

FASHIONING FAT

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



For two and a half years, Amanda Czerniawski was a sociologist turned plus-size model. Journeying into a world where, as a size 10, she was not considered an average body type, but rather, for the fashion industry, “plus-sized,” Czerniawski studied the standards of work and image production in the plus-sized model industry. *Fashioning Fat* takes us through a model’s day-to-day activities, first at open calls at modeling agencies and then through the fashion shows and photo shoots. Czerniawski also interviewed 35 plus-size models about their lives in the world of fashion, bringing to life the strange contradictions of being an object of non-idealized beauty.

Fashioning Fat shows us that the mission of many of these models is to challenge our standards of beauty that privilege the thin body; they show us that fat can be sexy. Many plus-size models do often succeed in overcoming years of self-loathing and shame over their bodies, yet, as Czerniawski shows, these women are not the ones in charge of beauty’s construction or dissemination. At the corporate level, the fashion industry perpetuates their objectification. Plus-size models must conform to an image created by fashion’s tastemakers, as their bodies must fit within narrowly defined parameters of size and shape—an experience not too different from that of straight-sized models. Ultimately, plus-size models find that they are still molding their bodies to fit an image instead of molding an image of beauty to fit their bodies. A much-needed behind-the-scenes look at this growing industry, *Fashioning Fat* is a fascinating, unique, and important contribution to our understanding of beauty.

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FROM BOOKS TO LOOKS: JOURNEYING INTO PLUS-SIZE MODELING

SUMMARY

Chapter One introduces the author's journey into the world of plus-size modeling. She conducts her research on the plus-size modeling industry by becoming a plus-size model herself. The author arrives at her first modeling open call as an investigative sociologist, but also a woman wondering if she has what it takes to be a plus-size model. At this open call, she has her first taste of the depersonalized nature of the modeling industry, where women are evaluated solely based on their bodies.

This chapter provides the framework for understanding the plus-size modeling industry. What qualifies as "fat" varies across cultures and time periods. The fashion industry also has a very different standard for "fat" than the medical field, and many plus-size models would actually be considered "average" to the everyday consumer. Fat carries a negative stigma, and it is often associated with laziness and lack of intelligence. Plus-size models occupy a unique position in the fashion industry, because they have the potential to alter what is considered beautiful. Even so, this chapter argues that plus-size models undergo an intensive labor process to maintain their figures and alter themselves to fit the needs of a client. As a result, they are not empowered, but remained disembodied women as they work to adhere to the fashion industry's standard of beauty.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are some of the negative stereotypes associated with fat, and how do these stereotypes affect everyday women?
- Do different cultures have different ideas of what is considered beautiful? If so, what are some examples of this?
- What is meant by "disembodiment," and why does the author believe that plus-size models are disembodied?
- What is the aesthetic labor process that plus-size models undergo?

ACTIVITY

Select a recent article or media clip from a reputable news agency that discusses fat in some way. How is fat depicted? Is the story perpetuating any of the stereotypes of fat discussed in the chapter? What kinds of images accompany the story? Do they portray fat in a positive or negative light?

HOW TO BECOME A PLUS-SIZE MODEL

CHAPTER 2

SUMMARY

Chapter Two presents the various ways women become plus-size models and the current status of the plus-size modeling industry. Many of the models interviewed for this ethnography are “outsiders”. Outsiders are women who had never considered plus-size modeling until scouted by an agent or designer who encourages them to try. Accustomed to hiding their curves, these women did not realize that they could ever be models. Plus-size models face intense competition and an industry that has always preferred thinner models. Agencies began establishing plus-size divisions in the 1990s, but faced ridicule and rejection from clients. Although the plus-size modeling industry has grown, there are still limited job opportunities for plus-size models, making the field even more competitive than the straight-size modeling industry. Plus-size models hope for fame and financial success, but also aim to overcome their shame over their bodies. They must courageously flaunt their curves in a culture that views fat in a negative light, and encourages women to hide their fat.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the different ways for a woman to become a plus-size model?
- What were some of the challenges that early plus-size models faced? How has the industry changed over the years?
- How do most “outsiders” feel about their bodies before becoming plus-size models, and how does modeling change their perception of their bodies?

MODELS OF ALL (PLUS) SIZES?

SUMMARY

Chapter Three discusses the various sizes of plus-size models. Depending on the type of job, clients will look for bigger or smaller plus-size models. For example, plus-size retailers hire slightly larger plus-size models than high-end fashion clients. Plus-size models face enormous pressure to become either bigger or smaller, depending on what types of jobs they hope to get. Models occasionally lose job opportunities because they do not appear “plus” enough. The term plus-size is vague and changes according to client preference and season. Many agents hope that the straight-size and plus-size modeling sectors will one day merge to become one industry.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are some of the potential consequences when a plus-size model loses weight?
- Why do clients prefer to hire smaller plus-size models and pad them to fit larger clothes, rather than hire larger plus-size models?
- How are some agencies reacting to the split between straight-size and plus-size modeling?

