

Weighted Identities: Deviant Fat Bodies and the Power of Self-Representation

by

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the perspectives and experiences of female bloggers and Instagrammers with a strong presence in both social media and the plus-size fashion industry. As producers of social media content, these women participate in a kind of social activism, critiquing mainstream media diets for encouraging fat stigma and deepening the negative effects of stereotyping larger bodies. The primary goal of the research was to explore the role (both the creative production of, as well as the consumption of) media diets characterized by body positive messaging in a cultural climate where sizeism, fat-shaming, and fat stigma are pervasive. Body positive media diets have transgressive potential, in that they could play a role in helping to combat fat stigma, a stigma perpetuated by endemic negative representations and stereotypes about what it means to be fat, plus-sized, or obese (these descriptors might be used synonymously, by some, but may carry subtle distinctions in terms of their connotations). The study helps to develop our understanding of the complex interconnections between production and consumption, self-expression and the politics of self-representation, the cooptation of these self-representations by profit-oriented media interest, and how commodification shapes the transgressive potential of these representations. Following a semi-structured interview format, I elicited personal narratives from eight women about the importance they attached to transgressive media diets (as consumers) as well as the political significance of their role as content creators. The study found that a key claim made by these activists is that they were drawn to participating in content creation because they saw a lack of realistic, accurate, and fair representations of larger women and decided that, in order to fill this gap, they owed it to themselves and to other women

like them, to develop those representations for themselves. Many of the participants brought up examples of fat discrimination yet many defined themselves as "confident" or "badass", thus finding ways to empower themselves despite the pressure of societal norms. Some of this empowerment came from finding a community online. As a result of these findings, the study went further and examined what community building meant within the porous landscape of social media platforms and the relationship between identity building and community building as social processes, particularly as it relates to the development of community within the context of the changing landscape of the fashion industry. By both demanding and being examples of diversity, these women acted as agents of social change within an industry where they would typically not have the opportunity to push the boundaries.

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Mainstream media diets, which, for this paper, is defined as the media content we are most frequently exposed to, and which also hold the most salience within our culture, reflect and uphold the power structures and views of society. Content creators of social (and other forms of) media define what is acceptable and unacceptable, shaping the cultural landscape that has the power to generate, perpetuate, resist, challenge, and transform the stereotypes and stigmas which influence our lived experience(s) of the world around us.

I find it useful to define two separate types of media diets. This differentiation of media diets allows for a conceptualization of the power of societal ideals and the idea of a transgressive media diet. The first, a mainstream or popular media diet is the consumption of the most dominant media, or the majority of what people see. It is the most prevalent source of content on what it means to be fat. Mainstream media content (regardless of the medium in which it is transmitted) reflects and perpetuates dominant ideologies (as does all content disseminated through popular culture), which in turn justify the status quo. On the other hand, transgressive media diets offer information that would be considered unconventional in popular media diets. The use of certain transgressive media diets, such as those that are body positive, offer alternative representation of information seen in mainstream media diets.

Transgressive media diets offer substitute options that could be used to benefit larger bodies and break down existing fat stigmas. One way in which content creators accomplish this via social media is by participating in the representation process, specifically using social media as a venue to show people's stigmatized bodies in a way

of their own choosing. This affects the ways in which their bodies are represented in the public space created by social media, shaping the ways in which the private body is displayed to the public. Deviant bodies, such as fat bodies, are those that do not conform to societal expectations of the ideal body. As a result, people with these bodies are often represented in ways that reinforce negative stereotypes, fetishizing or contributing to the idea that fat is shameful. Fetishizing stereotypes and objectifies people without their consent, and often in belittling ways; and fat stigma and fat shaming, more generally, increase risks for a wide range of psycho-social consequences, including low self-esteem and self-worth, poor body image, stress and anxiety (Annis, Cash, Hrabosky, 2004). My research suggests that while mainstream media diets perpetuate fat stigma, the participatory nature of social media enables those who are affected by fat stigma to combat fat-shaming.

A media diet is largely governed by the choices made by individuals about who they decide to follow on sites such as Instagram and Twitter, what posts they read on Facebook, and even what podcasts they decide to listen to during commutes. A transgressive media diet is created by actively curating one's media intake of specific content. The content could include a focus on a particular idea, or anything grounded in a specific ideology. It could include active participation in a virtual or face-to-face community, or circle of friends or cybersociates (Anderson, 2014). My research interrogates how body positive media diets are created, how they are consumed, and ultimately, whether and how they contribute to the lived experience of inhabiting a fat body in a fat-shaming culture. It is thought that body positive representations inspire a sense of empowerment, and thus it follows that social media, which provides a venue for

self-representation, can open up the possibilities for such body positive representations to exist. In contemporary American culture, bodies that do not fit a certain ideal are shunned and made to feel Othered. There is a lack of exposure to transgressive media that promotes positive body self-representation. Without this transgressive media, exposure to negative messages about body image could lead to low self-esteem and other possible emotional and psychological issues. How can self-representation through social media be used to destigmatize fat bodies? Do these more transgressive, body positive media diets help to eradicate widespread fat stigma and fat-shaming? Do they effectively combat false stereotypes? How can body positive media diets created by plus-size models and fashion bloggers improve body image? How do plus-size models and fashion bloggers position themselves as authorities in an industry that currently promotes the thin ideal body?

Social media creates an experience that is all at once connecting and disconnecting. While some studies have shown that social media can distance users from in-person interactions with others (Subramanian, 2017, p. 74), others demonstrate that some online platforms reconnect users with friends, as well as create new connections with people, communities, and ideas, previously unknown or accessible to them (Gray, 2009). Social media can provide the time and space to discover and develop connections, and this facilitates the development of new communities, in spite of a lack of firm consensus and consistency about its values and message. For example, some participants in the study stated that as the body positivity community¹ grew larger, its meaning

¹ I want to acknowledge that communities are imagined ideals, a concept defined by Benedict Anderson. However, the participants used the term “community,” thus I use

changed and was understood inversely by different users. This is likely a result of the participatory nature of the medium as a whole. The trajectory of a media diet appears multi-linear, meaning that its direction and scope represents an accumulation of what a person takes in through their involvement in the various avenues enabled by social media, as well as their exposure to a range of content providers.

Methodologies

I approach my findings and analysis from a poststructuralist, feminist standpoint epistemology. Feminist standpoint epistemology fits well into the work as it acknowledges that truth is located in experience. My goal is to honor “an individual’s material and lived experience,” which in turn, “structures his or her understanding of his or her environment” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 6). My incorporation of poststructuralism necessitates a critique of patriarchal power, recognizing that “the social construction of realities and the risk of maintenance and perpetuation of constructions arises from power interests” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 43). A poststructuralist perspective also emphasizes the insider knowledge of the power dynamics at play around those who are oppressed. These insider individuals, who frequently encounter and navigate those larger structures, are, by nature of their lived experiences, more able to identify, articulate, and openly challenge the system that places them at a disadvantage in the first place.

My epistemological framework led me to incorporate three distinct feminist methodologies throughout my research, including purposive sampling, reflexivity, and the use of critical theory to guide my research questions, and any subsequent analyses.

“community” as that was the vernacular used in the interviews. Other scholars such as Anderson and Miranda Joseph have problematized the use of the term “community”.

First, an intersectional framework acknowledges the multiple and varied experiences of those who inhabit fat bodies. For me, the acknowledgement of multiple social identities in larger systems of power, and the desire to capture at least a part of that intersectionality in my own research, required that I utilize purposive sampling as a way to capture a broader constituency of participants; and, in my later analysis, to pay close attention to how the politics of difference influenced the lived experiences of my participants. And, while the sample size of the study prevents any generalizable assumptions about body positive models and bloggers, the trade-off is that my sampling framework acknowledges and attempts to incorporate the perspectives and experiences of a diverse set of participants in terms of gender, age, race, and class.

Second, reflexivity guides my presentation of the research, as I have a personal desire to undertake the work and have a personal stake in the analysis as it effects my own life. My privilege and position and my part in the community will be recognized as an academic researcher who is active in the body positive community, yet simultaneously an outsider. I come into the project with a personal desire to see representation of my own body in media, and through my own use of body positive self-representation.

My position as a researcher required that I acknowledge the relations of power between the researcher and the participants. As Harris and Huntington stated, “Research is a potential instrument of emancipation or domination” (2001, p. 132). In an imagined hierarchy created by the nature of the interview, the researcher can hold a higher position than that of the participants. The opposite is also possible, simultaneously, in that participant hold the power, expertise, and knowledge - and this essentially positions them as gate-keepers of the data needed to inform the study.

