



## “I have to go the extra mile”. How fat female employees manage their stigmatized identity at work

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores how fat female employees engage in identity work to manage stigmatizing expectations grounded in healthism and obesity discourse that construct fat people as unhealthy, stupid, unprofessional, and lazy. We interviewed 22 women who self-identified as fat, full-figured or obese. Our analysis reveals how our participants engaged in identity work strategies in order to project a professional appearance and highlight their work performances. Many strategies reproduced dominant notions about fatness such as ‘smartening up’, ‘distracting’, ‘hiding’, ‘concealing’, ‘humour’, ‘compensating’, ‘explaining’ and ‘defensive Othering’. Yet at times some participants also used strategies that challenged dominant discourses about size, such as ‘flaunting’, ‘irony’ and ‘self-acceptance’. The identity work strategies our participants engaged in were not just narrative; many involved what they did with their bodies. We therefore argue the need for further theorizing *embodied identity work*, specifically with regards to how size matters in the context of employment.

### 1. Introduction

When I think about what it really feels like to be a fat employee, then I would say the need to prove myself. To show that I am just as good as someone who is slender. [...] Being better in completing things, being better in giving a presentation, getting more done, earning credits by doing those extra things. But also just making sure that everything I deliver is perfect.

This is how Jane,<sup>1</sup> who works in customer relations, reflects on the meaning of her fatness<sup>2</sup> in the context of her work. Jane’s words suggest that she feels compelled to put in extra effort in order to build a positive workplace identity and avoid marginalisation based on her fat body. Extant research indicates that identity work is an important way for marginalised groups to manage their selves in relation to workplace norms that position them as Other. Scholars working on diversity from a critical management perspective have, for instance, shown how women (e.g. Jyrkinen, 2014; Kelan, 2010; Tyler & Cohen, 2010), ethnic minorities (e.g. Boogaard & Roggeband, 2010; Essers & Benschop, 2007; Janssens & Zanoni, 2014; Van Laer & Janssens, 2014), older

workers (Riach, 2007; Thomas, Hardy, Cutcher, & Ainsworth, 2014) and disabled employees (e.g. Jammaers, Zanoni, & Hardonk, 2016; Riach & Loretto, 2009) continuously manage their deviance from the somatic norms that circulate in their workplaces. These studies indicate that employees actively engage in identity work to position themselves favourably vis-à-vis the power structures that construct them as subordinate (Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013).

One of the power structures that has gained momentum over the last few decades is healthism, a concept that indicates an excessive pre-occupation with fitness, appearance, and the fear of disease augmented by a sense of personal responsibility for health (Tischner & Malson, 2012; Zoller, 2003). Healthism emerges in organizations through informal interactions over issues related to health and more formal health promotion activities, which often obscure how power is involved and blur the boundary between private life and work (Holmqvist & Maravelias, 2010; Maravelias, 2009). Yet both studies related to diversity and studies focussing on workplace health promotion (WHP) often fail to recognize power dynamics related to body size and how these shape identity work of employees. Levay (2013), p. 578) therefore states that fatness carries potential ‘for theoretical development and for

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<sup>1</sup> All the names of our participants are changed to pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Participants identified themselves by using different terms: e.g. ‘fuller-sized’, ‘full-figured’, ‘obese’ and ‘fat’. Although we acknowledge that terminology is an important issue, for reasons of readability we choose to only use the term ‘fat’. Also, we prefer to refrain from using medicalized terms such as ‘obesity’ and ‘overweight’ because we do not want to reproduce the medicalization of fatness.

discovery of new aspects of organizational reality’.

Looking at body size from a diversity perspective renders systemic power dynamics regarding size visible. Critical management scholars have emphasized the importance of the ways in which power structures (re)produce inequalities in organizations, negatively impacting specifically those whose bodies deviate visibly from dominant somatic norms (Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013; Janssens & Zanoni, 2014). However, fatness is constructed through obesity discourse as changeable, a personal responsibility and thus an individual problem (van Amsterdam, 2013). This focus on individual responsibility can be seen as a neoliberal part of healthism (Kelly, Allender, & Colquhoun, 2007; Maravelias, 2009). With this focus on personal responsibility healthism frames fatness according to Craig and Scambler (2006), p. 277 as an ‘achieved deviance’ rather than an ‘ascribed deviance’. As such fatness is constructed as a moral deficit that implies individuals’ doing (having a healthy lifestyle or not) instead of an ontological deficit (possessing something different for which the bearer is not individually responsible). This distinction indicates how ‘fatness’ differs from other markers of difference such as gender and race; it carries a charge of explicit moral blame. The focus on individual responsibility thus obscures the systemic power dynamics at play – also in organizations – with regards to body size and health issues (LeBesco, 2011; Levay, 2013; Maravelias, 2009) and possibly explains why fatness remains an under-researched topic in critical management studies. Simultaneously, the focus on individual responsibility also belies the gendering of fatness (Tischner & Malson, 2012). Being fat and female is a particular identity frame with specific implications for how the stigma attached to this frame can be managed in the context of employment.

Drawing upon the theoretical concept of identity work (e.g. Alvesson, 2010; Brown, 2015; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Toyoki & Brown, 2013; Watson, 2008, 2009), this paper aims to explore how self-identified fat women manage their stigmatized identities at work. We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 22 participants. Going beyond conceptualizations of identity work as purely narrative, we aim to 1) analyse identity work of our participants against the backdrop of dominant power structures that define fatness and health, and 2) elucidate micro-political strategies through which identity work is taken up by our participants to manage fat stigma at work.

## 2. Fat bodies at work

That body size matters in workplaces is exemplified in research that examines health promotion and in studies that focus on health ideals in organisations (Holmqvist & Maravelias, 2010; Johansson, Tienari, & Valtonen, 2017; Kelly et al., 2007; Maravelias, 2009; Thanem, 2013). This research has shown that the pursuit and promotion of healthy lifestyles have become increasingly salient in organizational life. Several scholars have illustrated the importance of healthism or ‘looking healthy’ for employees and managers (Kelly et al., 2007; Meriläinen, Tienari, & Valtonen, 2015; Thanem, 2013). In both general managerial techniques and WHP programs, healthism and obesity discourses are used that construct being fat, overweight or obese as the opposite of good health. These discourses construct fat people not only as unhealthy, but also as sinful, lazy, ugly, stupid and altogether unproductive (LeBesco, 2011; Mik-Meyer, 2010; Saguy & Riley, 2005). In addition, obesity discourse constructs fat people as not presentable, professional or well-groomed. Fat employees’ bodily excess thus excludes them from qualifying as a legitimate ‘corporate’ body (Johansson et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2007; Longhurst, 2001). Arguably, this incites fat employees to engage in extra work in order to mitigate these negative constructions of their bodies and capabilities.

