Does This Make Me Look Fat? Aesthetic Labor and Fat Talk as Emotional Labor in a Women’s Plus-Size Clothing Store

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Drawing on participant observation at a women’s plus-size clothing store, “Real Style,” this article draws on the unique experiences of plus-sized women in their roles as workers, managers, and customers, to examine how mainstream beauty standards, body-accepting branding, and customers’ diverse feeling rules shape service interactions. Despite branding that promoted prouder appreciation for “Real” bodies, the influence of these body-accepting discourses was constrained by women’s internalization of mainstream fat stigma, resulting in an environment characterized by deep ambivalence toward larger body size. This ambivalence allowed hierarchies between women to be reified, rather than dissolved; although plus-sized employees and customers expressed gratitude to have Real Style as a “safe space” to work and shop, workers experienced gender segregation of jobs, and thinner employees were privileged with special tasks. Further, managers and white (but not black or Latina) customers used body-disparaging “fat talk” to elicit workers’ emotional labor while confronting thinner workers for defying aesthetic expectations. This research offers a more nuanced understanding of the ties between aesthetic labor and emotional labor, while highlighting some of the factors that prevent stigmatized groups from successfully reclaiming status within consumer contexts. Keywords: aesthetic labor; emotional labor; fat talk; service work; fat stigma.

Feminist sociologists studying interactive service work have built upon Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) classic study of emotional labor, as well as Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of habitus, to illustrate that—in addition to feelings—workers’ bodies may also be commodified. This work has introduced the concept of “aesthetic labor” (Warhurst et al. 2000; Witz et al. 2003; Wolkowitz 2006), noting that workplaces draw on unique gendered, racialized, and classed brand images that directly determine which workers will be hired to do what jobs, and how they are expected to look and behave while on the job. Important for sociologists studying inequality, aesthetic labor reproduces and legitimizes discrimination; as explained by Christine Williams and Catherine Connell (2010) in their study of upscale retailers, “in virtually every case, the right aesthetic [for workers to embody] is middle class, conventionally gendered, and typically white” (p. 350).

Despite a growing body of work on aesthetic labor, gaps remain in the literature. For one, research examining aesthetic labor has focused predominantly on workplaces that hold clear allegiances to hegemonic beauty standards. Yet, as illustrated by Dove’s 2004 “Campaign for Real Beauty”—in which “ads depicted women who were wrinkled, freckled, pregnant, had stretch marks, or might be seen as fat” (Johnston and Taylor 2008)—some companies seem increasingly willing to present themselves as challenging mainstream appearance standards. Several scholars have analyzed how these messages impact consumers (i.e., Johnston and Taylor 2008; Markula 2001), but none have asked how this type of brand strategy impacts front-line service workers.

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Further, work on aesthetic labor has only occasionally considered how diverse customers’ “feeling rules” shape service encounters at the interactional level, tending instead to emphasize the influence of corporate branding. Yet, it is fair to assume that customers vary in their desires to embody brand ideology—a phenomenon that may be more pronounced when corporate branding challenges deeply held cultural beliefs. How do customers’ diverse feeling rules (Hochschild 1983) shape workers’ aesthetic labor at the interactional level? Are service encounters bounded by top-down brand ideology, or is the customer “always right?”

To answer these questions, I draw from ten months of fieldwork conducted while working as a paid sales associate at a women’s plus-size clothing store, which I refer to as “Real Style.” Real Style—one outpost of a corporate chain of over 800 stores—was a workplace in which women’s appearance was both commodified and highly salient, yet where mainstream preferences for slenderness were purportedly rejected by corporate branding that instead emphasizes the concept of “Real Women.” Here, body-accepting branding existed in tension with the fat stigma that women experienced in their daily lives. Thus, when the top-down corporate culture of Real Style collided with the bottom-up culture of the real world, women had to interactively negotiate these competing cultural repertoires within the constraints of their roles as managers, workers, and customers. By examining service interactions between these groups, in light of corporate branding, this article advances a more nuanced understanding of aesthetic labor while more broadly considering the extent to which experiences of stigma and discrimination may be challenged within consumer contexts.

Theoretical Framework

In her groundbreaking work The Managed Heart (1983), Arlie Hochschild introduced the concept of “emotional labor,” referring to the effort workers must put forth toward exhibiting the “right” feelings—and inducing the “right” feelings in others—while on the job. At least some emotional labor is required in all jobs involving interpersonal contact, but it is particularly salient in “interactive service work,” which is found in jobs requiring workers to interact directly with customers or clients (Leidner 1993). Workers’ accomplishment of emotional labor often reinforces gender, race, and class differences (Harvey Wingfield 2010; Hochschild 1983; Williams 2006).

A growing literature on aesthetic labor, a term first conceived by Chris Warhurst and colleagues (2000), builds on Hochschild’s work, along with Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of habitus (referring to mannerisms that are cultivated in childhood and difficult to change in adulthood), to examine organizations’ interest in managing workers’ physical appearance and embodiment of organizational values. As Warhurst, Paul Thompson, and Dennis Nickson (2009) explain, “with many front-line service workers now expected to embody the company image [. . .] it is the commodification of workers’ corporeality, not just their feelings, that is becoming the analytical locus” (p. 104). Aesthetic labor includes “a worker’s deportment, style, accent, voice, and attractiveness” (Williams and Connell 2010:150). This list illustrates that aesthetic labor is accomplished through a combination of both physical appearance and mannerisms.

Work on aesthetic labor shows that organizations consider aesthetics and “style” when recruiting employees, preferring to hire workers whose embodied capacities and attributes, or habitus, already conform to their brand image. After hire, employers may continue to refine workers’ embodied dispositions through training in appropriate service styles and/or through rules regulating workplace dress and cosmetic styling. Workers who do not embody brand aesthetics may be regulated to nonvisible jobs, or even fired (assuming that they were hired in the first place). Demands for aesthetic labor reproduce inequality when a worker’s gender, ethnicity, body type, or class-imbued habitus limit her ability to meet a particular organization’s aesthetic standards (Williams and Connell 2010; Witz et al. 2003). Yet, legal scholars note that U.S. labor law generally recognizes employers’ rights to require workers’ aesthetic conformity to their “brand image,”
Gaps in the Literature on Aesthetic Labor

Research on aesthetic labor has predominantly focused on workplaces that hold clear allegiances to mainstream beauty standards, such as cosmetic counters (Lan 2003), exotic dance clubs (Trautner 2005), fashion modeling (Czerniawski 2011; Mears 2008, 2011), mainstream department stores (Hanser 2008), and upscale retail stores (Williams and Connell 2010). From these cases we see some differences in the aesthetic labor required by different workplaces; while in some jobs women workers are required to appear as sexual fantasies for men (see Hochschild 1983; Loe 1996; Trautner 2005: Wonders and Michalowski 2001), in others they are expected to be beauty and fashion role-models for women (see Hanser 2008; Lan 2003; Williams and Connell 2010). Despite these differences, employers have been consistent in their minimal demand for attractive and gender-conforming appearance and mannerisms. Indeed, Lynne Pettinger (2004) noted that, “[i]mplicit in the definition [of aesthetic labor], and explicit in the reported data, are the connotations ‘aesthetic’ has with beauty and attractiveness” (p. 177).

