

**Visibility, transgression, and community:
An exploratory study of plus-size fashion YouTubers**

by

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A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Apparel, Merchandising, and Design

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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2019

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the memory of my parents, Janet and Robert McCracken.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Linda S. Nielm, Dr. Te-Lin Chung, Dr. Kelly L. Reddy-Best, Dr. Michèle A. Schaal, and Dr. Dianne G. Bystrom, for their expertise and encouragement through the long course of this research.

Dr. Mary Lynn Damhorst and Dr. Eulanda A. Sanders served as my co-major professors, and I consider it a great honor to have worked closely with them on this study. Collaborating with such exceptional scholars and role models has been a wonderful experience.

I am indebted to the YouTubers who generously agreed to speak with me and share their thoughts and experiences.

Thank you to my family for their love and support, especially my brother, Breck McCracken.

Many people have positively impacted my life as a Ph.D. student at Iowa State University, particularly my fellow graduate students in the Apparel, Merchandising, and Design program. I am especially grateful for Dr. Sara Jablon-Roberts, Dr. Jody Aultman, Dr. Amy Dorie, Dr. David Loranger, and Archana Edmond. I also extend a heartfelt thank you to Amy Shane-Nichols, who served as my second coder.

Thank you to my friends and colleagues who have inspired and supported me through the years: Suzanne Tromblay, Dr. Mabel G. Freeman, Dr. Anjelica Garcia, JP Habib, Nina Hoppes, Dr. David Hothersall, Lacey Leone McLaughlin, Dr. Susan A. Mohrman, Dr. Susan Resnick West, Sarah Stark, and Dr. David Strauss.

Finally, through my ups and downs in life, work, and graduate school, I continue to be deeply appreciative for the guidance of Anne McCrea, LISW, and Allison Eness, PA-C.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to investigate the lived experiences of plus-sized individuals who make fashion-related videos on YouTube. Women were the main, but not sole, focus of the study. There were two parts to this study. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 vloggers who make fat fashion videos on YouTube. A content analysis of 60 YouTube plus-size fashion videos was conducted for the second part of the research. Data were analyzed using the grounded theory method.

Findings from the interviews were organized into eight major themes: (a) past and current attitudes of plus-sized YouTubers toward their bodies, (b) manifestation of interviewees' interests in fashion, apparel, and style in their lives, (c) changes in the apparel industry, (d) being a fat fashion social media "guru," (e) social media as a career, (f) visibility and representation, (g) agency, and (h) fashion as barrier and transformative tool. The last three themes emerged inductively from the data. The video content analysis added no new themes but did expand upon the ones that were generated from the interviews.

Participatory media platforms are available for use by anyone who has a smart device and an internet connection; thus, some groups who may have previously been underrepresented in mass media are now more likely to find representation in participatory media. For the interviewees, finding others on social media who were similar to them in weight, size, and/or body shape was often extremely important. Many interview participants had long searched for role models in mass media without success, and they eventually found role models via social media. Typically, interviewees also desired to serve as role models for others who were like them, and they implicitly and explicitly testified to the importance of representation in media.

Social media was not the only societal development that helped enable these plus-size fashion videos. The availability of plus-size apparel in the United States has increased dramatically since the 1980s, with ecommerce offerings cited by interviewees as adding greatly to the variety of styles and brands available to them. While not perfect, the current-day retail landscape was in marked contrast to the scarcity and lack of options interview participants recalled in years past, when their shopping trips with parents or friends were often deeply frustrating, unrewarding, and embarrassing endeavors.

Concepts of agency were an especially important overarching theme in both the interviews and the content analysis. Plus-sized YouTubers discussed and were seen engaging in transgressive acts, such as deliberately breaking the unspoken rules about what plus-size women are “allowed” to wear. In addition, interviewees also discussed taking an active stance in relation to fashion – they spoke of “using” fashion for a variety of goals. This was, again, quite different from how they interacted with fashion and apparel in the past, when they felt excluded and powerless.

Finally, fashion can be both a barrier and a tool for transformation. In mainstream Western society, fat people are marginalized because of their body size. When individuals have an extremely limited set of apparel choices that does not permit them the ability to wear similar apparel styles to their peers, their marginalization is only increased. In contrast, with today’s increased availability of plus-size brands, stores, and styles, interviewees have come to realize that fashion can serve as a tool for identity exploration, self-esteem building, and transformation.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Invisible and Hypervisible

It may seem counterintuitive, but fat people - those individuals who physically take up more space than society's given standard – often report feeling invisible when they are among others.¹ In fact, those who have lost or gained hundreds of pounds describe a distinct shift in how others interact with them as weight changes. Without any effort on the part of people who have lost weight, they are overlooked much less frequently and feel invisible no longer (Carbonell, 2016; Singer, 2014; Underwater, 2013). What *faux pas* have fat people committed if others cannot bear to look at them? Are they monstrous and no longer human because of their size?

While discomfiting, a purposeful ignorance is not the only way others can react to the presence of fat people. The less agreeable among us employ bullying, name calling, making animal noises, and a myriad of other practices that have recently been gathered together under the term “fat shaming.” Some individuals heap derision upon fat people in the name of concern for good health, while some simply hate fat people because they equate fatness with ugliness, laziness, lack of self-control, contamination, and disease, among other negative descriptors (LeBesco, 2004). On the extreme end of fat hate are those who describe fat people as non- or sub-humans who do not deserve to live (McMichael, 2013).² Instead of invisibility, shaming makes fat people vulnerable and hypervisible. What is it about post-industrialist society, or more specifically, mainstream culture in the United States, that these phenomena occur? Is being fat such a misfortune or a moral failing that passersby or acquaintances (or even some friends or

¹ For a selection of discussions about this experience, see bloggers and forum posters Alexa, 2011; Arteaga, 2013; Chastain, 2013; Kajaknowers, 2010; and Stepbystep33, 2011.

² For an example, see “The Crusade Against Fat People” blog, which although almost comically outrageous, does not seem to be a parody site, and posts within it include headings such as “Fat People are Not People I” (Aristodemus, 2011).

family) are at best unwilling to even acknowledge individuals who are so “afflicted” or at worst are driven to shame and excoriate them?

These are examples of the “dire social consequences” people experience when they fall short of society’s decrees regarding body weight (Sobal & Maurer, 1999). Beyond the peculiar experience of invisibility or the deep embarrassment of being fat shamed, “fat people are statistically more likely to live in poverty, earn less income, be unemployed, have lower education levels... and experience lower living standards” than individuals of lower body weights (Lupton, 2013, p. 5). It is therefore not difficult to conclude that fat people are stigmatized in contemporary society. Related to Goffman’s (1963) discussion of the term “stigma,” fat individuals, because their deviance is always visible, possess a discredited type of stigma – they can never hide it. People who are fat learn quickly and internalize beliefs through their daily interactions with others (Deghal & Hughes, 1999; Sobal & Maurer, 1999) that their bodies (and consequently, their selves and identities³) are “unsocial, undesirable, lazy, unlovable, shameful, [and] asexual” (Lewin, 2013, p. 16). Moreover, the trend since the 1990s to consider weight gain and fatness as parts of an alarming medical epidemic has only added another way to stigmatize fat individuals – not only are their bodies ugly, but they are also viewed as diseased (Berlant, 2010; Boero, 2012; LeBesco, 2004).

This study examines fat female and non-binary individuals who make videos about apparel and beauty products on YouTube. Given the strength of negative societal opinions towards their size, what motivates fat people to purposefully put themselves in the public eye by, for instance, actively participating in social media? What benefits are there to being

³ Fat studies scholars such as Lupton (2013) maintain that “we cannot separate ‘self’ from ‘body’: we always and inevitably experience the world as embodied selves” (p. 10).

unapologetically fat online, especially while becoming involved in the more visually oriented forms of social media, such as YouTube? How do individuals who may have been stigmatized based on their physical appearance go on to become fashion “gurus” who demonstrate their fashion expertise in their videos? These questions begin to frame the focus of this study.

Social Media and Traditional Media: Platforms for Positive Change?

Although thin is enshrined as the mainstream bodily ideal in the 21st century United States and in many other countries, one of the more significant technological developments in recent decades may be a tool for fat people to resist society’s prevailing anti-fat rhetoric and to directly communicate their lived experiences. The growth of social media platforms, such as YouTube, blogs, and Instagram, which allow content creation and participation by anyone who has a computer or cell phone and internet access, has been heralded as profoundly democratizing media (and society in general) by undermining the traditional gulf between producers and consumers of content (Burgess & Green, 2009b; Strangelove, 2010). While this viewpoint may be an overly optimistic assessment of social media, there is no doubt that these media can and do give voice to individuals belonging to otherwise underrepresented groups (Anarbaeva, 2011; Grossman, 2006; Thulin, 2013).

Traditional media does increasingly include the plus sized. For example, the plus-size modeling industry has grown steadily since the 1990s. Ironically, as Czerniawski (2015) detailed in her ethnographic study of the industry, plus-size models themselves are often much smaller than a size 14, which is generally the lower end of the women’s or plus-size range of sizes in a retail store. Czerniawski herself worked as a plus-size model and wore a misses size 10 at the time, and she noted that some of her colleagues wore even smaller sizes. Thus, although retailers marketing plus-size lines may use somewhat larger models than they might for misses or junior

lines, these models are still much smaller than the actual consumers who will purchase these items.

Some larger women do model. There are a handful of women who have gained fame modeling while actually fitting into the plus-size clothes they help to advertise. For example, in the 1990s, Emme was “the world’s leading model for plus sizes” (Witchel, 1997, para 2) at a size 14. More recently, models Ashley Graham and Tess Holliday both fit into the plus sizes they model professionally. Ashley Graham, at a size 16 (Merges, 2010), was the first plus-size model to appear on the cover of a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition. In 2015, Tess Holliday gained notoriety as the first woman who wore a size 22 to be awarded a contract with a major modeling agency; she also garnered a *People* magazine cover in the same year (Ogunnaike, 2015).

However, the career successes of a very few fat female models do not mean that the fat body is normalized in society. It is the apparent reluctance of mainstream media and advertising to feature fat women as something more than an occasional exception that makes the democratic nature of social media seem so appealing.

Fat, Contemporary Retail, and Fashion Leadership

The individuals profiled in this research make videos about apparel. Some contemporary retailers, such as Lululemon, are exceedingly reluctant to offer plus-size clothing (Bhasin, 2013). Similarly, the Brandy Melville apparel brand quickly became popular (and notorious) partly because of their size exclusivity (Talarico, 2015). Its stores only sell size small clothing, denying the majority of consumers the ability to buy and wear their clothes and reinforcing the exclusivity of their brand to only the most physically “deserving.”

However, there has been a relative boom in the availability of larger-sized apparel since the 1980s (Chowdhary & Beale, 1988). H&M, Forever 21, and Torrid are just three

contemporary retailers who have either added plus-size options to their stores (H&M and Forever 21) or are fully self-contained stores for plus-size young women, in the case of Torrid. Although the ratio of stores that include offerings for plus-size women is still a fraction of those catering to misses or junior sizes, most fat women today are not stuck relying upon only one or two stores for their entire wardrobe. Fat individuals who wear women's clothing and who love fashion may be able to develop their knowledge of fashion trends along with their wardrobes, and those who share their expertise via their social media work may possibly serve as a fashion authority for and an influencer of the people who follow them online.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to explore the phenomenon of fashion enthusiasts at the crossroads of the size-acceptance movement and social media. To do this, the researcher primarily investigated fat women who make YouTube videos related to fashion and beauty. Women are the main focus of this study because attractiveness and achieving a narrowly defined standard of beauty to achieve attractiveness are typically of greater salience in women's than men's lives (Germov & Williams, 1999; Maurer & Sobal, 1999; McKinley, 1999). The importance of female physical attractiveness is seen in traditional gender roles, in which women are described as taking the hedonic role and are akin to decorative, passive objects whose main objective is to make of themselves a beautiful ornament (Kaiser, 1998; McKinley, 1999). Whether or not these beliefs and expectations are internalized, they persist in contemporary post-industrial societies and therefore have the potential to make a profound impact upon women's lives.

The study itself consists of two parts. First, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 people who identified as fat or plus sized (or a similar appellation) and who

make YouTube fashion and beauty videos. The interviews were conducted via videoconferencing software or Skype. These individuals all identified as women except for one, who identified as non-binary. This participant was included in the study because they mainly shopped and wore apparel designed for the female body. Interviewees' identities are confidential, as it was thought that questions about their personal experiences could have the ability to elicit strong emotional responses. Second, the researcher analyzed the content of sixty (60) of the most-viewed YouTube fashion or beauty videos created by women who self-identify as "plus size" or "fat" (who may or may not be the interviewees). Video examination was conducted to triangulate findings from the interviews and served to ensure greater credibility and trustworthiness of the study findings (Creswell, 1998).

Beyond the fact that there has been little research done on this particular topic, as an exploratory, qualitative study, the researcher intended to achieve a rich description of the lived experiences of fat fashion enthusiasts who are visible and actively create content for social media.

Significance

Figures from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) suggest that almost 69% of the United States population can be classified as overweight or obese (Weight-control Information Network, 2012). Although a majority of Americans are therefore to some degree fat, the stigma against fatness still appears to be firmly entrenched in the mainstream of society. Rates of recidivism, or regaining weight after dieting, vary, but figures cited often range between 95% (Stunkard & McLaren-Hume, 1959) and 98% (LeBesco, 2004). These are dismal statistics for those individuals who strive to permanently lose weight.

If media have been used to promulgate an impossible bodyweight ideal, might they also be used to popularize a diversity of body sizes as attractive and normal? McKinley (1999) opined that: “Fat women have the potential to challenge both constructions of ideal weight and especially constructions of ideal women” (p. 109); if so, the individuals profiled in this study have the potential to effect a profound change in the diversity of the beauty ideals of our time because of their social media activities. LeBesco (2004) suggested that “fat-positive identity performances” (p. 7) – which, in this study, are online – are a way of resignifying what fatness is and what it means to be fat. To this end, this study aimed to understand the contributions to fat acceptance on one social media platform, YouTube, as well as the people who are creating these videos.

This study primarily considered fat women in the United States, yet all genders can subscribe to the thin ideal. In addition, those who are not fat can also be strongly affected by the consequences and mandates of the thin ideal, even if they are not visibly stigmatized by their body weight. At the very least, the 69% of the United States population who are considered overweight and obese could benefit from the findings in this study.

Terminology, Including “Fat” and “Plus Sized”

The primary distinguishing characteristic of the participants detailed in this dissertation is that they self-identify as fat, plus size, or some other term that relates to being significantly larger than the mainstream cultural ideal. The word “fat” is used in this dissertation as a descriptive, non-pejorative term. The word is often used by activists and academics in the fat studies field as a positive concept that connotes bodily acceptance and as an effort to take back the word “fat” from its widespread use in society as a highly negative term (Lupton, 2013). “Fat” as a positive adjective is not in common usage, and it is not surprising, therefore, that many individuals,

including study participants, may be very uncomfortable with the word and may not refer to themselves as fat, instead opting to describe themselves as “curvy,” “overweight,” or even “obese.” Because of this, when describing or analyzing specific participants or their videos, the dissertation will strive to use the terminology preferred by each participant.

Another term that this study will utilize overall is “plus size.” As mentioned above, the range of sizes designed for fat women is referred to as plus sizes, in contrast to misses sizes or junior sizes. Participants may also use “plus size” to describe themselves instead of the word “fat,” as plus size is less emotionally charged and has fewer pejorative connotations.

Scope and Limitations

Exploratory and Qualitative

This is an exploratory, qualitative study composed of content analysis and interviews. Any findings will apply only to the people and social media sites studied and will not be generalizable to a larger population. The aims of qualitative study are to both describe in great detail and effectively communicate the experiences of the participants, who in this case are fat, active in visually oriented social media, and may serve as positive role models for people like them.

The Internet

The nature of the internet itself is a limitation. Although this study features interviews with YouTube content creators, some of whom have tens of thousands of subscribers (and a few of the channels studied in the content analysis have millions of subscribers), these numbers are miniscule in comparison to the most popular YouTubers. The woman who has the most subscribers on YouTube is comedian and vlogger Jenna Mourey, whose stage/channel name is Jenna Marbles. She has almost 20 million subscribers. In comparison, the individual YouTuber

with the most subscribers is Felix Kjellberg (known by his channel name of PewDiePie), who has a little over 97 million subscribers to his primarily gaming-based channel. The channel with the most subscribers overall is T-Series' channel, with 104 million subscribers.⁴

Moreover, research on homophily and the “echo chamber” in social media suggests that while a fat-positive YouTube fashion and beauty channel may reach those who are already fat-positive and interested in these topics, it may have a more difficult time branching out from that particular audience to make any impact on other viewers using the YouTube platform (De Choudhury, Sundaram, John, Seligmann, & Kelliher, 2010; Liao & Fu, 2014; Wallsten, 2005). Homophily suggests that people seek out media sources that hold similar views to their own and disregard those with differing viewpoints. Thus, creating a YouTube channel – even one with many thousands of viewers – does not necessarily translate into effecting lasting change in society overall, but on an individual level, such a channel could positively affect individual viewers.

Dissertation Organization

Chapter 1 introduces the research study. Chapter 2 features a review of the literature and the theoretical perspectives pertinent to this study. The research questions are also discussed in Chapter 2. Research methods used are found in Chapter 3. This chapter also offers a researcher reflexivity statement, one of several practices that the researcher has used to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. Chapter 4 reports the findings from both participant interviews and video content analysis, and in Chapter 5, the researcher discusses the findings and implications of this study, places it in context with other research, and makes recommendations for further studies.

⁴ On its YouTube page, T-Series calls itself “India's Largest Music Label & Movie Studio.”

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 explores several topics in preparation for the study. As part of research devoted to illuminating the experiences and activities of plus-size people in contemporary society, the review of literature first considers texts related to the marginalized status of fat individuals. To contextualize how the idea of fat, and consequently, fat individuals themselves, have become synonymous with moral failure (Lupton, 2013) and disease (Boero, 2012), a history of the U.S. cultural mainstream's changing perceptions about fat bodies is delineated.

One of the more significant and disruptive societal factors in the past few decades has been technology, especially as manifested in the internet and the online world (Bower & Christensen, 1995). The third section in this review discusses how this medium has been characterized by various cultural critics and scholars, and then delves into the nature of participatory media, which is now more commonly known as social media.

The fourth section specifically considers academic research within the confluence of dress and social media. To date, the most commonly studied topic in this literature is fashion bloggers. This section will also consider the few pieces of research that have focused on fat individuals, dress, and social media.

The individuals featured in this study, beyond potentially serving as fat-positive role models, may also be regarded as influential consumers. Through their videos featuring apparel and beauty products, they may be seen by their viewers as experts or fashion leaders in relation to these consumer products. Therefore, literature related to the consumer concepts of fashion leadership and fashion opinion leadership will also be examined.

As this study deals with individuals who create visual products, issues in visual culture studies comprise the final section of Chapter 2. Visual culture scholars often take a critical theory

approach to their topics, and their work suggests the value of the creation of videos that may be seen as resistance to the entrenched mainstream beauty standards of contemporary Western society.

The Marginalized Fat Experience

Solovay and Rothbaum (2009) defined fat studies as an “interdisciplinary field of scholarship marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma place on fat and on the fat body” (p. 2). Wann suggested that “a fat studies approach offers no opposition to the simple fact of human weight diversity, but instead looks at what people and societies make of this reality” (Rothbaum & Solovay, 2009, p. x). Research that falls under the umbrella of fat studies, therefore, can stem from many disciplines and encompass a wide range of topics. This review of the literature will concentrate on the aspects in contemporary society that inscribe fatness with a host of negative connotations and marginalize fat people.

Maurer and Sobal noted the “centrality of body weight to people’s everyday lives” (1999, p. 7). In contemporary mainstream U.S. culture, body fat is highly negative. Society considers fatness “revolting” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 1) and “pathological” (Saguy, 2013, p. 5) and expresses “visceral hatred” against people who are deemed fat (Greenhalgh, 2015, p. viii). Fat individuals suffer socially, physically, emotionally, and economically because of mainstream society’s antipathy towards their size (Degher & Hughes, 1999).

Fat children tend to have fewer friends than smaller-sized children (Degher & Hughes, 1999). In addition, they are often targets for bullying (Weinstock & Krehbiel, 2009). A 2014 meta-analysis found that fat children, whether classified medically as overweight or obese, were found to experience significantly more bullying than peers of smaller size (van Geel, Vedder, &

Tanilon, 2014). The effects of bullying include lower self-esteem, greater risk for depression and/or anxiety, and feelings of being unsafe at school. Bullying may also continue to affect victims well into adulthood (Weinstock & Krehbiel, 2009).

Fat patients “receive prejudicial medical care” (Degher & Hughes, 1999, p. 12). After having an embarrassing, shame-inducing, or otherwise negative experience with a health care practitioner, fat patients may well decide to not subject themselves to the possibility of further sessions of bad care, which often translates to not scheduling routine preventive care, including breast exams and Pap smears (Ahmed, Lemkau, & Birt, 2002). Students in training for health care positions note widespread anti-fat bias among their fellow students and instructors, and these students typically also subscribe to some of the stereotypes about fat or obese patients (Puhl, Luedicke, & Grilo, 2014).

Fat women are punished for seeking sexual relationships. Straight men have been documented as engaging in “hogging,” where they compete with each other to seek sexual relationships with fat women, even while admitting that they find fat women highly unattractive (Prohaska & Gailey, 2009). As the name “hogging” suggests, their targets are seen as disgusting, less than human, and apparently deserving of this treatment. The act of successfully having sex with a “hog” is then shared with the man’s friends, his masculinity is “proven,” and his status among friends is raised.

One notorious manifestation of fat hatred occurs when people are flying. Small and Harris (2012) performed a content analysis of fat people’s blog writings about airplane travel, and they found “themes of discomfort, embarrassment, annoyance and fear” (p. 693); fat travelers feel profoundly unwelcome in airplanes. Blog posts by non-fat travelers did not all blame fat people for the cramped conditions on flights, but those who did expressed very strong

emotions and saw fat people not only as the cause of the problem but as “the other.” These vocal non-fat travelers apparently believe that fat travelers should either lose weight before they travel or spend twice as much money to purchase two airline seats, without considering that airlines have changed the size of airline seats over time. Huff (2009) wrote that the “limitations on the amount of space allotted to each airline passenger are artificially constructed” (p. 177) and mostly stem from airline companies’ desire to make profits; nevertheless, fat individuals are blamed for this situation.

A more subtle form of prejudice was described by King, Shapiro, Hebl, Singletary, and Turner (2006) in their study of fat stigma in customer service interactions. They found higher levels of interpersonal discrimination, a usually covert and nonverbal type of bias, emanating from sales personnel in the retail sector towards fat consumers. Interpersonal discrimination was “measured by an index of interpersonal nonverbal behaviors (a composite consisting of smiling, eye contact, friendliness, rudeness, and ending the interaction prematurely), shorter interaction time, and higher levels of negative affect” (King et al., 2006, p. 585). Similar to how fat individuals react to poor treatment from health care professionals, perceived poor customer service could directly lead to lowered sales and less loyalty to the company, brand, or product.

In a societal context in which such beliefs and treatment are commonplace, it is unsurprising that fat people themselves internalize the negative beliefs about fatness, and their body image and self-concept suffer accordingly, even among young children (Degher & Hughes, 1999). Women are especially affected and tend to have “more negative body image evaluations [and] stronger...investment in their looks” than men have (Cash & Roy, 1999). Moreover, in a study of over 3000 people, Schafer and Ferraro (2011) found that perceived discrimination

against fat individuals because of their weight could and did affect their health and intensify their medical problems.

Traditional mass media has been shown to reinforce the societal belief in the importance of perfect female bodies; the almost unremitting transmission of idealized beauty in both still and moving images “is a significant risk factor in girls’ and women’s development of maladaptive beauty ideals” (Markey & Markey, 2012, p. 209). Studies from Jung (2006), Kim and Lennon (2007), and Markey and Markey (2012) employed Festinger’s (1954) theory of social comparison to describe how these images affect viewers. Festinger (1954) wrote that human beings have a “drive for self-evaluation and the necessity for such evaluation being based on comparison with other persons” (p. 138). Kim and Lennon (2007) found “significant positive relationships between exposure to fashion or beauty magazines and overall appearance dissatisfaction” (p. 3).