According to Foucault (1979) visibility plays an important role in disciplinary processes regarding deviance from (somatic) norms: ‘a visible body is a knowable body that can subsequently become subject to the workings of power’ (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 41). Marginalization and exclusionary practices thus often materialize through

bodies. Particular markers of identity and intersections between them signify the social status location of individuals within their organizations, especially when these markers are highly visible (Puwar, 2004). Fat people often face negative consequences based on their visible transgression of normative standards for embodiment (Barlösius & Philipps, 2015; Monaghan, 2017; Puhl, 2007; Throsby, 2007). For example, their salaries are often lower compared to their thinner counterparts, their chances of promotion are slimmer and they can face problems when applying for a job because of their physique (Levay, 2013; Puhl & Brownell, 2001; Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Moreover, the negative consequences that fat people face are also mediated by other markers of difference as body size intersects with gender, social class, age, sexual identity, ability and race/ethnicity (e.g. LeBesco, 2004; van Amsterdam, 2013).

Much of the research in organization studies that discusses embodied health norms focuses on managerial health regimes. Kelly et al. (2007), for example, show how workers in a big IT company are confronted with healthism discourse through WHP programs. They argue that workers engage in technologies of the self to construct an identity as corporate athlete. Johansson et al. (2017) look at the role of bodies in the construction of contemporary managerial identities. Their research indicates that managers who are passionate about their healthy and fit bodies and lifestyles create a work environment where there is no place for bodies who are not considered fit and healthy, such as those who are perceived to be overweight. They conclude that ‘The norms that we have identified are strict and narrow, breeding intolerances as they not only draw sharp distinctions between those who can live up to the bodily ideal and those who cannot, but also offer opportunities to condemn, marginalize and exclude the latter’ (p.1160). Fat employees obviously belong to the ‘latter’ yet their experiences have to date remained largely unacknowledged in critical management studies. Expanding on extant research that has unpacked how subordinate individuals engage with somatic norms in their workplace regarding race/ethnicity, gender, ability, and age (e.g. Jyrkinen, 2014; Riach & Loretto, 2009; Van Laer & Janssens, 2014), we ask how fat female employees manage prevailing norms regarding appropriate embodiment in the context of their work.

## 3. Gender, size and health

Critical research that focuses on health in organisations often glosses over the gender dimension in health promotion (Johansson et al., 2017). Yet extant research on embodiment in organizations suggests that body size issues are indeed gendered. (e.g. Kelan, 2010; Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Meriläinen et al., 2015; Trethewey, 1999; Waring & Waring, 2009). Gendered discourses prioritize women’s physical appearance over their professional abilities and prescribe women to perform gender in accordance with somatic norms (Puwar, 2004; Tyler & Cohen, 2010). Issues around size and weight emerge as important factors in studies on female professionals. Trethewey (1999) study, for example, shows multiple instances where body size issues are pertinent in the identity work female professionals do. Most women in her study indicated that they had to be fit (meaning not fat) in order to appear disciplined and in control. They defined the professional body as not fat and made efforts to adhere to this norm. Mavin and Grandy (2016) similarly argue that weight is important in the identity work of elite women leaders. Being overweight is associated by these elites with being unattractive, unprofessional and unsuccessful.

Although the somatic norms regarding size seem to be stricter for women, men are not immune to the effects of healthism in workplace settings. Several studies show that fatness is constructed as undesirable, for both female and male professionals (e.g. Johansson et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2007; Meriläinen et al., 2015; Thanem, 2013). However, Monaghan (2007) shows that in spite of the stigma fat men face, they can sometimes find ways to construct a positive fat identity, in which their body size is equated with power and authority. It thus seems likely

that women are affected more severely by current health and appearance norms than men because of heteronormative ideals of femininity that equate beauty with slender bodies and produce women's bodies as objects of desire and scrutiny (Braziel & LeBesco, 2001; Brewis & Sinclair, 2000). Women's bodies have historically been rendered more visible and more problematic within organizations because they are always positioned as the opposite of the masculine somatic norm: as *not* rational, *not* controlled, *not* knowledgeable (e.g. Brewis & Sinclair, 2000; Jyrkinen, 2014). Yet it would be a mistake to reduce fat women to a homogeneous group; inequalities with regards to body size are very complex because size intersects in important ways not only with gender, but also with sexual identity, class, age, ability and race/ethnicity (Atkins, 2012; LeBesco, 2004; van Amsterdam, 2013). An intersectional perspective on body size is developed in Fat Studies scholarship (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Saguy, 2012), yet not particularly in relation to employment. This paper aims to elucidate how size matters for self-identified fat women at work while paying attention to intersections of size with other axes of difference where these appear relevant in our data.

#### 4. Researching fatness through identity work

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), p. 1165) postulate that identity work 'refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness'. Lutgen-Sandvik (2008), p. 99) writes that 'the reflexive project of the self is an essential, ongoing accomplishment' referring to the idea that identities are not stable or fixed and require constant effort. This also implies that identity work adds to employees' workload, especially if they inhabit identity positions that mark them as deviant from prevailing norms in a particular organizational context. The concept identity work allows us to capture the specificities of the continuous efforts made by fat employees to construct and uphold their identity.