While a number of scholars have critically assessed the (limited) impact of beauty counterdiscourses in consumer contexts—including fitness magazines (Markula 2001), Dove’s Campaign For Real Beauty (Johnston and Taylor 2008), and beauty blogs (Lynch 2011)—none have asked how these discourses impact workers employed by these organizations. This begs the question: What are the experiences of women employed in workplaces that purportedly counter mainstream beauty standards, and do these experiences ultimately challenge or reify broader social inequalities? Do body-accepting brand ideologies reduce workplace discrimination on the basis of appearance? Or, might mainstream cultural ideologies propel conventionally attractive workers to the top of workplace hierarchies in a “glass escalator,” as has been observed for men working in “femal”e professions (Williams 1992)? Finally, to what extent does body-accepting branding offer real modes of resistance and agency to the women—both workers and customers—whose bodies are stigmatized by mainstream ideology?

A second gap in the literature on aesthetic labor appears in its consideration for how customers shape aesthetic labor. While the extant work has rightfully illustrated that corporate branding shapes service interactions (i.e., through mandatory training on appropriate styling and demeanor) it has mostly neglected the question of how customers shape aesthetic labor at the interactional level.

We know that customers do care about workers’ appearance. For example, Lan (2003), who used the term “bodily labor” to analyze the experiences of cosmetic saleswomen, noted that, “workers’ bodies are not only subjected to the supervision of managers but are also under the surveillance gaze of customers” (p. 21). Yet, most accounts of aesthetic labor focus primarily on the influence of branding and managerial surveillance over service interactions. Typical of this approach is Pettinger’s (2004) discussion of the relationship between “Service Cultures and Store Brands” (p. 175). While recognizing that service may be “personalized, based on the interaction between worker and customer” (p. 174), Pettinger prioritized the role of branding by focusing on how micro-service interactions are influenced by “[t]he brand orientation, specifically which customer segment of the mass market a store is aiming at” (pp. 175–76). In describing the “customer segment […] a store is aiming at,” Pettinger referred not to actual customers, but to an imagined ideal customer who mirrored brand ideologies. This focus may reflect an assumed convergence between brand ideology and customers’ own values and aspirations. Yet, customers may vary greatly in their desire to embrace brand aesthetics, particularly if branding counters mainstream ideals. How do real customers shape aesthetic labor at the interactional level?
Research on emotional labor provides some predictive clues. Customers’ bring “feeling rules” (Hochschild 1983) to service encounters and workers respond to these in light of their own feeling rules (see Kang 2003; Williams 2006). Feeling rules are the emotional norms appropriate to a given situation or context, whether that context is a workplace or otherwise. As Hochschild (1983) explains, feeling rules “guide emotion work by establishing a sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges” (p. 56). Yet, emotion norms are not only shaped by the time and place of an interaction, but also the unique life experiences each person brings to the interaction. Thus, feeling rules also emerge out of one’s gender, race/ethnicity, and class status. In her study of Korean manicurists serving racially diverse customers, Milian Kang (2003) found that, while white customers wanted workers to induce positive feelings about their bodies, black customers instead expected workers to communicate “a sense of respect and fairness.” Williams’s (2006) ethnography of toy stores further illustrates that customers’ and workers’ gender, race/ethnicity, and class combine to shape emotional labor, such that black workers resisted acting overly caring to white customers because they felt that “adopting an attitude of servility would reinforce racism among shoppers” (p. 121). Just as gender, race/ethnicity, and class shape service interactions, it is reasonable to expect that aesthetic characteristics—and the feeling rules that emerge from these characteristics—will as well. But how, and with what consequences for those workers who do not fit aesthetic expectations?

**Body Size as Aesthetic Labor and the “Feeling Rules” of “Fat Talk”**

Contemporary mainstream American society holds strong aesthetic preferences for slender- ness, and contempt for larger bodies (Bordo 2004; Poppenoe 2005; Stearns 1997). Fat individuals may be considered personally responsible for their weight, lazy, lacking in self-control, and incompetent (Kristen 2002; Larkin and Pines 1979; Puhl and Brownell 2003), and are subjected to frequent discrimination and stigma. Fat stigma is highly gendered in that women experience intense pressures to conform to an increasingly thin ideal, while men are not held to the same stringent standards in terms of weight (Bordo 2004; Stearns 1997:72). Body image is further mediated by racial identity such that black and Latina women tend to feel more positively about their bodies at higher weights than do white women (Grabe and Hyde 2006; Hesse-Biber et al. 2004; Molloy and Herzberger 1998). However, many women of color report feeling pressured to have “curves in the right places” (Grabe and Hyde 2006; Martin 2007; Mendible 2007; Molinary 2007), and even curve-embracing ethnic communities have upper limits of acceptable size for female bodies (see Nichter 2000:176).

Unsurprisingly, larger women face workplace discrimination. C. A. Register and D. R. Williams (1990) found that young women (but not men) who were 20 percent or more over their standard weight for height earned 12 percent less than women with smaller body size. Similarly, J. A. Pagan and A. Davila (1997) found that clinically “overweight” women, earned less than “normal-weight” women, but that “overweight” men did not earn less than “normal-weight” men. Size discrimination may be particularly salient in low-wage occupations involving interactive service work. C. R. Jasper and M. L. Klassen (1990) found that their sample of college students rated fatter salespeople more negatively than thinner salespeople, and that the negative effects of larger body size were stronger for female than male salespeople. In addition, fat persons working in face-to-face sales environments are often assigned to nonvisible jobs (Bellizzi and Hasty 1998). These findings suggest that workers’ body size is an important trait to consider when examining aesthetic labor.

In Hochschild’s (1983) classic study of emotional labor, flight attendants’ bodies were regulated through grooming guidelines, mandatory girdles, and pre-flight public weigh-ins: “People may in fact be fired for being one pound overweight” (p. 102). Similarly, Pettinger (2004) describe saleswomen in upscale retail stores as follows: “Workers at such stores are not only fashionably dressed, they are young, *usually slim*, with ‘attractive’ faces” (p. 178, emphasis added). While much research finds that women workers are expected to maintain slim figures, little work has...
explicitly examined the experiences of fat workers (indeed, in most of these workplaces fat women would not have been hired, and slim women could be fired for gaining even a small amount of weight). Even Amanda Czerniawski’s (2011) analysis of the aesthetic labor performed by plus-size fashion models admits that, because models are considered plus size once they reach size 8, “most casual observers of plus-size models would not perceive them as ‘plus-size’ or even fat” (p. 2). Considering that obese women are less likely to go to college than their thinner counterparts (Crosnoe and Muller 2004) and that minimum-wage earners are more likely to be obese than those who earn higher wages (Kim and Leigh 2010), this lack of research documenting the experiences of women workers who are actually fat begs remedy.

Research on “fat talk” (Nichter 2000; Nichter and Vuckovic 1994) further illustrates that there are feeling rules tied to women’s body size. Although “fat activists” reclaim the word “fat” with pride, much as gay rights activists reclaimed the label “queer” (Cooper 1998; Saguy and Riley 2005; Saguy and Ward 2010), the word fat almost always takes pejorative connotations in popular discourse. The term fat talk specifically refers to a gendered discourse pattern in which a woman complains about her body to another woman (i.e., “I’m so fat!”) to evoke a supportive response (i.e., “No, you’re not!”). Psychologist Lauren Britton and associates (2006) have theorized fat talk as a virtually universal and mundane “Social Norm for Women to Self-Degrade” their bodies (p. 247), at least in the contemporary American context (see also Craig et al. 2006). Given gendered expectations that women should be both slender and self-effacing, fat talk might be understood as one way that women—at least white women—hold each other accountable for “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987). Yet, subcultural differences in body ideals suggest that black and Latina women may have different feeling rules for discourse around body size and shape. How might these different feeling rules shape aesthetic labor?