ACTIVITY

Search for images of plus-size models. Notice the kinds of jobs in which they appear and their body types. Are there any noticeable size differences as discussed in the chapter? What kind of plus-size model is “fashionable” today?

DISCIPLINING CORPULENCE THROUGH AESTHETIC LABOR

CHAPTER 4

SUMMARY

Chapter Four describes the aesthetic labor process that plus-size models must undergo in order to be successful. Plus-size models must be able to exude complete confidence in their bodies. Insecurity with their bodies shows up in front of clients and in photographs. They must also learn to control their emotions and charm clients despite the impersonal nature of the modeling industry. They endure harsh criticism from both clients and their own agents on a day-to-day basis. Unknown to the general public, plus-size models engage in rigorous diets and exercise regimes to maintain their weight and appearances. Many of the models interviewed for this book have struggled with eating disorders, just like straight-size models. Plus-size models are constantly working to control their bodies in order to fit a standard created by the fashion industry.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Explain the difference between affective labor and emotional labor.
- What are examples of the affective labor that a plus-size model must do?
- What are the unique challenges of being a fit model?
- What obstacles do plus-size models face that straight-size models do not? Are there any benefits? If so, describe them.
- Are plus-size models redefining beauty? Why or why not?

ACTIVITY

Make a diary of your personal bodily habits and identify how media and fashion impact your body image. How do the images of plus-size models make you feel about yourself?

SUMMARY

Chapter Five focuses on the modeling agencies that represent plus-size models. Agents transform women into plus-size models by helping them network, developing their talent, and finding them job opportunities. Agents analyze the future fashion market and scout models according to what clients will be looking for next. This chapter discusses the benefits and disadvantages of working under a modeling agency, and whether an agent is necessary for a model to succeed. Since an agent often becomes a fundamental part of a model's career, agents occasionally cross professional lines and become too involved in a model's personal life. An overly-critical or unsupportive agent can have a negative impact on a model's emotional wellbeing. The chapter analyzes possible protections that could help keep models safe and healthy.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the main roles and duties of an agent?
- Explain the disadvantages and advantages of working as a freelance model.
- Compare the author's experiences as a child actor to her experiences as a plus-size model.
- Describe the relationship between a model and her agent. Is this relationship always beneficial to the model? Why or why not? How could this relationship affect the model's mental health?
- What protections does the author suggest that could help keep models safe?

SUMMARY

Chapter Six analyzes the plus-size retail industry. Retailers and designers are discovering that plus-size women want great design and figure-flattering cuts. An increasing number of brands are offering larger sizes to accommodate this untapped sector that has money to spend. Plus-size women do not want unflattering prints or one-color clothes that hide their curves. They seek the same beautiful designs as their smaller friends, but made in larger sizes. Some plus-size women became frustrated with the lack of fashion options available to them, and decided to start their own clothing lines. Plus-size lingerie is also a large part of the plus-size fashion market. Plus-size lingerie retailers attempt to allow larger women to reclaim their femininity by using highly sexualized advertisements. However, this chapter argues that overly-sexualized advertisements distract us from larger concerns in fashion, such as the labor process of plus-size models.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How is the market evolving to accommodate larger women?
- Why do high-end designers still avoid creating plus-size lines?
- Some plus-size women are starting their own plus-size fashion lines. What role do these women play in changing the fashion industry?
- What advertising strategies do plus-size lingerie brands use? How do these advertising techniques empower or undermine plus-size women?

ACTIVITY

Perform an online search of plus-size designers and look through their offerings. What are their brand strategies, i.e., the primary message or underlying value conveyed in the brands' advertisements and promotional materials? What kind of plus-size models represent the brands? How are these models portrayed, e.g., sexualized or fun and flirty?

STEPPING OUT OF THE PLUS-SIZE LOOKING GLASS

SUMMARY

Plus-size models might feel temporarily empowered because they no longer have to hide their bodies. However, because the fashion industry conceals the intense aesthetic labor process of plus-size models, these models remain disembodied women. The public will continue to associate fat with laziness and lack of discipline, because consumers do not see the strict body management tactics that these models must undergo. The fashion industry also hides the work done on the models by makeup artists, hairstylists, and digital photo editors. Similar to straight-size models, plus-size models also engage in unhealthy dieting to maintain their weights. The presence of plus-size models in the fashion industry is a step towards changing society's standard of beauty. However, plus-size models will only be truly empowered when the public is aware of their labor processes, and when they no longer have to adhere to an image constructed by the fashion industry.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why is the reclamation of a plus-size model's embodiment only an illusion?
- Why is it important to make the public aware of a plus-size model's aesthetic labor process?
- Overall, does the author feel her experience as a plus-size model empowered her? Why or why not?

ACTIVITY

Design an ad campaign that would challenge negative discourses on fat while addressing the problem of the hidden aesthetic labor process in modeling. What would it involve?