In an attempt re-focus the debate around identity work to include structural influences, instead of merely highlighting individual agency Watson (2009), p. 431) the concept identity work can help management and organization scholars deal with ways in which individuals 'actively manoeuvre' discourses in order to present a professional work identity. Toyoki and Brown (2013) also link power to identity work by stating that discourses '... provide materials and opportunities for individuals and groups to reflexively author accounts of their selves' (p. 3). Extant research has shown that subordinate individuals actively engage with societal and/or organizational discourses of diversity to shape their identities and position themselves favourably (e.g. Essers & Benschop, 2007; Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013; Janssens & Zanoni, 2014; Van Laer & Janssens, 2017; Zanoni, Janssens, Benschop, & Nkomo, 2010). These scholars thus posit that people engage in identity work to ameliorate their social status and mitigate exclusion, marginalization and/or stigmatization based on identity markers that signify their deviation from dominant (somatic) norms. Building on these insights we consider identities to be reflexively formed by individuals in interaction with social power structures that shape, limit and allow their efforts to construct a coherent sense of self.

Watson (2008) also emphasizes the importance of contextual power dynamics for identity work. People strive for a coherent and distinct sense of self, yet according to Watson (2008), p. 130) this is always mediated by institutional, cultural and discursive forces that 'attempt to tell us who or what we are'. Fat stigma functions as one such force: it tells stories about fat people being lazy, stupid, unhealthy and looking unprofessional (e.g. LeBesco, 2004; Monaghan, 2017). Managing a stigmatized identity at work thus means managing stereotypical ideas and expectations of others about the self. In this context Watson (2008), p. 131) distinguishes between 'inward' and 'outward' identity work. Hereby, he aims to make visible how people manage their sense of self both internally by self-reflexivity and externally by engaging with

others through talk and action. In this paper we focus on the 'outward' forms of identity work that our participants engage in to manage their stigma in relation to co-workers, clients, supervisors, bosses and others who circulate in their work context.

Much of the research on identity work in organizations focuses on professional or occupational identities. While there are undoubtedly interesting specificities to the identity work of fat employees in different areas of work, we focus in this paper on the commonalities regarding identity work that our participants engage in *across professions*. We argue that, as an effect of healthism and obesity discourses, fat stigma produces a stigmatized identity for fat employees regardless of where they work. According to Becker (1963) a stigmatized identity often takes the form of a master status, in that it appears to mask or silence other aspects of self: 'one will be identified as a deviant first, before other identifications are made' (Becker, 1963, p. 33). We expect fat female employees to face more or less similar stigmatization across professions highlighting their deviant identity as fat above other identities related to their occupation, employment sector or rank, because fat stigma produces fatness as a master status for identification (e.g. LeBesco, 2004; Rice, 2007). However, some employees are probably more likely to encounter stigmatization than others, such as those working in lower positions and/or professions that require direct contact with clients or customers. Also, some employees may have more resources to evade or counteract stigma. Yet because of the dominance of healthism and obesity discourse in current Western societies, we imagine that most if not all fat employees feel compelled to engage in reparatory identity work to 'fix' the impact of fat stigma at work, similar to bullied employees that Lutgen-Sandvik (2008) studied. We expect that this identity work, done in reaction to stigmatizing experiences, becomes acutely conscious and intentional (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008, p. 99).

Furthermore, we take on a micro view to critically investigate these conscious and intentional practices our participants talk about to strive for a coherent and distinct sense of self in the context of their work. This micro view differs from the work of Fat Studies scholars who focus mainly on the social structures that reproduce stigma (e.g. Campos, Saguy, & Ernsberger, 2006; McMichael, 2013; Saguy, Frederick, & Gruys, 2014; Solovay & Rothblum, 2009). The current state of affairs in Fat Studies is that we start to know more about the structural characteristics and outcomes of fat stigma, but not quite so much about the daily practices of fat individuals in their work context. A micro view on identity work strategies allows us to study the daily behaviour of participants, their micro-actions, of trying to navigate these power structures.

Micro-actions have been conceptualized in work on organizational resistance, where the focus lies on 'mundane, covert, informal and emergent, individual and interactional, localized and fleeting practices such as cynicism, bitch, irony, parody, and so on' (Fleming & Fullagar, 2007 in Ashcraft, 2017, p. 44) through which individuals offer ordinary resistance in organizations. In sum, our theoretical perspective on identity work *strategies* is thus concerned with the actual behaviour of people reproducing, resisting or altering systemic power structures. This implies that there is room for agency and that there are various ways of relating to the structural restraints of fat stigma in the context of work that remain under researched.

#### 5. Research design

##### 5.1. Data collection

This study is part of a larger project focusing on the meaning of fat embodiment for self-identified fat, obese or full-figured people. All our participants were working and living in the Netherlands. Most of our participants responded to an invitation to participate in this study placed in a Facebook group called 'Wondervol' (Wonderfull). This closed Facebook group aims to provide a safe space for women to discuss

issues regarding body size without judgement. Anything from clothing, psychological issues, fat activism or general body positive information is shared here. Other participants were approached through a call in the Dutch Obesity Network monthly. A few additional participants were approached via our own network or the network of our participants. This means that most participants socialize or interact based on fatness as a shared issue. We therefore expect that our participants may be particularly reflexive regarding the issue of body size and they may also be more able than others to articulate their thoughts and experiences on the subject.

We took great care to approach participants who self-identify as fat, full-figured, overweight or obese. We aimed to refrain as much as possible from categorizing potential participants ourselves. Not only are terms related to describe fatness often felt as offensive but also, as Butler (1993) explains in her writings about 'lesbian identity', identifying someone as a lesbian or in this case as 'fat' can 'serve not only to affirm but also to constrain, determine or specify one's identity' in ways that support fat phobia and slender ideal thought. We contend that categorizations based on body size (fat/slender) are socially constructed and reproduce relations of power between those on either side of the binary (LeBesco, 2004). We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants to draw out reflexive narratives about their experience with being fat and the stigmatization that they encounter. For example, questions we asked in the interviews were: 'In what ways does your size matter in your work?', 'Can you give examples of how co-workers respond to your body?' and 'How do you deal with stigmatizing experiences within your job?'. The in-depth interviews allowed us to access 'hidden knowledge', by taking the voices of those who are marginalized as central to the research (Hesse-Bibber, 2014). The first author interviewed 14 self-identified fat women and the second author interviewed eight self-identified fat women. The interviews lasted between one and three hours and were carried out between October 2015 and May 2016.

