Miko as a solo spokesperson: the broadly palatable leader, part model, part advocate, part innovator, who will carry the plus-size men's community into the mainstream. When they signed Miko more than a year ago, they announced the launch of an entire male plus-size division called Brawn, but they have yet to sign anyone else. "Brawn" has disappeared as a category of models on the agency's website.

"The intention is there, but we were concentrating so much on Zach and showing his success that we're yet to sign more," Bart said. "I have targeted some men that I'm interested in, but for the moment we're concentrating on Zach."

Miko is well aware that not every plus-size guy will see themselves in him, but he is excited to be an example of a happy, confident, bigger man for anyone who might need it. "I didn't know that I would love working as a model and as a body-positive advocate," he says. He's eager to be part of the change, and he is optimistic that the industry is starting to grow. "I'm trying to make brands more inclusive and that's my ultimate goal, but in reality it's about trying to show people you can just be happy the way you are."

Though Miko is no doubt a worthy leader—the guy is almost impossibly likable, and it is hard to find fault with his promotion of confidence and acceptance—it seems clear that those waiting for the industry to align with a cohesive movement are not likely to get their wish.

When Paget confidently told me the industry is changing toward the inclusion of plus-size men's sizes, he gave credit to a brand, not a spokesperson or a cause. "ASOS entering that marketplace will doubtless trigger other people to do the same," he said. "It's only a matter of time."

While its peers fumble for the right message, ASOS Plus found commercial success by catering to plus-size men without ever mentioning body positivity or confidence. Youngish plus-size men know what they want, models say, and they don't need a cause to encourage them to buy cool, well-made clothes. And if those clothes happen to help them feel more confident their bodies? That's fine, too.

Photography by Kathryn Wirsing