Diane Wolf (2016) wrote, “Although feminist researchers may attempt to equalize relationships while in the field through empathetic and friendly methods, these methods do not transform the researchers’ positionality or locationality” (p. 106). I realized that the researcher can always leave and is merely a visitor in the participant’s environment. This reinforced my concern with the power dynamic between the researcher and the researched during interviews. I include strong objectivity to show my “researched work... through [my] own positionalities, values, and predispositions” (Hesse-Biber and Brooks, 2007, p. 222).

The final methodology incorporated in the study is the use of critical theory to guide my research questions as well as my data analysis. Critical theory was used to critique the power structures that define “deviant bodies.” This is essential as critical theory is “particularly concerned with exploring issues of power and justice and ways in which matters of class, gender, race, sexuality, ableism, and nation intersect with ideologies and discourses” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 54).

Body positive plus-size models and fashion bloggers were purposively selected in that I wanted to understand the placement of body positive plus-size models, as both media consumers and creators, deviant bodies in a thin ideal industry, and body activists who put their bodies on public display for critique. They are private people who have chosen a career that makes their body public. While plus-size models and plus-size fashion bloggers have larger bodies, they still operate in an industry that is defined by the thin ideal. Models also often have a social media presence in order to promote their work and bloggers create their content for social media consumption. Body positive plus-size

models and fashion bloggers are not only media consumers but also content creators that operate through a transgressive media diet.

Data Collection and Recruitment. The body positivity community from which I elicited participants is one that has been established and operates primarily online (there are face-to-face local communities of body positive activists, allies, and supporters, but because my intention was to understand the role of social media and media diets on the lived experiences of my participants, I recruited participants through that same medium). Members of the community can be found in a diverse set of socio-cultural domains and physical localities around the globe. They can also vary extensively in terms of their level of engagement with social media. My sample is, by design, only a small piece of the larger social landscape in which body positive activists participate. Every research project has its trade-offs; in this case, I recruited individuals with whom I did not have face-to-face contact, and this undoubtedly influenced the number of participants who could be interviewed during the data collection phase of the research. Given the limitations of the sample size, the sample is not as diverse as I would have liked. As a result, the role of certain dimensions of social difference (race, gender, culture, class) may not be represented in the research study as a whole.

My interviewees were all women. Five identified as Black or Black Caribbean, two identified as White and one identified as Other. At the time of the interviews, the participants' ages ranged from 24 to 38 years old. Participants were from the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand. To find participants I used Instagram, Twitter and personal contacts as recruiting tools. To find participants on Instagram and Twitter I specifically looked for models and fashion bloggers who stated that they were

body positive and plus-size. I also tried to pick participants who had been a part of the plus-size and body positive communities for an extended period of time. I initially faced some challenges in recruiting individuals by Instagram message or e-mail only. I then switched to directly tweeting at possible participants and, in response, increased my overall participant reply rate.

Interview Protocol. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured and lasted from 45 minutes to about two hours. The questions covered body image, experience in the fashion industry, the effect of gender on body image, and their perception of their body and identity (Appendix A). Once the interviews were transcribed, the transcriptions were coded through QSR International's NVivo 11 qualitative data analysis Software. The transcriptions came out to about 100 pages of data which was then put into NVivo for analysis.

Coding and Analysis. In order to develop a systematic approach to data analysis, I followed several explicit coding schemas (see Saldaña, 2016). First, I coded demographic attributes, collected while setting up recording equipment or while initially chatting (Warren and Karner, 2010, p. 133). After transcription of the interview, I utilized an initial open (or *in vivo*) coding method to identify insider language, motifs, symbolic markers of participants' speech patterns, and so on, that might indicate emergent themes that had not yet been considered for analysis (Saldaña, 2016, p. 105 & 115). The initial coding process allowed me to remain open and flexible enough to explore whatever theoretical possibilities could be recognized in the data, apart from what I had intended to look for based on my review of the literature and a priori research questions (Charmaz, 2006, p. 45). This positioned my participants' as informal collaborators of the lived

experiences I hoped to capture with my preliminary analytic framework (Charmaz, 2006, p. 53). I then incorporated an emotion coding schema Saldaña (2016, p. 125), which enabled me to follow how my participants experienced various events and encounters (discursive or otherwise). This schematic choice was informed by my goal to explore the diverse lived experiences of my participants, and more specifically, the somatic, or affective, factors that helped shape those experiences. Thus, emotion coding enabled me to develop a working understanding of my participants' (potentially, but not necessarily, shared) "lived experiences" as persons involved as both producers and consumers of social media content.

Face Validity and Generalizability. My study is not intended to represent anywhere close to a comprehensive portrait of fat embodiment - or the lived experiences of people who inhabit fat bodies. Logistical restrictions (largely, time and money) presented the largest obstacle in terms of recruiting a diverse pool of plus-size models; as such, I make no claims as to the generalizability of my sample. However, the face validity of the data was enhanced by the insider knowledge that I have access to given my own position (a fat, white female who participates regularly as a consumer of a body positive media diet), and I was able to utilize my own lived experience as a resource.

Literature Review

A review of the research is vital to understanding the place of fat bodies in society; it also serves as a way to further position my own contributions to the topic. My specific research looks at the intersection of public and private bodies that are fat in a thin ideal industry and who create and consume media. My research combines different strands of previous studies to look at how this particular phenomena functions. It

highlights a unique experience that puts fat bodies into a particularly interesting relationship with power. The power structure in these experiences is constantly fluctuating, which in turn creates fascinating research.

Until the past decade, there were few studies of the interrelationships between bodies, fat, and media, and the social implications of defining fat as deviance. What this burgeoning literature shows, however, is that people with certain bodies are subjected to more intense scrutiny than others.

Media Diets

My study focuses on the media diets produced and consumed by people who describe themselves as "fat" by social standards. Ironically, the term "media diet" comes from the concept of media consumption and suggests a restricting or "slimming" of consumption for a particular purpose (in this case, not to lose weight, but to ameliorate the unwanted psycho-social weight of fat stigma. In my case, I use the concept as a way to describe how individuals tailor their media consumption patterns in order to limit exposure to fat-shaming media influences, while simultaneously increasing exposure to more transgressive body positive media.

Media consumption increases as the reach of the internet and social networks expand. Media is the compilation of information taken in by an individual or group. This mass distribution of information was spurred by Johannes Gutenberg's printing press. Media then entered the electronic stage when Harrison Dyar invented the first telegraph. Then came radio, television, computers, the internet and social media. Media consumption has been shown in studies to have negative effects on self-esteem in men and women, as the concept of an "ideal body" spread by media can be damaging to those

who feel they do not fit into this ideal². A study in 2010 of 7,000 online consumers aged 13 to 74 showed that people spend one-half of their waking day interacting with media, which most certainly may have increased since the time of the study (Ipsos, 2010).

WIRED, a magazine that focuses on technology, created the “media diet pyramid” in 2009, with “suggested servings for optimal media health.” At the time of the article, the average daily intake of media by the average American was 9 hours. This included podcasts, television, online videos, news outlets, blogs, microblogging (Twitter and Facebook), and gaming (Leckhart, 2009).

To have an idea of the current mindset towards beauty, Dove commissioned a Global Beauty Report in 2016 that looked at “how women and girls are responding to the changing pressures around beauty and appearance, and to discover some of the new and hidden truths around the issue” (Nathan-Tilloy, Shann, and Skea, 2016, p. 4). From the collected data, Dove found the following:

Six in 10 women believe social media pressures people to look a certain way.

Nine in 10 women and seven in 10 girls stop themselves from eating or otherwise put their health at risk (e.g. avoid going to the doctor). Seven in 10 women and

² Beyond the scope of this project there are ongoing debates on the usefulness of social media. Here are some sources related to this project discussing the contributions and limitations of social media:

Aubrey, J. S. (2010). “Looking good versus feeling good: An investigation of media frames of health advice and their effects on women’s body-related self-perceptions.” *Sex Roles*, 63(1–2), 50–63. doi:10.1007/s11199-010-9768-4

Dijck, J. van, & Poell, T. (2015). Social Media and the Transformation of Public Space. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 2056305115622482. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115622482>

Duffy, B. E. (2017). *(Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work*.

girls believe media and advertising set an unrealistic standard of beauty most women can never achieve. Seven in 10 women and girls wish the media did a better job of portraying women of diverse physical attractiveness.

The study also found that “the effects of low body confidence on women and girls are significant, damaging and truly global in their impact. Across all countries, cultures, ages and stages of a woman’s life she is feeling under intense pressure from many different sources” (Nathan-Tilloy, Shann, and Skea, 2016, p. 4).