Most participants were white middle class women. Two had an ethnic minority background: one was Dutch-Surinamese and one Dutch-Antillean. Three participants were previously engaged in paid work, but were unemployed at the time of the interview and three had jobs that could be characterized as working class (e.g. in the cleaning industry). Our participants worked in different sectors and in different positions, ranging from the public service sector (schools, hospitals, municipalities) to the private sector (accountancy, entertainment, IT) and from lower positions (e.g. front office employees, waiters) to higher up in the organization (managers, directors, senior staff, and business owners). As argued earlier, the range of occupations our participants practiced enabled us to analyse the similarities in identity work fat employees engage in across different professions.

## 5.2. Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Qualitative data analysis software NVivo enabled us to arrange all the data into codes and categories. Table 1 provides an example of our coding process. Sections of the transcripts were selected based on their relevance to the way fat employees manage their stigmatized identity at work. We used a thematic analysis which involved the identification of themes in our data through 'careful reading and re-reading of the data' (Rice & Ezzzy, 1999, p. 258). Our analysis was an iterative and reflexive process. This means that we circled back and forth between our data and concepts from the literature. We approached our data with the questions 'what identity work do our participants talk about?', and 'what do they recount doing to manage fat stigma?' We also looked for personal pronouns (I, me, mine) and emotions as 'road signs to identity work codes' (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008, p. 103). We thus focussed on the 'micro-actions' our participants used in their work context to manage fat stigma. Based on this analysis, we identified two themes: showcasing a professional appearance, and showcasing professional performances.

We use 'performance' here as it is used in everyday workplace settings to indicate work achievements and outcomes.

## 5.3. Reflection

Our reliance on self-identification meant that we did not actively recruit more diverse participants in terms of class and race/ethnicity, or more homogenous participants in terms of their occupation (a specific sector and high or low position in the organization). We acknowledge that our findings cannot be generalized to cover experiences of all fat employees. Our data nonetheless offer unique insight into identity work that fat employees engage in to manage their stigmatized identity in the context of their work. Furthermore, although our sample is not generalizable in a traditional sense, the stories of our participant are 'metaphorically generalizable' (Stein, 2004, p. 179) in the sense that they have the capacity to sensitize readers into otherwise ignored or unknown experiences. The challenges we encountered with finding participants echoes that of previous research with stigmatized or minority groups such as sexual or religious minorities (e.g. Essers & Benschop, 2007; Meyer & Wilson, 2009; Riach, Rumens, & Tyler, 2014).

Whereas this paper focuses mainly on how identity work was recounted in the narratives of our participants, we also acknowledge that the interviews provided a context in which identity work was done. For example, we became acutely aware of our own privileged position as slender researchers in relation to those categorized as fat. We noticed and reflected on our attempts to flatten this power hierarchy by choosing clothes for an interview that did not emphasize our slenderness. We also found ourselves struggling with food that was presented to us during interviews. The first author, for example, always accepted cookies or other offerings of food, even though she sometimes did not feel like eating. She did this so as not to be construed as a person who morally condemns certain types of food or food choices. Furthermore, we explicitly resisted dominant obesity discourse rhetoric in the way we phrased our call for participants. For instance, we mentioned being aware of the negative stereotypes regarding fatness and stated that we were genuinely interested in how these might impact the lives of fat people.

## 6. Results

In this section we describe the identity work strategies that our participants indicated using to manage their stigmatized identity in the context of their employment. We illustrate this through two themes that we identified in our analysis: showcasing a professional appearance and showcasing professional performances. The first theme focuses on how fat employees manage expectations related to their appearance, while the second theme describes how employees engage in identity work to navigate expectations of important others at work about their professional abilities and achievements.

### 6.1. Showcasing a professional appearance

The narratives of our participants show that they feel impelled to engage in identity work to project a professional appearance. This work is thoroughly embodied and must be read against the backdrop of obesity discourse, that constructs fat people as ugly, unclean, and unfashionable (LeBesco, 2004; Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Sally, for example, described how she put extra effort into her appearance at work when she was a manager at a childcare centre:

I do believe that as a manager I had to look presentable, and I felt I had to put in extra effort to look well-groomed. Because being overweight is already something that I had against me. [...] I believe that I can compensate for my fatness with my appearance. So I am less inclined to wear a jeans and t-shirt to work because I don't think that is appropriate. I am fat so I have to put in more effort. (Sally)

**Table 1**  
codes, categories, themes.

Example quotes	Codes	Category	Theme
<i>I do not see myself as one of those fatties who comply with all those prejudices. I am not lazy, I am active, I am present, I believe I look good actually (laughs). (Wanda)</i>	Rejecting stereotypes	Defensive Othering	Showcasing a professional appearance
<i>I always tried to make myself invisible and dress as inconspicuously as possible, because I already stood out so much due to my size (Helen)</i>	Making yourself invisible	Hiding	Showcasing a professional appearance
<i>I once wrote a paper on 'it is allowed to be fat, however, you have to prove yourself before you will be accepted.' As examples I described Oprah Winfrey and Karin Bloemen, who both really achieved something. So that has been my drive, I have to be really good at something and then it does not matter that I am fat. (Lynn)</i>	Proving yourself to be accepted	Compensating	Showcasing professional performances
<i>I am happy the way I am and that is something most people do not understand. That is because most people assume that I will not have much self-confidence. But that doesn't bug me anymore. It took some time to think like that, though. But now, why should I have to be insecure? I like standing in front of a group to give a presentation and show off how smart I am, because that's what my work entails. It is not about if I look like a super model, or that I'm Asian, or anything about my looks. It is about being able to tell a good and interesting story. (Chloe)</i>	Showing smartness at work	Self-acceptance	Showcasing professional performances

This excerpt shows that Sally engaged in identity work to look impeccable and presentable for her job. Lisa, an elderly caregiver, expressed a similar sentiment when she said ‘For me it is really important to look well-groomed, because I will get judged sooner than someone else.’ By emphasizing the extra work they put into their appearance because of their size, participants implicitly acknowledged and in a sense reproduced the dominant notion that fatness indicates uncleanliness and sloppiness (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). This illustrates the entanglement of power, stigma and identity work. It shows that the identity work strategy of putting extra effort into their appearance, is shaped by systemic power dynamics that frame the fat body as an unprofessional body (e.g. Johansson et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2007; Meriläinen et al., 2015; Thanem, 2013).