Research Design and Methodology

To address my research questions I conducted ten months of participant observation as a paid sales associate at Real Style, a women’s plus-size store in Los Angeles, California. Previous work has argued that plus-size clothing companies’ “flesh-normalizing” campaigns offer a “species of resistance” against oppressive mainstream body ideals (Bordo 2004:xxxi). Abigail Saguy and Anna Ward (2010), for example, describe plus-size fashion as “the industry most invested in creating positive and glamorous images of larger female bodies.” Real Style was an ideal site for observing how brand ideology, body size, and feeling rules combined to shape service interactions because it offered the distinctive vantage point of observing the experiences of (mostly) plus-sized women workers and customers interacting within the framework of corporate branding that proudly emphasized the concept of “Real Women.”

Working as a paid sales associate at Real Style allowed me to spend considerable time observing both the “front stage” of the shop floor, as well as the “back stage” break room and stockroom (Goffman 1959). I spent the majority of my time assisting customers, working to keep the store tidy, setting up new store displays during after-hours “floor sets,” and passing the slower times by chatting with my coworkers. When interacting with customers, my tasks ranged from providing very basic help, such as retrieving an article of clothing from the stockroom, to more complex interactions, such as measuring women for bras or providing advice on clothing choices. I also spent time with several of my coworkers outside of Real Style in a variety of contexts including carpooling, sharing meals at the corner diner, and attending a movie, a baby shower, and a coworker’s funeral. I was open with coworkers about my status as a graduate student, and that I was conducting research on body image and the fashion industry.

I recorded field notes during my breaks at Real Style using a personal digital assistant and portable keyboard. When I could do so discreetly I scribbled a short “reminder” phrase or two on receipt paper while working. I dictated additional field notes into a digital recorder during my commute home, and then transcribed and elaborated upon these notes with remaining details in
the evening or on the following day. Field notes were analyzed inductively using analytic memos to organize prominent themes and narratives as they emerged. All names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

As a participant in the everyday life at Real Style I frequently found myself immersed within the data I was collecting. Because I have chosen to draw upon several of my own experiences for this article, it seems pertinent to describe my social location at the site. Compared to most Real Style shoppers and employees, I was of similar height to many (5’5”), but was smaller in girth to almost all, generally wearing a standard-sized 10 in pants; I belong to the class that Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) refers to as having “white-skin, middle-class, able-bodied, and thin privilege” (p. 308). I anticipated that my being a standard-sized employee might naturally disrupt some of the unspoken assumptions that women held about working or shopping at a plus-size store. In this sense, my mere presence at Real Style resembled Harold Garfinkel’s (1967) experiments to tease out the unwritten rules of social interaction. Because body size was of such great salience at Real Style, I have especially had to consider how “thin privilege”—and my own (white, middle class) assumptions about body size—shaped my role as researcher and, sometimes, subject.

A Note on Terms: Defining Body Size Contextually

Body size is both objective, in that it can be measured and defined, and subjective, in that understandings of what constitutes “normal,” or “desirable,” are based on context. The U.S. fashion industry has standards—albeit inconsistent standards—defining body size. At the time of this writing, in most American women’s clothing stores, sizes run in even numbers starting with 0 up to size 12. These are considered “standard” sizes. Sizes between 14 and 28 are generally considered “plus size,” and are predominantly sold by specialty plus-size retailers. Women who are larger than size 28 must buy clothes from other sources, such as online retailers. As illustrated in Table 1, women’s clothing sizes are determined by measuring the body’s circumference in inches at bust, waist, and hip; a “perfect” size 14 woman at Real Style has the bust/waist/hip measurements of 40”/34”/42” and a “perfect” size 28 woman measures at 54”/48”/56”, respectively. Due to variation in body proportions, few women match size measurements exactly, and many wear one size in tops and another in bottoms.

Interestingly, size 14 may actually be average for American women (SizeUsa 2004), a finding that highlights the extent to which the term plus size should be contextualized within the ultra-slim ideals of mainstream culture, including those found in the fashion industry (recall, fashion models are considered plus size starting at size 8!). As shown in Table 2, estimated clothing sizes for average white, black, and Latina women in America (aged 18 to 65) range from approximately size 10 to size 18. In this sense, the term plus size is quite comparable to the medical term overweight in that both of these terms place the majority of women in the “plus” or “over” category. Indeed, there is considerable overlap between women who are clinically overweight and who also wear plus-size clothes. However, because medical standards for body size are calculated using weight and height, while clothing standards use bust/waist/hip circumference, these concepts are associated but not always coexisting.

Because data for this project were collected in a women’s clothing store, I draw upon the guidelines set by the fashion industry, referring to subjects’ as either plus sized (size 14 or higher) or standard sized (below size 14). For the remainder of this article, other terms describing body size are used only when quoting from subjects who employ these terms.

| Table 1 • Real Style Sizing Chart |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   | Size 14 | Size 16 | Size 18 | Size 20 | Size 22 | Size 24 | Size 26 | Size 28 |
| Bust | 40” | 42” | 44” | 46” | 48” | 50” | 52” | 54” |
| Waist | 34” | 36” | 38” | 40” | 42” | 44” | 46” | 48” |
| Hip | 42” | 44” | 46” | 48” | 50” | 52” | 54” | 56” |
Findings

Below, I present my findings on how corporate branding and customers’ diverse feeling rules interacted to shape service interactions at Real Style, and whether Real Style’s brand ideology created opportunities for plus-sized women to resist stigma and discrimination. I argue that, despite branding that promoted prideful appreciation for real female bodies, these body-accepting messages were constrained by customers’ internalized fat stigma, resulting in an environment characterized by ambivalence toward larger body size. This ambivalence allowed hierarchies between women to be reified, rather than dissolved. After describing both the brand ideology and the fat-ambivalent climate of Real Style, I present my findings on (1) how demands for aesthetic and emotional labor, along with the physical organization of the store itself, shaped hiring and promotion practices, leading to gender segregation and the privileging of thinner workers and managers, and (2) how body-disparaging fat talk (Nichter 2000; Nichter and Vuckovic 1994) was used by managers and white—but not black or Latina—customers to elicit workers’ emotional labor and to communicate resistance to standard-sized workers who defied aesthetic expectations.

Ambivalence about Body Size: Real Pride versus Plus-Sized Shame

In my first impressions of Real Style it appeared to be an oasis of body acceptance for plus-sized women. Mannequins in the storefront were larger and more curvaceous than typical mannequins, and the branded concept of “Real Women” appeared throughout store and company literature, from discount coupons called “Real Women Dollar$,” to profiles of the “Real Women of Real Style” (always wearing the latest Real Style fashions) featured on the store website. From the store website, I also learned:

The Real Style look is fashionable, fresh and sophisticated. From chic, comfortable casual wear to fashion-forward wear-to-work outfits, Real Style is all about helping women with curves feel feminine, confident and proud in every situation.

Complimenting this emphasis on “Real Women” and “women with curves” in store branding materials and the store website, Real Style’s corporate website asserted that “Real Style customers shop for style, not just for size,” and that the company’s “emphasis on fashion—not size—makes us the premier destination in its category” (emphasis added). These branding and corporate materials suggested that women ought to be “confident” and “proud” of being “real” and having “curves.” Terms like “sophisticated,” “chic,” “fashion-forward,” and “feminine” further painted a picture in which the ideal Real Style “look” was presumably middle to upper class and certainly gender conforming.