Deviant Bodies

Deviant bodies are deviant in the fact that they are rejected by societal norms. Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* idea of abjection is similar to the discourses of fat shaming. Kristeva’s chapter focused on the concept of abjection. The abject body, or the deviant, is that which is Othered by the I. As Kristeva stated, “The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I” (1982, p. 1). Abjection goes beyond just an empty feeling. “Abjection is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). This abject identity has a feeling of lack, in that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 5). The abject identity can potentially become the dominant identity - however, this process can, and is, challenged, resisted, rejected, and reformed through the deployment of a range of strategies (in this case, through the intentional filtering of social media that presents fat as shameful, ugly, and unhealthy, and replacing it with an abundance of messages that promote body (and fat) acceptance.

Sobal and Maurer also discussed the way society systematically rejects fat bodies. In their article the core theoretical perspective is symbolic interactionism, which looks at the production of meanings and the creation and social management of selves and examines how people construct definitions and preferences in the course of human interaction (Sobal and Maurer, 2013, p. vii). These meanings are made possible through a common language. The "self" is an emergent social product created through interacting with others (Sobal and Maurer, 2013, p. ix). For those people with bodies that are stigmatized, they are forced to create coping strategies to minimize the negative characteristics that go with an obese identity.

These stigmas are opposite of the master status, or the “statuses of society that override all other statuses and have a certain priority” (Sobal and Maurer, 2013, p. 13). To enforce the master status, society uses discursive constraint to control a person or a group by establishing and perpetuating negative stereotypes that affect their behavior and how they think of themselves (Sobal and Maurer, 2013, p. 31). Sobal and Maurer stated, "Possessing a stigmatized identity requires social management to lessen the negative responses of others" (2013, p. ix). Weight-based stigmas vary by “cultural environments, social organizations, experts, and individuals" (Sobal and Maurer, 2013, p. 4). With these stigmas, body image and body satisfaction come to exist on a continuum. People then go through the placing process using self-evidentiality to discover their status. Placing is a cognitive process where an individual comes to identify an appropriate status from among those available (Sobal and Maurer, 2013, p. 16). Self-evidentiality is the degree to which a person who possesses certain objective status characteristics is aware that a particular status label applies to them (Sobal and Maurer, 2013, p. 15). Those who defy

these status labels use narrative resistance as a way to create and manage their own identities and to defy the power of discursive constraint, such as participating in transgressive media diets (Sobal and Maurer, 2013, p. 31).

Health

Research done by Woolley (2017), Murray (2007), and Jutel and Buetow (2003) focused on the ideals of health. Woolley looked at the different forms of self-representation of bodies online that are connected to consumer culture. As cited by Dworking & Wachs (2009, p. 14), Woolley notes that a healthy body is a sign of "success, a strong work ethic, and self-control.". Further, Woolley (2017, p. 206) suggests that the available language of the body is constricted by the idolization of slender "healthy" bodies. She looked at expanding this language by introducing "disruptive bodies" These disruptive bodies included "thinspiration" bodies and fat bodies as examples. Woolley explained the decision of choosing these examples as they refer to those "aberrant consumers who ascribe to a different value system in relation to the body and consumer practices" (Woolley, 2017, p. 206).

One of the issues of health ideals is focusing on separating body ideals from medicine. According to Murray, the "clinical gaze" of the doctor can never be neutral". Murray focused on how to "problematize the accepted objectivity of the 'clinical gaze'" (Murray, 2007, p. 362). Murray stated, "We respond to others on a visceral level: we know their bodies implicitly, and what they mean to us. We see a 'fat' woman, and we know her as lazy, greedy, of inferior intelligence" (2007, p. 363). These assumptions are internalized by society and affect the way we relate to one another and understand others. Our identities are managed through perception. "We believe we can come to know the

essence of a person through the way they appear to us" (Murray, 2007, p. 363). Murray goes on to suggest that "normative thinness constitutes the 'universally feminine'" (Murray, 2007, p. 364). Thus, women are forced into a specific ideal not as strictly held as men³. The authority of medicine then supports the "marginalizing [of] bodies of difference, and reaffirming the power of the normative body, which is still fundamentally an immaterial body" (Murray, 2007, p. 365).

Jutel and Buetow also focus on the separation of body and medicine. Our culture is image-driven, thus the visual has "assumed a disproportionately prominent position" (Jutel and Buetow, 2003, p. 421). Many stigmas come from the idea that the outer body and appearance reflects a person's character or morality. Hence, a fat person is perceived as lazy, unhealthy, etc. Jutel and Buetow argued that "how people look, or indeed how people believe people *should* look, has an important influence on a number of contemporary health practices by patients and their health care providers" (2003, p. 422). They discussed Carole Spitzack's concept called the "aesthetic of health". The "aesthetic of health" is when the ideals of health are replaced by beauty ideals. This includes body shape, skin color and complexion, body build and an absence of 'defective' features. According to Jutel and Buetow, the fear of being stigmatized inherently enforces the societal norm. "Seeing, being seen, or simply being at risk of being seen creates an internalized form of constraint that makes people adhere to social rules" (Jutel and Buetow, 2003, p. 426).

³ According to Lee F. Monaghan, while male bodies are not usually seen as objects like female bodies often are, they are seeing a rise in subjection to body norms. This elevated level of exposure to beauty ideals has increased for men recently, although they have historically not been as subjected to ideals as women (2005, p. 83).

The Physical Body

Adding to the debate, Iris Marion Young discusses a study completed by Erwin Straus in 1966 on the difference of how boys and girls throw a ball. In the original study, Strauss looked at how "the manifestation of a biological, not an acquired, difference" (Strauss, 1966, p. 157). This difference comes from girls' 'feminine attitude'. "The difference for him is biologically based, but he denies that it is specifically anatomical. Girls throw in a way different from boys because girls are 'feminine'" (Young, 1980, p. 138). Young's goal for her paper was to bridge a gap that occurs in existential phenomenology and feminist theory. According to Young, bridging this gap "traces in a provisional way some of the basic modalities of feminine body comportment, manner of moving, and relation in space. It brings intelligibility and significance to certain observable and rather ordinary ways in which women in our society typically comport themselves and move differently from the ways that men do" (1980, p. 139). This focus on movement illustrated a landmark in terms of the in-depth discussion of gendered bodies.

Shaw discussed female bodies and the effect of intersectional stigmas. Shaw argued that, "Western conventions of what constitute socially acceptable beauty devalue both race and gender of subaltern populations simultaneously" (2005, p. 143). According to Shaw, Western beauty focuses on "European features such as high cheekbones, straight noses, relatively thin lips and, of course, slender bodies" (2005, p. 144). Shaw also discussed the position of the Mammy, and how the Mammy plays an important role in the white definition of black femininity. The Mammy was seen as the antithesis of white women, by comparing "her large body, dark skin and non-angular facial features to

the ideal image of Western beauty causes Mammy to post no sexual threat to white women” (Shaw, 2005, p. 146).

In *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries*, Shildrick went into the idea of the body being a fabrication and “inconsistent artifact which merely mimics material fixity” (1997, p. 13). Shildrick looked at how females have a different relationship with their body than men. The differences lie in the distinction between mind/body, self/other, and inner/outer, which for women is “leaky”. Women’s bodies “leak” when the “outflow of the body... breaches the boundaries of the proper” (Shildrick, 1997, p. 17). Shildrick furthered this by stating that society sets the male body as superior to the female body. The male mind controls and constricts the female body. Shildrick stated, “The selfhood of women, whether it is characterized as deficient or excessive, is always inferior, incapable of full independent agency” (1997, p. 22). Women are connected to nurturing and nature. However, this correlation then becomes associated with women being wild and chaotic, thus needing to be controlled. According to Shildrick, Foucault calls this bio-power, or the power over life, which “operates by reaching into the private pleasures of individuals to liberate new public practices which constitute in effect systems of control. In other words, the local relations of sexuality emerge as the basis of new strategies which shape the social body by acting on the bodies of individuals” (1997, p. 46). This use of bio-power leads to an “unremitting and impossible struggle to realize perfection” (Shildrick, 1997, p. 55). The woman becomes the constant object of the male gaze and becomes the excluded Other.

Women’s Bodies

In *Unbearable Weight*, Bordo looked at how women's bodies are a place of battle for power, privilege and dominance. Bordo discussed the effects of eating disorders on the female body and how the female body is regulated so strictly by society. “Anorexia represents one extreme on a continuum on which all women today find themselves, insofar as they are vulnerable, to one degree or another, to the requirements of the cultural construction of femininity” (Bordo, 2013, p. 47). Bordo noted that eating disorders occur most often in females and are “culturally and historically situated in advanced industrial societies within roughly the past hundred years” (2013, p. 50). There have been dramatic changes in the past century on what defines an ideal body. “As our bodily ideals have become firmer and more contained... any softness or bulge comes to be seen as unsightly – as disgusting, disorderly “fat,” which must be “eliminated” or “busted” (Bordo, 2013, p. 57). Diets have become the greatest accomplishments of women’s lives, which distorts their idea of reality (Bordo, 2013, p. 60). No body is neutral. No body is outside of the pressures of society to fit the ideal (Bordo, 2013, p. 69).