Most women would be making an “upward” social comparison when comparing themselves to media images, as women of even average beauty or average size are rarely depicted in mass media (Jung, 2006). Wood (1989) asserted that upward social comparisons may be used for the goal of self-improvement, yet it is doubtful that contemporary images of professional actresses or models, which are almost always altered with computer software to “airbrush” or further perfect the already highly attractive female subject, can be considered a reasonable goal by anyone in society. Soley-Beltran (2011) noted that the use of digital editing created “make-believe images” (p. 192). The participants in her study were professional models, many of whom described being profoundly alienated from the highly altered images of themselves that were used in media and advertising. If the very models who pose for these images do not think they resemble the final images, then who could achieve such inhuman

perfection? Moving pictures, incidentally, are not immune from retouching: post-production artists have been known to resize actresses' body parts frame by frame in films and television productions (Dickey, 2014; Nededog, 2016).

If professional models feel that idealized beauty images are impossible goals, it follows that most women are unable to achieve the perfected images presented in mass media, resulting in “feelings of unhappiness, guilt, shame, depression, and lack of confidence” (Jung, 2006, p. 337). Writing specifically of the thin body ideal, Stice and Shaw (1994) cited the “heightened feelings of depression, unhappiness, shame, guilt, ... stress, and ... decreased levels of confidence” (pp. 301-302) in those who were exposed to the thin ideal in images. Kim and Lennon (2007) found that regardless of actual weight, women in their study persisted in seeing themselves as overweight. They suggested that “continual exposure to thin figures” in media contributed to women becoming unhappy with their body weights, again, no matter their actual weight (Kim & Lennon, 2007, p. 17).

Personal Responsibility, the Plastic Body, and Intersectionality

Often, people justify their negative attitudes toward fat individuals because of the longstanding belief that anyone can be a self-made person with the correct amount of effort and determination (McMichael, 2013). In the United States, this refrain can be seen in both the saying that anyone can grow up to be president and in the rags-to-riches Horatio Alger story. This faith in willpower and personal responsibility is also reflected in the widespread opinion that everyone, regardless of any mitigating factors, can lose weight and keep it off if they diet and exercise “correctly.” Failure to achieve these goals is simply the fault of the individual. LeBesco (2004) noted that “anti-fat bias is more pronounced in individualist cultures that emphasize personal freedom and autonomous goal achievement” (p. 55), such as the United

States. Considering how deeply these ideals are embedded in the mythos of the United States, fat people are almost un-American in their failure to achieve what “everyone” believes is possible.

Adherence to the tenets of personal responsibility over such factors as structural inequities or individual physical limitations is linked to the concept of the malleable or plastic body, which assumes that a given body can successfully be “fixed” through such interventions as dieting, exercise, or surgery, reflecting reigning societal norms, such as thinness (Ogle & Damhorst, 2004, p. 180). In *Unbearable Weight* (2004), Bordo turned the spotlight on Madonna to consider the idea of the malleable body. Madonna first rose to fame in the early 1980s, and initially, although she could never be described as fat, Madonna did not place herself under a strict eating or exercise regimen, and at that time spoke approvingly of the fact that she was a “more fleshy” contemporary female sex symbol (Bordo, 2004, p. 269). By 1987, however, Madonna’s physical appearance had changed significantly – she had lost weight and had developed a toned and more muscular frame, in part by having adopted a demanding exercise regimen consisting of running and weight lifting. Now in her early 60s, Madonna is still known for her taut, muscular frame and adherence to her fitness program.

A recurring and popular manifestation of the plastic body ideology are the “before and after” images and features in popular media, such as *People Magazine*’s periodic special issues that focus on 5-10 people who have lost over half of their body weight. These articles prominently feature side-by-side photographs of the fat version of the person next to the thin version. The magazine copy typically describes how each individual lost weight and includes some hints and motivational quotes from each person. Often, the people profiled discuss their diet and exercise programs. It almost goes without saying that the diet and exercise industries are also predicated upon the idea of the plastic body, as their entire reason for being is to sell

products and services to people who want to achieve the desired “after” body (Champion & Furnham, 1999; Furnham, Badmin, & Sneade, 2002).

The wildly optimistic ideology of personal responsibility and its offshoot, the malleable body, overlook at least two factors that may inhibit the ability to fulfill one’s appearance desires. First, not all bodies possess the same physical capabilities or capacities. Some people have fast metabolisms naturally and can easily burn calories. Similarly, some bodybuilders can easily build muscle, and others, popularly called “hardgainers,” have much more difficulty gaining muscle. A study of contestants on the television show “The Biggest Loser” (Fothergill et al., 2016) documented how the contestants’ resting metabolisms, which dropped precipitously as they lost large amounts of weight quickly for the reality show, remained at that very low rate even though most experienced “substantial weight regain” a few years after their participation in the show ended (p. 1619). A larger body usually requires proportionally greater calories to maintain its weight, but dieting upsets this relationship. Fothergill et al. (2016) concluded that “long-term weight loss requires vigilant combat against persistent metabolic adaptation that acts to proportionally counter ongoing efforts to reduce body weight” (p. 1619). In the case of one of the winners of the television competition, his “vigilant combat” at maintaining weight loss included exercising two to three hours a day and counting calories, but these were ultimately not enough for him to maintain his weight loss (Kolata, 2016).

Second, structural inequities exist in our world. Even if one’s body is capable of losing weight and keeping it off, living in poverty, as one example, may present many barriers to even being able to start a diet or exercise program. Ehrenreich’s *Nickle and Dimed* (2001), a memoir of her experiences working minimum wage jobs across the United States, clearly showed how low pay, a dearth of housing options, little free time, and physical exhaustion at the end of a long

day working a subsistence-level job led to a situation that did not enable or permit a “healthy diet” of fresh foods and home-cooked meals. Ehrenreich (2001) found that her wages only permitted her to live in motels that had been converted into long-term housing. These motels did not offer any kitchen facilities in their units, so Ehrenreich made do with a hot plate. Without a place to cook or store foods, it should not be surprising that already-prepared foods are often selected by individuals in such situations. Moreover, the level of tiredness at the end of a workday may preclude taking the time and energy to cook, even if the facilities are available. “Healthy” eating may not cost more money than fast food or prepared foods, but it may cost more in terms of time and energy, which can also be in short supply. In addition, although it seems strange to those of us who learned to cook at a parent’s knee and may have experienced some cooking instruction in public school, not everyone knows how to cook. For such individuals, learning to cook may be an overwhelming hurdle.

Intersectionality

The example described above, of how poverty may impact eating, cooking, and weight loss plans, leads to a discussion of intersectionality in the discussion of the thin ideal. Intersectionality has been described as “the interaction between [sic] gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (Davis, 2008, p. 68). Employing an intersectional approach allows for awareness of the many identities a person has and an understanding of how those identities can and do combine and affect a person’s life in unique ways. Intersectionality helps us to resist lumping people together and instead facilitates affirmation of the nuanced, complicated and situated state of a person’s life. Intersectionality

crucially fosters understanding of how overlapping identities may result in different experiences of oppression and/or marginalization.

The term intersectionality is a relatively new one, having been coined in 1989 by legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw illustrated the term by decrying the “single-axis framework...that distorts the multidimensionality of Black women’s experiences and undermines efforts to broaden feminist and antiracist analyses” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 356). Similar objections can be traced back to feminist women of color during the second wave of the feminist movements starting in the late 1960s, who disavowed the mainstream or liberal feminist movement’s singular and exclusionary vision. The liberal feminist vision “operat[ed] as if every woman’s experience is the same as the experiences of those women who have benefited from birth and continue to benefit on a daily basis from White privilege” (Tong & Botts, 2014, p. 213). The members of the Combahee River Collective, for example, wrote in their 1977 manifesto that they were:

... actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives (Eisenstein, 1977, para 1).

Many of the members of this collective had experienced sexism as they fought for the Civil Rights movement as well as racism in their interactions with the prevailing strains of feminism.

As noted in the Combahee River Collective’s statement, the group would go on to include the additional factors of heterosexism and economic oppression in their socio-political outlook. More recently, what constitutes intersectionality is expanding to a larger variety of

identities that a person may have that could be used for oppression (Knapp, 2005). Some examples of these recently added identities are age, sexual orientation, physical ability, and body size/weight.

Some fat studies scholars have approached fat oppression intersectionally. Farrell (2011) argued that “the enduring power of fat denigration overlaps with racial, ethnic, and national discrimination” (p. 2), as well as class and gender. LeBesco (2010) connected fatness with class concerns, as well as race and gender:

Fatness in our present time of abundance in the United States is now more closely associated with the poor and working classes. If African Americans and Latinos are fatter than Whites and Asians, and women are more likely than men to be fat, fatness haunts us as a reminder of deteriorating physical privilege in terms of race and sex (p. 75).

Comparisons of obesity prevalence and attendant body dissatisfaction in African American and White women have been a popular focus for researchers in many fields, including public health, nutrition, economics, anthropology and psychology. Although a higher percentage of African American women have been identified as overweight or obese as compared to White women, researchers have typically concluded that they are more accepting of and less dissatisfied with their own bodies, are less apt to consider themselves overweight, and prefer a larger body size as an ideal (Neff, Sargent, McKeown, Jackson, & Valois, 1997; Parker, Nichter, Nichter, Vuckovic, Sims & Rittenbaugh, 1995; Stevens, Kumanyika, & Keil, 1994). There seems to be less of a stigma against larger-sized women in the African American community as a whole; for example, heterosexual African American men prefer larger women as partners much more often than White men do (Hebl & Heatherton, 1998).⁵

⁵ Note, however, that this citation is from 1998 and may not be as applicable now.

On the other hand, it is not just White celebrities like Madonna who have altered their bodies to better meet thin-ideal beauty standards: African American celebrities Oprah Winfrey (Bernstein & St. John, 2009), Jennifer Hudson, Queen Latifah, and Missy Elliott have all, to a greater or lesser extent, lost noticeable amounts of weight. And one of the most well-known African Americans of recent years, First Lady Michelle Obama, was renowned for her physical fitness and her work to fight obesity in children (Farrell, 2011).⁶ These anecdotes suggest that at least some African American women subscribe to some of the mainstream societal beliefs about fatness, fitness, and weight loss. Again, seeing race as a monolithic identity that is not intersected with other identities when speaking of weight and fat acceptance may not tell the whole story.

The Changing Fortunes of Fat in the United States

As Lewin (2013) wrote in her exploration of fat-positive internet communities, “the vilification of the fat body has a complicated history in the United States” (p. 2); the overwhelmingly negative connotations of the word “fat” are neither timeless nor universal (Saukko, 1999). Starting from the mid-19th century in the United States, the confluence of a variety of factors slowly produced the idea of a thin figure as the ideal body type, especially for women (Stearns, 1999).

Fat, Nutrition, and Morality

By the middle of the nineteenth century, some North American social commentators had begun to express sentiments equating fat with moral turpitude, sexual excess, and/or simple ugliness. Religious historian W. G. McLoughlin (1978) classified this era as the Third Great Awakening in the United States. The religious influence in American culture clearly existed

⁶ However, the First Lady was reported to wear a size 8 or 10, which is closer to the average body size of U.S. women overall than to the size of fashion models.

before this time, but it is interesting to note the conspicuous pairing of this religious revival with an interest in health reform and nutrition (Sokolow, 1983). Sylvester Graham, the inventor of the graham cracker, was a Presbyterian minister in this era; he created his cracker as the food equivalent of the temperance movement for alcohol (Shryock, 1931). Later in the 19th century, John Harvey Kellogg stood firmly at the confluence of reformist religion and nutrition. Kellogg was the head physician at the Battle Creek Sanitarium health resort that was owned by the Seventh Day Adventist Church. In line with the writings of his church's leader Ellen White, Kellogg advocated vegetarianism and abstaining from alcohol (Fee & Brown, 2002). He invented corn flakes as an exemplar of a healthful food that, importantly, would help to dissipate lustful desires.

Kellogg specifically addressed his fat patients by prescribing prolonged chewing of meals along with the other services of his sanitarium, with the connotation that a morally fit body was thin (Farrell, 2011). McMichael (2013) aptly compares this urge to enshrine the thin body as moral as a reimagining of the religious ascetic, whose devotion to spiritual matters precluded any physical enjoyment.

Insurance Companies

A variety of commercial interests also impacted perceptions about fat and fat bodies. In 1897, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company (Met Life) issued its first height-weight actuarial tables, specifying optimal weight ranges for various heights and genders (Daniel, 2015; Matz & Frankel, 2014). These tables were compiled from data taken from Met Life's customer base, which was not representative of the United States population as a whole, skewing toward male, White, and middle class (Boero, 2012). Although the tables were initially "designed to reply to the economic motive of insurance selection" (Jutel, 2001, p. 286), they would go on to

be used for more than simply determining whether a person was an acceptable risk to insure (Daniel, 2015). The tables were divided by gender and age range and included weight ranges corresponding to “average” and to “overweight”; any individual who weighed 20% or more than the average was required to pay higher insurance premiums (Applebaum, n.d.). Czerniawski (2015) wrote that the tables were especially novel because they “introduced the notion of [a science-based] ‘ideal’ weight and became a means for practicing social regulation of weight” (p. 6). Because actuarial tables are commonly concerned with mortality rates, when insurance companies started using tables that classified people according to weight, “too much” bodyweight became linked to disease and/or early mortality, whether or not the linkage was completely accurate (Boero, 2012; Farrell, 2011).

Ready-Made, Mass-Produced Clothing

Another commercial innovation in the industrialized world from the late-1800s onward that influenced many people’s opinions of the most desirable body size was the burgeoning availability of ready-made mass-produced clothing (Aldrich, 2007). If clothing size options are preset and a body does not fit into any of those standardized sizes, it may not be surprising that the average person thinks an abnormally sized body should be the thing to change, not an entire system of clothes sizing. That the apparel industry today, as far as women’s clothing goes, offers a morass of confusing and substantial sizing variations between brands, as well as different sizing for different types of apparel (e.g., separate sizes for wedding dresses) merely affirms the fairly arbitrary systems of sizing for ready-made apparel. Men’s sizing, on the other hand, is much more (though not completely) standardized across retailers.

Pervasive Racism and Xenophobia

Gilman (1986) examined widespread beliefs in nineteenth-century Western culture about the Black female body. In considering Manet's 1863 painting "Olympia," Gilman wrote that like other artists of the time in the West, Manet used the mere presence of a Black woman in the painting to indicate sexuality, depravity and deviance in both herself and the other woman depicted in the painting, a White woman who was a prostitute. The idea of Blacks being overly sexualized and animal-like was well-established in the West by the time Manet painted "Olympia." It was also affirmed by the science of the day, with many scientists and doctors believing that Blacks were lower evolutionarily than White people and were in fact almost a different species, having evolved from different origins than Whites (Gilman, 1986). Black women were especially considered to be animal-like and extremely sexual. The science and medical establishment even believed that Black women's sexual organs were different from White women's. Seeing Blacks as the Other was epitomized by the story of Saartjie Baartman, who was known popularly as the Hottentot Venus (Gilman, 1986). Baartman was a woman of the African Khoikhoi people who was taken to London and Paris as a slave and exhibited as a curiosity in the early 1800s. She became notorious because of her especially large buttocks. While the public ogled Baartman's rear, medical doctors were apparently more interested in her "malformed," "too developed" labia, which they saw as proving that Blacks were indeed a separate and lower species from Whites. As Gilman (1986) wrote, Baartman became objectified as two monstrous sets of body parts in the eyes of the White West.

At approximately the same time, the antebellum South in the United States gave rise to the stereotype of the Mammy. Mammy was another fat, dark-skinned Black woman, but she was depicted as a maternal, nurturing, domestic slave who selflessly served as the primary caregiver

for the White children in the household (West, 1995). The Mammy figure is a continuing presence in United States culture and may play a significant role in African American women's relationships with their personal body image and with mainstream societal beauty ideals, which primarily privilege the thin, White body.

Along with endemic racist attitudes towards people of color already in the United States, such as African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latino Americans, by 1907 over 80% of those moving to the United States hailed from Southern and Eastern Europe (Goodwin, 2008). These new immigrants were also more likely to be Catholic or Jewish, and there were continuing attempts to characterize these immigrants as naturally less intelligent and less "civilized" than the White, Protestant, Western Europeans who had settled in the United States in decades past (Farrell, 2011). In fact, this era saw the introduction of intelligence tests administered to immigrants, effectively penalizing individuals who were poor, uneducated, and not familiar with Anglo-American, Protestant culture.

Psychologist Henry Goddard's work on Ellis Island is one example of flawed science feeding into the prejudice and racism of the day (Goodwin, 2008). Starting in 1913, his team administered intelligence tests to those arriving at Ellis Island. Interestingly, only those who traveled in steerage had to be processed at Ellis Island; first- and second-class travelers bypassed Ellis Island and these testing procedures. Goddard found that in testing individuals who were Russian, Hungarian, Italian, and Jewish, approximately 80% were "feebleminded" and hence liable to be denied entrance into the United States (Goodwin, 2008). The fact that his tests were difficult for non-English speakers to understand and were skewed toward the cultures already living in the United States was overlooked as Goddard's spurious findings simply affirmed the popular prejudices of the day.

At the same time that immigrants' minds were heralded as inferior to the mainstream, hegemonic culture's standard body shape was also used as a clear indication of how "civilized" a given people were – thereby strengthening mainstream culture's increasingly negative thoughts on fatness (Farrell, 2011). Saukko (1999) noted that the apparent intellectual weaknesses of various populations were often combined with various physical failings, such as "inferior" body shapes; in fact, fatness itself was used to classify certain groups on a continuum from "primitive" to "civilized," with prostitutes, Africans, and native peoples on the opposite end of the scale from White, aristocratic, Christian men (Farrell, 2011). LeBesco (2004) indicated that among Southern Italians at this time, where poverty was an enduring factor and the food supply was as of yet neither robust nor certain, a fatter body still stood for beauty and prosperity. This illustrates the two competing bodily ideals in contention at the turn of the century.

White, Middle-Class Women: The Public Sphere and the Vote

At the turn of the 20th century, additional societal developments extended the trend toward a thin body ideal. First, more middle-class women in industrialized nations were moving into the public sphere. Fraser (2009) suggested that many who entered the public sphere would come to literally or metaphorically forsake the maternal role and its "plump and reproductive physique, which began to seem old-fashioned" (p. 13). Women moving into the public sphere included those who agitated for female suffrage, which was finally achieved in the U.S. in 1920 (Leach, 1984).

Of course, the 1920s are also memorable for the iconic "flapper," a vibrant young woman who brooked tradition by cutting her hair, wearing short skirts and binding her breasts. Although not as thin as today's contemporary ideal, the flapper look was a clear step away from the more hourglass shape of previous decades and toward a thin body ideal. Not all women embraced the

flapper look or lifestyle, yet this iconic figure has had an enduring impact on bodily ideals in the West. Moreover, although the technological innovation of ready-to-wear clothing had first begun in the late-1800s, the concept benefitted from the 1920s fashions, as the “soft cylinder” shape of clothing from this decade was much simpler to mass-produce as compared to the more complex articles of clothing seen in previous decades on corseted figures (Aldrich, 2007, p. 38).

From the 1920s forward, thinness has been an important part of the beauty ideal for women in industrialized countries, although standards have fluctuated throughout the decades, from the more curvaceous Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe in the 1940s and 1950s to the extraordinarily thin model Twiggy from the 1960s or Kate Moss from the 1990s. Contemporary celebrities such as women of color Nicki Minaj and Jennifer Lopez and reality star Kim Kardashian present a different idealized figure as they celebrate their prominent derrieres. Although some of these stars offer diversity in regards to body silhouette and proportion possibly related to ethnicity, none claims to wear plus sizes.

Fighting the Thin Ideal: Size Acceptance and Fat Activism

Organized resistance to the mainstream thin ideal eventually came in the wake of the Civil Rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s. NAAFA, or the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (originally the National Association to Aid Fat Americans), was formed in 1969 as an assimilationist group that advocated societal reform and tolerance towards their constituency. It describes itself as the oldest North American-based nonprofit organization working to “end size discrimination” (NAAFA, 2016, para 1) through legislation and improving fat people’s lives.

Another important blow to the anti-fat/pro-dieting mindset occurred in 1978 with the publication of Susie Orbach’s *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, which aimed to be an “anti-diet guide” (p.

iii). In lieu of endlessly dieting, she instead advocated self-acceptance and learning to recognize bodily hunger signals. As the title suggests, Orbach saw fatness as being intimately tied to the “limitations of women’s role” (1978, pp. 13-14) in contemporary Western society. With her psychoanalytic background, Orbach theorized that women symbolically react to their social oppression by gaining weight. In this way, weight gain could be seen as a passive-aggressive way of expressing anger. Although this book was pioneering in that it depicted women who were struggling with their weight in the context of socio-psychological factors, Orbach never questioned the mandate that women should lose weight or struggle to resist gaining weight. She maintained in this book and its sequel, *Fat is a Feminist Issue II* (1982), that refraining from both dieting and compulsive eating would somehow translate into weight loss. In the very first pages of the first book, Orbach wrote that the goal was “permanent weight loss” (1978, p. iii).

Marcia Millman (1980) took a different approach to the experience of being fat in her book *Such a Pretty Face: Being Fat in America*. It was perhaps the first popular work to explicitly describe the stigma of being fat in ways that still resound today, describing obesity as “arous[ing] emotions of surprising intensity, including horror, contempt, morbid fascination, shame, and moral outrage” (1980, p. xvi). She noted that fat people are pushed to the margins of society and are “set apart” (1980, p. 79), and because of this, fatness may take on a master status among all their identities. In this case, having a master status means that a person is identified as fat first before any other identifications are made, such as gender, age, or profession (Becker, 1963).

Additional Restriction in the Late 20th Century: Thin, Toned, and Healthy

An additional requirement arose starting in the 1980s: Women should not just be thin, but also physically fit, meaning that the contours of their bodies should be smooth and taut, with

somewhat developed (but not too developed) muscles (Bordo, 2004). Women were entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers in the 1980s, and authors who have written about the various waves of feminism have noted how resultant societal changes often rebound upon women's bodies, as if increased power in the public sphere is counterbalanced by increased restrictions in other realms (Bordo, 2004; Wolf, 2002), or as if the *Zeitgeist* is written on women's bodies (Saukko, 1999). In addition, as many women have moved into roles that were previously only taken by men, such as in the realm of work, the slender and muscular female body may in effect "declare symbolic allegiance to the professional, White, male world" (Bordo, 2004, p. 210).

The late 20th century was also notable for the medicalization of obesity and for the framing of obesity as an epidemic (Boero, 2012; LeBesco, 2010). LeBesco (2010) described medical professionals' pronouncements as a form of social control, with the result that Western post-industrial society has almost completely conflated health and morality, "point(ing) the finger at individuals who we understand to be lazy, out of control, without will, ignorant, or some combination thereof" (p. 73). The fact that obesity is not evenly distributed across races, ethnicities, classes, and genders should not be overlooked (Berlant, 2010; LeBesco, 2010). "Fatness began to be framed as an epidemic based on social biases against those we imagine to be indolent and undisciplined only after it became more associated with women, the poor, and people of color than wealthy White men" (LeBesco, 2010, p. 75).

This preoccupation with portraying obesity as a disease that can be treated through a variety of weight loss measures is especially ironic. Both popular and medical sources implicitly assume that any person who is actually serious about losing weight and maintaining that loss can be successful (McMichael, 2013). However, this myth of individualistic "gumption" being able

to conquer all obstacles clashes with the actual evidence. Most people eventually regain the weight they have lost by dieting (MacLean, Bergouignan, Corner, & Jackman, 2011). Mann, Tomiyama, Westling, Lew, Samuels, and Chatman (2007) noted in their meta-analysis of dieting effectiveness studies that of those studies that followed dieters for at least two years after their weight loss, over 83% of dieters had actually regained more weight than they had originally lost. Mann et al. (2007) concluded that “the potential benefits of dieting on long-term weight outcomes are minimal” (p. 230).

Even as knowledge of these findings becomes more widely known, the mainstream beauty ideal for women remains slim, and fat people continue to be painted as failures for not being able to accomplish an impossible task. This is a hateful and difficult situation, not just for the people who do not measure up physically, but for a much wider swath of society.

Internet and Social Media

So far, this review of the literature has only considered mainstream media and their depiction and use of fat/plus-size women. However, it is impossible to think about media today without considering the rise of the internet in the late 1990s, especially the advent of “new” or participatory media, which are more commonly known as social media. Of greatest interest to this researcher is the potential for the more visually oriented platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat, to promulgate beauty and fashion standards deviating from the thin norm.

The internet was originally almost completely text-based and not unlike “old” mass media in that most webpages were descriptive, static, and featured one-way communication. This is not to say that there were no opportunities to belong to and contribute to communities online – Usenet was an early instance of newsgroups or message boards, where individuals could post,

respond, and help to develop a community around a particular topic. Chat rooms on early web portals, such as America Online (AOL), were additional sites for text-based community and participation by individuals.

