

Spoiler Alert — Vanity Sizing: How what you don't, err, didn't know is making you happy

Posted on [November 18, 2012](#) by [Kerry](#)

I can say without hesitation (but with considerable vanity) that I wear the same size clothes now as I did 20 years ago. I've always fit quite well into jeans with a 31" waist. It was that way in college and is that way now. I have always been very physically active and reasonably moderate in my consumption of fatty foods. Yay for me.

Until I went shopping in Madrid a couple years ago.

It was a very confusing experience for me. I picked out a couple pairs of jeans to try on in the size I've been wearing for 20 years, and took them to the dressing room to see how they looked, fully expecting to decide based on style. It only took a moment to realize that there was something very wrong. Even as I pulled the jeans up my legs I sensed that something was amiss. By the time I tried to insert button into hole at the waist, I was bewildered.



Where I lost my innocence.

In short, I couldn't do it. Not even close. Couldn't get the button anywhere near the hole. The two were a good two inches apart, even when I inhaled for all I was worth.

So I quickly tried the other pair. Same deal.

Ok, I thought, I must have screwed up the conversion from European sizing to American inches. The usual quick formula is to just add 10 to whatever you normally wear. They didn't have 41, so I'd gone to 42. So, hm, if anything they should have been a bit loose.

Much to my horror, I found that to achieve loose, I needed a 46!! 46!! What the heck was going on? I hadn't eaten THAT much on my vacation.

As it turns out, it was a matter of vanity sizing. In the U.S. (and increasingly the U.K. and elsewhere), the distance around a pair of jeans from button to hole had been inching up over time, just as had (to my dismay) the distance from one side of my belly-button to the other. No longer were 31" jeans 31" around. Now, 31" jeans were more like 33 inches around. Of course, it hasn't just been happening to our jeans.

This phenomenon began with women's clothing some time ago, as it turns out. Yesterday's medium is today's small, a large is a medium and so forth.

Recently, researchers in Turkey and the United States studied the phenomenon and discovered that, for some

of us anyway, this vanity sizing actually makes us feel better. As it turns out, thinking that we still fit into a small makes us feel better. This is particularly the case for people who don't have a great self-image to start with. Fitting into smaller sizes (smaller/ thinner = better) causes us to imagine ourselves as being thinner. For those among us who like to feel that way, the trick works. We like ourselves a bit better when we are wearing the small that really should be a medium than when we are wearing a properly-labeled medium.

Unfortunately, now that I know the deal, I'm not sure the trick works anymore, and I have to change the story I've been telling for a long time now about how I am in the same shape as I was in college.

Sorry if I just spoiled the trick for you. :-p

This blog post was written by Kerry Cunningham. [Follow @kerryfc](#)

The article reference above is: Aydinoğlu, N. Z., & Krishna, A. (2012). Imagining thin: Why vanity sizing works. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 22(4), 565.

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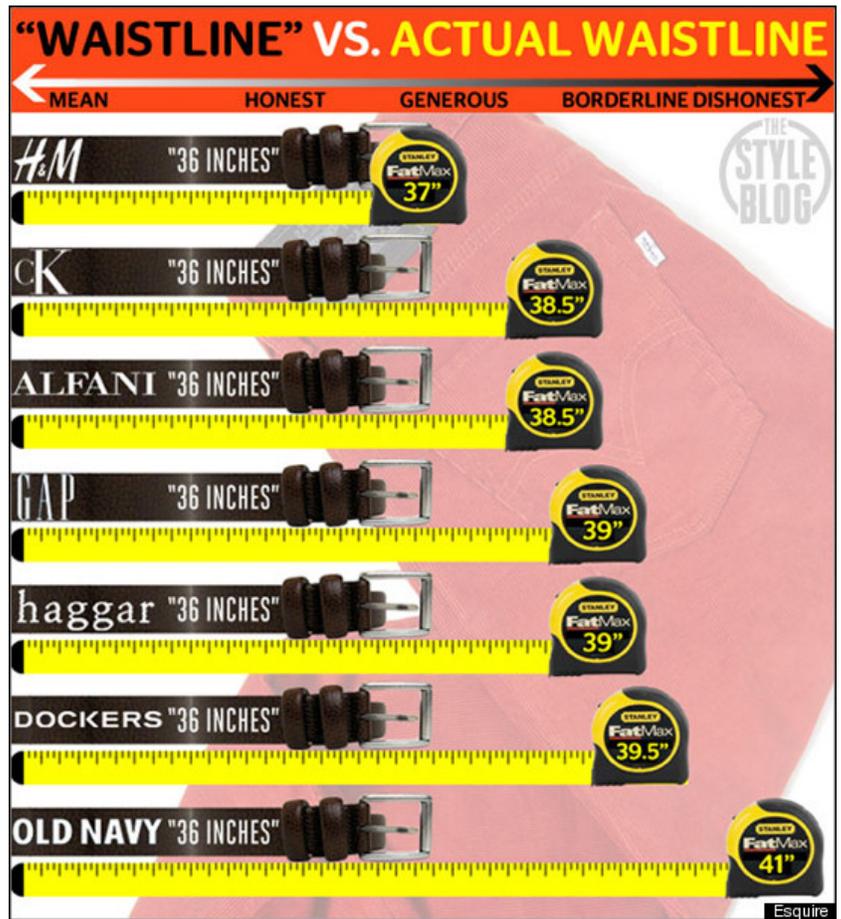


Image from Huffington Post. Here's how vanity sizing plays out with some major clothing manufacturers.



About Kerry

Kerry has an M.S. in Industrial-Organizational psychology and something just short of 20 years experience as a manager and executive in b2b direct marketing. Currently, Kerry works with organizations to improve processes and practices in the area of people management. In addition, Kerry has a deep and abiding passion for all things evolution, but particularly evolutionary perspectives on organizational and economic behavior. When not geeking out with research literature and data, Kerry is generally playing tennis and/ or enjoying a restorative cocktail.

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