The clothing offered by Real Style ranged in size from 14 to 28, with three additional sizes (12, 30, and 32) offered online for certain items. Most Real Style garments were designed to fit women of an approximate height of 5’6” with additional “petite” sizes for women 5’4” or shorter, and “tall” sizes 30 and 32.

### Table 2 • Average Clothing Size and Bust/Waist/Hip Measurements of American Women by Age and Race/Ethnic Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18–35</td>
<td>10/12</td>
<td>14/16</td>
<td>14/16</td>
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<tr>
<td>36–65</td>
<td>16/18</td>
<td>16/18</td>
<td>16/18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Size</td>
<td>10/12</td>
<td>14/16</td>
<td>14/16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bust</td>
<td>39.1&quot;</td>
<td>41.5&quot;</td>
<td>41.2&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waist</td>
<td>32.6&quot;</td>
<td>35.1&quot;</td>
<td>34.3&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hips</td>
<td>41.8&quot;</td>
<td>43.9&quot;</td>
<td>44&quot;</td>
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</table>

*Figures for this table are based on results of a national sizing survey (N = 6,310 women) conducted by [TC]² (2004).

²Clothing size was estimated by comparing bust/waist/hip measurements to sizes indicated in Table 1.
sizes for women 5’8” or taller. The Real Style corporate website identified its target customer as “plus-size women ages 35–55.” No corporate materials spoke to the race/ethnicity or class status of target customers, though in-store, print, and television advertisements typically featured both white women and women of color, often side-by-side. Customers, who frequented the store from a myriad of Los Angeles neighborhoods, were almost all plus-sized women, ranged in age from teenagers to seniors, and were racially diverse. A small minority of standard-sized women shopped at Real Style only to purchase bras, and one regular customer was a cross-dressing man.

As shown in Table 3, 23 of 34 employees at Real Style were plus-sized women, along with 7 standard-sized female employees, and 4 standard-sized male employees. Employees were also ethnically diverse; of the plus-sized women working at Real Style, 12 were black, 6 were Latina, 4 were white, and 1 identified as multiracial. Of the standard-sized female employees, 2 were Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 2 were black, 1 was Latina, 1 was white, and 1 identified as Israeli. Of the four male employees, 2 were black, 1 was Latino, and 1 was white. No male employees were plus sized.

As a site in which real female bodies “with curves” were emphasized with pride, rather than stigmatized, I was not surprised to learn that Real Style represented for many customers and employees the possibility of feeling and being treated as normal. Yet this informal designation of Real Style as a body-positive place for “Real Women” was tenuous, as plus-sized customers and employees seemed constantly wary of anticipated experiences of fat stigma from the real world. This contrast between corporate branding and women’s lived experiences created an environment that was ultimately ambivalent toward larger body size; customers and workers vacillated between gratitude for Real Style’s very existence, and self-disdain for “having” to work or shop there.

Several customers and employees explicitly expressed gratitude regarding their experiences of shopping or working at Real Style. Kim, a multiracial plus-sized employee in her mid-thirties told me that working at Real Style “[didn’t] even feel like work, ” because it was the only place where she could “relax and be [her]self.” Similarly, Joe, a store manager who was in the process of leaving Real Style to work at a different store, commented that he would miss Real Style because he felt that the employees were “more loyal here—less likely to just randomly call in sick an’ stuff.” When I asked Joe why he thought this to be the case, he said, “the women here think of this as their home—it’s a place of comfort to them, where they come to socialize. Not everybody here is like that, but there’s a lot of loyalty.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top Level Managers</th>
<th>Assistant Managers</th>
<th>Stock Associates</th>
<th>Sales Associates</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total sample</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plus-sized women</td>
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<tr>
<td>(N = 23)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latina</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Standard-sized women (N = 7)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
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<td>Latina</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard-sized men (N = 4)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
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</table>

Note: The store had no plus-sized Asian/Pacific Islander women, and no plus-sized men of any race.
One white, middle-aged customer expressed a similar sense of gratitude when she admitted to me that Real Style was the only store in which she felt comfortable enough to leave her private fitting room to look at herself in the semipublic store mirrors. Another customer, also white and middle-aged, mentioned that it was a “relief” to know that clothes were always available in her size at Real Style, which made her feel “normal.” Yet, this sense of security and gratitude toward Real Style, combined with plus-sized women’s disadvantaged position in society, introduced the potential for both workers and customers to be manipulated by corporate policies, even as marketing put them at ease. Christine, one of the store managers (who was a standard-sized black woman) mentioned to me that Real Style was “lucky these women can’t shop anywhere else. We just name the price and they have to buy it!” Christine’s comment was a stark contrast to the corporate website’s assertion that customers “shop for style, not just for size,” suggesting that this claim may be merely idealistic. In truth, compared to standard-sized women, plus-sized women customers did not have many clothing stores to choose from (indeed, none of the other 27 “women’s apparel” stores at the mall specialized in plus-sized clothing). Similarly, if employees felt that their body size would cause them to be stigmatized in other workplaces, they may have been more willing to accept exploitative conditions (i.e., low pay, poor hours, inadequate breaks) at Real Style, their “place of comfort.”

Customers often expressed explicit frustration, sadness, and disappointment about “needing” to shop at Real Style. Once, as I was ringing up a white customer in her late twenties and engaging in some small talk, the customer thanked me for my help, but then looked at her shopping bag and exclaimed, “Oh, I remember when Real Style didn’t print their logo on the bags. Now I always have to remember to turn the bag around so nobody knows where I have to shop!” Unsure of how to respond, I remarked that a lot of people might not even know that Real Style was a store for bigger sizes. In response, she said, “Yeah, but I know, and I’ll always feel disappointed in myself for not losing the weight.” This customer’s comment communicates her own sense of shame and embarrassment for “having” to shop at Real Style, while also driving home the extent to which certain boundaries had been placed around the store itself; despite thanking me for her shopping experience while at Real Style, this customer planned to hide her shopping bag once she left the store, perhaps in hopes that she might more easily “pass” as just another (standard-sized) shopper at the mall.

Erving Goffman (1963) points out that stigmatized individuals who attempt to pass as “normals” in their daily lives often encounter “unanticipated needs to disclose discrediting information” (p. 83). To the extent that some customers may have hoped to “pass” as not being plus sized, the activity of shopping in Real Style represented a shameful public marker of being somehow “officially” fat.

Susan Bordo (2004) noted that plus-size stores’ “campaigns proudly show off unclothed zaftig bodies and, unlike older marketing to ‘plus-size’ women, refuse to use that term, insisting (accurately) that what has been called ‘plus-size’ is in fact average,” (p. xxxi). Indeed, as described above, Real Style’s in-store, television, and catalogue marketing campaigns rarely used the term plus size but instead emphasized the concept of “Real Women,” which proudly insinuated that plus-sized women were somehow more real than standard-sized women. Yet, customers typically referred to themselves as “big,” “full-figured,” “curvy,” “thick,” or “chubby,” rather than as “real” or even “plus sized.” While the alternative descriptors listed above are less culturally stigmatizing than the word “fat” (which customers used frequently, but only when bloating their body size), these terms certainly did not pridingly reclaim identity in the way that real attempted to do in corporate marketing, or as the word fat has been reclaimed by fat activists. This finding, in particular, highlights the limited extent to which corporate branding was able to supersede deeply entrenched cultural values.