Bartky also discussed the restrictions placed on women’s physical bodies. Bartky stated, “Massiveness, power, or abundance in a woman’s body is met with distaste” (1997, p. 132) Hunger must always be monitored, as food is needed to live but also forbidden in fear of fatness. Women are meant to take up less space. While a man taking up space exudes power, a woman is not meant to have this space. “Under the current ‘tyranny of slenderness’ women are forbidden to become large or massive; they must take up as little space as possible. The very contours a woman’s body takes on as she matures – the fuller breasts and rounded hips – have become distasteful” (Bartky, 1997, p. 141). From physical body to body language, women must even police and train their

skin to be “soft, supple, hairless, and smooth” (Bartky, 1997, p. 136). Then, makeup is used to distract and disguise the body further (Bartky, 1997, p. 139). Family, friends, self and society discipline all of these aspects of a woman’s body.

In *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, Joan Jacob Brumberg looked at the historic shift from the Victorian focus on a woman’s character to today’s obsession with the female appearance. Brumberg stated, “When girls in the nineteenth century thought about ways to improve themselves, they almost always focused on their internal character and how it was reflected in outward behavior” (1997, p. xxi). This switched in modern times to girls being concerned with their body shape and their appearance, as this is believed to be the main expression of identity. Now, the body has come to be seen as something that needs to be controlled and maintained. This has led to adverse health effects. According to Brumberg, “The increase in anorexia nervosa and bulimia in the past thirty years suggests that in some cases the body becomes an obsession” (1997, p. xxiv). There is now clear evidence of society believing there is a link between appearance and morality. “The body is a consuming project for contemporary girls because it provides an important means of self-definition, a way to visibly announce who you are to the world” (Brumberg, 1997, p. 97). One’s image becomes one’s identity. Regarding fat, Brumberg discussed the idea of “fat talk,” with common phrases such as “thunder thighs” being used to negatively describe a person’s body (1997, p. 126). Brumberg also mentioned the use of violent phrases such as the “war on cellulite,” with cellulite being compared to orange peels and cottage cheese (1997, p. 127).

Fat Studies

Cooper's article presented a preview of fat studies and how it came to fruition. Cooper stated that the intent of the article is "to map the field of an emerging body of work that is critical of that dominant discourse" (2010, p. 1020). A recent reframing had inspired a new discourse around fat. "Fat studies enable the reframing of the problem of obesity, where it is not the fat body that is at issue, but the cultural production of fatphobia" (Cooper, 2010, p. 1020). Industrial and societal interests refuted this reframing. Cooper acknowledged that she omitted the view of fat studies from a health sciences point of view with an in-depth look into *Health at Every Size* (2010, p. 1021). Scholarly interest in fat studies have escalated recently, especially in the past five years. Cooper stated, "Emergence of an assumed global obesity epidemic has necessitated such discourse" (2010, p. 1022). There was a desire to regulate the work around fat studies, as much of the information that was coming out was completed by biased groups with personal interests reflected in their research.

In a different perspective on fat studies, Guthman discussed her experience of teaching the topic of obesity to undergraduate students. Guthman found that "student responses demonstrate how obesity talk reflects and reinforces neoliberal rationalities of self-governance" (Guthman, 2009, p. 1110). The article argued that, "the intensity of reaction stems from the productive power of the discourse of obesity and considerable investment students have in their bodies as neoliberal subjects" (Guthman, 2009, p. 1110). Guthman stated she was surprised by the angered reactions students had to the course. "It expressed something about the power of contemporary discourses on obesity as they relate to neoliberal rationalities of self-governance" (Guthman, 2009, p. 1111). Discourse defines bodily practices which then defines the how the body should be.

Guthman included excerpts from students' class reflections, one of which asked the question, "But why do fat people make people mad?" (2009, p. 1121). The goal of critical pedagogy, and what ended up as the result of Guthman's experience, is to "make sense of the experiences of the oppressed," as defined by hooks (1994) (Guthman, 2009, p. 1129).

In *Framing Fat*, the concept of fatness was broken into four frames using frame analysis. The four frames included the health frame, the choice/responsibility frame, the social justice frame, and the aesthetic frame. Fat is defined by society. According to the health frame, which is a dominant frame, the fat body is unhealthy. The terms "crisis" and "epidemic" are frequently used, and the blame of these crises and epidemics is placed on the individual, which then causes a "moral panic" (Kwan and Graves, 2013, p. 44). The choice/responsibility frame, which is a reactionary frame, looked at how fat body and food consumption are matters of individual choice and personal responsibility. The social justice frame, another reactionary frame focused on how fat is mainly about discrimination and social inequality. The final frame, the aesthetic frame, is another dominant frame. It is also known as the fashion-beauty complex, which comes from Bartky. This frame was about how fat is viewed as ugly and how the thin ideal is everywhere and nowhere. The aesthetic frame was discussed using mass media, more specifically, advertisements. Fat is fearful because it is seen as unattractive, which leads a person to feeling abnormal, which then leads to loneliness, which leads to a low quality of life and a feeling of personal failure.

The Fat Studies Reader covered topics including: mother blaming, race and class, childhood obesity, bullying, mandatory weight reduction, personal choice, and responsibility. According to the reader, fatness is strongly related to socioeconomic status

(Rothblum and Solovay, 2009, p. 25). The book referenced a study (Gortmaker et al., 1993) that stated fat young women were much less likely to be married, their household income was a third lower, they were three times more likely to live in poverty, and half as likely to finish college (Rothblum and Solovay, 2009, p. 27). The reader brought up movements such as Health at Every Size (HAES), which has an emphasis on self-acceptance and healthy day-to-day practices (Rothblum and Solovay, 2009, Ch. 5). The goal of the movement is to promote happiness and to end weight bias. The reader mentions in Chapter 34 the application of the Panopticon to fat stigma, or as Gauchet called it, the "cosmetic Panopticon" (Gauchet, 2006). Mass media has become the Panopticon, or surveyor and controller, of women's bodies, which includes enforcing patriarchal beliefs. This control requires docile bodies (Foucault 1977), and patriarchy must be internalized. Fat women go against "the ideal feminine body-subject," according to Bartky (1988, p.71).

Farrell's book, *Fat Shame*, had the intent of "exploring the roots of our contemporary ideas about fatness, the ways these cultural narratives still percolate today, and the voices and actions of those who have rejected dominant ideas about the rights and identities of the fat person" (2011, p. 3). Fat stigma came from social worries of consumer excess. Farrell argued that "fat denigration is intricately related to gender as well as racial hierarchies, in particular the historical development of 'whiteness'" (2011, p. 5). Regarding race, Farrell stated that "controlling images link blackness, fatness, and the "uncivilized body," making it easy for (white) viewers to read these characters as silly and inferior" (2011, p. 75). Fatness is a visible, physical stigma which can also be considered a character stigma. The issue of fat stigma covers a multitude of academic

areas, such as women's studies, American studies, African American studies, disability studies, history of medicine, US cultural and social history (Farrell, 2011, p. 20). Farrell discussed the class issues with fat. As the middle class becomes wealthier, they become larger as that was sign of being well-off. The rich, to distant themselves from the "newer money" lose weight and stigmatize fat to further distance the rising middle class. Much of this was done through images circulated by media. Schwartz and Stearns argued that middle-class denigration in the United States came with industrialization and the beginning of a consumer culture (Farrell, 2011, p. 44). Fat also became an issue with religion as fatness could be viewed as a symbol of gluttony and a poor relationship to God (Farrell, 2011, p. 44-45).

Control is a major theme in Farrell's book. Fat stigma purports control over one's body and control over all bodies. The private/public body also was mentioned as, there was the idea that "one's physical body can be read for signs of personal worthiness and quality persists, despite laws that challenge discrimination and educational forums that unpack the insidious ways that these ideas thread their way through cultural practices and beliefs" (Farrell, 2011, p. 136). Many forget that fat stigma is relative to historical and cultural contexts (Farrell, 2011, p. 7). As Goffman stated, "[There is] tolerance only if the deviant groups stay within the ecological boundaries of their community" (Farrell, 2011, p. 8). Apocalyptic thinking in headlines leads to a moral panic, which then leads to problematic media diets that build up some individuals while knocking down others. Advertisements, papers, and books all condemn the extremes. Farrell gave the example of postcards and how they "illuminate[d] the establishment of a symbolic place, or rather, no place - of the fat woman in the 20th century" (2011, p. 57).