Participation online dramatically increased with the advent of blogging sites, such as LiveJournal and Blogger; wikis, which are websites that are collaboratively written and edited, like Wikipedia; and social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook. All of these types of sites featured easy-to-use interfaces that allowed people who were not computer programmers to personalize a webpage, find friends, and begin to interact online much more easily. In 2005, with the launch of YouTube, participatory media expanded to include videos (Burgess & Green, 2009b). Anyone with a video camera, a computer and movie editing software now had a place where their video films could be shared with the world. YouTube is ranked as the second most popular website globally, with Google as most popular, and Facebook as third most popular (Alexa Internet, 2019).

Since the early days of online communities, participatory media has often been characterized in utopian terms by academics and writers such as Henry Jenkins and Howard Rheingold (e.g., Jenkins, 2006; Rheingold, 2000). Because participatory media enables the individual to actively participate in media, this perspective believes that individuals can directly take part in cultural conversations instead of those conversations being completely filtered through mass media owned by corporations. Thus, it suggests there is the potential for profoundly disrupting the entrenched thin ideal through the wide variety of individuals taking part in participatory media sites. Indeed, the fourth wave of feminism is closely connected with the internet and the possibilities of participatory media, which is seen as a medium that “enable[s] women to raise their voices... and organize powerfully across borders” (Cochrane,

2013). Rivers (2017) suggested that the internet is a tool to be used for mass organizing and resistance, “and for giving voice to those marginalized by mainstream feminist debates” (p. 145).

Because of the relative newness of social media, there is less literature on this aspect of the current dissertation. Much scholarship has concentrated on blogs and Facebook, but YouTube has been studied to a lesser extent. Kousha, Thelwall, and Addoli (2012) examined the inclusion of YouTube videos as citations in academic papers and noted consistent growth in their use. In contrast, there is less research on the actual videos themselves. The disciplines with the most research focusing on YouTube videos are communication, education, and health and medicine (Snelson, 2011).

Communication-focused research includes such topics as an analysis of comments on YouTube videos (Madden, Ruthven, & McMenemy, 2013), the reactions of a variety of user groups (e.g., varying by gender and geographic location) to specific YouTube videos (O'Donnell, Gibson, Milliken, & Singer, 2008), and the development of online community through sharing videos (Rotman & Preece, 2010).

Madathil, Rivera-Rodriguez, Greenstein, and Gramopadhye (2015) analyzed 18 academic papers that inquired into how healthcare topics were presented on YouTube. Healthcare-themed topics on YouTube that have been the focus of recent articles appearing in peer-reviewed journals include alcohol intoxication (Primack, Colditz, Pang, & Jackson, 2015), immunizations (Keelan, Pavri-Garcia, Tomlinson, & Wilson, 2007), antismoking campaigns (Paek, Kim, & Hove, 2010), and the use of medications during pregnancy (Hansen et al., 2016).

Studies have been conducted with an attempt to define who uses YouTube and why, as a longstanding critique of YouTube channels was that they were simply bootlegging music videos, television programs, and movies and reposting them on YouTube without permission

(Christensen, 2007). YouTube is typically seen as having a dual nature. On the one hand, there are individual, amateur video makers who do not have a background in film or television production (Burgess & Green, 2009b). The channels of amateurs are contrasted with channels created by traditional media companies and mainstream businesses that are on YouTube as part of a larger online strategy that encompasses having a YouTube channel, a blog, a Twitter account, Instagram feed, etc., in order to expand their reach, stake a place in the social media world, and engage with their customers. As an example of the corporate presence on YouTube, Dior's channel features professionally shot and edited featurettes. One recent video followed the creation of a handwoven fabric used for garments shown on the Autumn/Winter 2019-2020 haute couture runway (Dior, 2019). Dior's YouTube channel also includes footage from runway shows, interviews with designers, a feature on its jewelry collection, and makeup tutorials using the company's line of products. Some of these videos may be especially created for YouTube, but often these films are repurposed from other venues; television commercials for a designer's fragrances are often uploaded to a YouTube channel, where they transform from ad to feature film.

However, what has usually interested communication scholars and other researchers more than mainstream organizations' forays into the world of YouTube is the video work of individual, independent creators. Burgess and Green (2009b) focus on this group of YouTubers when they discuss the growing sense of entrepreneurialism of YouTube's "homegrown" performers and producers" (p. 91). Participants in the interviews conducted for this study were composed of individuals from this "homegrown" group.

Dress in Social Media

Blogs

To date, much research about dress- or fashion-related issues online has dealt with blogs and the phenomenon of selfies. *Fashion Theory* dedicated its April 2015 issue to the topic, with issue editors Mora and Rocamora noting that fashion and style blogs were now perceived to be venues “for understanding contemporary culture and society... and for interrogat[ing]... contemporary practices of dress and discourses on fashion and appearance” (p. 150). The issue featured five articles that investigated online dress-related issues through a variety of several theoretical frameworks, including historic, socio-psychological, and feminist approaches. Findlay (2015) documented the history of personal fashion and style blogs. She dated the earliest of these blogs to 2001 but noted that many mainstream fashion observers did not become aware of fashion bloggers until the bloggers began to be invited to runway shows in 2009. Fashion and personal style bloggers had been (or at least started out as) outsiders to the fashion industry, but became at least marginal and recognized “insiders” due to the volume of their followers on the internet, not to mention their potential for increasing exposure of brands to consumers. Findlay succinctly described two of the most important factors of fashion blogging as “an alternative, creative means of identity play through fashion” (2015, p. 158) and as a practice in developed nations that was typically in full accord with capitalism and consumerism. Titton (2015) considered fashion blogging as a narrative technique with the goal of the creation and performance of self, while Pedroni (2015) applied Boudrieu’s field analysis theory to the novel location of fashion bloggers within the field of fashion while enumerating the various types of capital at play in blogging. Lewis (2015) discussed subcultural change in the field of modest fashion as chronicled by orthodox Jewish and conservative Muslim fashion bloggers.

Although Pham's (2015a) article in this special issue, about Twitter selfies, does not explicitly concern blogging, much of her work has specifically examined fashion bloggers, especially Asian and Asian American fashion and style bloggers. Her 2015 book, *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet: Race, Gender, and the Work of Personal Style Blogging*, delved into the careers of influential Asian or Asian American fashion "superbloggers," including Susanna Lau, Bryan Yambao, and Aimee Song. Seeing them as representatives of a rising Asian creative class, she nonetheless refuted the suggestion, which is often implicit in discussions of virtual, internet-based work, that knowledge workers such as these bloggers labor in a post-racist, post-classist, and post-sexist milieu. In fact, Pham (2015b) drew comparisons between these bloggers and factory workers (both past and present) who physically labor to manufacture apparel.

In an earlier article focused on Asian women's fashion blogs, Pham (2011) placed the concept of participatory media in the context of a post-industrialist society in which technological developments often originate from and are deeply intertwined with military, corporate, and governmental interests. Because of these connections, Pham argued that the utopian vision of the potential for participatory media to serve as a truly democratic platform is mostly a mirage. Nevertheless, there was room for genuine agency in the blogging activities of the women Pham profiled. She noted that they have used their blogs as places to narrate their actual lived experiences, and in doing so, they were able to take a stand against racism and stereotyping.

Chittenden (2010) examined female teens whose blogs often featured images of the blogger attired in specific outfits, including teen's everyday attire or special-occasion clothing. These blogs were characterized as workshops to develop their individual identities as well as places for simple self-expression. Chittenden emphasized the importance of the interaction

between bloggers and commenters, as commenters' reactions were critical to help the blogger see and reflect on self. Rocamora's 2011 study of women's fashion blogs also viewed blogs as a space for "identity construction through clothes" (p. 407). In interpreting fashion for themselves, blogs became a space for women to explore questions of femininity, both positive and negative. Blogs served as an ambivalent space: They made a woman into an object, but also gave her agency to create – both her own blog content and her image.

Rocamora (2011) asserted that blogs had started to exert at least some influence on mainstream fashion, a point that Pham (2015b) also detailed in her book. She noted that popular fashion bloggers had potential "sales-boosting power" and were capable of bringing sudden notoriety to new or obscure designers just by wearing their labels (p. 1).

Fashion bloggers who considered themselves to be fundamentally independent from the industry they covered, and therefore not " beholden to advertisers, editors or deadlines, so they have complete creative freedom," were the subject of Heffner's (2012, p. 51) investigation. Heffner's bloggers were members of the Independent Fashion Bloggers network, and in this organization, they worked to make transparent any relationships they had with advertisers or other corporate entities and sought to create a code of conduct for ethical behavior as bloggers.

Kennedy (2011) studied 35 fashion and personal style bloggers to see how they positioned themselves with respect to consumerism and the fashion industry in their blogs. As noted, fashion bloggers usually start out as outsiders to the fashion industry. Kennedy (2011) suggested that these bloggers employed one of three strategies. First, they may stand in opposition to the entrenched consumerism of the industry, perhaps espousing slow fashion, thrifting, or not including advertising on their blogs. Second, bloggers may conditionally involve themselves in consumerist aspects of fashion. This may be manifested as allowing

advertisements on their blogs or in participating in a “no-buy” campaign, where they pledge to spend no money on apparel or makeup for a certain period of time, after which time they allow themselves to purchase dress products. Third, bloggers may buy into the existing system and may want to break in and gain acceptance by the fashion industry. These bloggers often see themselves as entrepreneurs and seek to work with established companies in the industry.

Luvaas (2013) also focused on the consumer aspect of blogs. He described the Indonesian fashion blogs in his research as platforms for both consumerism and self-promotion. Historically, Indonesian culture has intermixed ideas of fashion with class, status, and nation building. Instead of acting as Pham’s (2011) Asian women bloggers in opposing the mainstream cultural hegemony, Indonesian fashion bloggers who achieved success in their field apparently wanted to join the mainstream, not necessarily change or rebuild it. In this way, the bloggers in Luvaas’ paper can be seen to support Indonesia’s efforts to become like more affluent countries, such as Western or post-industrialist nations. Mendoza (2010) also portrayed fashion bloggers as entrepreneurs. Although they are usually neither professional fashion journalists nor designers, they are often perceived to be fashion experts. Those who have large readerships have the potential to influence many, which explains the growing relationships between marketers and bloggers and the bloggers’ increasing number of product endorsements (Mendoza, 2010).

Selfies

Selfies are a social media product that has become a popular research focus for scholars from a variety of fields. A quick query on Google Scholar returns over 26,000 articles related to the topic, almost all of which date from 2013 or later. Beyond foundational research that takes an overarching look at who takes selfies, much of the literature is related to the relationship between selfies, personality, self-presentation, and body dissatisfaction.

Souza and his colleagues (2015), noting that most work with selfies to date had approached the topic with qualitative methods based in psychological or sociological approaches, instead took a quantitative approach to the topic. They employed Instagram's application programming interface (API) to query the Instagram database directly for information on posts that featured selfie imagery. Focusing on posts from 2012-2014, they searched for hashtags that included the word "selfie" or variants of it, and they also used Face++, a software program, to find images that included facial features. These procedures produced a dataset of over four million images, which they used to study changing trends in selfie posts over time. They were mainly interested in cross-cultural questions, including whether selfies were indicative of greater gender equity in a society, the relationship between selfie posts and individualism/collectivism in a given culture, and if selfie posts were related to uncertainty avoidance.⁷ While the researchers could not conclude that more individualistic societies produce more selfies, they were able to conclude that nations with greater equality between the sexes produced more selfies.

Chua and Chang's (2016) qualitative study considered a specific population, Singaporean teenage girls, and their use of Instagram selfies in relation to peers and self-presentation. Arguing that social media offers a new space in which teenagers can experiment with self-image and with peer relationships, they employed semi-structured interview techniques with 24 teenage girls. Their results suggested two main themes: that edited (e.g., "Photoshopped" or filtered) selfies communicated beauty in line with societal norms and the importance of positive peer feedback in the process. Most interviewees admitted to insecurity about their looks. Even if they disagreed with the idealized beauty images in society, they felt they had to try to conform to them because

⁷ Individualism/collectivism and uncertainty avoidance are two concepts associated with social psychologist Hofstede (2001) and commonly used in cross-cultural psychology.

of peer scrutiny. As adolescents are in an intense developmental stage of their personality and beliefs, this study offers a window into the experiences of the young female participants.

McLean, Paxton, Wertheim, and Masters (2015), working in the field of public health, focused on a similar population of adolescent girls but were concerned with how selfie image editing may be related to body image dislike, and potentially, dietary restraint or other disordered eating. They administered surveys to 101 female seventh-grade students. McLean et al. (2015) concluded that “higher levels of body-related and eating concerns were found for participants engaging in more social media-related self-photo activities” (p. 1137). For these adolescent girls, more engagement in social media was associated with greater body dissatisfaction and greater adherence to a thin body ideal, which could potentially include disordered eating.

Seock and Merritt (2013) surveyed 320 female high school students to explore questions related to the roles of media and peer teasing in encouraging body dissatisfaction. They found that peers and media had more influence on body dissatisfaction than a high body mass index (BMI). A BMI figure compares a person’s height and weight to assess if the individual is of so-called “normal” weight. As the authors note, judgments from friends and society at large therefore impact adolescent girls more strongly than their actual physical state as measured by the BMI.

Chua and Chang (2016), as well as McLean et al. (2015), described the selfie taking, editing, posting, and feedback process as potentially leading to greater body dissatisfaction and lessening self-esteem. Although Seock and Merritt (2013) did not focus specifically on selfies or social media, their findings that social pressures as expressed through media in general and through peer criticism/approval, aligns with other findings that are specifically about selfies.

Fat, Fashion, and Social Media

Lewin (2013) is one of the few authors who has specifically investigated questions of beauty and fat acceptance on a social media platform. She compared images posted to a fat-positive Tumblr blog called “Fuck Yeah Fat Positive” to photographs used for a New York City anti-obesity public health campaign. The health campaign used images of fat people, apparently without their explicit permission, to portray them and their fat bodies as objects that are diseased and inferior, even going so far as to Photoshop an amputated leg into one image. The Tumblr blog, in contrast, features self-portraits actively submitted by the subjects of the photographs. “Fuck Yeah Fat Positive” allowed each individual pictured to “create new narratives of the body that resist mere pathology” (Lewin, 2013, p. 19).

The “Beauty Community”: Dress on YouTube

Relatively few investigations have been conducted on YouTube’s “Beauty Community,” the self-styled appellation of the content creators on the platform who make videos related to dress, fashion, and beauty products. In 2014, Chang profiled four popular YouTube Asian American “beauty gurus”⁸: video creators Jen Chae, Jenn Im, Weylie Hoang, and Michelle Phan. Outside the dominant White mainstream because of their ethnicity, these creators’ video work uses “beauty as moralistic currency in which to navigate” capitalism (Chang, 2014, p. 7). One type of video that is common currency among these Asian American gurus is a makeup tutorial creating a faux eye fold on a monolid – that is, correcting a “defective” body through makeup, thus more closely conforming to White beauty ideals.

⁸ This phrase, as well as the previously mentioned “Beauty Community,” are terms that are in general use on YouTube (including among the beauty gurus themselves) to describe individuals singly or as a group who typically make fashion, style, and makeup-themed videos.

In the 1990s, Anarbaeva (2011) was an exchange student in the United States. She described the experience of being in the ethnic mainstream in her native country, Kyrgyzstan, but upon arriving in the U.S., she almost immediately and jarringly realized she was “the ‘Other’” (Anarbaeva, 2011, p. 3). Her skin tone, hair, and facial features clearly varied from the U.S. mainstream, as seen in the features of the people in her host community and in mainstream media. Years later, returning to the United States as a graduate student, she found female video creators on YouTube who had features similar to her own. Her 2011 dissertation considered YouTube beauty gurus in relation to gender, ethnicity, and difference. Anarbaeva concluded that on YouTube, Asian women could and did actively and authentically represent themselves and their lived experience, similar to Pham’s (2011) conclusions on Asian women’s fashion blogs, although Anarbaeva did not approach her subject through a critical lens.

A case study of two Asian American vloggers examined the intertwining aspects of entrepreneurialism and identity work in their careers on YouTube (Ledbetter, 2014). Like Anarbaeva (2011), Ledbetter herself was drawn to the YouTube beauty community because she could see women of color like herself there. She noted, “I could hear stories that were familiar, see faces that at least looked a little like my own, and feel my own experiences validated” (2014, p. 2). The two women she profiled also noted that YouTube, to some extent, had alleviated the feeling of isolation they felt as women of color in the offline world. Ledbetter also characterized her participants as individuals who use the platform to tell the story of themselves in a way that they felt was most authentic and that disrupted mainstream’s society’s beliefs about how they should be or behave. Ledbetter wrote that individuals “of diverse backgrounds construct and use the beauty community for identity work that is as essential to cultural sustainability” while also being a place of “entrepreneurship and profit” (2014, p. 31).

Anthropologist Spyer (2011) investigated several topics in his study of the YouTube beauty community, including “tag” videos and parasocial interactions. Tag videos can be about any topic, but the vlogger who originally comes up with a tag has in effect created a set of questions about the topic in question, answered those questions in the video, and then finally “tagged” other vloggers to make a similar video by answering the same set of questions. For example, the “Would You Rather” beauty tag, with questions like “Would you rather be forced to shop at only MAC or Sephora for the rest of your life?” is a tag that has been filtering through the beauty community since at least 2010 (Fowler, 2010). Spyer (2011) described these types of videos as ceremonial ways to gain and build relationships among vloggers.

Spyer (2011) also equated one of the staples of this community’s videos, makeup tutorials, as “traps” (p. 37) to highlight the artificiality of the videos. They are artificial in the sense that the speaker is pretending to speak directly to the viewer, someone the vlogger has most likely never met, acting as if the vlogger and viewer were friends. This type of interaction is not only found in vlogging, however, as research on television shopping channels also described this kind of parasocial interaction, “a pseudo-intimate relationship between viewers and media personalities” (Park & Lennon, 2004, p. 138). Park and Lennon (2004) reported that parasocial interaction was encouraged by television shopping network management as a way to increase sales and loyalty to the station.

Keats (2012) studied YouTube “haul” videos, in which individuals were filmed showing items they had recently purchased. Hauls are popular subjects in the beauty community. A haul video simply features the vlogger discussing a recent shopping trip. She methodically shows each item she has purchased to the camera and talks about it. This can include the purchase price, why she decided to buy the item, and how she envisions using the product. Keats (2012) found

three main themes throughout her case studies – the relationship of production and consumption, identity exploration and construction, and community. “Consumption and production” refers to the fact that haul videos by definition require acquisition of products in order to have something to film. Additionally, if the content creator is dedicated to producing videos on a regular schedule, then the demands of production may push her to do a haul video, because they are easy to do. One need only go to a store and buy things to have material for a video. Like several of the scholars who examined fashion blogs, Keats found many opportunities for content producers to engage in various kinds of identity exploration. Finally, she noted that content creators usually ask their viewers for suggestions and comments and to stay in contact with them via such media as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Keats proposed that in doing so, community is created.

Leadership in Fashion Diffusion

There is a significant body of research based on Rogers’ (1962) diffusion of innovation model in relation to fashion adoption and consumption. Rogers’ theory can be graphed as a normal bell curve, with time as the x-axis and number of adopters of a given fashion as the y-axis. In the bell curve, the first adopters are usually called “innovators” and make up less than 3% of a given population (Brannon, 2005). Moving forward in time, the next group of adopters are typically denoted as “early adopters/fashion opinion leaders,” and about 12-13.5% of a population is made up of these individuals (Brannon, 2005). The innovators and early adopters/fashion opinion leaders were described by Kaiser (1998) as change agents, through whose actions a new fashion is introduced and publicized. Their actions may lead to the next category of individuals in the bell curve, the majority of consumers, to accept the new fashion.

Fashion innovators may not necessarily want to popularize a new style, but they serve as “visual display and initial exposure” of a new fashion (Kaiser, 1998, p. 493). Innovators tend to

be non-conformist, deal with risk well, are more interested in fashion than the average consumer, and are novelty seeking (Kaiser, 1998).

Fashion opinion leaders are part of the second, larger, group of adopters. They are different from innovators in several ways. Opinion leaders are more conformist than are innovators and “provid[e] the needed impetus for others’ adoption processes” (Kaiser, 1998, p. 496). They are sociable, cosmopolitan, self-monitoring, knowledgeable about fashion trends, have a need for variety (Workman & Johnson, 1993), and have a “concern with self presentation” (Kaiser, 1998, p. 497). They tend to be more connected to groups than innovators (and some other early adopters) are. Kaiser (1998) also noted that some people are both innovators and opinion leaders, though these people are few in any population.

Behling (1992) analyzed 20 studies in the field to create an aggregate definition of what it means to be a fashion early adopter. Based on her findings, she did not separate innovators from early adopters and fashion opinion leaders, and she used the term “early adopter” as an umbrella term. She defined them as young, unmarried, and usually female, “interested in fashion enough to read magazines,” and as “social, conforming, and competitive” (p. 40). In addition, they are somewhat exhibitionistic and do not have trouble dealing with change.

Findings from research into fashion blogs mentioned the profoundly consumption-focused nature of some of these blogs and the fact that many bloggers consider themselves to be entrepreneurs (Kennedy, 2011; Luvaas, 2013; Mendoza, 2010). Fashion and beauty bloggers write and post online surprisingly frequently – on a weekly, or even daily, basis. Blogger Aimee Song, one of the “superbloggers” profiled by Pham (2015b), posted daily to her blog “Song of Style” (<http://www.songofstyle.com>) during the period February 9 – February 16, 2017. Prior to that date range, she typically posted at least once per week. With such regular postings, bloggers

need to continually find and feature new content to keep their readers' interest. Beyond noting that popular fashion bloggers did have the ability to drive sales to specific brands and designers (Pham, 2015b), little research has been done about where bloggers fit into the fashion adoption process. Are they fashion innovators, the earliest adopters of trends? Are they fashion opinion leaders, individuals who are still fairly early adopters of trends and who help to publicize new trends as they come along? Does their apparently high consumption of products (that come to be featured in their frequent posts) suggest their membership in one of these two categories? More research needs to be done on this topic in regards to bloggers.

As for vloggers, no existing research could be found on the topic. As the video-making counterpart to a blogger, it would seem reasonable to think that YouTube fashion and beauty vloggers may also influence their viewers. Where do the fashion vloggers profiled in the current study fit in the fashion adoption process? Do plus-size vloggers successfully connect viewers to the items and brands they discuss in their videos? Yu, Damhorst, and Russell (2011) found that for conventional advertising, "thin model images might not be the most effective brand image for all consumers" as their study participants also responded positively to "realistic and nonideal models" who wore average sizes, defined in the study as US sizes 12-14 (p. 71). As mentioned earlier, a size 14 is typically considered the start of plus sizes.

YouTube and Visual Culture Studies

One of the ways YouTube distinguishes itself from other types of social media is the importance of the visual on its platform. Bloggers or Twitter users, for example, may embed images or videos into their posts, but these are typically to illustrate something being mentioned in the text – the written word takes precedence over the visual. In contrast, the uploaded video film is the focal point of a given YouTube page. Clearly, text does accompany each video; a

video has a text title, it may include written annotations or other details provided by the creator in a description box located below the video itself, and other users of YouTube may post comments or responses. However, all of these elements supplement the video film itself. Because of the prominence of visual information on YouTube, theory from visual culture studies is relevant to this study.⁹

Visual culture studies draw from a variety of disciplines and approaches, including art history, sociology, film studies, feminism, and critical theory. Unlike traditional art history, it does not seek to categorize visual creations as high or low art, and the idea of connoisseurship is not a focus of visual culture studies (Jones, 2010). Instead, visual culture studies look broadly at visual products in a society. Historically, visual culture studies arose as “a critical project, ranging from engagement with feminism, to ethnic studies and poststructuralism...” (Mirzoeff, 2013, p. xxxvi), and this critical stance still tends to play an important role in the field.

Art critic and writer John Berger is often mentioned as a foundational thinker in visual culture studies, and his work impacts this project. In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger (1972) first described the differences in how men and women (both of whom are depicted by him as universal categories) act and are perceived in everyday life. He noted that a man is considered a subject and that his “presence” suggests what he can do to or for others. Men are active and interact with the outside world. Women, on the other hand, are viewed as fairly passive and reflexive. A woman’s “presence” reveals what can be done to her. Women, moreover, are aware that they are objects to be looked at by others. Men can do something without automatically considering how they will look doing it, but women have the extra burden of being eternally under the “male gaze.” Berger argued that they therefore think about their appearance

⁹ Of course, like film and television, YouTube videos typically feature the spoken word.

continually because they know that others, especially men, will look at them. Because they have historically had greater economic power and privilege, men have power in society and thus have power over women. Of course, women do look at others, but women always are aware that they are simultaneously the focus of men's gaze. Moving to the art world, Berger then discussed the nude in painting and the fact that most painters and most individuals who commissioned paintings were historically men. Thus, any viewer was imagined as a heterosexual male who had the power and right to look at the mostly female nudes who had been turned into beautiful objects and commodified. Although many art movements have long abandoned the nude, the tendency to objectify the female model has continued into contemporary advertising and other media.