Many of our participants emphasized how they continuously worked on their appearance. Susan, for example, also said ‘no casual Friday for me’. Similarly, Mary said:

I noticed that clothes play an important role. I am very much focused on being neat, without any blemishes, no jeans and not something tight.

Interviewer: Why is the way of dressing so important to you?

That is your ‘tool’ to do something about it. The few fat people I know are all very much focused on their appearance. They go to the beautician, have neat hands, their make-up is spotless. (...) You cannot lose those 20 kg, so you do what you can do. Someone else can easily pull off a loose t-shirt, yet for me it looks like I am painting. Or these jeans I am wearing now, they are just not neat enough. Yet my colleagues wear this all the time. (Mary)

‘Smartening up’ is an identity work strategy many fat women we spoke to engaged in to manage weight related stigma. This often entailed meticulous attention paid to clothing, make-up, hair and personal hygiene in order to be seen as well-groomed or presentable. Interestingly, this identity work strategy is primarily an embodied one, and involves little to no narrative elements.

In addition to making an effort to look well-groomed, the narratives of our participants also indicated how some fat employees tried to conceal their fat bodies as much as possible in order to mitigate negative reactions from others. Hannah, a former professional pianist, for example, said:

I realize that my body influences the way people see me, and that is not how I want to present myself. I want to be judged for what I have to say and do, not for what my body says. I often wear black, because I know in a white dress everyone would concentrate on that white dress and my big body instead of what I have to say and want to do. In that sense, it is compensation behaviour, however I think it is justifiable. (Hannah)

The embodiment of identity work performed by Hannah seems

striking here. Hannah’s narrative furthermore indicates how a stigmatized characteristic can become a master category: the stigmatized person is reduced to his or her stigma by others (Becker, 1963; Michalko, 2009). Within this power dynamic, many participants indicated that managing their hypervisibility was part of the outward identity work needed to manage their workplace identity.

Mary, a head principal at an elementary school, used a slightly different strategy than Hannah to manage her hypervisibility. She indicated wearing a ‘bow tie’ to distract attention from her fat body:

When I was young – and still slender – I once had to give a presentation for a large audience and I was a bit nervous about it but then I received a really good tip from a corporate person: to wear something that distracts the attention, like a big bow tie. That tip really helped me and I am still using it. Then I know they are watching that bow tie and not my fat rolls. (Mary)

Mary’s and Hannah’s narratives exemplify that our participants sometimes managed their workplace identity by ‘concealing’ their fatness and/or ‘distracting attention’ from their fat bodies. Moreover, this indicates how identity work involves not just narrative strategies but also embodied ones. Mary’s words furthermore indicate the intersection of size with age and gender. This dovetails with findings from Jyrkinen (2014) and Mavin and Grandy (2016) who argue how youthfulness is often tied in with slenderness in constructions about being a fit and capable woman at work. Whereas men are also increasingly subjected to neoliberal healthism in the context of their employment (Johansson et al., 2017; Maravelias, 2009; Thanem, 2013), the historical focus on beauty for women seems to make them more vulnerable to exclusions based on both size and age.

Related to Mary’s strategy of distracting, some participants recounted how they at times tried to hide themselves in organizational spaces. Sophie, for example, related her general feelings of taking up too much space to her experiences with working in a big commercial clothing store:

I feel like I am always in the way.

Interviewer: What do you mean by that?

Well, when I for instance have to walk by something. I previously worked at [store name], and I remember that I had to walk through the shop with clothing racks. And those clothing racks made a lot of noise, so people noticed me. I really hated that, especially when those racks would be empty. So I moved as quickly as I could through the shop to not stand out and hoped that no one would see me. So yeah, with a lot of things I feel like I am in the way of people. And that they judge me based on how I look. (Sophie)

Similarly, Lisa explained using this strategy to avoid possible stigmatizing situations:

Often, I wait in front of the door when I am with colleagues. When

we arrive there together, I always take a step back. So that we won't need to go in at the same time, those kinds of things. Maybe nothing would happen, maybe no one would say anything, or someone would only make a joke. The point is that you think about it before the situation takes place, and that I choose not to be in that kind of situation. (Lisa)

These examples show that Sophie and Lisa put a lot of energy into anticipating stigmatizing encounters and making themselves less visible. These examples furthermore show how Sophie and Lisa's identity work strategy of 'hiding' involved their bodies.

Previous research indicates that embodied work in organizations is often gendered (e.g. Gatrell, 2013; Jyrkinen, 2014; Kelan, 2010; Trethewey, 1999). In general, women spend more time on the management and discipline of their bodies and can experience trouble taking up space in organizational settings (Bordo, 2003; Puwar, 2004; Tyler & Cohen, 2010). Especially within professional contexts, women's bodies are more fiercely scrutinized than men's (Brewis & Sinclair, 2000; Johansson et al., 2017).

Lisa and Sophie's desire for 'not being in the way' and their subsequent hiding practices, illustrate the gendering of identity work strategies. This resonates with previous research on women as non-normative inhabitants of many organizational spaces. In her study on women and racial minorities in British Parliament, Puwar (2004) for example shows how those who transgress the somatic norms of the organization often become highly visible, and are in effect marginalized or stigmatized. Similarly, Tyler and Cohen (2010) found that women felt they were 'out of bounds' in organizational settings and therefore not regarded - by themselves and others - as valid subjects in this masculine environment (p. 186, 187). This simultaneous 'erasure and overexposure' (Tyler & Cohen, 2010, p. 192) of women in organizational settings, might be even more apparent for fat women, because of their 'hypervisibility'. For our participants, the intersection of their size and gender increases their marginalization. Fat women, whose bodies do not comply with strict norms regarding the desirable, fit and professional body face severe judgment and scrutiny in organizational settings (Johansson et al., 2017; Longhurst, 2001; Trethewey, 1999). It is therefore understandable that these women put a lot of effort into managing their appearance as to comply with (White, heteronormative and slender) somatic ideals in organizational settings by 'hiding', 'smartening up' 'concealing' or 'distracting attention'.