In *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, Susie Orbach looked at how dieting and food deprivation are not successful or sustainable in women's lives. Orbach discussed how the obsession with thinness has gone too far. "Thin is now aspirational; it purports to be a passport of entry into modernity. It is the ambition and sign of belonging in a world in which division between those who have and those who don't has also... come to be demarcated by size and shape" (Orbach, 2016, p. vii). These bodies that do not meet the thin ideal are seen as deviant. "Being overweight is seen as a deviance and anti-men. Overeating and obesity have been reduced to character defects, rather than perceived as the expression of painful and conflicting experiences" (Orbach, 1978, p. 6). Here can be seen the repeating theme of fatness being equated with low moral values. Orbach quoted John Berger to explain the way women's bodies are situated in society compared to men's, which shows the implicit difficulty for fat women under the male gaze. "As John Berger says in *Ways of Seeing*: Men *act* and women *appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves" (Orbach, 1978, p. 8). The relationship women develop with their fat bodies leads to a deviant relationship with society which can be positive and/or negative. Orbach explained:

"For the compulsive eater, fat has much symbolic meaning which makes sense within a feminist context. Fat is a response to the many oppressive manifestations of a sexist culture. Fat is a way of saying 'no' to powerlessness and self-denial, to a limiting sexual expression which demands that females look and act a certain way, and to an image of womanhood that defines a specific social role. Fat offends Western ideals of female beauty and, as such, every 'overweight' woman

creates a crack in the popular culture's ability to make us mere products" (1978, p. 21).

This offending of Western ideals can backfire, according to Orbach, who stated that destabilizing men can get women into trouble, thus creating an internal fear of one's own body (1982, p. 189). There is a distinct push to constantly increase the number of women who feel their bodies are not thin enough and not the ideal seen in stores or on the runway. "The richness of our different shapes is reduced to the overriding image of slimness. Advertisements for women's clothes feature pre-pubescent girls, ... models with anorectic bodies display clothes designed to make women into objects, and shop mannequins are literally shaved down each year to present the newest fashions on figures that correspond to fewer and fewer bodies" (Orbach, 1982, p. 193). Orbach explained that variety in females' bodies is unacceptable in society's eyes, thus thinness is encouraged for "profit and control" (Orbach, 1982, p. 194).

To wrap up a look at fat studies, Boero wrote an article that was an analysis of 751 articles from *The New York Times* that looked at the topic of obesity. The articles covered subjects ranging from fatness to health to size discrimination. Boero argued that "the 'obesity epidemic' is a part of a new breed of what I call 'post-modern epidemics'" (2006, p. 41). This idea of post-modern epidemics is when a health phenomenon without a clear medical base is deemed by society as a moral panic. Boero took a social constructionist approach and looked at how the "obesity epidemic" had come to cause a moral panic, especially as it was perpetuated by media (2006, p. 42). "What makes the 'obesity epidemic' unique is that we are all at risk for obesity; what varies is our degree of risk," stated Boero (2006, p. 42). Through the use of grounded theory, Boero found

that “chaos and containment, professionalization and ‘common sense,’ and nature and culture,” were the main discursive pairings (2006, p. 43). Historically, the target of diet culture and slenderness was white, middle- and upper-class women (Boero, 2006, p. 44). Overall, the articles conveyed the sense that people did not have their bodies under control. Being fat was seen as being simultaneously controllable and uncontrollable. “Success” stories of controlling fat praised those who adapted the habits of an eating disorder (Boero, 2006, p. 48). There was also the introduction of gastric-bypass surgery, which “suggests that some bodies that are so out of control, and such a threat to public health that they need to be surgically altered” (Boero, 2006, p. 48). A final added issue was that the official measurements of fat kept fluctuating and changing. This lack of a solid definition meant that anyone could be considered fat at any time.

Communities and Population Control

According to Benedict Anderson (1990), nations are socially constructed communities, or imagined communities. The media can also create imagined communities through generalizations and the circulation of images, with which people find the image they relate the most to and thus create and join the imagined community. Imagined communities came to be because of “print capitalism”. Printing media in the vernacular broadened circulation which then allowed common discourses to bring people together beyond physical location. Miranda Joseph (2006) then discussed how community validated social hierarchies such as gender, race, sexuality, etc. She stated that we see community as an ideal we too readily apply. Community is brought up by anyone as a way to encourage a cause. This community eventually becomes exclusionary.

The body positivity community, like many communities, has a divergence in the social location of its members. There is also divergence in body types, gender, race, etc. From a glance, the boundaries of the community seem to be that any body is accepted. However, there was noted lack of intersectional inclusion in this project's interviews. Those who are on opposite sides of the size spectrum seem to be less involved in the community. Those who are not white-passing seem to not be as accepted. There is a question from looking at the body positivity community of how transgressive can someone be and still be acceptable to the community?

The reason this paper uses the term "community" instead of another term such as "social movement" is because "community" is the vernacular used by the participants of the study. There is a sense of community, sense of shared goals, through which the participants seem to justify the use of community. From the information provided by the participants, some of the parameters for the body positive community was that there be no commodification of the message and those who label themselves as part of the community must be authentic, with the definition of authenticity most likely changing on a person-by-person basis.

A large focus on deviant bodies is how to control them. How can they be changed? How can they be shamed? How can they be eradicated? How can they be hidden? How can they be avoided? What are considered deviant bodies has shifted with societal changes. Some deviant bodies of the past and present include people with immigrant bodies, minority bodies, disabled bodies, colored bodies, and fat bodies. Many times, this label of "deviancy" affects not only a body type but also a socioeconomic class. These deviant bodies threatened the social norm and created fear that whatever was

considered undesirable would spread throughout the population. In reference to fatness, this fear can be seen in media stories on the obesity epidemic, fear of childhood obesity, and an overall fear of fat. Apocalyptic thinking in headlines leads to a moral panic. These fears reinforce fat stigma, leading to inaccurate stereotypes that are completely without merit. To corral these deviant bodies, control is implemented. This control can come from multiple directions. For people with fat bodies, this control comes from the government, the medical industry, the fashion industry, the media, friends, family and more. Regarding the media specifically, problematic media diets build up some while knocking down others. The constant barrage of negativity weighs heavily on those affected.

Fat stigma came from a socioeconomic shift. The upper class used to view fatness as a sign of wealth. The more a person could afford to eat, the better off they were. However, as time progressed, the middle class began earning more, thus becoming fatter as a sign of wealth. Those of old money saw this as a threat to their separation from those with new money and decided to distance themselves physically by encouraging thinness. The idea was that those who were rich could afford to eat well but chose not to in order to remain thin. According to Schwartz and Stearns, the middle-class denigration in the United States came with industrialization and the beginning of a consumer culture (Farrell, 2011, p. 44). These assumptions have persisted to today to where fatness is equated with laziness and low moral standards. These are used as cultural tools to show and teach Americans that fatness in women is "a sign of primitive, out-of-control impulses" (Farrell, p. 72). With the factor of class also comes the factor of race. According to Farrell, "Fat denigration is intricately related to gender as well as racial

hierarchies, in particular the historical development of 'whiteness'" (2011, p. 5). Race issues with fat involved "controlling images [that] link blackness, fatness, and the "uncivilized body," making it easy for (white) viewers to read these characters as silly and inferior" (Farrell, 2011, p. 75). There is a perpetuate "Othering" of whatever is restricted, thus furthering the deviant body from society mentally, emotionally and physically (Farrell, 2011, p. 70).

Much population control stemmed from specific cultural beliefs or the fear of overpopulation. For some, birth control was seen as a way to weed out unwanted genetic strains. According to *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control*, "One branch of eugenics maintained that the rich and powerful were genetically superior to the poor, and that whites were in general superior to other races. To the United States elite, such a philosophy provided a convenient justification for their privileged position" (Hartmann, 1995, p. 98). In the early decades of the 1900s this was a popular excuse for stigmatizing and shaming deviant bodies. Paul Popenoe, a known eugenics spokesman, projected that about 10 million Americans could be sterilized on the basis of having a low IQ, thus not being seen as fit to reproduce. By 1932 mandatory sterilization laws for the "feeble-minded, insane, criminal, and physically defective" had been passed by twenty-seven of the states in America (Hartmann, 1995, p. 98). Eugenists in the early 1900s were also known to have believed that those who were deemed "unfit" threatened the population. Some populations this included were immigrant populations and people of color. Much of this was up to the discretion of the states. For example, how the state would define "physically defective" could include those who were fat, disabled, of color, or more. While this viewpoint was eventually

deemed extreme, in large part due to the genocidal practices of the Nazis in World War II, the United States then turned to birth control. According to Hartmann, the purpose of birth control was to stabilize the family, even if that implicitly meant “stabilizing women’s inferior role” (1995, p. 101). This continued to place women in an inferior position to men, although the opinions of birth control ranged from sexual freedom to controlling of family planning.