As Goffman has demonstrated (1976), it is indeed not unusual to see women in contemporary advertisements lying down and looking away from the camera in a passive posture very like the painted nudes Berger discussed. Men, on the other hand, often stand up straight and look directly at the viewer in ads. They meet the viewer's gaze and return it. The ubiquity of ads in a consumer culture can make it difficult for people to understand that what ads portray is not necessarily a natural state of affairs, and a consideration of both the denotative and connotative meanings of such images is important to more fully understanding them. Berger, an art critic, and Goffman, a sociologist, both approached the study of the visual as a way to discern and critique the truths about culture that are most likely to be found in connotative meanings.

Mulvey (1975) extended Berger's arguments in her critique of popular films. She argued that Western society's sexism and misogyny can be read in standard Hollywood narrative cinema. Movies allow their viewers to do two things at once. First, moviegoers are permitted to look at the people on the screen and take pleasure in the act of gazing without any fear of the

people being gazed at taking offense. Second, because human beings like to look at and recognize themselves as if in a mirror, they want to identify with someone in the film. The first desire, to look at someone else as an object on the screen, is met by a female character in film, who can be looked at for pleasure. The second desire is met by male characters, with whom male viewers can identify. As with Berger, men actively look and women passively are the objects of the men's gaze. Mulvey suggested that this is why women are usually portrayed as decorative objects in films, while men are portrayed as active and non-objectified.

Hoping that her critique could hasten the demise of traditional narrative film, Mulvey called for, but did not describe in great detail, new types of film that do not perpetuate these sexist tropes. She mentioned that some experimental films approach moviemaking from angles that do not feed into these stereotypes. Would individuals who are far outside the Hollywood film industry, such as passionate amateurs making YouTube videos, be able to break free of traditional narratives that reflect and reinforce sexism?

Bordo's (1993) *Unbearable Weight* pointedly considered visual imagery in mainstream Western culture and its effect upon viewers. Her introduction to the 2003 version was aptly titled, "In the Empire of Images," suggesting the legitimizing (and authoritarian) power of seeing concepts portrayed time and time again in visual media. Bordo wrote about the body in contemporary Western society, and how "images of slenderness are never 'just pictures'.... [but are] powerful lessons in how to see (and evaluate) bodies" (2003, p. xxi).

hooks (1992) took the theme of looking, especially in regards to film, to a new level. She noted that African American women hardly ever see themselves on the screen and that African American female moviegoers are clearly aware of the racism in mainstream films because they either are not represented in films at all or are portrayed as incidental helpers of others. To

counter this, hooks described the use of critical spectatorship, agency through the look of an oppositional gaze. As hooks noted, looking has power. The oppositional gaze directed at films allows an African American woman a way to view a film without completely surrendering to its pleasurable pull. This oppositional gaze work can include commenting on the film as it is running, a sure way of denying the film at least some of its power over viewers. This gaze can allow moviegoers to turn an encounter with film or TV from a negative one into a positive one. A viewer is in an active role as she “takes on” the movie, mentally assessing it and cutting it down to size, and in the process revealing to herself and others what the film is actually saying and promoting. This skill is powerful: Duke (2002) clearly was describing the oppositional gaze when she documented how African American girls would read mainstream, White teen magazines critically. Their stance allowed them to see the artificiality of the images and stories contained within the magazines and lack of fit with their lives as African Americans.

Whereas Mulvey (1975) stated that women have to explode the objectified vision of the female image on the movie screen, her use of the category “woman” is too abstract and does not actually encompass the lived experiences of all women. To accurately understand the experiences of more than just White women, feminist theory has to be more than the pontifications of White women. It is clear from hooks’ essay that African American women are generally affected by mainstream film very differently than are White women. Clearly, race, as well as social class, age, ethnicity, etc., are important factors that affect a woman’s viewpoint and experiences.

Will a more diverse representation of people in visual culture and media be enough? Cheng (2010) believed that more is needed. “Voice, rather than sight... has the ability to empower and authenticate the truth effects of sight” (p. 349) and argued that a presence that

includes voice and image is the best way to affect culture and to serve as a means for marginalized people to actively combat their status. Again, the potential for participatory media to be used by marginalized individuals and groups with the goal of broadcasting their voices and images could be considerable.

Research Questions

As this research project focuses on the individual experiences of fat YouTubers, one important category to explore has to do with their perceptions of body size, size acceptance, and stigma. Thus, Research Question 1 is:

RQ1: What is the history of the participants' attitudes towards their own bodies?

To more fully plumb this category, specific interview questions asked about the participants' experience with weight-related stigma, their feelings about the size acceptance movement, and whether their relationships with their bodies have changed over time. Beyond considering the factor of stigma in the participants' lives, questions related to RQ1 also sought to explore other intersecting identities that may impact any fat oppression experienced by the vloggers.

Research Question 2 relates to the participants' interests in dress, beauty, fashion, and personal style.

RQ2: What role do their interests in dress, beauty, fashion, and personal style play in participants' lives?

Probing questions asked participants to describe their personal styles and how they were developed. In addition, the interviewees' opinions about the plus-size fashion industry, both past and present, were solicited.

Research Question 3 focuses on the participants' lives as creators active in social media.

RQ3: What does it mean to be a fat social media “beauty guru”?

The phrase “beauty guru,” while originally applied to people who created YouTube beauty and fashion-related videos, is also used on other platforms to characterize individuals closely associated with fashion, beauty, and style. At the confluence of body size, technological communication, and fashion, how do the study participants define themselves and their work? What is it like to be publicly visible and unapologetically fat online?

The fourth research question relates to entrepreneurship, business, and career.

RQ4: What kinds of connections are there between the participants' careers and their respective social media work?

Is social media work their sole career? Do they consider themselves entrepreneurs? Can “beauty guru” be translated to “fashion leader”? What kinds of relationships does the vlogger have with viewers and commenters?

Finally, Research Question 5 is an inquiry about the relationship between the interview data and the video content analysis.

RQ5: How do the data from the video content analysis resemble or differ from the interviewee data?

CHAPTER 3. METHODS

Overview

This study examined female or non-binary YouTube content creators who focus on fat beauty and fashion-oriented themes in their videos and who are themselves fat. For this study, YouTube videos were chosen over other types of social media, including blogs. While a blog may feature images on its site, it is still highly reliant upon the written word to communicate much of its content. The author purposefully focused on a medium in which the visual was a more central component of communication. As noted earlier, this is due to her interest in research that spans feminism and visual culture studies, such as the work of art critic and theorist John Berger, film theorist Laura Mulvey, and Black feminist bell hooks.

Semi-structured interviews of YouTube video creators plus video content analysis were the methods used for this research. As there has been little academic investigation of people at the juncture of social media, size acceptance, and fashion, a semi-structured interview protocol was followed when speaking with the participants. As McCracken (1988) noted in the *Long Interview*, this type of interview is structured enough so that the researcher efficiently uses the time allotted to the interview, without needing repeated meetings or other types of “prolonged contact” (p. 11). Unlike a fully structured interview, a semi-structured interview is open-ended as necessary, permitting the interviewer to follow up on surprising or unforeseen data that her participants may provide, as “extemporaneous strategies of investigation are often the only road to understanding” the lived experiences of an individual (McCracken, 1988, p. 25). In addition, access to and analysis of content of the YouTube videos produced by the participants prior to the interviews allowed preliminary, informed preparation for interview question formulation.

However, the researcher diligently worked to avoid blinding or bias due to the YouTube content and sensitizing theories employed from previous scholars.

Another perspective on the topics covered in the interviews, such as weight, self-esteem, and plus-size fashion, was sought through an analysis of content of YouTube videos, with focus on topics covered in the interviews, such as weight, self-esteem, and plus-size fashion. As a “systematic examination of forms of communication” (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 196), content analysis was used to consider what kinds of messages are explicitly and implicitly communicated, with the researcher taking on the role of a viewer. By analyzing YouTube videos directly, the researcher aimed to triangulate, or show “convergence among ... different sources of information” as a way of demonstrating the validity of findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126).

Interview Participants

To generate a list of potential participants, YouTube’s own search function was employed. The two key phrases “plus size” and “fat fashion”¹⁰ were searched. YouTube’s search function includes a variety of filters, and the search results were filtered to only show the names of content creators’ channels whose videos or channel names have some references to the two key phrases. Each individual who has an account on YouTube has a designated channel. Often the channel name is the creator’s actual name (for example, Sarah Rae Vargas’ channel is called “Sarah Rae Vargas”), but sometimes the channel names are not eponymous

¹⁰ Searching for the single word “fat” on YouTube yields many videos not related to fashion/beauty, such as “Weird Al” Yankovic’s parody song/video, “Fat”; videos that are advertisements on how to lose weight; and fat shaming videos, such as “Fat People Fails Compilation,” which features several short clips of fat individuals who fall while being physically active or who break chairs/hammocks/etc. because of their weight. On the other hand, “plus size” reliably yields videos related to dress, without needing to add the word “fashion” to the search term.

(“LearningToBeFearless” is Alexandra Thomas’ channel). Excluded from the study were channels operated by corporate entities (e.g., the channel “Monif C. Plus Sizes” is the channel of a plus-size clothing brand), primarily about weight loss, hosted by men, or focused on fat men. Only independent video creators who identified as female or non-binary and who purchased and wore women’s apparel in the videos were included in this study. Finally, individuals who had not lived in the United States or its territories were not included.

Each channel was examined individually. The researcher did not make judgments as to whether a given YouTube vlogger was fat or plus size. If YouTubers self-identified as fat or plus size, then they were placed on the list of potential participants. Self-identification was seen in a variety of ways. For example, the vlogger may have made a video trying on purchases from a retailer that specializes in plus-size apparel, may have discussed experiencing fat stigma, or may have referred to the self as plus size or fat in the course of a video.

From these results, a table was made of the channel names, creator names (if different), their YouTube homepage URLs, their contact information, and what kind of search was used (i.e., what specific search terms were used in the YouTube search, such as using the YouTube “relevance,” “upload date,” or “view count” filters, etc.), and any other useful notes.¹¹ One hundred forty-four (144) YouTubers were identified as potential interviewees from this search process.

The table was used to purposively select potential interviewees to contact. The researcher found contact information for 104 of the potential participants. A purposive sample was used so

¹¹ The “relevance” search filter, as defined by YouTube, returns a list of videos “ranked based on a variety of factors including how well the title, description, and video content match the viewer’s query. Beyond that, we look at which videos have driven the most engagement for a query” (YouTube Creator Academy, 2019, para 2).

that a diversity of races, ethnicities, ages, locations, and socio-economic statuses were represented in the study (Creswell, 2014; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Indeed, as an exploratory, qualitative study on a topic that has received little attention to date, the study's goal is not to generalize or describe the average fat vlogger. Rather, the researcher was interested in delineating some of the varied experiences that people with different backgrounds encounter as fat individuals who are contributing to the YouTube platform (Seidman, 2013). As Lincoln and Guba encouraged, the researcher actively tried to "increase the scope or range of data exposed" (1985, p. 40). In addition, to draw upon the participants' expertise in their field, they were asked if they could recommend other YouTubers for interviewing; the recommendations allowed for snowball sampling to increase the pool of potential interviewees.

The constant comparative method suggests that sampling in qualitative research can stop when the data shows saturation (Frankel, 1999; Glaser & Strauss, 1999), or when a researcher "no longer find[s] new information that adds to [the] understanding of the category" (Creswell, 2007, p. 240). There were 18 individuals who initially replied to the researcher's email invitations; of these, five did not respond to repeated follow-up emails asking to finalize interview dates and times. Thus, although it was estimated that 10-15 individuals would be interviewed, the actual number of interviews was 13, at which point data saturation was reached. This figure was 12.5% of those who were initially contacted. If saturation had not been reached with the 13 interviews, the researcher would have run additional searches with the YouTube search engine to find additional channel owners to contact.

Procedure

The 104 potential participants were contacted primarily through email addresses, which are often listed on YouTube channel homepages. When no email address could be found,

individuals were messaged through Instagram or Facebook. Initial communication included information about the study and the researcher, the consent document, and a formal request for participation in the study. The introductory message suggested potential dates and times for interviews but also assured the vloggers that their schedules would be accommodated if none of the listed dates were suitable (see Appendix B). For those who did not initially respond, a follow-up message was sent within two weeks. No compensation was offered to the participants.

Depending on the participant's preference, interviews took place using Skype or Zoom videoconferencing software (and in one case, through email). Once an interview had been scheduled, the researcher viewed and took notes on several of the participant's YouTube videos in preparation for the interview, allowing her to become familiar with the vlogger's channel and what topics were frequently discussed in the videos.

After IRB approval was received (see Appendix A), interviews were conducted using the semi-structured interview method and lasted approximately one hour each. A participant's right to not answer any question or stop the interview at any time for any reason was explicitly detailed at the beginning of the conversation. Consent forms were signed and returned to the author via email before the interview began. A signed consent form affirmed that the participant:

- 1) agreed to take part in the research study and
- 2) allowed for the interview to be recorded.

Skype calls were recorded using the Call Recorder for Mac software; if the interview was conducted via Zoom, the program's own native recording capability was used. After each interview, the researcher composed a memo to document her thoughts on the experience and the information shared, evolving ideas about the research topic and any other pertinent data or thoughts. Memo writing is often recommended as a useful tool in qualitative research as it

creates a mechanism for “regular reflection [on] and review” of the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 151).

As noted above, a semi-structured interview protocol was followed (see Appendix E for the questionnaire). The questionnaire included both questions and follow-up prompts to elicit as much information as possible. Referring to a written questionnaire helped to ensure that the interviewer covered all the topics and questions with each participant without having to memorize the entire interview protocol, thus allowing the interviewer to more closely attend to the participants and their responses (McCracken, 1988). Although there is some structure to this interviewing process, the semi-structured approach does recognize that surprises and individual variance frequently occur while interviewing; having the freedom to follow up on unique or unforeseen responses is an important facet of the semi-structured interview method (McCracken, 1988).

Participant Confidentiality

Because of the potentially sensitive nature of the interview questions, such as those referencing the experience of stigma, interview participants have been identified by pseudonyms in the research process. Actual names and contact information have been and will continue to be kept separate from all interview data and any writings that are produced during or after the study.

Interview Data Analysis Procedures

The researcher analyzed data based on the strategies described in Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) grounded theory approach, in that the constant comparative method, along with specific approaches to coding (including open, axial, and selective coding), were employed. Constant comparison is a systematic process that permits continuous and iterative refinement of coding categories and theory throughout the research process. Coding began upon receipt of the first

transcribed interview and was underway while the remaining interviews and video analysis were in process (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). To begin the data analysis process, available materials, including transcripts, field notes, and memos, were read multiple times.

Three types of coding - open, axial, and selective coding – typically associated with grounded theory describe the types of coding that were used during the different stages in the analysis for this research. When first encountering the data in a transcript, for example, open coding involves identification of the existence of categories or themes in the data (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Axial coding helps to combine some categories, and themes may converge into larger, overarching themes as relationships among categories are explored (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

A codebook was created to make sense of the coding categories as they were developed and refined throughout the process (see Appendix F). As more data became available from additional interviews and video analyses, selective coding enabled the researcher to integrate the emerging themes into a theoretical framework (Pandit, 1996).

For greater credibility and to ensure that the researcher was not allowing her biases to impact the accuracy of her coding, a portion of the interviews were coded by both the researcher and an additional scholar. After the primary researcher and second coder separately coded the first interview, they met to compare codes and to negotiate disagreements between them. Afterwards, each individual coded a second interview separately, and then met a second time to compare coding and resolve any coding disagreements or difficulties. At this point, they created the initial codebook from this collaboration.

With a working codebook, the two researchers continued to code one fourth of the interviews, meeting regularly to discuss new codes, meaning, and any disagreements.

Throughout the coding, the codebook was continuously changing, as new codes and new linkages between codes emerged. With one fourth of the interviews coded, interview intercoder reliability was calculated at 93.02%, which met the goal of achieving an agreement of 80% or more as suggested by Creswell (2007) and Saldaña (2013).

The rate of intercoder reliability was calculated with the following formula (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002):

$$\frac{(2 \times \text{number of agreements}) \times 100}{(\text{number of coding decisions by coder 1} + \text{numbers of coding decisions by coder 2})}$$

Video Content Analysis

Content analysis of a selection of YouTube videos occurred concurrently with the interviews. Content analysis, as noted in Chapter 2, has been used by scholars in a variety of fields to analyze YouTube videos. Because of confidentiality issues, interviewees have been identified by pseudonyms; to further work to keep their identities confidential, it was decided that analysis of YouTube videos should not be confined to those created by the interviewees.

Similar to how participants were found for the interview portion of the study, a list of potential videos to analyze were found using YouTube's search function, again employing the two search key phrases "plus size" and "fat fashion." The 560 videos generated from this search were examined individually. Only videos made by independent female video creators were included in the content analysis; these vloggers may or may not have taken part in the interview process. After initial examination for inclusion criteria, 185 videos remained in the list. In an effort to get a wide-ranging sample of pertinent videos across the platform, the researcher limited the number of videos by any one content creator to two, except in two cases. The two channels "LoeyLane" and "Sarah Rae Vargas" are responsible for many of the most-viewed videos made

by an individual related to fat or plus-size fashion, so each has three videos in this list. This resulted in a working list of 107 videos that could be analyzed.

From the working list of 107 videos, the researcher picked videos to analyze purposively in order to get a breadth of data; this included selecting both older and more recent videos, videos of varying popularity, and videos from channels with a range of subscriber counts. At the point of data saturation, 60 YouTube videos had been analyzed, with a total of 46 individual channels represented in the list of 60. As noted in Chapter 3, to preserve the confidentiality of the interviewees, this list of videos analyzed for content may or may not contain videos by any of the interview participants.

The selected videos in the list were examined using the grounded theory approach as detailed above for the interview transcripts, except that for video analysis, the entirety of a “video’s visual, audio, and text presentation” is available for the content analysis process (Yin & Kim, 2011, p. 89). Sixty (60) videos were semiotically analyzed for both denoted and connoted messages and themes.

Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs and their various levels of meaning, which are generally divided into denoted and connoted meanings. Denoted meaning is the literal, most rudimentary description of a word, image, or other individual piece of text. Connotations are “the socio-cultural and personal associations ...of the sign. These are typically related to the interpreter's class, age, gender, ethnicity, etc.” (Chandler, 2017a, para 2). “Text” was described by Chandler as “a message that has been recorded in some way” (2017b, para 7) – it refers to more than words. To more fully understand a given piece of text, a viewer must share in a set of cultural knowledge, called a lexicon, which he or she holds in common with the creator of the text or

with other viewers of the text; lexicons can be aesthetic, cultural, practical, national, etc. (Penn, 2000). For the fullest understanding of the possible connotations of a given text, viewers will likely need to be familiar with several sets of lexicons.

While semiotic analysis is typically used for the written word, it can be very useful for exploring visual meaning, as the approach “sharpens and makes explicit that which is implicit in the image” (Penn, 2010, p. 241). The present research follows the approach outlined in Penn (2010). Elements in each video were considered in a literal way to express any denotational meanings. After this, the researcher analyzed the video elements for any connotative meanings, including what kinds of cultural knowledge one needed to understand a given connotation.

Rose’s (2016) conceptual framework, which considers the meanings of visual imagery in four different sites, each of which may contain three specific aspects, was adopted for this analysis. The approach should permit a more detailed interpretation of each video being analyzed. Therefore, YouTube videos were analyzed at the site of production, the site of the image itself, the site of its circulation, and the site of its audience.

Four Sites

Site of production. This focus of analysis discusses the conditions under which a visual image was originally created. For example, beginning YouTubers may use a camera phone to record a video, may not use any professional lighting, and often film in their bedrooms.

Site of the image itself. Analysis of the image site specifically scrutinizes what elements are in the picture plane or video frame. Is the speaker in the center of the picture frame? What other elements are featured in the background? Do text or captions appear in the video, for example, to identify products being discussed?

Site of circulation. YouTube videos may be viewed on a smartphone, tablet, or large-screen TV, affecting how the video looks. Computer screen colors can vary greatly, as can video resolution, with more pixels creating a more highly defined and detailed image. YouTube videos can also be embedded into other websites quite easily; a viewer often does not need to go to the YouTube site to see a YouTube video.

Site of audience. Viewers interpret and ascribe meaning to visual images, and their understanding of a picture or video may not necessarily be what the creator intended. For YouTube videos, perhaps the most immediate way of accessing audience interpretation and reaction is through the viewer comments that can be posted beneath almost every video on the site.¹²

Aspects or Modalities

Rose (2016) suggested that each of the four sites above may be analyzed for three different aspects: technological, compositional, and social.

Technological. Clearly, technology is central to how a video is made (site of production), but it also affects the other three “sites.” Rose (2016) suggested that the technological aspect includes any special visual effects in the site of the image. Technology also affects how videos are circulated (site of circulation). It may also affect who views the video; using Google to search for a video on a specific topic may produce a list of hundreds or thousands of videos that have been selected and ordered by Google’s complex search algorithms, and videos on the bottom of that list will most likely not be viewed by the person who performed the search.

¹² Some YouTubers disable comments, essentially “turning off” the comments section, especially when they have made videos about especially emotional or political topics, for example.

Compositional. Rose (2016) described composition as concepts related to form, such as genre, composition inside the image itself, and how a video is displayed on a webpage. On a default YouTube page, the video is located in the top left-hand corner. Directly below it is some information about the video (the “description box”), written by the person who posted the video. Below that information is the viewer comments section. The right-hand column consists of a list of additional videos that may be related to the current video being watched or may reflect topics related to the viewing history of the individual accessing the site.

Social. Rose (2016) used the term “social” to refer to “the range of economic, social and political relations, institutions, and practices through which [the video] is seen and used” (p. 26). Contextual analysis of meanings of content are the focus of this modality.

Rose’s (2016) framework is compatible with semiotic analysis. In her framework, the sites of the image and the audience will be areas where semiotic meanings can be discerned. In both of these sites, the compositional and social should be the two main modalities that are applicable to semiotic analysis.

Video Intercoder Reliability Calculation

One fourth of the videos were coded by both the researcher and the second coder. Using the codebook generated for the interviews, the two researchers coded videos, meeting regularly to discuss new codes, meanings, and any disagreements. For these coded videos, intercoder reliability was calculated at 90.6%, which exceeds the suggested minimums of Creswell (2007) and Saldaña (2013).

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Corbin and Strauss (2015) preferred to use the term “credibility” when considering the quality of qualitative research, as they considered the terms “validity” and “reliability” to retain

connotations strongly suggestive of quantitative research. Instead, Corbin and Strauss (2015) wrote that “‘credibility’ indicates that findings are trustworthy and believable” (p. 346).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) used the word “trustworthiness” as the measure of whether “the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of” (p. 290). They noted that differences in basic beliefs, such as between a perspective rooted in a positivist paradigm and one rooted in an interpretivistic paradigm, call for “different knowledge claims and different criteria” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 294). They further divided the concept of trustworthiness into four sub-categories: “credibility,” “transferability,” “dependability,” and “confirmability,” in lieu of the positivistic terms “internal validity,” “external validity,” “reliability,” and “objectivity” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest several practices that should serve to increase trustworthiness. These practices are listed and described below. Many of these practices were used throughout this study.

Creswell (1998) saw “‘validation’ in qualitative research to be an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants” (pp. 248-249). In summarizing the literature on this topic he suggested using eight possible practices to produce credible and accurate conclusions. Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) and Creswell’s (1998) suggested practices to ensure credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative research are presented in Table 1 below. These practices are then described in detail in the following sections. In addition, it is then noted which practices were used in this study.

Table 1. Practices to Ensure Credibility and Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

Lincoln & Guba, 1985		Creswell, 1998	Additional Practices
Credibility	Prolonged engagement	Prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field	
	Persistent observation		
	Triangulation	Triangulation	
	Peer debriefing	Peer debriefing	
	Negative case analysis	Negative case analysis	
	Referential adequacy		
	Member checks	Member checks	
Transferability	Thick description	Thick description	
Dependability	Dependability audit	External audits	
Confirmability	Confirmability audit		
All Four Categories	Reflexive journal		
		Self-identification of researcher bias	
			Intercoder reliability
			Data saturation

Engagement and Observation over a Prolonged Period of Time

Engagement over a long period of time within the field in which research is being carried out means that the researcher should possess enough knowledge to speak with individuals in that field, such as interviewees, knowledgeable and with appropriate cultural sensitivity. The researcher has observed YouTube fashion and beauty video creators for several years and is

well-versed in how the media platform operates, as well as past and current trends in fashion and beauty videos. In addition, as a woman who has been fat for almost all of her life, the researcher is intimately aware of many issues affecting fat people in contemporary Western mainstream culture. These personal and academic areas of expertise enabled the researcher to approach her interactions with participants and observations of their videos with a respectful sense of context.