Some of our participants, however, put extra work into their appearance to rebel against the idea that fat people should not take up space:

I try not to hide myself in clothes but stand out by painting my hair red and wearing cupcake dresses. It is a little rebellious. I just think: you want to look at my fiery red hair or dress with cupcakes on it? And then what, what do you want to say? A fat woman in a cupcake dress? SO WHAT! (Jane)

Here, Jane used her appearance to resist the demands on the stigmatized to become less visible. She managed her stigma by making herself more visible through donning extravagant looks. By intentionally adopting an extra visible appearance, some participants try to claim space that fat people are usually denied (Puwar, 2004). This identity work strategy can be considered 'flaunting'. As described by Yoshino (in Saguy & Ward, 2011, p. 57) flaunting is the refusal to cover one's stigma but rather draw attention to it. Saguy and Ward (2011) refer to the strategy of flaunting as a way of 'coming out' for those with visible stigma 'when fat-identified women affirm their difference, whether in a bikini or in a restaurant, they are often not affirming difference for difference's sake but as part of an effort to challenge social norms in order to gain social inclusion.' (p. 70). Similarly, Pausé (2012) writes about 'coming out as fat' as a form of identity management. She for instance describes wearing a necklace of large sized letters that spells 'FAT'. This type of identity work thus involves using the

body to proudly come out as fat and resist stigma. Sarah engaged in the identity work strategy of flaunting by dying her hair blue and wearing only brightly coloured outfits.

Jane also used 'irony' as an identity work strategy to deal with situations in which she receives comments about her body:

I often try to make jokes, but not bad ones. For example, one time there was cake, and a colleague asked 'do you want some cake?', with the expectation that I would say no. But I said: 'of course, I have to think about my figure'. And then they laughed and we were able to have a conversation about it. I do those kinds of things to take the sting out. (Jane)

For Jane, using irony helps to open up a discussion with others about their body size and this enables her to resist fat stigma. As Lang and Lee (2010), p. 47) write 'Since what a person does in a jest is usually not accorded the same weight of responsibility as what he does seriously, humor provides a means to test the openness, accessibility, and riskiness of sensitive issues'. Irony was thus used by some of our participants to safely attempt to change perspectives about fatness in the context of their work.

To summarize, the identity work our participants took up to manage fat stigma at work was gendered, often embodied and involved 'smartening up', 'concealing', 'distracting', 'hiding', 'flaunting' and 'the use of irony'. Our participants seemed invested in showcasing a 'professional' appearance, yet they did so in different ways. On the one hand, some participants engaged in identity work strategies to distance themselves from a spoiled fat identity by investing time and effort to appear professional. Yet sometimes participants engaged in identity work to rebel against these norms and expectations by redefining fat identity itself.

## 6.2. Showcasing professional performance

The narratives of our participants illustrate the vast amount of identity work they reported doing to avoid being labelled as unprofessional because of their fatness. This did not only include (extra) work they spent on their appearance. Many participants explained how they also compensated at work by showing that, contrary to the constructions produced by the healthism and obesity discourses, they were not lazy, dumb and/or unhealthy (LeBesco, 2011; Mik-Meyer, 2010; Saguy & Riley, 2005). Our analysis shows that participants continuously tried to show how smart and fit they were. Jane, for example, told about a tour of her company that she had to give to a group of students, and how she engages in identity work by walking extra fast to avoid being seen as lazy or slow:

During the tour I walked faster than my usual walking speed. I did not want to confirm the prejudice that fat people are lazy or slow. I climbed up the stairs pretty quickly. I noticed that it was warm and I felt that the lining of my blazer was getting really hot. And I thought 'Am I sweating? Shit. Now they might think I am not fit'. (Jane)

The identity work strategy of 'compensating' that many participants described, can be considered both a way of conforming to the notion that their fat body is making them a 'failed' employee, and as a way to counter that notion by showing they excel in other areas in terms of outstanding work performance. For instance, Jane recounted how fear of stigmatization feeds her perfectionism:

Especially the idea that being fat means being lazy, that is just so dominant. I often feel like I'm not being taken seriously, and therefore I have to go the extra mile. So when I have to deliver a report, I'll check it an extra time. I really want to prove that I do things perfectly. [...] I notice that I compensate in case of possible prejudices, I try to make sure I do not comply with these prejudices. I have mixed feelings about that: Jane you are ridiculous, what are you doing? But it is so deeply internalized. (Jane)

In terms of her work performance, Jane feels anxious about not

being taken seriously because of her fatness and therefore works extra hard. Here, fatness seems to intersect with gender too: women often have to work hard to be taken seriously in their profession (e.g. [Brewis & Sinclair, 2000](#); [Tyler & Cohen 2011](#)). Later on in the interview, Jane mentioned the costs of managing stigma. She warned against the risk of burnout that she feels is particularly relevant for fat employees because managing stigma increases their work load.

Some participants also engaged in ‘explaining’ as an identity work strategy to resist being seen by people they work with as lazy or unhealthy and construct a positive workplace identity. For example Leslie, who worked as an elderly caregiver, said:

Whenever I enter a new location and meet new colleagues, I feel I have to explain why I am so heavy. Because they say or think things like: ‘are you doing something about it?’ and ‘are you capable to do this work?’, ‘will you keep up?’, combined with ugly glances and gossiping. So at a certain point I feel like I have to lay it out: I have lymphedema. It is a sickness and it limits me in how to be and behave, but I give a 1000%. I constantly feel that I have to explain myself to other people. (Leslie)

Here, Leslie used explaining to avoid being seen as lazy and to circumvent the assumption that she is to blame for her fatness. This narrative identity strategy highlights the focus on individual responsibility in obesity discourse, which can be seen as part of neoliberal healthism ([Tischner & Malson, 2012](#)).

In the context of work, the issue of responsibility for body size and health is often framed through discussions about sick leave. Ann, a social worker, mentioned in her interview that she is never sick although absenteeism amongst her thinner colleagues is high. She stated: ‘that prejudice, that fat people take sick leave more often, is just not true’. Amy, a beautician, also addressed this issue in her interview:

I am very explicit about my health. Like, I am healthy and I can do everything. I do not have a medical record and I am never sick. I say all that just to prevent people from thinking I often take sick leave. It is not that they are going to ask me about my health so I just say it, to prevent them from immediately assuming this about me. (Amy)

Amy’s narrative illustrates that she too employs ‘explaining’ as a narrative strategy to manage fat stigma in the context of her work and emphasize her abilities to perform professionally.