This control over one body led to control over all bodies. The separation of the private and public body became blurred. "The idea that one's physical body can be read for signs of personal worthiness and quality persists, despite laws that challenge discrimination and educational forums that unpack the insidious ways that these ideas thread their way through cultural practices and beliefs" (Farrell, 2011, p. 136). From this control a fear can develop around the body. Those with deviant bodies discover from a young age the different messages their body holds. As Orbach stated, “We learn instead that our bodies are powerful in a negative sense, they can destabilize men and get us into trouble. It is no wonder then that we become frightened of our bodies and see them not as where we live but as a part of us that we must control, watch and direct” (Orbach, 1982, p. 189).

Analytical Framework

This study explores the lived experience of people’s discourse around the body, specifically the discourse of plus-size bloggers and their relationship with their bodies, the plus-size community, and the body positive community. As noted by Katsulis (personal correspondence):

"There is no one-to-one correlation between specific external encounters or events and the ways in which those encounters or events are "lived," or experienced, internally. At the individual level, the affective (live, or felt) experience of an event is shaped by their specific cognitive framework, which itself is a by-product of a lifetime of accumulated events, corresponding interpretations, and affective experiences. All new events are filtered through that cognitive framework, shaping the ways in which those events are interpreted and experienced. This is the way I use the concept of "lived experiences," - they are "lived" in that the accumulation of events, interpretations, and experiences shapes the ways in which future events are interpreted, felt, reacted, and responded to. Thus, the same set of events, whether those events are purely discursive or not, and the more homogenous (or similar) the group, the more likely their experience of that event will be shared (or similar) within that group; the more diverse that set of individuals is, the more likely their lived experiences will differ. Thus, when we interrogate the lived experiences of a group of individuals who share a similar background, personal characteristics, cognitive models, and previous experiences, we should expect a high degree of consistency in terms of lived experience - the reverse is also true. Finally, the ways in which those experiences are "lived," will shape (but not determine!) a range of potential reactions, responses, and behaviors."

As stated by Jutel and Buetow, "Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder, but rather in the cultural norms of the dominant social group" (2003, p. 429). Definitions of beauty and of the "correct" body greatly affect an individual's body image.

While this ideal of beauty can affect anyone, it has been shown to affect more heavily those already oppressed and marginalized by society. Regarding fat in particular, Amy Farrell argued, "Fat denigration is intricately related to gender as well as racial hierarchies, in particular the historical development of 'whiteness'" (2011, p. 5). Issues surrounding fat are not just about the effects of added weight to the body. Fatness is bounded by false stereotypes and negative stigmas. Race issues involving fat center around "controlling images [that] link blackness, fatness, and the "uncivilized body," making it easy for (white) viewers to read these characters as silly and inferior" (Farrell, 2011, p. 75). This is perpetuated by race, gender, culture, and socioeconomic stereotypes. The "blame" of fatness specifically is placed upon the individual. As Sobal and Maurer stated, "It is the offending body that must be changed; not the culture that is offended by it" (2013, p. 50). Our culture is image-driven, thus, the visual has "assumed a disproportionately prominent position" (Jutel and Buetow, 2003, p. 421). This comes from the idea that the outer body reflects a person's identity, health and personality. "Appearance is a powerful tool in social control and understanding the role of appearance is fundamental to our understanding of the relationships between appearance, morality, and contemporary angst," stated Jutel and Buetow. "Seeing, being seen, or simply being at risk of being seen creates an internalized form of constraint that makes people adhere to social rules" (Jutel and Buetow, 2003, p. 426). This act of self-policing and self-surveying leads individuals to curate their appearance based on how they believe society is judging them, bringing up a situation similar to that of the Panopticon. By Othering people with bodies that are seen as "deviant," society successfully isolates those who are deemed deviant of the desired physical mold.

In my research, individuals who inhabit fat bodies are marked within the dominant culture as "deviant" - and as a result of the similar events and encounters they have in the world because of the stigma attached to fat bodies, their lived experiences of discourse around fat and fat bodies, are shared (to some extent). Fat stigma can inspire a range of emotional reactions and responses; and the degree to which those are shared can be further shaped by other shared social characteristics (such as gender, race, age and class).

Findings and Analysis

Anticipating that the lived experience of fat stigma would differ across these various differences, I wanted to interview people from a range of backgrounds; however, I was limited by the scope of the population I was able to attain. While my population consisted of five women of color, two white women and one Māori woman, I by no means represented all races who are present in the body positive community. I also only had women participants in the study as I had not received responses from the men I reached out to in the body positive community. While this at first was not ideal, I believe the study was stronger in the end as I was able to focus my questions to have a stronger analysis of the female perspective.

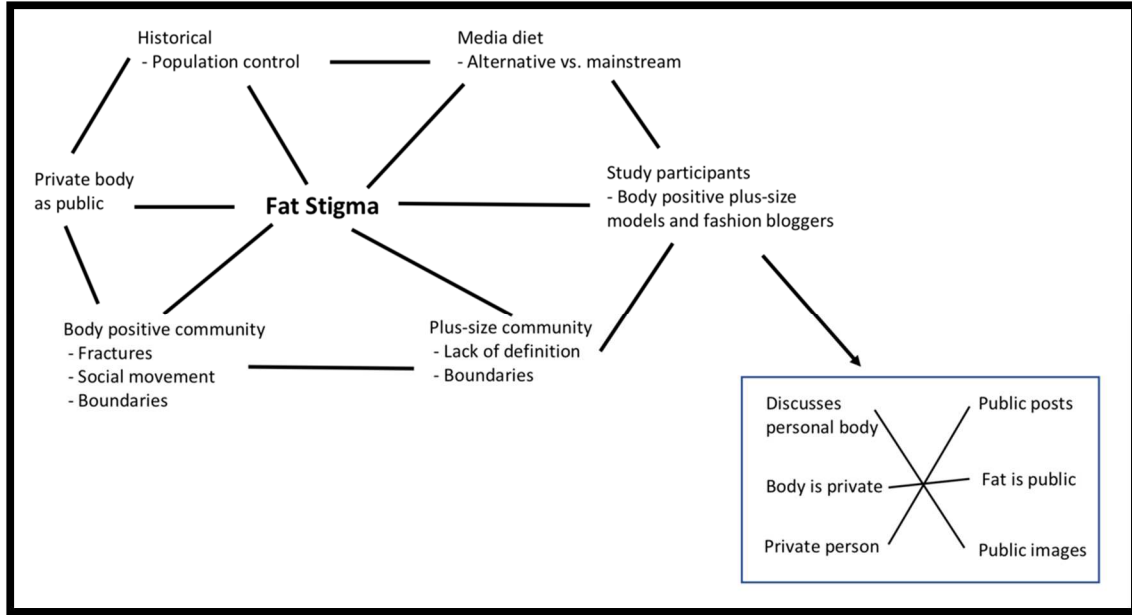


Figure 1. Visual map showing connected subjects and concepts found in project.

The lived experience(s) of inhabiting a fat body included an array of emotional reactions including: banishment, pride, disgust, embarrassment, desire, longing, and rejection. These emotions stemmed from outward negativity toward people with fat bodies, inward negativity toward one’s fat body, positivity towards fat bodies, and an aspiration to create representation of themselves on social media. These lived experiences come from simply being “fat” in the world and also from the experience of being involved in social media, and to an extent social media activism. Rejection was a significant theme among this set of interviewees in a surprising manner. In this case, it was not the rejection they felt as a result of inhabiting a fat body, it was a rejection, or refusal, to feel shame. This, often adamant response, reflected the personal politics of

participants in that they worked hard to embrace their body and to have confidence in their skin.

Many discussed ups and downs as they felt the need to accommodate society's views on their bodies while also working to have a positive view of themselves. There was also discussion of the exaggeration of marginalized groups, such as fat women must be sexy or that African American women were expected to love their curves. These exaggerations are an example of how stigma is perpetuated. Overall themes found in the interviews were the Othering of the fat, female, colored body, and the need to self-police one's body, similar to the concept of the Panopticon (Foucault, 1977). The Panopticon reflects this idea of self-policing as the Panopticon was a prison setup so that prisoners were never sure if they were being watched or not, and thus policed themselves in case someone was watching. This relates to body consciousness as people may feel, accurately or not, that their body is being watched and judged, thus they police themselves in order to fit into society without punishment.

Many interview participants discussed that earlier in their lives they were discontent with their bodies and were convinced that they were not good enough. This inward negativity came from outside forces defining their fat identity as negative. The communities these women belong to often try to actively change the ways in which "fat" is used in language, and the meanings associated with the term. In this case, I will focus on how that struggle over the meaning and use of the word fat unfolds through social media.