Triangulation

Triangulation is mentioned both by Lincoln & Guba (1985) and Creswell (1998). Researchers can triangulate “by using different sources, different methods, and sometimes multiple investigators” in collecting data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 307). In this study, participants were interviewed and a selection of YouTube videos was analyzed. Similar findings in both the interviews and the video analysis lend greater credence to the rigor and trustworthiness of the study overall.

Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing “provides an external check of the research process” (Creswell, 1998, p. 251). The researcher and peer debriefers met regularly to discuss the unfolding research study. It allowed for the researcher to receive advice and critique from colleagues while also creating a safe space to discuss any problems or frustrations experienced. The researcher met regularly with her two major professors to discuss the progression of the study. In addition, a group of doctoral students, including the researcher, who were currently in the midst of writing their dissertations met regularly to write together; this practice naturally led to conducting peer debriefings, which continued throughout the research process.

Negative Case Analysis

Creswell (1998) maintained that specifying which hypotheses, theories, or previous research findings do not turn out to fit with the present findings is important to the study: “in doing so, the researcher provides a realistic assessment of the phenomenon under study” (p. 251). Lincoln and Guba (1985) succinctly described this process as “revising hypotheses with hindsight.... Until it accounts for all known cases without exception” (p. 309). When relevant, this type of information was included in the study.

Referential Adequacy

Referential adequacy is described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as follows: “the investigator will earmark a portion of the data to be archived – not included in whatever data analysis may be planned – and then recalled when tentative findings have been reached” (p. 313). These raw data can be examined in reference to the findings to test the appropriateness of the conclusions. This technique may be difficult to employ with a small sample size, however.

Member Checks

Although conversations with YouTube vloggers were audio recorded and transcribed and the researcher endeavored to develop a complex and deep understanding of the phenomenon explored in this dissertation, she does not pretend infallibility. As such, study participants were asked for their input on the data and how quotations drawn from their interviews were depicted, and the researcher shared with them the study’s overall findings and conclusions.

Thick Description

In an acknowledgment of the complexity and uniqueness of the culture or phenomenon under investigation, a qualitative study benefits from describing its subject, setting and participants in as detailed and knowledgeable a fashion as possible. Especially when undertaking

an exploratory study of a topic that has not been studied to any great extent in the academic literature, a primary goal of qualitative research can be to make an accurate description of the topic. However, thick description includes not just a plethora of detail about a culture or a phenomenon, but also what Geertz (1973) described as the activity of “sorting out the structures of signification... and determining their social ground and import” (p. 9), and thus explicating, as much as possible, the meanings associated with the collected data. Geertz described the process overall as working with a “multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he [sic] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render” (p. 10); thus, understanding and reflection upon meaning are as critical as collecting a great amount of detail.

Audits

Taking part in an audit means enlisting the aid of an individual who is not affiliated with the research study or the topic under investigation. The auditor “examines the process” as well as the accuracy of the records kept by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 317).

Because of the probable costs associated with this practice, the researcher may not be able to utilize all parts of this strategy. However, she retained an audit trail, which includes raw data, field notes and memos, summaries, written reflections, descriptions of working hypotheses, notes on the process and methodologies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Such material describes the researcher’s thoughts on the emerging findings and should indicate to a reader if her decisions, descriptions, and conclusions are reasonable and credible (Shenton, 2004). The dissertation advisors served, in part, as auditors.

Reflexive Journal

Lincoln and Guba (1985) also suggest that researchers keep a reflexive journal in which thoughts on oneself and methodological decisions can be recorded. The journal can supplement the audit trail and may include sections detailing the study logistics, such as appointments to meet with participants, a personal diary, and a methodological log.

Self-Identification of Researcher Bias

Researchers who employ qualitative methods often do not subscribe to the concept of a completely objective researcher. However, remaining largely objective, reflective and aware of one's potential or actual biases is an important part of the research process. A personal researcher reflexivity statement is included after the conclusion of this section on strategies for ensuring credibility and trustworthiness, with the goal of communicating to readers the researcher's life background and how it may affect her worldview and approach to the topic under discussion.

Additional Practices

Additional strategies to ensure greater credibility and trustworthiness were undertaken by the researcher in the course of her study. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, a second researcher, also called the audit coder, coded approximately one fourth of the interviews and one fourth of the videos. Intercoder reliability was calculated with the goal of achieving an agreement of 80% or more as suggested by Creswell (2007) and Saldaña (2013).

Finally, the researcher pursued data saturation in the data collection and analysis process, meaning that she continued to conduct interviews and/or analyze videos until these additional data yielded no new or different findings (Creswell, 2014).

Researcher's Background and Reflexivity Statement

As one of Creswell's eight strategies for ensuring an accurate and credible research study, an acknowledgment of the researcher's background and biases is detailed here. The qualitative researcher is an instrument, and qualitative research itself is "quintessentially interactive" (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 33). Therefore, I would never pretend to perfect objectivity, although I do intend to interpret and describe my findings as accurately and objectively as I can. However, my own life experiences shape how I may approach my topic. I am a fat woman, and here I attempt to describe my own position in relation to the topic of this dissertation. Readers will note that I am deeply alienated from my body, routinely distinguishing between "me" and "my body." It is also clear that I have thoroughly internalized the profoundly negative attributes that a fat identity in the post-industrial mainstream Western society encompasses (Degher & Hughes, 1999).

I do not feel that I am unusual in being able to recite the history of my body weight in great detail. I am, and have been for most of my life, fat. I went on my first diet when I was five. In elementary school I was intermittently teased and shamed about my weight. I remember that I lost 40 pounds in sixth grade, and in doing so, reached a weight that looked "normal" to me. I also remember how happy and relieved I was. By the time I graduated from high school, however, I had slowly inched up to a size 18. Over the next decade and a half, I became aware of the size acceptance movement, read many of the publications associated with that movement (*Radiance*, *BBW*, *Dimensions*, etc.) and joined the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA). As far as I was concerned, the concept of size acceptance was a boon for society, for others who had struggled with or were dissatisfied with their bodies, and for the friends, lovers, and families of fat people. But all of the size acceptance literature I ingested

could not change my attitude, inculcated over decades, towards my own body. I have tried for almost twenty years to change how I feel about my own fat body with little success.

After the death of my mother from breast cancer in 2000, at a time when I weighed over 300 pounds, I was exceptionally motivated and unhappy enough in my body to try to effect a great change in my size. Over the next 2-1/2 years, I slowly lost over 180 pounds and ended up wearing a misses size 8. At 37 years old, I was the smallest I had ever been, either as a teenager or an adult. I lost so much weight that my shoe size changed (from a 10 or 11 to a size 9). I could fit through turnstiles, sit in economy airline seats with room to spare, and cross my legs. Instead of there being one or two stores in any given mall that would have clothes in my size, I could now shop anywhere I wanted. While I was losing weight, I was a member of a popular online dieting website called eDiets, and my success led me to being featured in a May 2006 *People* magazine article.¹³ My body had changed so much that people I had worked with in years past literally did not recognize me until I spoke. I was incredibly fit (at the time I had a less demanding job that allowed me to work out 1-2 hours per day). I was *small*. It was, frankly, glorious. I was not on the outside any more. I can un-ironically state that those were quite possibly the most wonderful days of my life.

And then, my body began to betray me, yet again. The diet upon which my body had thrived, a fairly low-fat, very high-fiber diet, began to give me odd digestive problems. Working out led to repeated injuries. I had a series of jobs that were not only stressful, but also substantially cut into my workout hours. I then started a master's degree program and was a full-time student while also working full time and realized that something had to give. So I gave up

¹³ <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20061003,00.html>

counting calories, that innocuous-sounding phrase that hides how odd, obsessive, and time consuming it is to measure and keep an accurate record of every morsel of food eaten every day. Then came the start of perimenopause and its host of large and small bodily changes. Slowly but surely I regained almost all of the weight I lost in the early 2000s.

I do not love or respect my body as it is, and at this point in my life I am not optimistic that this will ever change. I have resigned myself to a kind of *détente*, a somewhat neutral stalemate with my body, believing this to be the best relationship I personally will be able to achieve. That is one reason why I am so intrigued by the participants in this study, both for their apparent body love and confidence and for their enthusiastic communication of their passions for makeup, apparel, and fashion on YouTube. I will be saddened, but not all that surprised, to learn that some of my participants have felt as negatively about themselves and their bodies as I have. I remain hopeful, however, that bodily self-acceptance will be much more prevalent in this group of vloggers – and in their subscribers and fans – than it has been in my life.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

Chapter 4 details the results of the data generated from the semi-structured interviews of 13 individuals who make YouTube videos and the content analysis of 60 YouTube videos. The chapter first includes descriptive data about interview participants and themes arising from the interviewee transcripts. Information and themes from the video content analysis will then be discussed. All of these data were generated in an effort to answer this study's five research questions, which are related to understanding the experience of being a plus-size, fashion-loving YouTube content creator:

RQ1: What is the history of the participants' attitudes towards their own bodies?

RQ2: What role do their interests in dress, beauty, fashion, and personal style play in participants' lives?

RQ3: What does it mean to be a fat social media fashion "guru"?

RQ4: What kinds of connections are there between the participants' careers and their respective social media work?

RQ5: How do the data from the video content analysis resemble or differ from the interviewee data?

ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS

Descriptive Data about the Interviewees

Thirteen individuals who make YouTube videos dealing with women's plus-size apparel agreed to be interviewed for this study. Each person self-identified as someone who wore plus-size clothing or who was plus sized, fat, curvy, thick, or other descriptive terms used to describe a woman who wears U.S. plus-sized clothing. They all identified as women except for one person, who identified as non-binary. The individual who identified as non-binary was included

in the study because they primarily shopped at stores and bought brands marketed towards women. The age of participants ranged from 20 to 49 (see Table 2). The average age was 31.5; the median age was 28. Three interviewees were people of color: two women identified as African American, and one identified as Afro Caribbean. Eight of the participants identified as White. One participant was of mixed race, and one declined to identify race or ethnicity (Table 3).

Table 2. Ages of Interview Participants

Participants ($n=13$, $M=31.5$, $Mdn=28$)	
Age in years ¹	n
20-29	6
30-39	5
40-49	2
Range	20-49

¹ as of interview date

Table 3. Race/Ethnicity of Interview Participants

Participants ($n=13$)	
Race/Ethnicity	n
African American	2
Afro Caribbean	1
Mixed Race	1
White	8
Did not answer	1

The interviewee who had been on YouTube the longest first created her channel in 2006, a little over a year after YouTube was founded, while two participants had joined as recently as

2016 (Table 4). The number of videos created (and publicly viewable) differed widely among the interview participants, from a high of 435 to a low of 5 (see Table 5). It should be noted that the respondent who only had five videos publicly viewable related that she had made and posted hundreds of videos since she joined YouTube, but that she had recently opted to make most of them private (they were still posted to her channel, but only she could view them). The average number of videos viewable on an interviewee's channel was 170, but the median was 71.

Table 4. Date Interviewees Joined YouTube

Interviewee Channels ($n=13$, $M=2012$, $Mdn=2011$)	
Year	n
2006	1
2007	0
2008	0
2009	2
2010	3
2011	1
2012	0
2013	1
2014	2
2015	1
2016	2
2017	0

Table 5. Number of Videos Publicly Viewable on Interviewees' Channels

Participants ($n=13$, $M=170$, $Mdn=71$)	
Videos ¹	n
1-99	7
100-199	0
200-299	2
300-399	3
400-499	1
Range	5-435

¹ publicly available YouTube videos as of 8/2019

Table 6 shows the number of subscribers to each interviewee's YouTube channel; this figure also varied greatly, from a low of 56 to a high of 67,866, with a mean of 12,541 and median of 4,906. "Total channel views" refers to the total number of times all of a YouTuber's videos were watched; this number ranged from a low of 20,147 views to a high of 11,008,472 views. The average number of channel views was 1,715,110, and the median was 380,223 (see Table 7).

Table 6. Interviewee Channel Subscriber Counts

Interviewee Channels ($n=13$, $M=12,541$, $Mdn=4,906$)	
Channel Subscribers ¹	n
0-99	1
100-999	2
1,000-9,999	6
10,000-99,999	4
100,000-999,999	0
1,000,000+	0
Not available	0
Range	56-67,866

¹ as of 8/2019

Table 7. Number of Total Channel Views of Interviewee Channels

	Interviewee Channels (<i>n</i> =13, <i>M</i> =1,715,110, <i>Mdn</i> =380,223)
Total Channel Views ¹	<i>n</i>
0-9,999	0
10,000-99,999	5
100,000-999,999	4
1,000,000-9,999,999	3
10,000,000-99,999,999	1
100,000,000+	0
Range	20,147 - 11,008,472

¹as of 8/2019

Interview Data Themes

Reflecting the first four research questions, the interview protocol was divided into four sections, with separate sets of questions asking about the interviewees' feelings about their bodies, their attitudes towards being fat (or plus sized),¹⁴ and their thoughts on how fat people are treated in society. The first set also included questions about when they first realized they were plus sized and who had affected their beliefs about their size or weight.

A second set of questions delved into apparel. This section asked about the role apparel and fashion played in interviewees' lives both past and present. Questions were also asked about interviewees' perceptions of the state of plus-size apparel retailing in the U.S.

The third set of questions was related to exploring what it was like to create content on and be active in social media as a fat person, both in general and more specifically on YouTube.

¹⁴ Unless directly quoting or paraphrasing an interviewee or other YouTuber, the researcher uses the terms "fat" and "plus size" interchangeably and as simple descriptive terms.

Of particular interest was ascertaining the interviewees' goals for their social media work and what benefits that work gave them personally and professionally.

The fourth set of interview questions were related to what role their YouTube channel and social media activity in general played in their work life. Did interviewees consider themselves entrepreneurs? Did they intend to make a living from YouTube, or was it more of a hobby?

The themes and subthemes that surfaced from the interviews are listed in the taxonomy below and will be described in detail in the sections that follow. Themes 6, 7, and 8 emerged inductively from the data.

1. Past and current attitudes of plus-size YouTubers toward their bodies
 - 1.1. Memories and confirmation of difference
 - 1.2. The nexus of appearance, health, weight loss, and eating
 - 1.3. Body positivity, fat acceptance, and body politics
 - 1.4. The word "fat"
2. Manifestation of interviewees' interests in fashion, apparel, and style in their lives
 - 2.1. Long-time lovers of fashion
 - 2.2. Buying what fits
 - 2.3. Memories of shopping
 - 2.4. Fashion opinion leaders in everyday life
 - 2.5. Apparel restrictions as marginalization
3. The apparel industry and its changes
 - 3.1. Increase in options
 - 3.2. Online shopping

- 3.3. Online versus physical store shopping
- 3.4. Desire for parity with smaller sizes
- 4. Being a fat fashion social media “guru”
 - 4.1. Community
 - 4.2. Community nurturing
 - 4.3. “People like me”
 - 4.4. Role models
 - 4.5. Online fashion opinion leaders
 - 4.6. Authenticity
 - 4.7. Social media as a powerfully positive force
 - 4.8. Trolls
 - 4.9. Sharing too much
 - 4.10. Self-criticism
- 5. Social media as career? Desire and actuality
 - 5.1. Hobby
 - 5.2. Secondary source of income
 - 5.3. Entrepreneurs
 - 5.4. Conflicts between social media and career
- 6. Visibility and representation
- 7. Agency
 - 7.1. Transgressive acts
 - 7.2. Active versus passive word usage
- 8. Fashion as barrier or transformative tool

Past and Current Attitudes of Plus-Size YouTubers Toward their Bodies

Memories and confirmation of difference. It was not unusual for interviewees to easily recall incidents that were tied to understanding that they were set apart because of their size. Often these memories were from their childhood or adolescence. These ideas of difference were linked to interactions with people in their lives, such as family members. Kate¹⁵ remembered a family member whose negative attitude towards being fat was turned on her:

So I definitely always felt like I was too big, and I got that in my family. I got that. I remember my one grandmother in particular liked to call me “fat,” all the time. And I look back at those pictures now, and I was a [size] 10 to 12. Which is really average, but it sticks with you.

Tabitha realized that her mental health was negatively affected by the attitudes of her parents towards fatness:

It's just like my dad has always ragged on me about my weight. My mom has always had a weight problem, whatever you would call that, always wanted to be thinner. That had such an impact on me until I finally just said, “No.” Like, “That's not healthy for me. I don't care about physical health in this ... I care about my mental health.” I think I figured that out in time, to not really be too down on myself.

Tabitha felt that in the past five years she had made a great deal of progress towards greater body positivity and self-acceptance. Family members, as well as others in Toni’s life, let her know she was different:

I think that's why a lot of people have these issues around their bodies, because it starts so young.... I think from a very young age I knew I was fat. Like my brother would tell me

¹⁵ All interviewee names are pseudonyms.

I'm fat. If he would tease me, he would tell me I'm fat. Elementary school kids. I mean, I think as long as I could remember, I think I've always known you are fat.

Difference, however, was not always tied to inferiority, imperfection, or failure. Lily had a more positive experience with her family, stating:

It never really bothered me. I know there are a lot of people that, it's really bothersome for them to be overweight or fat. And it just never bothered me, I guess. And maybe it's because almost everyone else in my family is big too. And so like, that's just the norm for us? And so we just supported each other and never really, not that we didn't talk about it, but we didn't put pressure on each other to be like, "Oh you need to lose a bunch of weight."

Kiara expressed similar thoughts about her family. She noted:

It was never about weight in my family, ever. We had a lot of different sizes. The majority are on the heavier side, but it was never a thing. So, that for me was not an issue.

But she did start to understand that she was different as a teenager:

I was [age] 16-17. I'll never forget. I was with a bunch of other girls. It was a group of us, we were all out. A guy, he made a comment about one girl's body, and then he made a comment about another. And then he made a comment about mine, and I realized that me and another girl, we were considered the "thick" girls.

Like Lily and Kiara, Margot was fairly body positive, but she could recall asking herself when she was younger,

"Why don't I look like these other girls?" Or, "Do I need to diet? Do I need to try to look like these girls?" Then, I'd be like, "No, but I'm happy being me." But I'd definitely have those thoughts just because all my friends were very skinny.

These recollections affirm symbolic interactionism's primary premise that social interactions play a pivotal role in the formation of the self (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Stone, 1962). In a social encounter, how others respond to us affects how we perceive ourselves. Stone championed the importance of appearance in these interactions; he argued that "appearance is at least as important for the establishment and maintenance of the self as is discourse" (Stone, 1962, p. 19). Body size is one of the most obvious visual traits a person sees and assigns meaning to when viewing another. Thus, one reason why these incidents are perhaps so memorable is because they marked a shift in how the interviewees understood themselves.

Although Isabella did not cite anyone in particular as having an influence on how she felt about her body and size, she did poignantly note, "[In] high school, I remember thinking to myself, if I only had one wish, it would be just to be a normal size."

Beatrice had similar feelings, stating simply:

There have definitely been times where I wished that I was smaller.... I think that with society, you're forced to take note on your size. Even in school, I remember, we would have to get weighed for gym class, [and] obviously I weighed more than almost every other girl.

Regardless of the official reason for publicly weighing children, as a metaphor it succinctly symbolizes the societal drive for bodily control of its members and evokes Foucault's concepts of surveillance and discipline in the process of creating docile and physically conforming bodies (Foucault, 1995). Toni also characterized what she saw as societal-wide influences that impact people starting in early childhood. She opined, "People are trying to control and manipulate your body even before your body has a chance to understand itself. People are trying to have your body conform..."

The nexus of appearance, health, weight loss, and eating. Respondents often carefully expounded on the distinction between appearance and health, and how body size/weight was still seen as a proxy for health in our society. Imbuing the properly sized body with health and moral correctness is, as we have seen, a longstanding tradition in the U.S., but more recently, some have propounded the idea of “health at any size,” moving away from that tradition (see, for example: Bacon & Aphramor, 2014). Natasha was one of the interviewees who separated health from body size and appearance when she stated, “I’m learning more and more about being healthy versus looking good for everyone else.” Beatrice said, “Ideally, I would be healthy more than any [particular] size.” Bess also concurred: “I would like to be comfortable and a healthy weight. I think that's what's most important. The older I get, the more I focus on health more than image.” Tabitha commented:

I just know, when I was little, my mom was never concerned about her health. She was concerned about her weight. Maybe we can start making that distinction. Now people are talking about eating at Whole Foods and going paleo, but it still revolves around weight loss and not about health.

Toni had experienced problems with her knee, and this prompted her to lose some weight although she still remained plus size:

I realized I was going up the stairs two years ago, and I could not get up the stairs. Because I had a bad knee, I had had ACL surgery. And with graduate school I ended up gaining a lot of weight. And I had noticed because I was not dressing the way I wanted to dress. And it wasn't a big deal. Until, goddamn, like, “Wow, this hurts.” And then I was like, “No, this can't work.” But I just started to lose weight. And I really watched what I was eating. And it wasn't any kind of crash diet or anything like that. It was just going to

the gym. Making better choices. And I did lose some weight.... It is honestly easier to walk up the stairs, and my knees don't hurt.

Toni took care to explain that although, in her case, some weight loss had helped her quality of life, she had not jumped on the you-must-lose-weight-at-all-costs-and-be-thin bandwagon. In fact, she had decided she would not talk about her weight loss on her channel, as she feared it would send the wrong message to her viewers. Natasha was another interviewee who had decided to lose some weight “because I need to for my health.”

As a result of the longstanding connection of thinness with health, some of the negative connotations associated with fat people are that they are lazy, eat “bad” food, don’t exercise, and are even willfully unhealthy. In the book *Against Health*, contributor Lauren Berlant observed, “To many these days, the obese body serves as a billboard advert for impending sickness and death” (2010, p. 26). This was a topic that Kate talked about. She noted,

I think that there's so much stigma that being plus size means being unhealthy, and that bugs me a lot. The assumption is that it means that I don't eat well, that I don't exercise, that I am prone to diabetes and heart disease.

None of these statements actually applied in her case. Lily disclosed that combatting this stereotype was a motivation for her YouTube work:

That's kind of my goal, I guess, is to not put such a stigma on fat people and prove that we're not all lazy and on welfare and just sitting around eating ice cream all day. Some of us are productive members of society. Just because we're fat doesn't mean we're not a person.

These YouTubers wanted to emphasize that people can be healthy at a variety of body sizes and that they strive to live healthy lives just as people of other body sizes do. Interestingly, this

unquestioning espousal of the health ideal (encompassing healthy eating, healthy exercise, and healthy living overall) can arguably be seen as just a slightly different way of embracing the idea of the plastic body that is created through individual labor and morally correct living (Bordo, 2004; Brownell, 1991; Ogle & Damhorst, 2004). In this case, the body may not be molded into a small, slim specimen, but it is turned into a strong, disease-resistant, long-lived vehicle.

The contemporary health narrative is clearly morally imbued, and as noted in Chapter 2, has existed in the Western world since the mid-19th century (McMichael, 2013; Sokolow, 1983). Lily's aside about eating ice cream all day, above, is telling, as it is set up in opposition to people being productive members of society. Connotatively, one state is shameful and highly negative, and the other is socially sanctioned and morally correct – and to embrace the one is to forfeit the other. The healthy ideal is very widespread in the wealthy industrialized West. Indeed, increasingly popular phrases related to food and how one eats are “clean eating” and “clean food”; at the same time, the National Eating Disorders Association has begun to investigate orthorexia, defined by that group as an eating disorder in which there is “an obsession with proper or ‘healthful’ eating,” as extreme adherence to whatever is seen as perfectly healthful eating becomes more common (National Eating Disorders Association, 2018, para 1). The “clean” in “clean eating” can be seen as a synonym of “pure,” which fits neatly into the drive for morally correct living that has been more or less admired in the mainstream Western world for over a century.

Body positivity, fat acceptance, and body politics. Respondents had varying levels of comfort with the idea of accepting their bodies in their current states. Bess was very forthright about the fact that she did not accept her body. “Absolutely not, no, I don't accept my body, and

I'm not comfortable in my size." College undergraduate Lauren was like most interviewees in this study in that she had experienced feelings of hate for her body.

I still struggle to this day to feel body positive. I feel like I try to exude the confidence that I want to have. That way, it's kind of like tricking your brain to think, kind of like how people say, "If you smile while you're having a bad day, you'll feel better." So, I try to dress myself up the best way I can, to make me feel good about myself. Then I'll go out and I'll exude that and show everybody else I feel good about myself. I think I have come a very, very, very long way.... Coming to college, I feel like this is the best way that I've ever been with my body positivity.