Chloe, a postdoctoral researcher who works in a university hospital described an embodied identity work strategy to avoid being seen as stupid:

Well, I wear my badge in such a way that it is very visible. Like, here is my title, so I am not one of those fat lazy persons [...] It shouldn’t be necessary, but by showing my titles people see immediately that I am not stupid. Sometimes people also think I am the cleaning lady. That is, until they see my badge. Then they suddenly react to me very differently. (Chloe)

Chloe managed her workplace identity here by visibly wearing a badge that shows her qualifications. This form of identity work, which involves emphasizing her cleverness indicates the intersection of fatness with other markers that signify low social status, such as class ([Levay, 2013](#); [van Amsterdam, 2013](#)). Chloe’s narrative constructs those who do manual labour as unintelligent, and she actively attempts to disentangle fatness from lower class positions. This can be considered a case of ‘defensive Othering’. [Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, and Schrock, \(2000\)](#) conceptualize defensive Othering as an identity work strategy that does not aim for resistance but entails reproduction of the power dynamics in organizations: ‘Defensive othering is identity work done by those seeking membership in a dominant group, or by those seeking to deflect the stigma they experience as members of a subordinate groups’ ([Schwalbe et al., 2000](#), p. 425). A well-known example of this is when female employees devalue or critique other women at work for being ‘too emotional’ or ‘too sexual’ ([Kelan, 2010](#); [Trethewey, 1999](#)).

Through defensive Othering a person accepts the stereotypical ideas about a marginalized group, but rejects the idea that those stereotypes apply to them. By visibly wearing her badge Chloe reject the idea that she is lazy and stupid: ‘I am not one of those lazy fat persons’.

Other participants indicated ‘using humour’ to compensate for their ‘failed’ body. Humour is used to take the sting out of possible unpleasant situations and claim one the few positive identities available: the funny fatty ([Hole, 2003](#)). Sophie explained how she feels she has to compensate for her fatness at her work by being funny:

I feel like I have to be a more enjoyable person than others, and funnier. Sometimes I mock myself, only to prevent others from doing that. It is better to make the jokes myself, because then it is less hurtful. People always say I’m funny. And yes, I believe I use humour to compensate for being fat. (Sophie)

Sophie’s narrative illustrates that humour can be used to manage fat stigma. Like Sophie, Mary often used humour related to her body size to make everyone at ease or prevent possibly painful stigmatizing situations. Lynn used humour differently, in the form of irony. She constantly makes jokes about her body size in her profession as an actress and comedian. She claimed to be using humour to resist dominant expectations of fat people:

I like to dance, even more so at conferences. In order to get people to move, I start moving myself. So I twist my hips, I show everything [of my body]. I tell people: ‘I understand you are jealous; you all want to be like me’. And I ask people the direct question: ‘do you think I am fat?’ Then people are shocked. That kind of self-mockery, to criticize those things out in the open (...) Also, I am quite limber. I can easily fall into a splits. I cannot get out of the splits in a charming way but can make one quite nicely. People don’t expect that. So I see that as a form of self-mockery, by falling into a split and seeing all those people think: huh, how is that possible? (Lynn)

Lynn thus engages in a particular form of identity work that involves her body: she shows and moves her fat body to make her audience laugh, because this goes against normative ideas about how fat people are to behave and what they are capable of. She also uses irony as a narrative identity work strategy to prompt her audience to think differently about fatness.

Most of our participants indicated using the strategy of compensating, which means putting in extra work that involved their body, or involved narratives such as explaining and humour. Yet others downplayed or denied the importance of weight related stigma. Some participants mentioned ‘self-acceptance’ as a way for both fat people and their colleagues to accept them as worthy instead of tainted, inferior employees. Kathleen, who is a project manager and plus-size blogger described this as follows:

I think most important is how you deal with it yourself. (...) It is very easy to claim that people have prejudices because you’re fat, and therefore you have to behave in a certain way. I think that is a fallacy. I do not like that at all. I am just a big or a fat woman, or however you want to call it. I don’t care. I just do my thing. Because I believe the way you want to show yourself and you want to be, that is the way you will appear to others. Personally, I have little experience with discrimination or overcompensation. I don’t do that because I feel like I do not have to compensate just because I am bigger than average. (Kathleen)

This narrative shows that Kathleen attributes her lack of experience with stigmatization at work to her own attitude. Her words can be considered identity work: she positions herself as a professional who can ‘do her thing’ by framing her size as irrelevant. This could be considered defensive Othering: Kathleen distinguishes herself from other fat women who she seems to position as self-victimizing. While this feels empowering for Kathleen, this strategy simultaneously obscures the systemic nature of fat stigma and reproduces the neoliberal

notion of self-responsibility that is dominant in healthism and obesity discourse (LeBesco, 2011). According to Kathleen, fat people can and should take responsibility for their own happiness and success.

In sum, the identity work strategies our participants took up to manage expectations concerning their professional performance involved ‘compensating’ through being extra smart or extra funny, ‘explaining’ as a strategy to distance themselves from stereotypical ideas about fat people, both in narrative as embodied ways, ‘using irony’ to resist dominant expectations about fat people, but also downplaying stigma in the form of ‘self-acceptance’ and ‘defensive Othering’. These identity work strategies again indicate that participants put in much extra time and effort to manage a stigmatized identity. This involved both compliance to dominant ideas about fatness and rebellion against these norms.

## 7. Discussion

We started out with the premise that instead of focusing on fatness as a medical or individual problem, body size can fruitfully be theorized as an aspect of diversity that is produced in and through healthism and obesity discourse. Looking at body size from a diversity perspective thus allows us to analyse systemic power dynamics regarding body size and how these differ from and intersect with power dynamics related to historically marginalized identities, such as those related to gender, age, and social class. One important difference is that fatness is constructed through healthism and obesity discourse as achieved deviance, a personal responsibility and thus an individual problem (McMichael, 2013; van Amsterdam, 2013). This individualizes body size issues and makes it hard to analyse them as social and political matters. A diversity perspective makes visible the often obscured regulatory and discriminatory effects of fat stigma on individual employees and thus renders issues regarding size as interesting organizational phenomena. Neoliberal ideals underpin these effects, since the focus on medical ‘knowledge’ and personal responsibility in healthism and obesity discourses reduces these effects to a ‘problem’ for each individual fat employee (LeBesco, 2011; Levay, 2013; Maravelias, 2009). Fat stigma likewise feeds into the institutionalization of health and size norms in organizations. This marginalizing effect is compounded by hegemonic gendered ideals, that render women’s bodies – both slender and fat – extra visible and object of scrutiny in organizational contexts (e.g. Brewis & Sinclair, 2000; Jyrkinen, 2014; Tyler & Cohen, 2010).