Content creators on social media understand the significance of the visual elements that shape their interactions with an audience. One participant discussed her method of posting:

“When I post on social media, usually I have this model that I go by which is to post with intent and with purpose. So those are the two things that I always keep in mind when I post something. So then on the next level of that is to post basically a pretty picture with heavy content. Basically, the pretty picture stops you in your tracks, just even if you don’t read the caption, you just look at the picture of me doing what I’m doing. Whether it’s high fashion, whether it’s grunge, whether it’s me in some bushes with a flower crown on, you’re like WHOA wait a minute. So, she’s fat, she’s black, and she’s Muslim. Just in itself, you’re getting all these emotions and all these thoughts and feelings about this photo. Then if you’re interested, which people usually are in the picture, then you scroll down and you read a heavy caption” (Vernon, 2017).

With social media comes the social aspect of it – the audience. The audience cannot be controlled, outside of deleting comments and restricting accounts. No matter the account, the audience comes in with presumptions and preconceived notions. Whether they come to the account looking for a transgressive media source or to critique it, deviant bodies immediately must prove these assumptions wrong or in need of rewriting. Social media allows for the audience to interact with a subject. It breaks down a wall not always seen with other forms of media. Posts go beyond just the posted content and at times the commentary becomes its own form of content. Active involvement on social media can alter the ways in which people with fat bodies are represented, simply by virtue of the

fact that they are made available to the public to view and possibly reconsider. Social media allows a redirection of the narrative away from simplistic stereotypes. All participants expressed a desire for deviant bodies to be better represented. “They’ve only, I guess, they’ve chosen people who are palatable to the public, which I find that so boring. I want to see people who represent me” (Kerr). By inverting the power structure of media, this form of transgressive media can put people with fat bodies in a place of power.

A simple word frequency count showed the ten most frequent words in the interviews were: body, fat, obesity, people, social, women, sizes, media, health, and culture. These words were then used to find correlations through linguistic proximity by analyzing the discussions surrounding the most popular words. The following themes were found: desire for equality, body positivity, identity, positivity towards body, race, gender, inward negativity towards body, outward negativity towards body, language, community, and commodification. Some of these themes are discussed below. These themes were chosen due to the number of times they were mentioned, the importance of the theme to the larger discussion of stereotypes, and also those which seemed to be the most interesting to discuss. Many themes were also combined into the larger topics below as many of them coincided with each other.

Language

Language has power, and stigmatization (and resistance) takes place through language. Language transmits stereotypes and provides the medium through which stigmatized groups are dehumanized, objectified, and marked as deviant. It also provides

a medium through which those stigmatized groups can combat stereotypes, and resignify⁴ the meanings associated with a particular term (in this case, "fat"). Although messages from the dominant, mainstream culture via social media can suppress the voices of those who are oppressed by quickly, efficiently, and effectively transmitting and reinforcing a master narrative that justifies that silencing, those who are stigmatized can use that same platform to reclaim the language being used and flipping it on its head. They can harness that same rapid, broad-reaching vehicle to respond, in kind, creating a continuous justice-oriented, body positive stream of images and words with viable, sufficient content that can serve as a counterpoint to that master narrative. In fact, the audience, or consumer, can literally "switch channels" and tune out content which they find detrimental to their health and well-being. Taking control of one's own media diet requires that some media feeds simply be shut down and replaced by others. Content producers of alternative media can literally provide a self-sustaining stream of more positive counter-narratives. For example, gay men reclaiming the term "faggot" or plus-size women reclaiming the term "fat". Each interview participant was asked their thoughts on the terms "plus-size" and "fat". One participant discussed her experience with "fat" and how initially she declined the term and instead leaned towards being "full-figured" or "plus-size". Andrea Michelle shared a moment when another plus-size model changed her thoughts on fatness:

"There's a model out there, Saucy West, and we did a radio interview together one day, and she defended the word fat so hard that I fell in love with it. She said

⁴ Butler's concept of resignification fits well here as it is creating a radical crisis for current norms and power structures (Butler, 2008).

it's one of those that we're taking back. They've made it something negative and we want to make it something positive" (Michelle, 2017).

This reversal of power is essential in fighting fat stigma and it lies in the importance of language.

In the plus-size community, the term "fat" has recently gained more support. My research showed that some women saw the terms "fat" and "plus-size" as descriptors. They describe their physical appearance and were only seen negatively depending on how someone else used them. If a word is used with cruel intentions, it will seem negative. However, if the stigma of the word itself is taken away, then it just becomes another adjective. A couple of the women found the term "plus-size" to be most helpful when shopping and looking for their section. However, this invites further investigation into why the clothes were separated in the first place, and who decided which sizes belonged in which section. Why is "plus-sized" clothing in need of its own market niche, not only with its own sections in a department store, but also with entirely separate stores, magazines, models, and fashion lines? One participant found that as her body image improved, the effect of negative language declined. Leah Vernon stated, "I think when I started getting more okay with my body, these terms, these terms that we just attach so much negativity to and we crumble over, just started to dissolve and became nothing to me" (Vernon, 2017).

For others, their bodies became public entities that others felt the need to comment on. This Othering of fat bodies is not a rare occurrence:

"I even had a lady come into my job, so it's a little different for me working at Victoria's Secret. And it shouldn't be but that's just how the world views women.

And she was just a handful of jelly beans away from being the same size I was, an African American woman at that, and she walked to my manager and said, ‘I think it’s inappropriate that you have someone as large as she working here’” (Michelle, 2017).

There is a stronger focus on the body for plus-size bloggers than there seems to be for straight-sized bloggers, or bloggers under the clothing size of 12 or 14. This constant emphasis on the blogger’s body instead of her content can be frustrating. According to a participant:

“I just think that I want, I want it to be to where the body doesn’t even have to come up because it’s not important. It’s not like a big thing to talk about because my body is no different from anybody else’s... And why is it even a conversation? Why are our bodies everyday conversation? There’s so much other stuff to talk about that is far more interesting than my back fat” (Hosey, 2017).

An exhaustion forms from the discussion of plus-size bodies. The language used by the fat body itself can also be harmful. One participant remarked that “For the longest time I had issues with my own image” (Blair, 2017), and another participant recalled a time that made her self-conscious in her own skin. Recalling a rafting trip with friends, she said, “I’m bigger than all of those friends that went that day. And I was like, I fucking hate myself, I need to do something I need to change something now, I need to make a change, I can’t be this person anymore I can’t be it. And then the next day I was kind of fine. Like, it waxes and wanes” (Horne, 2017). Being fat or obese is directly connected with ideas of panic, poor health, and epidemics. An oppositional stance of this is seen as

radical. The language used to refer to any particular body, despite its size, shape, or type, can have long lasting, psycho-social effects.

Commodification

There was also concern of body positivity becoming commercialized, and thus turning away from the community's original intent. Plus-size brands such as Lane Bryant and Torrid were criticized by participants as using body positivity as a marketing tool, and yet doing very little to actively showcase diverse people of different shapes, sizes, colors and abilities. The commodification of the plus-size community and the body positive community was commented on by multiple participants. One participant mentioned her experience as a manager at Lane Bryant and the frustration of having the mannequins being straight-sized in a plus-size store. She said:

“I was a manager at 18 and it was, our mannequins were a size ten, but my clothing starts at a size 14. I want to know what the real woman is going to look like in that shirt. You might have picked out that mannequin, but I've got six rolls on the side of me. I would love to start using more of the plus and pluser size models and with business really teaching them” (Michelle, 2017).

Others found that the body positive message was used by companies in ways that were not true to the community's original intent.

“Before being taken over by the main stream for profit, body positivity was about embracing bodies that didn't conform to that on magazine covers. It was about encouraging yourself and others to look in the mirror and learning to love the reflection. It was about standing together and saying 'NO' when told to hate ourselves” (Reid, 2017).

Some participants recognized that commodification was done for marketing purposes, however, they were displeased with the results that showed a distinct lack of diversity and understanding of the community's goals.

“I think it's also been co-opted as a marketing thing by brands. For example, Lane Bryant would definitely be one that is really on the bandwagon in terms of body positivity. They want to be seen as body-positive, but not particularly using intersectional models, you know. Models of similar shapes, similar size, not a lot of diversity happening there. I think it's like a watered-down version of body-positivity is what we're seeing a lot of” (Kerr, 2017).

With companies using the community to make money and not promoting diversity of peoples' bodies, one participant commented that she felt disconnected from the body positive community now as she feels people of color have been left out of the conversation. She stated, “I feel like the main, my main issue is as a woman of color, it's become watered down and I've been left out of the conversation so it's not really that important to me anymore. And it's been commercialized for people to make money off of” (Hosey, 2017).