Claire had an epiphany as a teen about her body and came to equate obedience to established societal norms of female body size not just with a reduction in her own body size, but also with a diminishment of herself as a human being. She eventually opted to go a different route:

I think it was around like 13, 14, and I was like, "Okay, there's kind of two routes I can go. I can either go just really hating myself, not loving my body." Again, I've always been tall, I've always been big. There's really like no way of missing it. So I was like, "Either I have to shrink myself, like my light, my energy, myself, and live in the shadows, or I need to accept who I am."

Lily also worked on accepting her body and size:

There's been times where I'm just like, "Oh my god, why am I like this?" But again, it would be only after someone made fun of me or someone said something negative and I'd be like, "Oh, I wish I wasn't like this." And then I'm like, well, that's part of who I am. It's almost so much ingrained in me that it's like part of my personality now. And it's kind of developed who I am because it's just always been there. I was telling my friend the other

day, and he was like, “You're not fat, you're beautiful.” I was like, “Hold on. I'm both.

But you know, being fat is... just who I am. It's just part of me.”

Beyond dieting, Lily had a history that included gastric bypass surgery, which resulted in a weight loss of 150 pounds. However, she had ultimately been unable to maintain her weight loss. “I have been up and down since then... And now I'm just like, I don't necessarily want to lose weight.” The very high levels of recidivism after dieting were mentioned in Chapter 2 and typically range from 95% - 98% (LeBesco, 2004; Stunkard & McLaren-Hume, 1959). For Lily, medical intervention for weight loss was only a temporary solution. Interestingly, as seen in the previous section, Lily was one of the interviewees who manifested health-ideal concepts in her speech, but both quotations in which she talks about being fat as part of her identity and in her conclusion that she wasn't going to attempt to lose more weight, suggest that she came to believe that the promise of the plastic body was not realistic. When a permanent medical procedure tries and fails to deliver a permanently thin body, it may indeed be sensible to reject the concept of the malleable body.

Kiara, who had some heavier relatives and had not experienced family pressure to lose weight, cited these two facts as helping her with body acceptance. Kiara maintained, “Even when my clothes aren't fitting me as well as I would want them to, it's still not a thing where I hate my body.” Toni stated, “I think I've always been confident. I've never had issues about my size, feeling some type of anxiety, depression, or ill feelings towards my size ever.”

Beyond their relationships to their own bodies, some interviewees specifically thought about the issues in a wider sociological context. Toni came to her social media work well-informed about the greater socio-political issues impacting plus-size women and people of color. “I study a lot about body politics and societal expectations and the societal ideals of eating and

all that. So that kind of informs the way I think about the world.” Tabitha brought up the irony of fat stigma in a country where so many people are fat. “It's weird that it's so stigmatized when it's so common.... Everyone loves to comment on how fat Americans are. Yet we [Americans] are like self-loathing fat [people].” Nelly’s YouTube channel and social media presence overall were designed to raise the consciousness of their viewers and followers about body acceptance:

But yeah, totally. Definitely body liberation, fat liberation-minded. Even though I have all the fashion stuff, I always am sneaking stuff in, putting in other stuff, and linking to articles, and whether it's on my Instagram or my personal Facebook page, I don't just leave it at the influencing. I take it to my personal Facebook page, too, because everyone is affected by this, and everyone will benefit. We can all be liberated with our bodies.

Nelly regarded fat activism as a movement that would benefit most people in society, which is reasonable, because the stigma about fat and fatness impacts everyone, regardless of size (McMichael, 2013). The prevailing societal preference for thinness is internalized by all the members of a society to a greater or lesser extent; it is not just fat individuals who are affected by the thin ideal. People who believe they need to lose a few pounds, for example, can also become obsessed by dieting and weight loss.

The word “fat.” While it seems that most of the interviewees could affirm that they were or had been striving towards seeing their bodies in a positive light, that acceptance did not necessarily extend to the word “fat” itself. Some respondents were very uncomfortable using the word at all and certainly not to describe themselves. Tabitha acknowledged that she was

not someone who’s fully embraced “fat.... Fully embracing “fat” is – I don't know if I'm quite there yet, which I know a lot of women are. I respect it, but everybody's on their journey. I prefer “thick.”

Bess admitted,

I don't like the term "fat." I've tried it out, because I do think by definition I am, so I've tried it. I've tried to use that word, honestly. I didn't like it. I don't like the way it sounds, and I don't like how it feels coming out of my mouth. I just don't. I don't even call other girls or boys that. I don't like it at all. I don't care how big or large you are, I just don't call people that.

Others consciously employed the word. This reappropriation of "fat" was seen in the practice of some interviewees using it as either a simple, neutral, descriptive adjective or even as a positive word. Lauren took the sting out of the word by claiming it as a compliment and positive aspect of self:

I like to use the word "fat." I know it can be kind of controversial, but I use that word as a "I'm going to say it before you can say it to me." Like you can't use it derogatorily to me because I used it as a compliment towards myself. So I like to call myself "fat mama," "little fat girl," something cute like that.

Kiara was one of the interviewees who was comfortable using "fat" to describe herself and saw it as a neutral adjective. She related,

I'm plus size. I'm curvy, I'm fat. I use them all. I'm not one of those people who shies away from the words. I take ownership of the words. They're just additional descriptives to describe me.

Toni also talked about "owning" the word; instead of being limited or denigrated by the word as imposed from without, Kiara and Toni took an active stance. Toni elaborated:

I think I only use "curvy" when it comes to using hashtags. It's not a term that I really use. I use "plus size," and I think the term that I use, I make a lot of people

uncomfortable, is “fat.” And I just said it to start owning “fat” because it's a descriptor and it's not a judgment on your worth. And for so long people have used that word, thrown it at you as a type of value judgment. “Oh, you're fat.” And then you feel so bad in elementary school. You go crying, “Oh they tell me I'm fat.” So now I own it. I'm fat. This is how I am. This is who I am. You like it. You don't. So I think that word is still controversial, and that's why people will say “phat.” I just say, “fat, f-a-t.” Or I say, “plus size.” That's how I identify, and I think it just sets the tone for people to know this is the type of chick I'm dealing with, and they know how to move forward. Usually I'll say, “Yeah, I'm fat and unbothered,” kind of thing. So I think it's a nonchalant type of attitude. I think that really encompasses all of this. I think it's a very controversial word. It's a very political word. And it has become a very radical word. So “plus size” or “fat” are the two descriptors that I use.

Nelly, who purposefully aimed to raise consciousness within social media, agreed.

I don't usually say “thick.” I'm past thick. I say “fat.” I say “plus size” if I'm with people who I'm not sure how they will take the word “fat”.... Fat. Well, it's been reclaimed by a lot of people in the fat community, because it's just a descriptor. It's a descriptor the same way that skinny, short, tall, other descriptors [are] about people. It's a physical descriptor, like brown hair, blue eyes, whatever. It's just a body type, and there's nothing bad about it, because fat people have existed forever, and they will continue to exist. And yeah. I don't know. It's just a word. It's just a word.

Isabella also saw the potential of using a word with so much negative connotation.

I usually use “plus size” or “curvy” to describe my size. When I'm writing and trying to really explain my experience, I will use “fat,” because I think it's a word that people shy

away from because it has been so derogatory for so long. I use it as a reality check for those who might not have had this experience. Because it's kind of like any other derogatory slur where you never want to be caught calling somebody it, but you know that everyone has called someone "fat" in their life. So, I use it when I'm teaching. I use it as a teaching tool.

Claire self-identified as plus size or fat, and she also purposefully employed the word "fat" for didactic reasons, because "It makes [people] uncomfortable, and I feel like it makes them, at least for a split second, recognize that they have feelings attached to that word and that those feelings are negative and fat-phobic." She recognized, however, that different words were needed depending on the context. She noted, "When it comes to shopping and fashion, I think that we need the term 'plus size,' because how would I find clothes otherwise?... Because we're many, many years away from every store carrying every size."

A practice of many oppressed groups has been the reappropriation of highly derogatory terms that had originally been used as slurs against them by the more powerful in society. Galinsky et al. (2013) formulated a reappropriation model that shows an association between a group using a slur as a label for themselves and an increase in that group's power. After a marginalized group initially gains some power in society, the group's members are more likely to label themselves with a highly negative term that has been used against them; the fact that the group members have done so is then understood by others outside the group as reflecting an increase in the group's power. This, in turn, leads to a lessening of stigma associated with that group. Action, even in the use of words, leads to a decrease in perceived powerlessness (Magee, 2009), and power increases status (Kilduff & Galinsky, 2013).

Galinsky et al. (2013) characterized this reappropriation as taking ownership of the derogatory terms; importantly, both Kiara and Toni specifically used the words “ownership” and “owning” when describing their relationship to the word “fat,” and several other interviewees had no problem using “fat” to describe themselves or for teaching purposes. Their reappropriation of this word suggests that fat acceptance has started to gain some ground in contemporary U.S. society.

Manifestation of Interviewees’ Interests in Fashion, Apparel, and Style in Their Lives

Long-time lovers of fashion. Unsurprising for individuals who spend a great deal of time making videos about shopping and apparel, most respondents noted that they had been interested in fashion for many years, even since childhood. Some had also developed an intense love of fashion magazines. Margot enthused that she had loved fashion since

birth - I don't know - in the womb. I've always liked fashion so much. Makeup, it took me a little longer to get into, but fashion, I can remember watching TV shows as a kid or cutting clothes out of magazines and making little mood boards with outfits that I dreamed of having one day, or would just daydream about. So, I mean, it's just always been a thing for me.

Claire was also very young when she began to be interested in fashion:

I got into fashion when I was a young, young, young child. I would say three, when I started dressing myself. I was always into glamour. I was always into style, fashion. I read fashion magazines like they were going out of style. Like my parents would drop me off at the bookstore so I could read all the fashion magazines when I was a teenager. But I was never included because I was fat, I was plus-size.

Similar to Claire, Kate distinctly remembered loving to pick out garments to wear as a child:

I remember always really loving choosing my outfits, and I have this pretty strong memory - I think I was around five or six. I know my mom kept saying that it looked terrible, this one outfit I liked to wear [which was a floral skirt paired with a gingham top]. I remember being very excited about that as a kid.

As Claire noted, however, that love of fashion was, for many years, an unsuccessful pursuit for them when it came to actually finding apparel for their own bodies. Bess had strong feelings about loving fashion but being powerless to find fashionable garments for herself:

Fashion, ah. Fashion, hmm. Fashion was difficult. It was difficult for me because I was interested in it since as long I can remember, but I couldn't participate in the "fashion club," I'll just call it that, because of my size. This whole plus-size thing is new. I mean, I was born in '88, and it still wasn't a thing to have really nice clothes that were in fashion and on trend for girls my size back in the ... Even the early 2000s that wasn't a thing, so I couldn't participate. I told myself, "Oh, I don't care." I convinced myself. I tried to anyway.

I would always watch and observe and collect fashion magazines and all these things, so I was obviously very interested. I guess I was bitter, because I was like, there's nothing in my size. I can't find these things in my size. I was forced to wear things I didn't want to wear, so I just kind of put it in the background, I guess, until recently where all these fashion companies are getting on board and making clothes in bigger sizes, which I think is really cool.

So, when did I get into it? I've been into it since the beginning of time. When was I able to participate? When they allowed me to participate. Yeah, so that's just how it is. Yeah.

The repeated mention of fashion magazines brings to mind Behling's (1992) definition of a fashion early adopter (an early adopter included fashion opinion leaders), who by definition read fashion magazines. We will see shortly that a few of the interviewees were acting as fashion opinion leaders in their everyday lives, even before their social media careers. After they had become active in social media, most of the interviewees served as fashion opinion leaders in some way to their followers.

Buying what fits. In the past, as they were faced with a drastically limited range of garments to choose from, most interviewees noted that they bought what would fit them. Buying what they wanted, what they deemed as flattering, or what was fashionable were never truly viable options. Every interviewee could remember a time in their lives when there were very few options, styles, brands, or stores available to them as plus-sized individuals. Claire's mother sewed, "And I would beg my mom to make me things that I wanted, because I could never find what I wanted in stores, ever." Isabella explained her enthusiasm with shopping nowadays by saying, "When I'm shopping, I'm excited about it. There are things that I'm buying because I like them. Not just because they fit, which is huge."

Memories of shopping. Shopping memories were poignant and tied into the idea of having to "buy what fits." Respondents typically had clear – and not terribly pleasant – memories of being children or adolescents shopping with parents and trying to find garments that would fit. In elementary school, Lauren had to go to Sears Kids Plus, "which did not have the cute clothes that everybody was wearing, but that was all that fit." Natasha also remembered Sears as "the

only place” where she could shop growing up. As a child, Isabella was also forced to shop at the one store that carried clothes that fit her:

I remember being a kid, and my mom having to – we would go to the store. I grew up in Canada, and there was this store called Reitmans.... That was where she took me because that was where I could fit into things.

Participants also recalled uncomfortable episodes of shopping in years past with friends who were not necessarily plus sized, including Natasha, who stated, “It was very embarrassing whenever I’d go shopping with my girlfriends.” Kate contemplated:

My love of fashion and clothing was always a bit more of a lonely experience. I didn't always have friends I could do it with. If I went shopping with friends and they were a different size, it was always a little demoralizing. They would come out of the store with five items, and I would have a scarf. That kind of thing. So to be able to make friends [online] who had the same kind of struggles, and who can get as excited with you for finding the right size legging, is making up for a lot of high school insecurities, which is great.

Standing inside a store where literally no article of clothing even comes close to fitting you and waiting for a friend to come out of the dressing room, perhaps pretending to examine earrings or shoes while simultaneously trying to push the feeling that you don’t belong in that store out of your mind is a memorable experience, but not a positive one. Margot might have wanted to shop with her friends as a teenager, but she could not:

In high school, when, you know, I was a size 16, I couldn't shop at the stores my friends were shopping at because they stopped at like a [size] 13. I'm like, "Oh, okay." So, I had to go to Lane Bryant because there was nothing else in our area.

As children and teens, interviewees found themselves wearing clothes that seemed better suited for much-older individuals – the incongruity of the situation was still evident to them years after the fact. Isabella was relieved that “For me now, the thing is that I can buy things that are age appropriate. When I was younger, I always felt even on my best days a little bit more frumpy and dumpy than your average high school girl.” During her interview, Lily recalled “the really old lady clothes that I had to wear when I was in middle school and high school because there were no other options for us plus-size girls.”

Fashion opinion leaders in everyday life. Somewhat ironically, their love of fashion meant, for at least three of the interviewees, that their real-life friends asked them for advice on what to wear. Thus they were considered to be opinion leaders, individuals who stayed abreast of fashion trends, were considered to have expertise in many aspects of dress and apparel, and had influence on others (Brannon, 2005; Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996; Workman & Johnson, 1993). Beatrice was one of these individuals; as she remarked in her interview, “All my life, I’ve always had my friends [ask me], ‘Can you help me pick out this outfit?’” Claire started her blog in part because people in her everyday life were asking her for fashion information. She stated, “So many people that I came in contact with Everywhere I go, people are asking me A, about where did I get my clothes? And B, how are you so confident? So that was really where my blog started.” Natasha, too, indicated that she had long shared her fashion knowledge with her real-life friends.

So even if these plus-size individuals could not always dress themselves to their own style specifications, their passion and knowledge could be used for the benefit of others. As we will see later in this chapter, the interviewees’ entries into social media widened this opinion

leadership capability to a much-larger online audience, and more of the interviewees recognized that they took part in serving as a fashion opinion leader online.

Apparel restrictions as marginalization. Fashion, dress, and apparel are routinely dismissed in mainstream society as being unimportant, and following fashion is often seen as a shallow and wasteful pastime of the bourgeoisie and/or a racket perpetuated by capitalism. Yet for fat people, all of the restrictions on what they could find in the marketplace to wear served as another facet of marginalization. Having very few plus-size apparel options is more than having a half-filled closet. Beyond the negative socio-psychological effects of being fat, apparel restrictions themselves are linked to social exclusion. In the symbolic interactionist tradition, Solomon theorized that “a significant portion of consumption behavior is actually social behavior”; he added that “the consumer often relies upon the social information inherent in products to shape self-image” (1983, p. 319-320). Adolescents are known for desiring to fit in with their peer group and be socially accepted, and to gain that acceptance they will use apparel similar to that worn by individuals in a desired social group (Littrell & Eicher, 1973). Stone noted that women are generally “concerned... with the desirability to don the uniform of their peer circles” (1962, p. 35). Thus, apparel restrictions can negatively affect one’s self-concept. Deprived of much choice in choosing clothing, continuing identity development and self-articulation may well suffer greatly.

Is it therefore not surprising to hear that many respondents made the connection between this apparently unimportant thing – having access to clothes that are fashionable and also fit their bodies and hating their bodies less and liking themselves more. Isabella was one of the interviewees who explicitly made that connection. As noted previously, she had wished to be “a normal size” when she was in high school:

Now, no. Now, obviously there are days where I'm like, "Oh, I should do this or I should do that, or I should lose some weight or whatever," but it is no longer my must-have biggest wish. I think now that has a lot to do with the fact that I can buy clothes that I like.

Nelly stated frankly,

I think the politicism in plus-size fashion, especially, is just recognizing that there are people who are in bigger bodies who deserve clothing that is as high quality, as fashionable, as people who are in socially accepted bodies.

The Apparel Industry and Its Changes

Increase in options. All interviewees noted that the apparel industry overall had improved greatly in the last several years, with noticeable increases in the mix of apparel styles being created in plus sizes, as well as increases in the numbers of brands and stores selling plus-size apparel. Tabitha enthused, "There's been such an explosion and availability of cool plus-sized clothes." Characterizing the growth of options in the plus-size apparel arena, Kiara stated, with a touch of sarcasm, that

brands don't necessarily expect us all to be wearing muumuus now. Now we get a lot of variety. We get color and pattern. So, it's definitely improved, and it has definitely changed over the last 10+ years. Even in the last five, it has changed a lot. Yeah.

Kate was relieved that there had been such an increase in the numbers of brands and companies active in the plus-size apparel field.

This amazing change started happening in the last five years where there are all these new brands that have come out, and it's just, I think that's when I felt like, well, I can

explore more, and I can be seen as more fashion forward in a way that I was never able to before. But I think that it was always within me, I just didn't have, there was no choice.

Claire agreed that there was more choice now, but she didn't think it was enough:

Fashion, I feel like, thank goodness, we've come a long, long way. But I feel like we have so much further to go. Again, I think I'm a little bit in the minority of plus-size women because I want different pieces, I want things that are ... I feel like that's also a response from growing up having no options or choices, that I want all the way to 10, and I feel like a lot of plus-size women want like to five. So that's why I can't ... I'm not really satisfied with mass-market fashion. But yeah, I think thank goodness we've come a long way, but we definitely have a long way to go.

Nelly remembered the “fat-girl clothes drought” in years past but also asserted that, even now, some people who wear smaller plus sizes have more options than those who are larger:

I think there's certainly more options, and I think it's becoming more fashion-forward and current for some sizes. So up to 3X [typically a size 22/24], I feel like that's all true.

When you get past that, it's still not a huge selection.

Overall, the plus-size apparel field has increased greatly since the 1980s and now includes both stores that have always had plus-size women as their target market, such as the Avenue (founded in 1983), and more recently, mainstream brands that had previously excluded fat women from their target market, such as Nike, which introduced a plus-size women's range in 2017 (Chowdhary & Beale, 1988; Hopfinger, 2014; Wright, 2017; York, 2007).

Online shopping. Online commerce was seen as instrumental in connecting plus-size apparel consumers with more brands, retailers, and styles. Many online-only companies, such as Eloquii, Simply Be, and boohoo (as well as online style subscriptions catering to the plus sized,

such as Dia & Co.) were cited as significant change agents in plus-size apparel retailing.

Interviewees proclaimed the internet to be the best place to shop for the plus-size customer at present. Tabitha succinctly described the current landscape for plus-size shoppers by saying, “It’s great online. It’s just really questionable in store [aka brick and mortar stores].” Bess agreed: “Online stores I prefer the most, to be honest, because I can find more options there.” She listed ASOS and boohoo as two of her go-to online stores. Isabella credited online retail with opening her world to fashion. She said:

It's probably been the past three to five years with the advent of online shopping becoming more and more popular, that's when I started to have access to fashion, and plus-size fashion specifically.

The internet as a shopping channel was characterized by Anderson (2006) as ideal for specialized or underserved markets and offers benefits to both consumers and retailers. A company catering to plus-size women that only operates with a physical storefront may struggle financially if it is located in a smaller town, but an online store is not bound by a trade area, traditionally defined as a “contiguous geographic area that accounts for the majority of a [physical] store’s sales and customers,” simply because it does not exist as a physical storefront (Levy, Weitz, & Grewal, 2019, p. 210). Thus, online stores have the potential to draw customers from across the country and even internationally. Operators of internet stores can also be less concerned with “the economics of shelves, walls, staff, locations, working hours, and weather” (Anderson, 2006, p. 49); while setting up and maintaining a virtual storefront is not free, those costs are almost always lower than costs to operate a physical store. Additionally, without the limitations of the square footage of any particular physical space, an online company’s variety of product categories and assortment of items in each category can be as wide or deep, respectively,

as makes sense for its target market. Virtual retailers are also well-situated to engage in streamlined and more efficient order fulfillment by utilizing such tactics as drop shipping, where customer orders are shipped directly to customers from the manufacturer (Levy et al., 2019). As the interviewees affirm, ecommerce has made profound changes in how specialized or previously underserved target markets shop.

Online versus physical store shopping. When an apparel company that carries plus sizes has both an online storefront as well as physical stores, interviewees found that the physical storefront typically carried far fewer styles. Her local Macy's store was a disappointment for Kiara, because "Macy's used to be my go-to, but it's harder for me because they don't stock like they used to at my store here in [town]. But, I still shop their website."

Accustomed to the greater options available to plus-size people online, Claire was dismayed by what she saw during a rare trip to brick and mortar stores in a shopping mall. As a response to this experience, she later wrote, starred in, and filmed a scripted video called "Shopping while Fat." She explained the video and the comments it received from viewers:

I was shopping in a mall looking for something, and I was like, "Oh ...," and I was suddenly taken back to being [age] 14, 15 and couldn't find anything I liked. We were in the back corner of the store with flickering lights, like no one was there. It was like a ghost town. Like a tumbleweed rolled by. I wrote a parody on that, and it was an interesting response because the first response was, "Oh my God, this is my exact experience." And then more people were like, "Oh, I didn't even laugh at this at all. This was just like my exact experience."

Desire for parity with smaller sizes. Interviewees wanted parity between what was offered in misses/junior sizes and what was made in plus sizes. Lily expressed this by simply

stating, “I want to wear the same clothes as my cute little friends!” This desire was manifested in several ways: These YouTubers were often quite excited when they would learn that a company that had previously only made apparel in misses or junior sizes was now expanding their size range into larger, plus sizes. Margot was pleased to find a larger size range at a store she herself did not usually patronize:

Just like going in somewhere like New York & Company, which is my mom's favorite store, which always went to a 14 or 16, and now they have plus sizes and that blows my mind, just like how many retailers and designers are finally catching on. It's a completely different world, even from when I started YouTube eight years ago.

Participants also hoped that trends seen in misses or juniors sizing would not be delayed from months to years before their appearance in plus-size apparel. Claire, who as previously noted was less interested in mass-market trends, bemoaned this fact. She commented, “I'm very much over cold shoulders. Like no more cold shoulders, plus-size community. And again, I feel like we're, as the plus-size community, kind of given scraps.... Like trends hit us two years later.”

Isabella had better luck:

This is how I know. Now that as a plus-size woman with access to things that are my age and my size, Carly Cristman is my favorite YouTuber – and she's not a plus-size YouTuber at all. She's actually 6'3” and she's tiny, but I can look at her and her outfits, and I can recreate them with clothes that I can wear, which goes hand in hand with being able to actually buy things that look like everybody else's clothes.

Understanding that so many women in the United States wear plus sizes, some interviewees opined that a brand's plus-size clothing styles should be the same as its misses/juniors styles, and some didn't see why all apparel stores or brands wouldn't also carry

plus sizes. Beatrice asked, “The average size of a woman in the United States is a 14, so why doesn’t every store have a plus-size section?” Alluding to the wish to have age-appropriate clothes, the 23-year-old Beatrice also said that she wished a specific trendy store for young women carried plus sizes:

The store Garage Clothing. It's kind of like a teeny 20-year-old store, I'd say. I wish that they had plus sizes... But yeah, definitely younger stores tend to carry less plus sizes than, say, a department store like Macy's, where all age ranges shop.