We showed how the fat employees we spoke to managed fat stigma at work by engaging in several identity work strategies in order to project a professional appearance and highlight their work achievements. Many strategies reproduced dominant notions about fatness such as ‘smartening up’, ‘distracting’, ‘hiding’, ‘humour’, ‘compensating’, ‘explaining’ and ‘defensive Othering’. Yet at times some participants also used strategies that challenged dominant discourses about size and can thus be seen as resistance, such as ‘flaunting’, ‘irony’ and ‘self-acceptance’. Our study shows many similarities in identity work that fat female employees engage in across professions and job hierarchies, which indicates the systemic nature of body size issues in the context of work. Our first contribution to critical management literature is, thus, that we highlight the power dynamics related to body size issues in the context of paid work.

Our second contribution lies in taking a fatness lens to study identity work strategies. Our analysis of the micro-actions of our participants revealed that the identity work they took up was not just narrative. Whereas existing accounts of identity work strategies are mostly oriented around narratives and other rhetorical strategies (e.g. Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Brown & Coupland, 2015; McInnes & Corlett, 2012) our data show that the bodies of our participants were crucially involved in the identity work they engaged in. How they move (quickly or awkwardly), how they dress (in black or in colorful cupcake prints), how they try to fit themselves into certain spaces (chairs, clothes, doorways) all seem critical to the identity work they do.

Although there is a burgeoning interest in issues of bodies and embodiment in organizations (Gärtner, 2013; Gherardi, Meriläinen, Strati, & Valtonen, 2013), this is not fully developed in relation to identity work theorization. Feminist scholars have provided important insights into the embodiment of identity work related to gender (e.g. Kelan, 2010; Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Meriläinen et al., 2015; Trethewey, 1999; Waring & Waring, 2009). Yet the ways identity work strategies are embodied in terms of size offer new opportunities to develop the concept of identity work.

Therefore, we argue that *embodied identity work* needs to be further theorized. Although this concept is not new (see for example Mavin & Grandy, 2016) there seems to be a lack of theorization around it. We suggest that the notion of ‘body work’ – a practice that entails the management and modification of one’s body to comply with social norms – can be helpful (cf. Gimlin, 2007). Following this conceptualization, embodied identity work could be defined as the activities people engage in *with and through their bodies* to produce a coherent sense of self (cf. Alvesson, 2010; Brown, 2015; Watson, 2008). Our diversity framework teaches us that structural and institutional influences are key in how this project of self is taken up (Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013; Zanon et al., 2010). Identity work is intertwined with power, and systemic power structures should therefore form the backdrop against which identity work is read (Watson, 2008). This also means that an intersectional perspective is crucial to understand how embodied identity work is shaped by the specific social location from which it is performed.

For stigmatized people, embodied identity work means that they use their bodies to ward off negative associations attached to their person (cf. Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). Moreover, attention to micro-political practices and everyday tactics can provide rich insights into how these activities take shape for different actors in organizations. New materialist frameworks (e.g. Ahmed, 2014; Thompson & Willmott, 2016) could be employed in future research to further explore the embodied and other material aspects of doing identity work, as well as the affective dimensions such as shame, anxiety, fear and anger that are clearly present in our data yet go beyond the scope of the current paper.

Lastly, our analysis illustrates the vast amount of extra work that fat employees feel compelled to engage in to manage their spoiled identity at their place of work. Brown argues that there is often too little acknowledgement in research for the costs of identity work: ‘many explorations of identity work have tended to represent it as necessary, utilitarian, desirable or pleasurable, without considering its potential dis-benefits’ (2015, p. 32). Our third contribution lies in making these costs visible. Even though in general identities are not fixed and therefore require continuous effort (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008), the efforts our participants engaged in seem excessive. The costs of doing identity work to manage fat stigma are clearly indicated by our participants: they have to put in extra effort to manage negative stereotypes associated with fatness such as being stupid, unproductive, unhealthy and looking unprofessional by constantly regulating their dress, demeanor, posture, and verbal and written communication. This resonates with the concept of ‘performative labour’ described by Tyler (2018), p. 10) as ‘the expenditure of time, effort and skills required in order to bring particular subjectivities into being through the work involved in conforming to normative regimes of intelligibility and recognition’. Examples include the effort, concentration and emotional strain involved in repressing transgender identity and conforming to gender norms in organizations. These seem to parallel the lived experiences of our participants.

The narratives of our participants show both the emotional stress and the increase in workload that managing fat stigma entails. This performative labour became visible through our analysis of the micro-actions our participants talked about using in their everyday working lives to circumvent being seen as the stereotypical fat employee who slacks off, can’t perform up to standard, looks unprofessional and is a financial burden to the organization because of their assumed high rate



of sick leave. Although not mentioned explicitly by our participants, we posit that the pressure on fat employees to manage their deviant bodies is exacerbated in recent years by hierarchical structures: both the general obsession with health and fitness in society and specific initiatives related to health promotion within organizations have an effect on how healthy embodiment is constructed and evaluated within the workplace and to some extent also institutionalizes fat stigma (Holmqvist & Maravelias, 2010; Johansson et al., 2017; Maravelias, 2009). This could thus also have formal consequences as ‘health’ is taken up in for example job evaluations, salary negotiation and promotion procedures.

While the workforce in western countries is purported to get fatter (Harwood & Wright, 2012) and health ideals are becoming ever more strictly applied in workplaces through healthism, the demands on individuals to manage their embodied identity increases, placing more stress on their workload. Awareness around these issues should benefit policy makers, HR professionals, managers and employees alike and help further initiatives around equality and diminishing stress, especially for those who experience fat stigma both in their daily lives and their work. This research has made a step towards creating awareness around these issues by focusing on the perspectives and experiences of fat employees, whose voices are rarely heard in scholarly literature.

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