

The Thing About High Heels

Nikki Dick was a shoe buyer for Marshall Fields for six years. She says the store trained her how to use a three-point assessment process to estimate, with a fair degree of accuracy, how well a pair of shoes would sell. Nikki says the process worked pretty well for nearly every kind of shoe—except high heels.

“High heels are different,” she says. “Women have erratic, emotional responses to them. A woman will walk in thinking she’s going to buy, say, winter boots, but then she’ll grab a pair of black stilettos and say, ‘I *have to* have these.’ It’s like an itch. You just can’t estimate how many women are going to get that itch and act on it in a given period of time.”

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Inside Izzy Magie, a small, sassy shoe shop on Superior Street in downtown Duluth, there are a lot of high heels for sale. You’ll find a few chic flats. But for the most part, the shop sells exclusively heels. Owner Susie Fryberger says this assortment makes women “giddy.”

Susie’s husband, Tiegan Fryberger, spends a considerable amount of time in his wife’s store. He’s witnessed this giddiness, but he calls it something else.

“It’s an addiction—it really is,” he says of women and their interest in high heels. “Women of every shape and size are addicted.”

In his time in the shop, Tiegan’s noticed a few other things about women and heels. For one, he suspects that the self-confidence level of the average high-heel buyer is a bit higher than, say, the national average. “I think inherently confident women come in and buy heels,” he says. “At least that’s the way it seems. My wife always says she can tell a lot about a man based on his shoes. I think you can tell a lot about a woman based on *her* shoes, too.”

Another thing that Tiegan has learned in his wife’s shop is that he is not great at selling high heels; his sales numbers are low. He says this is because women prefer to buy high heels from another woman.

“Women will come in and chat with me,” he says, “and then they’ll come back later when Susie is here to actually buy the shoes.”

Maybe addicts like buying from other addicts. When it comes to high heels, Susie is definitely addicted. “I love them,” she says. “I absolutely love them. They are magic.”

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Trevor Harting understands how the human body moves. He has a master’s of physical therapy from The College of St. Scholastica and his own clinic in Brainerd, Minn. If you ask Trevor why women love heels so much, he’ll tell you it’s a no-brainer.

“When a woman walks in high heels, her posture changes and essentially accentuates every body part that guys love,” Trevor says. “A woman in heels is walking on her tip toes, like a ballerina. This slims the muscles on the front of the leg, and it also forces the calf muscles to contract and appear more defined. It’s like a guy walking around with his arm muscles flexed all the time.”

Furthermore, says Trevor, when people stand on their toes, they have to arch their spine, lean back, and stick out their chests and backsides in order to maintain balance.

A final element in the “no-brainer,” says Trevor, has to do with momentum. “Our normal gait is about 75 percent passive,” Trevor says, “because we utilize momentum. That changes when you’re wearing high heels. More muscles have to fire because you’ve locked your ankles in order to stand on your toes. You have to bend your knees more and move your hips around to move forward. Basically, walking in heels demands more movement and hip motion than a normal gait.”

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Leif Lindbow, a 26-year-old lumber worker in Duluth, says that high heels don’t turn him on—or off. “It has a lot more to do with what’s *above* the heels,” he says.

Thinking aloud, Leif wonders if perhaps the whole thing with attraction and high heels has run its course, like maybe it’s a generational thing that’s losing relevance as the years pass. I’ll share that, in the past week, while working on this piece, I spoke to half a dozen men under the age of 40 in the Duluth area, and none of them would admit to finding high heels attractive. You might say this serves as anecdotal support, at least, of Leif’s theory that male interest in high heels is becoming passé.

Leif acknowledges, though, that some men might feel differently than he does about heels, because “the women in strip clubs” are almost always wearing heels. “Or,” he surmises, “maybe it’s about how the heels make *women* feel? And not how they make *men* feel?”

I asked my 61-year-old mother about this—about how high heels make her feel. “Heels make you feel feminine,” she says. “When I was single, I used to wear 3-inch heels every day. I felt like a princess walking down the street. Ask your father. He’d remember.”

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