Gender

Many participants discussed that gender was also a prevalent issue in the plus-size community. One participant stated:

“I think there's a lot more pressure on women to look a certain way and conform to certain body types. I think that fat men are far more acceptable and considered cute and loveable than fat women... Women are systematically programmed to compare ourselves and not be happy with anything. But we don't get an award for

that. You don't get an award for picking yourself apart. You don't get an award for constantly not liking something about your body" (Hosey, 2017).

In other research and in this study's interviews, there is a significant gap between male and female bodily expectations. While there is some progress seen in gender equality, there is still room for improvement. One participant said:

"I think a lot of it has to do with programming and the word "should". This is how a woman "should" look; this is how a man "should" look. But time and time again we are seeing the alternative. We are seeing people, gendered and non-gendered, fighting back and messing with mass media's body algorithm. A male ballet dancer with a small frame and slightness is no less a man and a tall muscular female wrestler is no less a woman. Refusing to mold our bodies into what they "should" look like is the very definition of body positivity" (Reid, 2017).

While female-identifying people seem to be more affected, all people's bodies are affected by societal expectations and ideals. "I think women are, I guess marketed to, around their bodies a lot more than men are. I don't know, I guess body image issue kind of doesn't matter what gender you are. Like I know people of all genders with eating disorders, with body hang-ups" (Kerr, 2017). Finally, women seem to have become ornamental figures, which is a particularly interesting issue in the modelling industry as the model's body is a part of the fashion being showcased and is an essential of portraying the brand and its products. "You know, like you gotta, you gotta be this way, you always gotta be prim and prepped, and you know, be respectful and you only speak when you're spoken to, like you know what I mean? Like an ornament, pretty much" (Arrington, 2017).

Race

Through the interviews, I found that there are gaps widening in the body positive community and the plus-size community. Some participants stated that in both communities there is a lack of equal representation regarding race. One participant stated when discussing the lack of diversity in modelling:

“You still see an influx of either light-skinned models, ambiguous models... It’s like, okay, there are so many natural hair, dark-skinned women. There are Indian plus-size women, Asian plus-size women, and then you still see a bunch of white women and then you’ll see one dark one. And then you see one with really light skin and curly hair. That’s not the world” (Vernon, 2017).

Another participant discussed how she felt that women of color were being left out of the body positive conversation. Coming into the fashion industry, which has its share of issues surrounding diversity, women of color have different experiences with fashion, blogging and social media than many women who are white passing. One participant stated, “Coming to L.A. and being a young black girl, and being a young fat black girl, my dad always used to say, you have three things against you – you’re a woman, you’re black and you’re fat. You know, so it strengthened me a little bit to understand” (Michelle, 2017). Many participants commented on the lack of equal representation of race in fashion and online. Some of the comments were:

“I definitely think that, like, anyone who’s not white is massively underrepresented and therefore, like it’s potentially like fueling this idea that like, only white bodies are beautiful” (Horne, 2017).

“I’d like it to be more inclusive, and less led by thinner, white women. There’s room for everyone at the table, and I think body positivity for everybody is important. At the same time, we need to be centering those marginalized voices, and I don’t think that that happens often enough” (Kerr, 2017).

Women of color, like other women, and like men of color, must constantly conform to a particular body-type or shape, style, and persona - however, some participants discussed that there appears to be a greater pressure on women of color to fit themselves into the fashion industry as it currently is; there is less flexibility or room for those who transgress those boundaries. A participant explained what she saw as the background of this whiteness-centered mindset in fashion. She said, “The history of the country and the mindset transfers over to opportunities or lack thereof. You know, like the dominant culture, the mega narrative. The mega narrative is, you know, the most desirable person is supposedly a slender blonde-haired blue eyed you know, woman” (Arrington, 2017).

Image becomes identity, especially in today’s online world of social media. One participant found power in the increase of women of color in the plus-size blogging industry. She stated, “I do feel a kinship with fellow women of color who unapologetically show the world their body and their style, irrespective of body shape” (Reid, 2017).

Community

A repeating theme through the interviews was community and how it can be helpful and harmful, specifically online. An online community has many strengths and weaknesses. It’s able to reach a large amount of people across large distances with the main requirement to participate in the community being to have access to the Internet.

However, it can be difficult to have a strong, clear message understood throughout the community. Unstructured lines of communications can lead to fracturing. One participant was not comfortable being labelled as body positive, as it had brought her negative experiences with some members of the community. She explained her counter narrative by saying:

“I’ve never tried to be offensive in my views but I’ve always seemed like if you want to change your body, change it. If you want to lose weight, lose it. If you want to gain weight, gain it. Like, do what makes you happy. Make sure you’re doing it for you and if you want to have a boob uplift or, like, a butt implant or other ops, because I myself have other ops, like, do what you want to do” (Horne, 2017).

This is an example of a fracture in the body positive online community. Some members of the community see plastic surgery or other procedures as adverse to the central body positive message of loving your body. Others, however, see body positivity as supporting whatever changes you want to make to your body, as long as they are done with the intent of increasing your personal happiness.

There is a desire for the body positive community to go back to its original intent, as some believed its core message has shifted as the community has grown. One participant stated, “I’d love the body positivity movement to revert back to what it was. I’d love to see all shapes and sizes celebrated and visible in main stream media” (Reid, 2017). Other participants felt that the plus-size community had overly sexualized plus-size women. One participant said:

“I think that our bodies have been more accepted, but I also think there are plus-size African American women who have been placed into a certain jovial, good friend, instead of... I think African American women when they are plus-size are placed into two roles. They are either jovial, good friend, class clown, or you’re a sex pot. And there’s no normal, there’s very rare normal in-between” (Hosey, 2017).

Another participant commented on the same subject, stating, “I don’t always want women to think body positivity means posing nude. Like, yeah, ok, there might be a power if it’s all women. But it’s like... it’s just more than that, you know?” (Arrington, 2017).

Conclusion

Through my research I have found that many content creators come to transgressive media diets because they see a lack of representation and decide that they must make that representation themselves. Many of the participants I talked with brought up examples of fat discrimination, yet many defined themselves as confident or badass, thus finding ways to empower themselves despite the pressure of societal norms. Some of this empowerment came from finding a community online. Finally, these plus-size models and fashion bloggers move through a thin ideal industry by demanding, and being, examples of diversity.

Fat discrimination and fat stigmas can have huge impacts on individual’s lives. The lack of consent regarding the criticism of people with fat bodies breaches the privacy of one’s body. This is also seen with women, people of color, children, and more marginalized and oppressed groups. In society’s view, “it is the offending body that must

be changed; not the culture that is offended by it" (Sobal and Maurer, 2013, p. 50). This mindset benefits no one and does nothing to promote societal acceptance of those who do not fit the so-called "ideal". By providing an option for a transgressive media diet, those who do not fit into the ideal can find acceptance, even if that means finding comfort in the discomfort of being the Other. As social media grows more and more popular, we should be looking at ways to promote acceptance, understanding, and equality in our society. There are many movements online promoting the accepting of the Other, whether that be those with disabilities, mental illness, etc.

Future Research. Research on the power of social media and its effect on deviant bodies would be incredibly beneficial to see if there is a lasting difference. Also, as social media is always shifting and changing, following the usage of different forms of social media with deviant bodies in mind would provide fascinating feedback. Further research in the area of transgressive media diets would be highly effective in understanding the changing definition of communities as our world continues to merge online.

Countercultures and counter movements have shifted from in-person planning to online recruiting. By researching these phenomena, there could be a better understanding of why these movements come to be and how social media has helped or hindered their creation and the spread of their message. Also, looking at the change of a "community" becoming a completely electronic creation is a fascinating phenomenon we've only started to see in the past few decades. As technology changes, so will our use of media, community, and, hopefully, stereotypes.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

What is your intent for your social media posts?
What are five identifiers you would give yourself, starting with your main identity?
What does social media mean to you?
Why were you interested in being a part of my research?
How did you decide to become a plus-size model and/or a fashion blogger?
How do you curate your look?
What communities are you a part of?
Who do you follow on social media?
How do you think gender plays a role in body image?
How do you think race plays a role in body image?
How would you describe body positivity?
Is there anything you'd change in the modeling/fashion blogger industry?
Is there anything you'd change in the body positive industry?
What made you become a body positive advocate?
How do you feel about the term "plus-size"?
How do you feel about the term "fat"?
What has shaped your identity?
What would you like others to know about body positivity?
Has your relationship with your body changed since you entered the modeling/fashion blogger industry?
How do you see your body?
How do you think others see your body?
Is there anything else you'd like to add?