Too Fat to Dress a Mannequin?: Mechanisms of Size and Gender Segregation at Real Style

Hiring practices and task assignments at Real Style revealed that both gender and body size strongly shaped the store’s organization of labor. In particular, top-level managers and stock-room
workers were *all* standard sized, and were more likely to be men, while all assistant managers and sales associates were women and were predominantly plus sized. At first glance, these patterns suggested the influence of a glass escalator mechanism (Williams 1992), propelling men and standard-sized workers to the top of workplace hierarchies. Indeed, standard-sized sales associates were often assigned “special” tasks and were given more *opportunities* for advancement. Yet, these opportunities were rarely fulfilled, as few workers desired assistant-manager positions and turnover was high. Instead, the relative thinness of upper management seemed best explained by this high turnover rate and Real Style’s resulting practice of filling store manager positions by recruiting managers from other clothing stores, where plus-sized employees were rare. Thus, Real Style’s size segregation did not fit Williams’ classic glass escalator model. I nevertheless argue that the gender and size segregation of lower-level workers (stock associates and sales associates) was shaped by managers’ *sexist* and *szist* assumptions about workers’ abilities to provide satisfactory aesthetic and emotional labor, as well as assumptions about workers’ physical abilities. Further, the physical organization of the shop floor, itself, privileged thinner workers.

As seen in Table 3, 5 out of 6 assistant managers, and 18 out of 20 sales associates were plus sized, *none* of the top-tier managers or stock associates at Real Style were plus sized. Also, all of the men employed at Real Style (none whom were plus sized) worked either as top-level managers or as stock associates. Top-tier managers included store managers (one Latino man, one black woman), the district manager (an Asian woman), and the regional director (a white man). Stock associates, all standard sized, included two black men and one Filipina woman. Among sales associates, all whom were women, only three were standard sized. Assistant managers were all women and predominantly plus sized.

Of the two standard-sized sales associates, one, an Israeli immigrant named Nessa, had previously been plus sized but had lost weight after having bariatric surgery. The other standard-sized sales associate, a black woman, worked only during monthly “floor-sets” and during the winter holiday season when business was particularly busy. The only standard-sized assistant manager, a Latina woman, had been recruited externally and hired as a “packaged deal” along with one of the store managers. While the size distribution of the store (with plus-sized workers hired for the most visible and customer-oriented jobs) is a stark contrast to prior ethnographic work on retail workplaces, the gendered concentration of men into leadership and stock-room positions is not unique (see, for example, Williams 2006). Compared to the segregation across size and gender, the racial/ethnic composition of employees was actually quite dispersed both horizontally and vertically. I will return to this finding in the conclusion.

Assistant managers were typically promoted from within the sales associates currently working at the store, but I never saw this lead to additional promotions above this level. Rather, the assistant manager jobs were associated with extremely high turnover, as these positions demanded more responsibility and longer hours, but offered no benefits and only a small pay increase. Additionally, because many sales associates depended on income from two part-time jobs, and because assistant managers were expected to work hours approaching—but never actually *reaching*—full-time work (which would have included benefits), accepting a promotion to assistant manager made for an exceedingly slippery stepping stone to full-time work as a store manager. Indeed, several sales associates had worked at the store for longer than two years without even seeking a promotion. As Kiesha, a black plus-sized sales associate, explained to me when I asked her why she didn’t want to be an assistant manager, “they know not to even ask me. If’we’l got to keep my assisted-living job and I don’t want to deal with managing people.” The high turnover of assistant managers also helps explain why store managers were recruited from outside of the store; assistant managers generally quit before they could be promoted.

Real Style’s explicit commitment to “helping women with curves feel feminine, confident and proud” helps explain why plus-sized women were preferred over standard-sized women for sales jobs. Yet, this preference seemed to have less to do with a need for workers to model store fashions, and more to do with presumptions for how a woman’s body size predicted her ability...
to get along with customers. Specifically, preferences for plus-sized women as sales associates seemed to reflect assumptions about their ability to more sensitively attend to plus-sized customers’ body insecurities. For example, during my employment interviews, I was quizzed about my ability to serve customers without alienating them. In my first interview, Daphne, a plus-sized black assistant manager, tried to subtly bring up this concern by asking me, “Do you shop at Real Style?”

I wondered if she was trying to find a polite way to bring up the fact that I was not plus sized. I told her that I wore size 10 and had never shopped at Real Style. She explained that the only reason she was bringing this up was because employees who are also plus sized sometimes had a better understanding of their customers and have easier interactions.

Later, when I interviewed with the district manager (a standard-sized Asian woman), I was more pointedly asked, “What will you tell a customer who asks you ‘Why are you working here? You aren’t plus sized!’” After responding as best as I could, I was told, “Well, it will definitely come up at some point, so it’s good for you to think about it now.” These open concerns about the ability of standard-sized women to attend to plus-sized customers points to the important relationship between workers’ aesthetic appearance and their presumed ability to adequately perform emotional labor.

A similar fear of alienating female customers kept male employees away from the sales floor, though men were considered inappropriate due to their gender, rather than their size. During a corporate-mandated training meeting lead by Joe (the store manager), sales associates were required to practice performing bra-fits on each other. Conducting a bra-fit involved measuring the circumference of a woman’s body at the fullest point of her bust, and again around her torso, just under the bust-line. After several sales associates couldn’t complete the task without giggling, Joe seemed to become frustrated by their immaturity. To make an example, he asked Mark, one of the stockroom workers to “show them how it’s really done!” Mark—an unfailingly proper man—proceeded to demonstrate an impeccable bra fit on a sales associate, carefully avoiding touching the sales associate’s body by asking her to hold one end of the measuring tape at the side of her torso. The sales associate helped as requested, but at the completion of the fit, stuck out her chest and jokingly wiggled it at Mark, breasts bouncing. This caused several of the women sales associates to break into laughter again. They further embarrassed Mark by suggestively cupping their breasts and asking him to measure them. After convincing the women to calm down, Joe jokingly exclaimed “and that’s why we keep guys in the back!”

Of course, being plus sized was not the only requirement for being hired to work on the sales floor; sales associates were also expected to “look good and sound right” on the job, which meant embodying the Real Style brand image. The ideal interactive service worker at Real Style was not only plus-sized women, but was also “chic,” “sophisticated,” and “feminine” in her dress and mannerisms. I saw these stylistic standards prompt store managers to filter out a few plus-sized job applicants on the spot, including one woman who—according to Joe—“wasn’t even wearing a bra!” Another time Christine, who took pride in being a “respectable” black woman, refused to hire a plus-sized black woman who “sounded ghetto and smelled like McDonald’s.” These examples illustrate that managers desired workers whose aesthetic attributes had been cultivated prior to hire. Indeed, sales associates were often recruited from within Real Style’s (plus-sized) customer base, echoing Williams and Connell’s (2010) finding that companies often do so to build a workforce that seamlessly replicates the aesthetic tastes and mannerisms of discerning customers (at least those who have the “right look”).

Once hired, sales associates were given specific instructions for their dress. Although we were not required to wear clothing from Real Style during our shifts, our “style” needed to be “consistent with current merchandise,” and we were not allowed to wear jeans or flip-flops (deemed “too casual”), even though these items were sold in the store. I witnessed store managers chastising sales associates who “acted ghetto” by speaking in urban slang, or who “looked like white trash”
for wearing flip-flops to work or having unkempt nails. However, these reprimands were only
loosely enforced; I never witnessed a worker being sent home, much less fired, due to dress code
violations, and even the store managers frequently shifted into more casual language and/or
urban slang, particularly when assisting customers who spoke in these ways.

