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## Inequality in Clothing Stores

*Shopping in the plus size section of department stores can feel humiliating when the store is designed to keep you out of sight.*

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**By Kathryn H. Anthony**



Photo courtesy of Getty Images/LIVINUS

## Plus-Size Sections are Separate and Unequal

*“It’s embarrassing to walk into a department store knowing that the plus-size section is on the third floor in the back corner, away from most customers. When I finally get there, people walk by and sneer at me.”*  
*(Female, white, age 61, 4’11”, 200 lb.)*

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the average American woman weighs 162.9 pounds and wears a size 14, yet retailers treat her like an anomaly. Almost two-thirds (62 percent) of American females are considered overweight. Many plus-size women shop online rather than face the unpleasant experience of shopping in a store, yet when they do so they lose the ability to see, touch, or try on merchandise in advance – and often have to return whatever they buy. As Ginia Bellafante wrote in her article “Plus-Size Wars” in the *New York Times Magazine*, “Given the fit challenges a plus-size customer faces, the shift to a virtual space where nothing can be tried on can seem alienating to her – a directive to wear a muumuu.”

Just as African Americans in the South had separate, “Colored” building entrances, a not-so-subtle form of discrimination occurs in the design of many retail establishments that place plus-size clothing in hidden, hard-to-find locations, out of sight from the rest of us.

Full-figured women can shop at plus-size chains such as Lane Bryant and Fashion Bug or big-box stores such as Kohl’s and Target. Walmart is the top seller of plus-size apparel in the United States. Yet women who seek more style and fashion at mainstream department stores often feel like second-class citizens. And many retail stores don’t even sell plus-size clothes at all, although they may have them available online. The message sent to plus-size customers: “You’re not good enough to shop here.”

As a result, large women face a catch-22: they purchase less than they might otherwise because they don’t find enough appealing merchandise in stores, hence retailers point to poor sales figures as evidence of low demand and fail to provide the supply.

Many blogs, websites like *A Curvy Cupcake*, and Instagram hashtags like #ThisIsPlus have helped plus-size women band together to show the world what a plus-size looks like and how it differs from the simplistic depiction in the fashion world, to share their experiences with each other, and to accept and celebrate their bodies as they are.

By contrast, the men’s sector of plus-size clothing is called “Big & Tall,” a less derogatory term that typically covers men with waist sizes 40 or greater, or over 6’2” tall.

My student Joanne Muniz and I spent the past year studying “the plus-size displacement,” or how retail-store design affects plus-size consumers’ experience. We discovered several previous studies focusing on “fat stigma” and “fat talk” and how these concepts affected shoppers’ self-images and level of satisfaction with their shopping experience. Yet we found relatively little

information about the impact of the layout and design of the retail environment.

So we visited several stores at our regional shopping mall, where we documented in-store signage, mannequins, target images, merchandise displays, fitting rooms, and proximity of store entrances, all of which can influence plus-size shoppers' experience.

Among our most striking observations were that at department stores, the plus-sized clothing aisles were often just as cramped and crowded as those in the rest of the store, an uncomfortable situation that also led to circulation problems. In several instances, we found a conspicuous lack of mirrors and very few mannequins, and those mannequins we did find often looked about the same size as everywhere else in the store.

By comparison, in a store exclusively for plus-size shoppers, we observed mannequins prominently displayed near the entrance. Warm, bright colors were used to make customers feel welcome, plus-sized people were used in store images, and aisles were spacious. According to the store manager, "the approach is to make the plus-size shopper feel comfortable, cared for, and most of all, worthy."

We developed an online survey to find out more about plus-size respondents and their typical shopping experiences, and we received 80 responses, including both women (84%) and men (16%), ranging in age from 15 to over 50. Most had a waist size from 40 to 52 inches, a shirt size from XL to 4X, and pant sizes between 16 and 52.

Their responses to our questions about the layout and design of plus-size sections were striking:

- Only a quarter (25%) said they typically found the plus-size area accessible and unobstructed.
- Only 18 percent said the plus-size section was welcoming.
- Only 18 percent said they could locate plus-size mannequins in the store.
- Only 15 percent of the respondents said they could easily locate the plus-size area once they entered a store.
- Only 14 percent said they could easily locate images of people who looked like them in the store.
- Only 13 percent said the plus-size section was easy to navigate.
- Only 13 percent said they could see the store entrances from the plus-size section.
- Only 11 percent said they could easily find the fitting rooms from the plus-size section.
- Only 9 percent said the plus-size section aisles were spacious.

In a nutshell, the respondents found the layout and design of plus-size sections to be inadequate for their needs.

And their customer experiences revealed a great deal of dissatisfaction. Just over a quarter (26 percent) said they felt comfortable purchasing plus-size apparel in mainstream apparel stores, only 23 percent said they felt comfortable with the store atmosphere in the plus-size section, only 20 percent said they were able to find apparel variety in the plus-size section, 19 percent said the clothing displays in plus-sized sections invited them to make purchases, 19 percent said sales associates motivated them to purchase apparel, 14 percent said sales associates were attentive, and only 10 percent said their overall shopping experience was agreeable.

# Defined by DESIGN

The Surprising Power  
of Hidden Gender,  
Age, and Body Bias  
in Everyday Products  
and Places



KATHRYN H. ANTHONY

*Foreword by Eric Schmidt, Executive Chairman and  
Former Chief Executive Officer, Google*

Cover courtesy of Prometheus Books

When asked to elaborate on their experiences purchasing plus-size apparel, and how the location, layout, and design of the plus-size section in the store makes them feel, many stated that they felt ostracized and treated like “second-class citizens,” uncomfortable, stressed out, frustrated, and unmotivated to return. Among the worst experiences: “I felt a bit asphyxiated.” By contrast, several had their best experiences when shopping in plus-size-only stores, where they found plenty of clothing variety, as well as sales associates with a similar body type to their own, and where they could relate to the images portrayed. Still others could not even describe a “best experience” shopping for plus-size apparel in a store at all.

What changes did they want to see in the design of retail environments for plus-size shoppers? They called for larger plus-size sections, more clothing

variety, more plus-size mannequins, better signage, more spacious aisles, and larger fitting rooms. But the following comment said it all: “Make the plus-size section more roomy, attractive, near the entrance of your store! Forcing fat people to retreat to the rear of a store speaks volumes: store owners don’t want to wait on fat people!”