Lauren noted with approval what Target had done with its plus-size offerings:

Target, for example, they had this collection called Wild Stable. And they made pieces in the regular size, and they had the exact piece in plus sizes. I wish there was more of that in the fashion community for plus-size women, because when I go to Forever 21, I may want a skirt that's in the regular section, but I'll never find that in the plus section. It just kind of defeats the purpose of even wanting to shop there, in my opinion.

Bess had ideas about why this pronounced separation still existed, and as she discussed the apparent reticence of apparel brands and stores to market to the plus-size consumer, she pointed to the continuing inclusion of thinness as a part of the long-enshrined beauty ideal in mainstream Western society.

It's so interesting to me, they're slowly creeping [extended sizes] in. They start with “Oh, we offer tall, and then we offer extra-long” or whatever, and it's like, just go ahead and add some more X's. XXL. I don't know what they're waiting on. They're tiptoeing, but ... I don't know. I feel like if they were smart and if they wanted to make more money, it's an easy answer. Just get more bigger sizes honestly. But, again.... I feel like a lot of them want to - they purposely leave out bigger sizes because they want to conserve a particular

image, or maybe portray a certain image and that is wealthy and thin, or just thin, because maybe that's how they view beauty still, as being thin.

The 2019 death of Chanel designer Karl Lagerfeld brought not only media tributes for his decades of design work, but it also saw some commentators reflecting upon Lagerfeld's entrenched hatred of fat or even average-sized women (that is, any woman whose body size was above a runway model's size) (Jennings, 2019). Having such an influential figure in fashion continually belittling all women who didn't fit his extremely narrow standards of beauty is merely the most obvious sign that the fashion industry has all too often been unwilling to engage with larger women.

Being a Fat Fashion Social Media “Guru”

Community. Interviewees overwhelmingly mentioned the concepts of community and friendship as two of the most important benefits of being active in social media. They enthused about developing relationships with their subscribers and commenters on YouTube and followers on other social media platforms, especially Instagram. In addition, some participants nurtured friendships with other content creators, such as other YouTubers and bloggers. Margot mentioned making friends through social media several times in her interview, exclaiming at one point,

Fashion makes me really happy, and I think other people have probably been able to see that, so it's been able to connect me to other people who love fashion or are just looking for friends.

Kate also mentioned friendship as a surprising by-product of her activity in social media:

I've made some good friendships. I've actually connected with some other women, when our lives would have never overlapped otherwise. Absolutely not. We live all over the

world. Not all of them are plus size, but there's that sense of just having similar interests and enjoying each other's company, and I didn't expect that kind of friendship.

She added,

I think that for me that's been a huge part of why I love it [YouTube] and keep doing it.

Bess enthused,

You genuinely feel like you have a connection with the people who are watching you, especially when they comment, and you see the same people over and over comment.

Isabella often filmed try-on hauls, in part because “they generate the most traffic, and I get the most interaction, so it's fun to see the comments and get to interact with my viewers, because they tend to be more vocal when I post that type of content.”

Lily not only had a relationship with her YouTube subscribers (“I've made friends with a ton of people from YouTube”), but she also had created a private Facebook group that was quite active:

I think I've built a really good community around positivity, and especially the Facebook community that we've built is, it's so crazy.... There are women supporting each other with either their small businesses, or if they're having a bad day, they can write on there and get support from other people. And it's like the coolest thing I've ever been a part of, it's so awesome.

Social media did not just help her viewers. Of all her videos, Lily especially liked her vlogs, where she would simply talk to the camera, because they were a release for her.

The vlogs are kind of like my therapy. Instead of me going to a therapist or counselor, I get to talk to a camera, and then people can offer me their point of view on something or give me some support that I needed.... I like the vlogs a lot.

For Lily, vlogs were implicitly a two-way avenue of communication, an actual exchange. Developing that relationship entailed more effort than just posting a video and reading any comments. Nelly emphasized, “I respond to all my comments, always.” Isabella tried to do the same. Beatrice mentioned responding to comments, but she also tried to do more, if possible:

If people comment on my channel, I'll always comment back and say thank you or [see] if they have a question. For example, one girl just recently asked what self-tanner I use, so I'll always comment back and answer any questions. A lot of people message me on Instagram as well about a question [such as] where I got the specific thing I'm wearing. I always make sure to answer back. I try to also, on Instagram, to follow their account and like some of their pictures as well, so they know I'm a regular person, and I see what they're doing, as well as they see what I'm doing.

Tabitha was a YouTuber who developed new relationships with not only her viewers but also her fellow content creators. After relating a story that one of her YouTube subscribers had told in the comments of one of her videos, she noted:

That, mainly, is what's fun. It's just getting to interact with people I wouldn't have interacted with otherwise. And creating a little community with other YouTubers. There's other little YouTubers that started with me, that started around the same time I did. It's cool, because we're supportive of each other and comment on each other's stuff. I think that's really nice too.

Claire spoke of having created a community in social media. Of her followers on YouTube and her other social media accounts, she noted:

I would say we have a good relationship. I feel like I have a solid group of people who really rock with me and who really like what I am putting out and follow me on all my

platforms and buy things.... So I feel like I have created a cool community within my blog and YouTube and social channels.

Like Lily, Claire recognized that her YouTube channel and blog (and social media presence, in general) were, for her and her community, a place to let down their guard. Although she dubbed her channel a place “for the unapologetically fat bad bitch,” she also thought of it as a forum for “being vulnerable too and being like still emotional and still sharing stories and sharing experiences.”

Interviewees uniformly described their dealings with viewers, followers, and other YouTube content creators as real relationships between individuals. Keats, in her 2012 exploration of YouTube haul videos, also argued for the existence of real community in the virtual world. The interviewees’ discussions of their relationships do not suggest that these are parasocial interactions, a simulation of a relationship between media personality and viewer (Park & Lennon, 2004). This may be because the concept of parasocial interaction was created with mass media in mind (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and mass media is by design a one-way broadcast of information; in contrast, social media was designed for mass participation in two- or many-way interactions.

Community nurturing. Responding to comments, as mentioned above, was a basic but key part of how interviewees tended to their community, but there were many other things done to reinforce this connection. The activities among community members were described in many ways by interviewees: They spoke of sharing problems and experiences, helping and supporting, entertaining, and giving advice. With a background in theater, Claire described activities related to storytelling, empowering and inspiring:

I went to school for theater, and what theater is about is connecting with people through storytelling, and that's what I really feel like I've transitioned into in social media. Again, I've always loved empowering women and empowering confidence, inspiring people to feel like a boss bitch themselves. [Social media] has given me a platform to really do that on a wider scale.

She was not the only one with such a background. Nelly also mentioned having theater experience, and Toni had received a master's degree in documentary filmmaking with an emphasis on writing and storytelling. "Telling one's story" was one way the interviewees symbolized the authenticity of the giving, taking, and sharing that would happen between these YouTubers and their viewers. Lily stated,

I'm kind of a people person, and so, I like meeting and interacting with new people and hearing other people's stories. And I guess that's why I like to share mine, because I get to hear other people's in return. And so, it makes sharing mine even better.

She also described her YouTube channel as a place where she was documenting her unfolding life story: "And it's just kind of blossomed into following my journey on becoming like more of the person that I wanted to be."

"People like me." A yearning for community was often evoked by using the phrase "people like me." Tabitha used the phrase as she summarized her goals for her YouTube channel: "I just want people like me to find me, basically." Bess used a variant of the phrase to explain why she had started making videos:

I thought I would be able to connect with *others who were like myself* [emphasis added]. I think helping others and connecting with others, being relatable. Yeah, my main motivation was probably that. Just finding my own community and people that I could

relate to. I felt like if I put myself out there like that, I'd attract people that were like minded.

And she was successful, Bess reported, as long as she “was consistent for long enough, people started to gather and join. So yeah, that was cool.”

Isabella invoked a related concept when she spoke of how important it was to her viewers to see garments worn on “bodies like theirs”:

Because occasionally, I'll post hauls that aren't try-on hauls. I will usually get all these comments that are like, "Try it on! Try it on! Try it on!" Because they want to see what it looks like. They want to see that body in that clothing because they want to be able to associate *a body like theirs* [emphasis added] in stuff that they would buy and want to buy.

This repeated desire of the interviewees (and presumably, for their viewers and followers) to find others who are like them could be, as is the striving for community, interpreted as a plaintive need related to social identity – for understanding oneself as part of a group, for belonging (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Someone searching for videos on YouTube to find people who resemble the viewer also brings to mind Mulvey's (1975) writings on film. She stated that people prefer to identify with someone in a film, because psychologically, by doing so, they are in effect looking at themselves in a mirror. It seems reasonable that a fat viewer who finds videos starring a fat YouTuber may indeed be able to identify with the YouTuber (although in Mulvey's discussion, only men were able to identify with people on the screen, as the women actors/characters she described were categorized as passive objects to be looked at by men.)

Role models. Many interviewees saw themselves as role models, often consciously presenting themselves as such. The existence of or lack of role models for the interview

participants themselves was noted as well; just as the lack of apparel choices or options was quite negative, so was the dearth of role models for these plus-sized individuals growing up. Finding plus-size bloggers was a healing experience for Claire:

It was also through fashion bloggers, plus-size fashion bloggers, that I found, sort of like [at age] 17, 18, that I was like, “Oh wow, this whole world is out here.” And that was a really interesting, healing, kind of thing, because I felt really alone. I was like, “Oh my God, I had no idea other people experienced this.”

Tabitha had been intrigued by Lesley Kinzel’s 2012 book on fat self-acceptance, *Two Whole Cakes*, and by FatGirlFlow, Corissa Enneking, a social media personality active on a variety of platforms, including Tumblr, Instagram, and YouTube, which led her to discover other plus-size individuals on social media. She said, “I feel like I owe all of them to inspire more people.” She was paying her debt to her role models by serving as a role model for others.

Some of the interviewees did not have role models when they were younger. Nelly stated, “The best thing for me is just that I'm affecting people's lives in positive ways.... because I never saw anyone like myself really when I needed it.” Bess, who preferred to dress more conservatively, also had had no role models and wanted to remedy that for others.

I need to give [women] more examples and give them someone that can help them or guide them in this way, because I didn't even have anyone to look up to. I didn't have a go-to plus size, I guess, fashion vlogger on YouTube I could count on for those sort of videos. Most of them, like I said before, they wear a lot of really tight clothes, and just clothes that I wasn't really interested in.... I could count on one hand, and I couldn't even complete the hand, of people that dress like they're interested in dressing like me. I was like okay, so I guess I'll be the one if nobody else is going to do it.

Margot started her channel because she had started watching fashion videos on YouTube:

I was seeing the outfit of the day videos, so that got my interest kind of piqued because I wasn't seeing girls that are plus size. I mean, these girls are beautiful, but I was like, "I want to see what I look like." So, that's where [it] started for me.

Kiara aimed for her social media work to have an inspirational and motivational effect on her viewers and followers:

I'm hoping that just through the experience of watching me live my life, do the things that I do enjoy, the things that I do, I'm hoping that it motivates and influences other women to try and have the same kind of desire to just live. Live your life and not be challenged by the mundane things and other people and their opinion.

Overcoming some inner personal turmoil to post a swimsuit try-on haul, Beatrice was proud of the video because she thought it would positively affect her viewers:

A company reached out, and they asked me to do a swimsuit haul, and normally with fashion I'd be like, "Of course, I'd love to do a video," but this time I was like, I don't know if I want to just put my body trying on swimsuits all over the internet for critics to comment whatever they want. But I decided that I would, because I wanted to show girls you can wear whatever you want. If I'm a person that a lot of plus-size girls look up to or look for fashion advice, if I can't be confident and wear what I want to wear, how can I display this message of confidence to these girls? That was one of my favorite videos. For that reason I think it will positively affect a lot of other girls' confidence and self-esteem.

Recognizing the benefits of social media in creating camaraderie, Kate simultaneously felt a strong sense of responsibility to her viewers and carefully composed her words:

I do think a lot about the messaging that I put out there now. [I'm] much more conscious, and I think it's because I realized that I had a viewership of people who will never know me, that I don't know, I'll never meet. And I feel more responsibility, especially when we talk, because it's not just fashion. It is body stuff, and I just feel like I wouldn't want to put anything out there that would cause harm to someone or have them doubt themselves more or feed into their own negative self-talk in that way. I think a lot about that.

Bess was also careful about what she said in her videos:

I try to be polite and careful with how I word things, especially if it's a critique or a negative critique. In general, I try to be that way. And also, because of the type of videos I was making, they were more so in the safe zone. What I mean by that is I didn't have a drama channel where I was just cursing and bashing people and things like that. I mean, especially with my ... Could you imagine? Oh, God. Especially with my profession outside of YouTube. No, there's no way.

Online fashion opinion leaders. As part of serving as a role model with expertise in fashion, most interviewees were in effect serving as opinion leaders for their viewers, spotlighting new trends for their audiences, sometimes helping to set those trends, and reading comment after comment from viewers that their videos influenced those viewers' buying decisions (Darden & Reynolds, 1972; Schrank & Gilmore, 1973; Summers, 1970). Natasha was one interviewee who had transferred her status as a fashion opinion leader in her everyday life to her YouTube audience.

I started making videos because I fell in love with the beauty community. It was so much fun to watch these girls show off their latest finds in beauty and fashion. I wanted to do

that too! I love telling my friends what I'm loving and what's working for me, so why not tell the world?!

Natasha also noted,

I think I have definitely influenced my viewers in one way or another. I get messages all the time saying how much they love my outfit or how this video or that post has helped them.

Margot mentioned casually that she was receiving “a lot of questions from people about wedding dresses, too,” because she was seen as very knowledgeable about plus-size brands and companies. From her viewers' comments, she could tell that she had influenced a lot of their buying decisions. “They'll be like, ‘I bought this. You know, you showed this in your video, and I bought it.’” Lauren had similar experiences.

I've had ladies like DM [direct message] me, “Can you pick me out an outfit?” “Can you please pick me out an outfit?” And I've had ladies like, “You know, I don't really wear makeup, but you make me want to try. Can you help me out?”

Authenticity. Another behavior that reinforces the notion of these YouTubers acting as role models is the fact that all of the interviewees went to great pains to note that they were truthful and genuine in their opinions, reviews, and generally, in their relationships with their viewers. This emphasis on authenticity is often described as a part of “YouTube's ‘common culture,’” so it is not surprising to find it in the interviews (Burgess & Green, 2009a, p. 91; see also Lim, Nicholson, Yang, & Kim, 2015). Beatrice simply stated, “I try to be as real and raw as possible.” Later in her interview, she added, “I want to stay true to myself and to my subscribers, because I do think that when you're passionate about what you're doing, it shows.” Margot attributed her success on YouTube in part to her authenticity and truthfulness:

For me, it's always just been very important to stay true to myself, my style, not do things that aren't me, or not do things ... I don't ... I'm not somebody that does stuff for shock value, or I'm not trying super hard to get followers or anything. I just want it to be very organic, very natural, and just very, you know, as realistic as possible to what my life is. Lauren stated simply, "I can't force myself to come on a camera and smile and do this and that ... if that's not what I have going on right now," and while discussing her Instagram posts, Tabitha said that she had not realized "that you can edit Instagram pictures. I was like, "Oh you can?" I wouldn't [do that to] mine anyway. I like to be real."

Honesty was also something interviewees kept in mind as they moved into doing sponsored videos, which are videos that are made through a paid collaboration between the YouTuber and a particular brand or company. Nelly had begun to work with various apparel and beauty brands to do sponsored videos but was adamant that these videos would be completely honest:

So yeah, totally, if it's a product that I either already like and love and trust or something that I have the opportunity to try out and really put through the wringer and then trust and use, yes. But my coworker always is like, "Do you *really* like that?" And I'm like, "Yes, I *really* like it." So yeah, I'm not going to talk about something I don't like, because people trust me, and trust is everything when it comes to this stuff.

Social media as a powerfully positive force. YouTube, and social media in general, were frequently credited with the power to profoundly affect plus-sized people's lives for the better. Toni stated that:

I think the best thing is when people comment to you or they tell you in real life that "I never wore a bikini before I saw you on Instagram or YouTube," or "I never would wear

a crop top,” or “I really hated myself and the way I looked before I saw you, and you inspired me to love myself.” You realize in those moments that it's not just about yourself and the narcissism of social media, but it's really about changing lives. And sometimes a lot, right?

Lauren had similar thoughts:

One of the things I enjoy about social media is that you can help someone or you can be an inspiration to someone, or you can just like, small things that you do, can affect someone else and can make someone feel a different way about themselves. I've even inspired people to do YouTube videos. Just because I've done one.

Beatrice also saw very positive benefits in using social media:

I think that social media, in general, has really helped pave the way for plus-sized and curvy girls. I know that I never would have started this YouTube channel if I didn't see other girls that looked like me doing it. I'm really grateful for them.

In essence, Beatrice restated the “people like me” (i.e., “girls that looked like me”) idea.

These interviewees' opinions on the power and promise of social media mesh fairly closely with the more optimistic writers on the potential benefits of the internet and social media, Henry Jenkins and Howard Rheingold. Jenkins espoused the potentials of participatory media made possible through social media platforms (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2015), while Rheingold described early online communities and the use of internet and mobile technologies by groups to cooperate and organize for social action (Rheingold, 2000, 2002). Each in their own way envisioned the online world as a new way for people to come together as a community.

Trolls. The negative issues endemic to social media were experienced by interviewees as well. Claire was one interviewee who spoke about online “trolls,” who can be defined as

commenters who don't actually care about the content of the social media post or the poster, but just want notoriety, to stir up trouble, or to upset the content creator in some way:

Most everything you do is policed by trolls. I mean you could be doing literally anything and they have something to say.... You just telling me I'm fat, I'm ugly, go kill myself is doing nothing productive.... So I was like, okay, this says more about them than it does about me. Like well-adjusted, successful people are not trolling people on the internet.

After experiencing the troll phenomenon, Toni philosophically opined, "What I find is that a lot of people have problems with plus-size women loving themselves as they are." Lauren spoke at length on the issue, evoking both the promises and pitfalls of social media by noting,

I feel like social media [equals] more scrutiny, though, on the plus-size community.

People wander where they have no business. So if somebody's just happy being themselves, just enjoying the skin that they're in, because – this is right now. We can't change things overnight. We have to embrace where we are right now. I feel like when women do that, some people get bothered. I don't know why. I don't know what it is about plus-sized women that bothers people. And I feel like that's more prevalent now that we have social media.

Natasha suggested that one of the positive aspects of being a YouTuber with fewer subscribers is that she is spared from having to deal with many trolls.

Thankfully, I'm not a big YouTuber to the point where I get trolls on a daily basis.

Honestly, it's very rare if someone is rude to me on my videos, and when they are rude, I delete their comment right away. I don't give them any attention.

Beatrice credited having a thick skin with helping her brush off rude comments:

People leave some pretty mean comments sometimes, but I'd say for every 25 nice comments I get, I'll get one mean comment. I am someone who has thick skin in general, to be quite honest, and I think that with having a YouTube channel, that's something that you kind of have to have.

Lily, on the other hand, admitted to having trouble dealing with negative comments. She said, "If I get like 15 really good comments and those make me happy, and then I get this one nasty person? I get so down on myself." Instead of having to deal with the troll herself, she found that "A lot of times, the other commenters on my videos will, kind of, go at them" in her stead, in effect, sticking up for her, as someone might protect a vulnerable friend.

Isabella made cooking and vegan-focused videos, and this occasionally gave her pause: Sometimes you can get nervous, because if you are a plus-size woman, I feel like that might typically invite more nasty comments, just because it is food related, and there is this weird correlation between, yes, fat people eat. Wow. Amazing.

Interviewees were aware of, and some had dealt with, people who are referred to as health-concern trolls. Regardless of the subject matter of any video, health-concern trolls take it upon themselves to comment upon the YouTuber's weight, while pretending that they are doing this to help the YouTuber. They weaponize the health ideal to belittle, shame, or otherwise denigrate a plus-size YouTuber. Claire discussed commenters who pretended to care about her health as a plus-size woman.

A "health concern." And it's like you're absolutely not concerned about my health, because you'd be concerned about my mental health. We would talk about the economics

of health. We would talk about why a hamburger at McDonald's is a dollar where a salad is \$7.

Another commonly encountered type of troll was the “creepy-guy” troll, who sexualizes or fetishizes the YouTuber. Nelly stated that “I'm not visible enough that I get a ton of trolls or a ton of hate, but it's just the gross sexualization of me without my permission that's the worst part” of being on social media. Tabitha concurred,

You do get the creepy-guy comments. They don't bother me too much. It's hard to offend me. I just laugh and delete them, but it is like, why? Why does it have to be like that? If you're a woman on the internet doing anything, there's some creepy guy that will say, “You're hot.” Like A, yes, I know, and B, that's gross. I didn't ask you.

Isabella discussed a run-in with a troll she had dealt with recently:

Occasionally I will get these comments from men who think that they're being encouraging, but they're actually just being gross. Like there's one user I recall in the recent past... and I was just like, "This isn't for you, sir. This is for my friends. Like girls who feel insecure, girls like me, girls not like me. This is not for you."

Lauren noted that although she had not experienced a lot of trolling on her channel, she had received “one rude comment about my race, but I figured that would happen eventually.” In response, she used a filtering tool available to YouTube creators to block comments with words and phrases that she listed. She blocked out any racial slurs and “anything that could be very offensive towards me.... That way those things don't even make it to me.”

Sharing too much. Kate had the unpleasant experience of sharing too much personal information on YouTube:

YouTube has a lot of things where you have this “tag,” and you answer [a set list of] questions. And there was one that was like a get-to-know-me tag, and it was actually a lot of very personal questions. I put it up, and it got some of my highest hits in terms of viewers and a lot of comments, but it also got some negative comments, and I felt very vulnerable and exposed afterwards, so I've also taken it down. Well, I think I might have set it to private. But basically it's not there anymore, and it made me really rethink in terms of anonymity and safety issues. And when I say safety issues, not necessarily that anyone's going to find where I live, but some of it's just emotional safety. I don't know if I necessarily need everyone to know my inner workings and comment on that in such a big forum.

I don't think you think of that when you're putting ... I mean I know that sounds silly because obviously it's a public forum, but it's tough. Our self-esteem and our body image, it's not that easy to just put it out there to a bunch of strangers for them to feel that they can comment on.

Self-criticism. While interviewees overall were positive about social media and how it could affect lives, some did admit to feeling overly self-critical when creating visual content. Isabella and Margot talked about the difficulties of creating a good Instagram picture. Isabella stated:

I will never be an Instagram model on a beach.... I take a special amount of care when it comes to the things that I post. When I'm posing for pictures – I've never been skinny, and I've never been skinny on the internet, so I'm not really sure I know what it's like for average or skinnier, thinner women and how long it takes them to get a perfect picture or

what their process is like – depending on the day, it can really bring out the critical side of yourself when you're trying to create things that you're sharing with other people.

Margot felt similarly, but she also saw that viewers liked her photos more than she did:

Sometimes I think I'm overly critical on myself, and so I'll overthink even a picture.... I think I worry too much about what somebody else might think about it, even though usually everybody's pretty much really positive. Even if it's something they wouldn't wear, or you know, something like that, they're still like, you know, "That's awesome. You do your thing." I think I'm just overly critical of myself sometimes.

As noted in Chapter 2, social media's ability to negatively affect its users' self-regard (including self-esteem and body image) is well-documented (Chua & Chang, 2016; Cohen, Newton-John, & Slater, 2017; McLean, Paxton, Wertheim, & Masters, 2015; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014). This negative effect is usually attributed to the process of social comparison, where individuals assess where they stand in comparison to others, specifically upward social comparison, where one compares oneself to people who are more attractive, thinner, younger, or possess other socially desirable characteristics (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989). While upward social comparison could be seen as an impetus for self-improvement, it very often negatively affects the person doing the self-evaluation, especially when they are comparing themselves to highly edited and artificially perfected images on social media (or traditional media).

Social Media as Career? Desire and Actuality

Hobby. There was a divide in the interviewees as to the role their YouTube channel (and their social media activity in general) played in their lives. For some, it was strictly a hobby, a visual personal journal, with the YouTuber not really interested in or planning to make it a

significant source of income. Margot was one of the interviewees who viewed her channel as primarily a personal endeavor:

I started it just to post my outfits, just like an online journal of my style and how it changes. So basically, it's just really personal to me, and for some reason I guess other people have liked seeing it or get ideas from it.... It's just, it's my happy space.