Standard-sized sales associates were more likely than plus-sized sales associates to be assigned
special tasks, such as dressing mannequins or “running” to get coffee or snacks for managers. The
first of these tasks, dressing mannequins, was delegated to standard-sized employees for “practi-
cal” reasons; the window bays used to display mannequins were extremely narrow, and only
standard-sized employees could actually fit into the space. Because dressing mannequins was
one of the few tasks in which sales associates were able to display independent decision making,
self-supervision, and creativity, these assignments increased standard-sized employees’ level of
responsibility and rapport with managers. Standard-sized sales associates were also more often
asked to “run” errands for managers, presumably because plus-sized employees were thought to
be less able to perform these tasks efficiently. By sending standard-sized employees on unsuper-
vised coffee runs, these workers were more often provided breaks from the monotony of sales-floor
work (indeed, I tended to “run” these errands at an exceedingly slow pace!), while simultaneously
performing tasks that were appreciated by management. Plus-sized sales associates requested these
tasks but were denied.

Echoing the hiring patterns of sales associates, stockroom workers seemed to be hired based
on assumptions that men and standard-sized women would be more capable of physical labor,
would be less likely to steal inventory during unsupervised work, and—as described above—that
they would make customers feel uncomfortable if assigned to more interactive service work. Fur-
ther, as with dressing mannequins, the narrow physical space of the stockroom made it difficult
for the largest plus-sized workers to shelve clothes. While taking my break in the store’s back
room, I struck up a conversation with Marisol, the standard-sized Filipina woman who worked in
the stockroom. I asked her why she decided to work at Real Style. She explained that she worked
at another store in the mall, but needed more hours. She wanted her second job to be at the mall
because she didn’t own a car, and didn’t want to have an extra bus commute. A coworker at her
other job worked at Real Style and told her she could work both places on the same days. So I
applied and got hired.” When I asked Marisol why she’d decided to work in the stockroom I
learned that she had actually applied for a sales associate position, but that Joe asked her if she
could work “in the back” because he “needed people who were light on their feet.”

This logic surprised me, as working on the sales floor involved constant activity and had its
own share of heavy lifting. When I asked Marisol if she thought the job really needed somebody
“light on their feet,” she replied:

Well, there are definitely some big boxes but it’s mostly just about staying organized . . . (she paused
before continuing) . . . but I don’t think the biggest girls could fit between the stock shelves too easily.
I usually have to get stuff for the other girls, but I don’t mind—this way nobody can mess up my
shelves.

Marisol’s story suggests that both narrower body size and presumed “lightness on feet” may have
motivated Joe to hire standard-sized women and men as stockroom workers. A few weeks after
this conversation, Marisol was reportedly caught stealing from the store inventory and promptly
fired. Commenting on the situation, Christine exclaimed, “I was so surprised, I mean, we figured
she wouldn’t be interested in the clothes back there!” During the weeks before finding Marisol’s
replacement (a standard-sized black man), Nessa—one of the standard-size sales associates—was
asked to take over some of the stock-room responsibilities. Christine’s comment suggests that
another reason managers hire standard-sized women and men to work in the stockroom is to
minimize internal theft. Because stock associates work largely unsupervised, managers may feel
more comfortable hiring workers who cannot wear the merchandise and would, therefore, be less
motivated to steal it.
“Fat Talk” as Emotional Labor: Feeling Rules and Aesthetics

Real Style customers’ and managers’ frequent conversations about dieting, and requests for body image reassurances became emotional labor in that sales associates were compelled to respond supportively any time fat talk was initiated by either of these groups. Expectations for fat talk reassurances were so pervasive that the phrase “Does this outfit make me look FAT?!” was an inside joke between sales associates, who seemed to find it both ridiculous and annoying that plus-sized (i.e., fat by definition) customers wanted reassurance that they were not, actually, fat. For example, one day while I was folding t-shirts with Luz, a plus-sized Latina sales associate, I overheard a white customer in her early twenties ask Luz whether the jeans she had tried on made her “butt look big.” Rolling her eyes at me before turning to the customer, Luz replied by calling out, “Oh honey, don’t worry about that. Those jeans made your butt look cute!” and then, quietly enough so that only I could hear, she whispered, “...and big.” As has been observed in other ethnographies examining emotional labor (Sanders 2004), the use of this type of humor and sarcasm between workers seemed to help redirect and reframe negative emotions while also reaffirming workers’ camaraderie.

Fat talk and conversations about dieting seemed particularly degrading and frustrating when customers or managers assumed that plus-sized employees wanted to lose weight. One example of this arose when I noticed that there was a scale in the employee restroom. Curious as to why it was there, and who was using it, I asked Andrea, one of the assistant managers, to explain, “who brought in the scale?” Andrea laughed and said, “Oh...well that was for this weight-loss contest we had last winter. We all divided up into teams with Daphne (assistant manager) and Joe (store manager) as the leaders, and the team that lost the most weight won a pizza party.” Recalling Hochschild’s (1983) observations of flight attendants’ public weight-ins, I asked her if everybody had to get on the scale in front of each other. She reassured me that, “Only the team leaders got to know the weights.” When I remarked that being weighed in front of my boss didn’t sound like fun, Andrea chuckled and exclaimed, “Well I thought it was fun.”

This weight-loss contest illustrates the pressures placed upon workers to echo managers’ attitudes, while further demonstrating Real Style’s ambivalence toward larger body size. On the one hand, many employees clearly wanted to lose weight (or at the very least enjoyed participating in the collective event), as seen in Andrea’s description of the contest as “fun” and in Nessa’s prior decision to undergo bariatric surgery. On the other hand, because store managers supervised it, the contest seemed to imply that plus-sized employees should be monitoring their weight—an approach seemingly in conflict with the concept of “Real Women.” Yet, by rewarding the winning team with a pizza party (which, I learned, was actually shared by everyone), the management team seemed to ultimately tell workers, “Actually, we don’t care whether or not you lose weight, as long as you’re willing to play along with the situation at hand. Eat up!”

Learning to behave flexibly in their attitudes toward larger body size was an important skill for workers to have when it came to interacting with diverse clientele. For example, a white, middle aged customer came into the store one day, announcing that she had just lost 20 pounds and was going to “spend a lot of money” to replace her “entire wardrobe.” Over the next two hours, Kim, a plus-sized sales associate, spent every minute closely assisting this customer, fetching clothes and accepting unsolicited diet advice, while attentively and animatedly responding to her concern that the weight loss “didn’t show.” At the end of this extended interaction, the customer happily left the store with several hundred dollars worth of clothes, Real Style benefited from the large sale, but Kim seemed simply drained by both the emotional and physical labor involved. Although the extended time involved in this interaction made it unique from most service encounters. Kim’s supportive reaction to her customer’s fat talk was typical. Later that afternoon Kim, who had worked through her 15-minute break to assist this customer, was chastised by one of the managers for resting on a bench that was “just for customers” while folding clothes in the fitting rooms.

Does This Make Me Look Fat? 493

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Over time I noticed that white customers were much more likely than black or Latina customers to initiate stereotypical fat talk with employees, a pattern that reflects both Kang's (2003) and Williams's (2006) findings about the different feeling rules at play in racially diverse service work environments. Black and Latina customers were also much less likely than white customers to express shame for “having” to shop at Real Style. In fact, on two different occasions, standard-sized black women entered the store and expressed frustration that they weren’t big enough to fit into the clothes. These instances suggest that shopping at Real Style was not seen as stigmatizing for these women, a likely effect of differing cultural ideas about ideal body size and shape.

If they engaged in negative body talk at all, black and Latina customers tended to express dismay about not having the “right” body shape (hourglass seemed to be the ideal), sometimes remarking that their breasts or bottoms were too small or flat. In one case, a Latina customer was having trouble finding a pair of jeans with a good fit, when Gia, a plus-sized Latina sales associate, gently suggested that the customer try a pair of jeans designed for women “with more of an apple shape.” The customer sighed loudly and said, “yeah that would help. I’ve got this stomach, but no culo [bottom] to balance it!” In response, Gia promised the customer that the suggested pants would help make her look more “curvy.” On another occasion a middle-aged black customer told Krystal, a white plus-sized sales associate, that she could not wear shorts or short skirts because her legs were “too skinny.” Krystal seemed surprised, but, after a slight pause, assured the customer that her legs were lovely and that she should wear whatever she wanted. As this second example illustrates, customers’ feeling rules direct these interactions; even if surprised, workers responded sensitively, regardless of their own cultural understandings of body size and shape.

Customers’ understanding of Real Style as a “place of comfort” for plus-sized women, combined with their “the customer is always right” authority over all store employees, allowed them to voice dismay toward workers who failed to meet expectations for aesthetic or emotional labor. For example, one day I was scheduled to work with Christine, the store manager, and Silvia, an assistant manager, both who—like me—were standard sized. While working at the register, I overheard Silvia speaking with an elderly white customer, who asked if she could “speak with the manager.” Silvia explained that she was a manager, and asked if she could help the woman with something.

The woman said, “Well, that’s just it . . . you might not understand. I haven’t been in here for a while, so maybe something changed, but isn’t this supposed to be a store for big ladies? All of the girls working here are small. Didn’t they used to be bigger?” In response, Silvia said, “Well I just started so I don’t know how it used to be, but we still have a lot of bigger girls working here, they just didn’t get assigned to this shift.” The woman looked upset, and asked “but isn’t this a store for bigger girls?” Silvia reassured the woman that the clothes were still plus size, but the customer left the store without looking at anything, saying, “I’ll come back another day, but I hope it’s back to normal by then.”

To this customer, the mismatch between Real Style’s brand identity and employees’ bodies challenged her expectations to the extent that she left the store. Instances like this were rare, but nonetheless offered opportunities for plus-sized women to use their power as consumers to communicate to managers that standard-sized workers might be bad for business.

Customers varied in their responses to being confronted in a space that was supposed to be “safe,” with reminders of social preferences for thinner bodies. As predicted by my hiring managers, customers frequently asked me, “Why are you working here?” The tone of this question tended to be jovial, but a few times felt more accusatory. Often, customers’ reactions to standard-sized employees took the form of verbal disciplining within fat talk interactions, a phenomenon I term “talking out of size.” In these cases, shared understandings of how fat talk should be performed provided customers with the opportunity to break the rules (or signal to me that I was breaking them) to communicate their displeasure or frustration.

For example, when I was assisting a middle-aged white woman in the fitting room she lamented that she couldn’t wear short sleeves because of her “fatty arms.” In response I began to
tell her that I thought she would look just fine in short sleeves, but she interrupted before I could finish, saying, “oh, what would you know? You’ve got twig arms!” This interaction initially followed a typical pattern for fat talk in that the customer began with a seeming request for body reassurances. However, she cut me off before I could provide them. This interruption—permitted through her status as a customer—prevented me from talking out of size, as a thinner woman. These instances reveal that consumer-environments do present opportunities for customers to evoke agentic resistance to situations they find stigmatizing, although this came at the expense of workers’ own abilities to respond in kind.

Another time, when describing the fit of a pair of jeans to a white customer in her early 30s, I jokingly said that the pants were “great for women like me, who always get a muffin top!” When the customer stared at me without responding, I naively continued by saying, “You know . . . muffin top! When the waistband of your pants cuts into your waist and you kind of spill over them like the top of a muffin.” Without cracking a smile the customer responded curtly: “I don’t think you have any place to be complaining about muffin top.” Again, the Real Style environment offered plus-sized women customers (though not workers) rare opportunities for safe subversion against cultural preferences for thinness. Through these interactions I learned more about the unspoken rules at Real Style, and also about some of the (upper-class white, standard-sized) assumptions I’d had about my own body. For example, when I started my field work at Real Style I’d thought of my “size 10” body as being obviously closer to plus sized than to “skinny.” However, when challenged for talking out of size = I quickly learned that being even one or two sizes smaller than plus size was very meaningful to customers, who often viewed me as “skinny” and therefore as a distinct “other.”

Later that day a manager pulled me aside and suggested that I tell customers that I “used to be fat” to avoid these “uncomfortable situations.” This advice may have been inspired by the experiences of another sales associate, Nessa, an Israeli immigrant in her mid-twenties who had previously been plus sized, but, having undergone bariatric surgery, was strikingly tall and slender. Customers often accused Nessa of being “too skinny.” In response, Nessa would say that she “used to be a size 26” but had gotten her “stomach stapled.” If customers expressed doubt as to the truth of her story, Nessa would lift her shirt to proudly reveal extensive scarring on her waist and stomach, from the initial surgery and several “excess-skin removal” procedures. By doing this, Nessa signaled her ability to empathize with customers (and, thus, successfully provide emotional labor), despite her standard-sized body.

Without a similar story (and an unwillingness to lie) I developed alternative techniques to avoid customers’ chastisement. For example, I learned to respond to customers’ fat talk by suggesting different articles of clothing as solutions, rather than by providing untrusted reassurances or by presuming that my own body-size complaints were appropriate bridging techniques. Of course, this was an imperfect solution; although offering clothing to remedy a customer’s body complaints allowed me to reframe the “problem” as residing in garments rather than her body, by agreeing that there was a problem to be solved in the first place, I often found myself reinforcing mainstream beauty ideals. Sadly, the most effective way to prevent myself from talking out of size was by finding an area of my own body that was believably unsatisfactory. In my case, during bra-fits, I could respond to women’s complaints about their breasts by communicating disappointment with my own (relatively) smaller breasts. Because having large breasts was often a source of pride for many customers, this provided a means by which they could feel somewhat luckier than me. While I felt relieved to have learned another “trick” for smoothing fat talk interactions, it was disheartening to knowingly reproduce body-hating discourses. For better or worse, I decided that easing interactions away from conflict (and perhaps helping some customers feel “lucky” about their breasts) felt infinitely better—and more authentic—than refusing to empathize with fat talk out of principle.

Fat talk also appeared as emotional labor when managers initiated it with workers. These fat talk interactions had the potential to be especially demeaning, given that upper-level managers were almost universally thinner than their subordinates. Yet, in contrast to instances when
a standard-sized sales associate talked out of size to a plus-sized customer, standard-sized managers who initiated fat talk to plus-sized workers were responded to with reassurance and flattery. In other words, managers’ privileged positions at the store allowed them to talk out of size without reprimand, at least to their subordinates. For example, while folding t-shirts I overheard the store manager, Joe, complaining to Kim about how he had gained seven pounds and was “getting fat.” He lamented at length about how difficult it was to get to the gym every day, and Kim responded by saying “I know what you mean, it’s so tough! But you can do it—you have to take care of yourself!” On another occasion, after I returned from a “coffee run,” Christine complained to one of the plus-sized assistant managers and me about the calories in her drink, saying, “Oh, I really have to watch myself with these treats so I don’t gain weight.” She then turned more pointedly to me, and jokingly said, “You know what I mean!”

At no point did I see a worker initiate fat talk with a supervisor, and I only rarely observed workers initiate it with customers, always in cases where customers were “regulars” who had friendship-like relationships with workers. Customers’ and managers’ fat talk placed a disproportionate burden on subordinate workers to “feign” rather than “feel”: the emotional labor of fat talk became an enactment of deference, as well as an opportunity for customers to discipline workers who defied aesthetic expectations. These data again point to the enmeshment of emotional and aesthetic labor, and also how different feeling rules shape both.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article examined how corporate branding interacts with customers’ diverse feeling rules to shape service interactions. More specifically it investigated how a (purportedly) body-accepting brand ideology impacted the experiences of plus-sized workers and customers, asking (1) how this unique commercial context shaped workplace inequality in terms of aesthetic and emotional labor, and (2) whether it offered plus-sized women opportunities for agentic resistance against fat stigma. I argue that, although corporate branding at Real Style promoted prideful appreciation for larger female bodies, these discourses were limited in power by customers’ internalized fat stigma, and, thus, did not create the “species of resistance” optimistically proposed by Bordo (2004). Instead, Real Style was characterized by deep ambivalence toward larger body size, a context allowing hierarchies between women to be reinforced, rather than challenged.

Because the primary corporate goal of Real Style was to profit financially by selling clothes, the concept of “Real Women” seemed to be perpetuated by management only insomuch as it helped employees and customers feel “at home” and “normal” while spending time (and money) at Real Style. In this endeavor, it was clear that corporate branding came second to premise that “the customer is always right”—a finding that may have been uniquely visible at Real Style, given that this store’s marketing challenged mainstream ideologies. Rather than being re-claimed with pride, fat was instead re-named (i.e., “real,” “chubby,” or “thick”), an approach that may have temporarily distracted some shoppers from their poor body image but did not actively challenge the social systems perpetuating it. Further, while Real Style’s branded concept of “Real Women” offered a rare critique to the mainstream ultra-slim beauty ideal, it simultaneously reified hierarchies between plus-sized and standard-sized women by implying that the former were somehow more real than the latter.

Employees at Real Style were segregated into jobs and tasks according to gender and body size such that the majority of sales associates and assistant managers were plus-sized women, while top-tier managers and stockroom workers were standard sized, and more likely to be men. Although plus-sized women were preferred for interactive service jobs, these jobs were associated with high turnover, preventing plus-sized workers as a group from advancing to top-tier managerial positions. In particular, assistant manager positions provided an exceedingly slippery stepping stone to upper-level management, as these jobs demanded increased responsibility and availability to work almost full-time hours, while offering no benefits and only a slight pay increase from lower
positions. Because turnover was high, top-level management positions were recruited externally, where candidates were unlikely to be plus sized.

Despite managerial preferences for hiring plus-sized women workers to positions requiring interactive service work, sales associates were assigned to tasks according to their body size, such that standard-sized sales associates were disproportionately selected for desirable tasks. These included dressing mannequins (which, due to the physical design of the store, could only be performed by standard-sized workers) and “running” managers’ errands. Standard-sized women and men were assigned to work in the stockroom, seemingly due to managers’ presumptions about workers’ physical fitness, concerns about their ability to adequately perform emotional and aesthetic labor on the sales floor, and (incorrect) assumptions that members of these groups would not steal merchandise. The physically narrow design of the stockroom shelving meant that, again, the largest workers could not easily perform stockroom tasks. I do not argue that dressing mannequins, running errands, or stockroom work were tasks of uniquely high status at Real Style (although they did offer workers greater self-supervision and breaks from monotony). Rather, my findings simply illustrate that jobs will be assigned to different groups of people depending on the prevailing workplace culture and aesthetic. Further, these findings point to the importance of considering how preferences for slimmer bodies are not just matters of taste, but have been built into the physical structure of workplaces in ways that invisibly privilege certain bodies over others.

Micro-interactions between workers, managers, and customers provided additional insight into how mainstream fat stigma discursively reinforced power hierarchies between women, even in an environment that branded itself as challenging hegemonic beauty standards. White (though not black or Latina) customers and managers often complained about their body size to workers (who then comforted them), but workers almost never initiated fat talk to supervisors or customers. Black and Latina customers, on the other hand, rarely complained about fatness, but sometimes expressed frustration about not having an “hourglass figure,” highlighting the different feeling rules at play in gendered discourses about body size and shape. When evoked, fat talk operated on the sales floor as a form of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), reinforcing workers’ deference to both customers and managers, while also reifying hegemonic beauty standards. Because fat talk interactions followed well-understood scripts, plus-sized customers were able to deviate from these scripts to discipline standard-sized workers who defied expectations for aesthetic labor. Given the extent to which larger female customers are frequently discriminated against by sales associates in service interactions (King et al. 2006), these instances seemed almost a form of poetic justice. Yet, plus-sized customers’ opportunities for resistance against mainstream fat stigma came at workers’ expense. Further, that managers were almost uniformly thinner than the workers to whom they complained further reinforced the lower status of workers when managers could talk out of size without recourse. Ultimately, fat talk at Real Style reified hierarchies of inequality between women on the basis of their bodies and their statuses as customers, managers, or workers.

My findings certainly point to areas of potential improvement for consumer spaces that wish to challenge fat stigma. However, these data should not be interpreted as evidence that Real Style did not, or could not, provide opportunities for plus-sized women to feel good about their bodies, or that the site was uniformly oppressive or divisive. To the contrary, my observations and personal experiences suggest that, compared to most other retail spaces (particularly those that do not even offer women’s clothing above size 12, or that would not consider hiring a fat woman), the brand ideology and culture at Real Style offered a more inclusive and “safer space” for plus-sized women to work and shop.

My data suggest several avenues for further research. While prior work on aesthetic labor in retail environments has found that ideal workers are “middle class, conventionally gendered, and typically white” (Williams and Connell 2010:350), workers at Real Style were racially diverse, and race/ethnicity was not a meaningful predictor for hiring decisions or task assignments. Given that retail workers are often selected to represent ideal consumers, and are often recruited from within the customer base, it is possible that this was simply due to customers’ racial diversity. That said,
given prior research showing that people may be more accepting of women with larger bodies when those bodies are also black (i.e., Maranto and Stenoien 2000), an interactional effect may be at work; it is a tantalizing possibility that—among plus-sized women workers—women of color may actually be preferred over white women. Although my observations of Real Style suggest these possible explanations, it is difficult to say with certainty. A compelling avenue for further research on aesthetic labor would be to focus more closely on the question of which physical characteristics are most meaningful in different workplaces, and how multiple traits intersect in hiring decisions.

Additionally, viewing fat talk as a form of emotional labor reveals not only the extent to which fat talk (and women’s poor body image in general) has been commodified on the sales floor, but also suggests that status may be an important dimension at play in all fat talk interactions. Naomi Wolf (1991) astutely noted that competition between women over appearance is one mechanism of patriarchal control, whereby “constant comparison, in which one woman’s worth fluctuates through the presence of another, divides and conquers” (p. 284). This article continues in this tradition in its finding that, through the discursive rituals of fat talk, women interactively reinforce distinctions between each other on the basis of body size while reifying power hierarchies. These interactions not only reinforce inequality between women on the basis of body size, but also reinforce gender inequality more broadly by contributing to a disproportionate emphasis on women’s appearance as determining their social worth. Future work examining how power is subtly articulated through fat talk in myriad contexts could shed light on the processes by which women negotiate status through everyday interactions, and how these negotiations damage women’s status, overall.

References