Lauren had a similar viewpoint on her channel:

The most important thing that keeps me making YouTube videos is that I enjoy it. I don't put myself on a schedule. I don't make it my job. I just do it because I like to, or I wanted to, or I felt like it. So it's just kind of like another hobby on the list of hobbies I have.... Maybe one day I'll put more time into it, but I don't want to spend so much time on that, and not focus on anything else, and try to make it my full-time. If it's meant to be my full-time that'll come to me. I would love that, if I could get paid for just being in my house and doing what I like to do. I would love that.

In fact, Lauren's future goals were centered on fashion, not social media:

I wanted to be a fashion designer, and I wanted to design for girls like me. That has always been the bottom line.... I want to make a line for plus-size women. Because I didn't have that when I was younger. I didn't have the clothes that I wanted to wear that everybody else was wearing.

Secondary source of income. Other interviewees saw it as at most as a secondary source of income and did not intend to quit their "day job" to be a full-time social media content creator. Toni didn't dismiss the possibility of doing YouTube/social media as a full-time job, but she seemed to think it would be more realistic to see it as a second source of income, stating,

I really wish I could make a substantial living inspiring women and creating content that I love.... If I could make a solid \$50,000 [from social media] coupled with my full-time job, I think that would be great. And maybe one day actually being full time.

One of Beatrice's goals for her channel revolved around making YouTube videos full time:

I would love to grow my YouTube channel enough to do that full time and be able to quit my day job, I guess you would call it. Right now I'm making very little money on YouTube, and the only money I'm making is through collabs with companies. I'm not making any money through advertisements yet, so one of my goals would be to grow my account to be able to do it full time.

Tabitha alluded to the demanding posting schedule of full-time YouTubers as she mulled the idea of making videos as a full-time job:

If I could maintain doing one video a week-ish, like I do, and somehow make enough money to consider it a career... but it seems like the people that really make money doing it have a weekly schedule, like three videos.... I feel like I see other YouTubers, and they seem much more organized than me, and they plan out their videos really in advance. I'm kind of just like, you know, doing it for fun.

Some interview participants were uncomfortable with the uncertainty of not having a regular paycheck or specifically mentioned that they were not best positioned to become a viral YouTube or Instagram success. In social media as in other aspects of mainstream society, the most highly followed social media stars are often conventionally attractive, thin, and White. This preference for the hegemonic ideal also impacts the frequency of interviewees being approached for paid sponsorships with apparel or beauty brands. Nelly was not convinced it was a viable career path for them:

Not knowing I'm having a steady income is something that would just freak me out.... I don't think I've talked to one truly fat influencer or vlogger who is making a ton of money or is not struggling in some way.

Lily preferred to have a steadier source of income as well, and her hesitation about doing social media full time also touched on some of the more recent problems of some social media stars who were caught up in well-publicized scandals and, as a result, lost viewers and often lucrative company sponsorships.

I've never been without a job since I was like 15, so it's ingrained in me that you've got to work hard for what you do. And I guess I would [be a full-time YouTuber] if it was stable enough. And I wasn't afraid that I would lose the entire income if I said one stupid thing. (Lily)

Natasha discussed the constantly changing nature of YouTube and the people making videos on it, and how it made being successful more difficult:

I wouldn't say I'm super successful with YouTube. Personally, I don't think I've reached the amount of success that I would like. YouTube has kind of stalled for me, and it can be very discouraging. YouTube is constantly changing, and now that more and more people are uploading videos, it's harder and harder to get views. I definitely recommend being on other forms of social media, like Instagram and Pinterest to help gain more of an online audience.

Lauren was another individual who was very aware of this issue, stating that

when I started YouTube, it wasn't because of money, and I realize that being a young Black female plus-size, I'm not necessarily set up for success on the platform. So I try to look at it as more of a realist.... But I know the reality of my demographics are not very

avored on YouTube. You have your select few, but I don't feel like that would be a quick thing for me. I would need to have something else to do to build up to that.

Nelly, Lily, Natasha, and Lauren's comments shed light on the less privileged positions people of color and fat individuals occupy in social media such as YouTube. The resulting disadvantages to their ability to successfully earn a living on the platform references the intersectional nature of social oppressions, as race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status and fatness (as an incomplete list) all intersect and reinforce the negative effects on individuals with these characteristics (Farrell, 2011).

Entrepreneurs. Two interviewees could be described as approaching their careers with an entrepreneurial mindset, and these individuals did intend to make social media work their career or a significant part of their career. Claire mused, "My occupation ... All over the place, but I am a, I would say, 75% freelance blogger/social media influencer." She continued, "I am a full-time creative.... I make a living doing this." One of her goals for the year was to focus on her personal blog to further monetize it, "so I can get more income from multiple sources." She elaborated, "I really love business, so I love being my own boss. I love creating. I love doing exactly what I want to do." However, her long-term goals were not primarily centered on social media:

Social media was never the end all, be all. Social media was totally a left-field thing that has now made me money that I was like, "Oh wow, I can do this while pursuing my other things that I want to do." Again, I want to produce, direct, star in, write television and film. I also want to be a globally recognized brand.

Like I would love to be – I always say Barbara Streisand. That's the easiest one for me. But like J Lo, or Madonna. Somebody who transcends art forms and is a globally

recognized brand. I mean I want to do fashion, I want to do film, I want to do music.

Again, coming from a musical theater background, I want to do theater, I want to do Broadway. But not only do I want to be in, I want to produce, create, create opportunities for others.

Kiara described herself as “an entrepreneur. I've worked for myself for going on 14 years now,” and had continuing plans for her brand and her website, which was a hub for all her social media work, including her blogging:

As of late, I have definitely started redirecting the way that I'm going to handle my brand. I'm adding more of the whole lifestyle element to my brand, because it's always something that I enjoy. For me, in order for me to do things and do them well, I have to enjoy them. So, I have definitely been in the last couple of months especially, going into the end of the year into the new year ... Been mapping out more, planning out more, hoping to just expand my brand.

Conflicts between social media and career. Since most interviewees weren't interested in working in social media or YouTube as a career, there were sometimes clashes between their social media work and their main source of income. Bess, a college instructor, was uncomfortable with people in her everyday life finding out about her YouTube videos:

There's this perception, especially in academia, where you're trying to maintain a particular persona, or you don't want to draw attention in a way that maybe the traditional person in academia would not – it would be frowned upon in their eyes, you know what I mean? That was the thing for me. That was the hardest thing, especially when I started teaching, I was like, oh gosh, my students are around the age range that my demographic is for YouTube. I was like, I can't have them looking at my videos.

Kate also took pains to keep her YouTube activities separate from her actual job in the legal field. She said, “I like to have anonymity in terms of my plus-size fashion stuff, because it isn't really related to my professional life.” Continuing, she said that the reason why she kept these two aspects of her life separate was because of potentially negative scrutiny coming from her work peers:

I think there is some judgment around women in fashion, in that it's sort of this frivolous – why would we be interested in, particularly as plus-size women, why on earth would you be interested in fashion? So, there was a sense of wanting some sort of personal safety around that, some anonymity.

Bess and Kate’s discussions bring to mind role theory and suggest that they both have experienced conflict between two important roles in each of their lives. Role theory reflects the fact that people “wear many hats” in their everyday lives as they navigate between disparate social situations that may all demand different behaviors from them. Coworkers, subordinates, and superiors have beliefs about how their coworkers should behave, which are then internalized by their fellows and vice versa (Biddle, 1986). Each of these interviewees perceived that the role norms of her career was at odds with her role as a plus-size fashion YouTuber, indicating a situation of inter-role conflict.

Finding the right balance between YouTube and her busy work life, which included working three different jobs, had become difficult for Margot, so she had taken some time off from making YouTube videos. She admitted,

I really want to make videos, and I'm hoping to make videos.... But right now, trying to find the time and the balance to do it has been really hard. But I'll occasionally, if a

company reaches out to me, I'll take on a very few projects, which lately have just been Instagram. But, it's just time really.

Emergent Findings from the Interview Data

The following themes surfaced inductively from the interview data and were not directly shaped by the interview questions.

Visibility and Representation

Concepts related to visibility and representation were found throughout the interviews. First, some interviewees asserted that they themselves personally desired to be noticeable and used fashion to that end. Lily described her fashion style by stating,

I want to be comfortable, but I also want to be noticeable.

Claire affirmed,

So I just went to fashion week, and I had my friends make me custom looks, because I was like, if I'm going to New York Fashion Week, which is a dream of mine since childhood, I'm going to make them see me.

She was emphatic that the fashion powers-that-be would not relegate her to invisibility, a condition that was mentioned in Chapter 1 as a common outcome of being fat in public.

Claire also evoked another type of invisibility, as well as its consequences on her self-esteem, when she discussed a childhood and adolescence immersed in mass media that only rarely depicted people like her:

Society, media reinforcing the idea that you're not good enough, you're not pretty, you're a friend. Men won't find you attractive. I mean those were things that I really struggled with and like am still working through in therapy, of like am I good enough? And I think

that was really indicative of growing up in a society where I was not reflected in mass media.

Margot noted that today, “There's more visibility, I think, of plus-sized women, even though it's still very minimal” in mass media. Social media, however, was seen differently by the interviewees. Kiara was

so grateful... for social media, because we do see ourselves in the world now. So, we know that we don't have a limit that we may have felt we had before.

Claire also credited social media with enabling the increase in the visibility and representation of fat people:

I've been fat, plus size, whatever, my whole entire life, and from going from not having any representation, except for like the sad, body-hating, nobody-likes-her fat girl, to now with new media and YouTube and everything, and not just one form ... Yeah, it's really grown.

Finding others who were like them on social media, that is, other fat or plus-size individuals who were visible through their active use of social media platforms, sparked the interviewees to become active on social media. This was the case for Isabella:

As more and more plus-size women started being active on YouTube and there were plus-size women that I watched on YouTube, that was when I became more comfortable posting.

They hoped to inspire others like them to become more visible and active. Kiara stated,

I'm hoping that the more visible we are, the more inspired and motivated other women are to be visible.

Lauren concurred, and her statement affirmed the crucial importance of representation and role models. She declared,

I want to be one of those people that somebody can look up to. That's why I follow those who can also be people for someone else to look up to. Because we need that.

Although social media was not her end goal, Lauren's long-term career plans entwined with her desire for representation:

The whole reason I decided to be a fashion major is because I wanted to represent plus-size women. I stood by that since I was in elementary school.

Toni reflected on how a seemingly trivial activity, such as talking about one's apparel purchases, could affect others in a very powerful way:

So in those moments, you realize that you're actually really impacting people's lives, and the work that you do is really important. Because even though you may not see it as work in that sense, it is work, and it is actually creating this body-positive space even though that really wasn't your intent to be political.

Agency

Transgressive acts. Interviewees spoke passionately of their desires to consciously break the unspoken rules that governed their lives as fat individuals, both generally and in relation to dress. This was often coupled with a fervent hope that their viewers would be strong enough to also commit transgressive acts. Breaking the rules was, for them, a necessity on the journey to greater self-esteem and acceptance. In describing her YouTube channel, Toni invoked transgression and defiance:

I think, in general, my YouTube channel is a place for women all across the world, as a platform for them to accept their body size regardless of society's narrow ideals of

beauty, learning how to shop on a budget, and really, I think, defying society in many ways.

After internalizing society's disdain of fatness throughout one's life, the act of accepting one's body without hating it might be quite radical for a plus-sized individual. Kiara used words of agency along with transgression to communicate how she urged her viewers to take a more active posture in how they lived their lives. She said,

I just want women to just own their lives, you know? It's our one go-around. I really want women to just live and own their lives, and to not hide and not feel that they have to conform.

Transgression was often performed by wearing clothes that one "shouldn't" wear or showing a part of the body that one "shouldn't" show. Nelly noted:

I would say that there are no rules, or there are less rules than you think they are, or you don't have to follow the rules. That's what I would say to anyone who follows me, because there's all these rules, especially for fat people, about what's flattering and what colors you can wear or what patterns you can wear and what your gender can wear, and there aren't any rules. And if you want to wear something, wear it and rock it.

Toni specifically wore garments that she knew plus-size women "shouldn't" wear:

I'm attracted to crop tops. I'm attracted to rompers. Anything that shows areas where, traditionally, bigger women shouldn't show or be proud of, like my legs. I wear things a lot with my arms out. And that's usually a sour spot for a lot of plus-size women. My shoulders out, my belly out, not that many shorts. I might own a few pairs of shorts but not that many. Definitely rompers, definitely crop tops, definitely bikinis. Just because

those are the things I think of that are things I shouldn't wear. And then all these things I shouldn't wear, are the things that I wear.

She also recalled posting a series of bikini photos on Instagram and how it marked a change in herself:

I just realized I'm grown, this is who I am, I'm going to own it, I'm going to be sexy, I'm going to be beautiful, I'm going to be confident, I'm going to show the world. So I started posting bikinis. Before I would just post the things I would wear to class.

Toni also commented that posting such photos was good for society, because “changing the narrative around bodies has been something that I've tried to do as well.”

Tabitha remembered one of her first plus-size fashion role models, the social media personality FatGirlFlow (Corissa Enneking), who broke fashion rules:

I found her super inspirational, you know, because she is wearing crop tops, and she's putting it all out there. Then you go down the rabbit hole of other videos and Instagram and all of that. It's like stuff that I wouldn't have considered wearing before, seeing other people of different shapes and sizes wearing them.

Like FatGirlFlow, Tabitha hoped to inspire her viewers to “wear what they want and not care.”

Isabella may not have broken the fashion rules for plus-size women as frequently as Toni, but she noted that the availability of more apparel styles in her size helped her go outside of her comfort zone. She stated,

It encourages me, I think, to try styles I wouldn't originally have tried. Now, I'll consider trying on something without sleeves, whereas before, I wouldn't be caught dead in anything shorter than three-quarter length.

Bess had a different viewpoint about transgressing dress rules; nevertheless, representation was still a key reason she made videos. She noted,

I thought that I represented a smaller community within the plus-size community being that I'm more conservative, whereas a lot of girls on YouTube are not. So, I thought, you know what? I have something to say, and I feel like I'd be speaking for a majority in real life, because I was thinking the type of clothes I wear, the type of clothes I'm attracted to and things like that, I feel like is more realistic and it's something you see in day to day. Not these really skintight fitted tops and dresses, and crop tops and things like that. I mean please, come on. You're not going to see people day-to-day in these outfits. I was like, "I need to make some videos for girls that are actually walking outside their door."

Active versus passive stance. There was a noticeable shift in how participants described their relationship with fashion in the past as compared to that relationship in the present day. Speaking about the past, interviewees used terms of powerlessness, exclusion, and passivity. Claire stated, "I was never included [in the fashion world] because I was fat," and similarly, Bess said, "I couldn't participate in the fashion club, I'll just call it that, because of my size." This sense of powerlessness was also seen in the memories of interviewees as they were forced to shop at one or two stores because no other stores carried their size. In addition, they often had to purchase the few pieces of apparel that actually did fit them without regard to any personal style preferences.

A different, more active tone was obvious in participants' speech as they discussed the present day. All but one of the interviewees talked about exhorting their viewers to "wear what you want to wear," as Margot put it, and to not worry about what others might say about one's choices. Both Kiara and Bess also talked about using fashion for one's own goals or desires.

Kiara noted, “The way you use fashion is strictly about you. You don't have to follow other people's rules. It's about how the clothing makes you feel.” Although Bess watched fashion trends, she did not slavishly follow them or what she might have observed on a fashion show runway:

I'm definitely always paying attention to the trends and what's on the runway. That does not mean I respect what I see on the runway, that does not mean I understand it, and that does not mean I agree with it. It means I see it, and I take what I want from it.

Fashion as a Barrier or Transformative Tool

For the interviewees, access to fashion was closely intertwined with self-esteem and body acceptance. This was explicitly suggested by Claire:

Fashion was a tool for me to put on armor and put myself together and have this creative expression that would keep me up. It would keep my confidence up. It would be kind of like my crutch. Like okay, I feel good, I look good, let me internalize that. So fashion was a tool, such a tool for me to finding self-love, confidence, body confidence, and ultimately self-esteem.

Lauren, too, saw fashion's transformative potential to affect “what's underneath the clothing”:

I feel fashion is a big part of body positivity. I know body positivity kind of starts with yourself and just kind of loving yourself like there. But I feel like when you can dress yourself up, you start to feel better about who you are.... I feel like that's one thing that I want women to do – “just dress yourself up, make yourself feel good,” because when you feel good, as you are, without having to do anything but put clothes on... you will love what's underneath the clothing as well.

Fourth-Wave Feminism

Overall, the emergent themes discussed above can be seen as linked to feminism's fourth wave, which portrayed the internet and social media as efficient ways for people to actively voice their resistance and organize against societal oppression by virtually joining together with people who could be located anywhere around the world (Cochrane, 2013; Rivers, 2017). Moreover, a continuing strain of feminist thought emphasizes that empowerment can come from resistance and from "the construction of transgressive appearances" (Tyner & Ogle, 2009, p. 110).

ANALYSIS OF VIDEOS

Information about the Videos Used for Content Analysis

Numbers of subscribers to channels of videos considered for content analysis ranged from a minimum of 48 to a maximum of 1,855,702 (see Table 8). The mean number of subscribers to the channels in this list was 128,995, and the median was 26,370. The view count (how many times a video was viewed) of the individual videos on the list ranged from 125 to 23,067,767, with a mean of 1,065,081 and a median of 60,441 (see Table 9). Upload dates ranged from 2013 to 2019. Thirteen (13) videos did not include any spoken words; they included music in lieu of speech.

Table 8. Demographics of YouTube Channels and Videos Examined for Content Analysis

Channel	Channel Subscribers (<i>n</i> =46, <i>M</i> =128,995, <i>Mdn</i> =26,370) ¹	Video Title	Video View Count (<i>n</i> =60, <i>M</i> =1,065,081, <i>Mdn</i> =60,441) ¹	Upload Date	URL
Adrienne Starr	11,330	Braless Outfit Of The Day OOTD Plus-Size Running Errands	38,287	4/20/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAe5SxHi2GY
Amanda Allison	40,042	Inside the Dressing Room: Ashley Nell Tipton for JCPenney Boutique+ #HereIAm	28,807	9/1/2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dw60clnnU3c
Amanda Allison	40,042	Spring Floral Vibes ²	6,318	4/2/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=synTFtKDApo
Amara Reyal	112,504	PLUS LOOKBOOK SPRING 2019 ft ASOPH.com ²	7,003	4/11/2019	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-8BrGU8ah4
Amber Rose	163	SPRING PLUS SIZE TRY ON HAUL PT.2 FT. GSLOVESME	1,744	4/20/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-ZqgLEKPK4
Arlena Cheyenne	6,952	Lovesick Plus Size Fashion Haul + Try On	473,161	8/20/2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=573kNDJPJ5c
Beauty ByBenji	46,509	GET A SNATCHED WAIST KILLER KURVES SHAPEWEAR PLUS SIZE	101,363	12/28/2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0X1LXtJI7PM

Table 8 Continued

Channel	Channel Subscribers (<i>n</i> =46, <i>M</i> =128,995, <i>Mdn</i> =26,370) ¹	Video Title	Video View Count (<i>n</i> =60, <i>M</i> =1,065,081, <i>Mdn</i> =60,441) ¹	Upload Date	URL
beautyundergrad	9,703	SEXY SECRETARY plus size OOTD	401,394	1/20/2015	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbcjSCzGHAi
BeYouBeautiFULL	84,762	Plus Size Waist Training Review feat. Your Fashion Frenzy	660,934	7/7/2014	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDvSJwdyfxk
CeCe Olisa	45,523	Plus Size Shopping at Universal Standard Dressing Room Confidential	5,008	4/24/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mChlt-Kde8M
Chadrän	490	Fashion Nova Jeans Try On Plus Size 1x	22,059	4/20/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HE00J5WnfBY
Chrissyb Styles	16,529	DATING WHILE PLUS SIZE...TIPS, TRICKS, AND WHEN TO LET HIM GO!!! PT.1 CONFIDENCE SERIES	5,921	6/24/2019	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7IPOZHCZ_g
Cora Diane	385,319	Plus Size Shorts & Crop Top Try-On Clothing Haul: Asos Curve, Torrid & Forever 21 Plus Curvy Style	247,301	5/7/2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-ZawT-7aOo

Table 8 Continued

Channel	Channel Subscribers (<i>n</i> =46, <i>M</i> =128,995, <i>Mdn</i> =26,370) ¹	Video Title	Video View Count (<i>n</i> =60, <i>M</i> =1,065,081, <i>Mdn</i> =60,441) ¹	Upload Date	URL
Cora Diane	385,319	Affordable Plus-Size Fashion Try On Haul Curvy Sense	29,163	4/27/2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wu4YpKiEJMM
Daquana White	198,536	Miami Ready Swimsuit Try-On Rosegal Plus Size	76,255	2/7/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1pVg5ZO9fg&t=1s
Daquana White	198,536	It's DRESS WEEK!!! Fashion To Figure Dress Try-On Haul High Quality Plus Size Clothing	21,296	6/20/2019	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2XJIfkRAN8
Éstefany Alcazar	6,461	Plus Size Lookbook Spring 16' ²	2,238	3/16/2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9UuK8_0cY8
FatGirlFlow	74,130	PLUS SIZE CLOTHING HAUL - simplybe // fatgirlflow.com	614,512	9/23/2015	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPK8tNCmYxA
FatGirlFlow	74,130	Plus-Size Clothing Haul Modcloth Spring '17	303,642	2/2/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0IgEpZOT9k
Gabriella Fortunato	43,635	SPRING Plus Size Inside The Dressing Room ft. TARGET!	18,605	3/27/2019	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnIos9Q_aMU

Table 8 Continued

Channel	Channel Subscribers (<i>n</i> =46, <i>M</i> =128,995, <i>Mdn</i> =26,370) ¹	Video Title	Video View Count (<i>n</i> =60, <i>M</i> =1,065,081, <i>Mdn</i> =60,441) ¹	Upload Date	URL
Geek Out of Water	13,031	Dia and Co Unboxing & Try On Plus Size Personal Styling	6,846	4/20/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HrOkXLcLto
Glitterandlazers	213,364	In the Dressing Room: Dillard's Plus Size Try On	900,011	9/29/2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FxPthf3L0U
Glitterandlazers	213,364	Fantastic Florals: Spring Plus Size Look Book ²	12,788	3/7/2019	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btOWbi_fIA
Grace Doe	1,480	ThredUp Unboxing & Review Plus Size	1,527	6/16/2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPh8jqi4934
Heidi Christine	5,950	PLUS SIZE TORRID TRY ON HAUL	23,913	4/19/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dL9pQBCqYsY
HouseOfAmparo	1,490	WIN \$100 JORD WATCH GIVEAWAY + PLUS SIZE OOTD! - OPEN ²	34,088	4/20/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVcgfxgC3q8
jackofalltrades82	6,614	Orchard Corsets: Average vs Plus Size	235,801	3/28/2013	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WrpFI13HgL4
Jalisha Vee	19,921	\$500 Boohoo Plus Size Spring Try on Haul!	2,551	3/27/2019	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJMoHtSONfs

Table 8 Continued

Channel	Channel Subscribers (<i>n</i> =46, <i>M</i> =128,995, <i>Mdn</i> =26,370) ¹	Video Title	Video View Count (<i>n</i> =60, <i>M</i> =1,065,081, <i>Mdn</i> =60,441) ¹	Upload Date	URL
Jessica Teacakes	8,208	Collective Spring Try On Haul Plus Size 4x, 5x, 6x	553,115	6/29/2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpU0AKb-QXA
Karina Gomez	6,622	A "Plus Size" Summer Lookbook in Vertical Mode ²	2,485	6/27/2019	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0zU4Dkro0z4
Kmink	not available	Plus size jeans/ Old Navy jeans	46,739	2/4/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtQW7gUeQOM
LearningToBeFearless	378,750	Plus Size Bikini Lookbook LET GO OF "FAT" INSECURITIES	253,778	1/31/2015	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jBSBbVz9Fk
LearningToBeFearless	378,750	Plus Size Fall Fashion Try-On Haul!	296,614	10/2/2015	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2C9d_5OhkM
LoeyLane	1,855,702	Plus-Size Swimwear Lookbook	3,752,432	8/18/2014	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_kcIUVPsDw
LoeyLane	1,855,702	Plus-Size Swimwear Lookbook	741,972	5/29/2015	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8waXaHK0lVI

Table 8 Continued

Channel	Channel Subscribers (<i>n</i> =46, <i>M</i> =128,995, <i>Mdn</i> =26,370) ¹	Video Title	Video View Count (<i>n</i> =60, <i>M</i> =1,065,081, <i>Mdn</i> =60,441) ¹	Upload Date	URL
LoeyLane	1,855,702	Plus Size Bikini Lookbook Target 2016	872,159	3/4/2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=938Woua60-E
Lyah Lush	48	Mini plus size Lookbook & Vlog {Lyah Lush} ²	164	4/20/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbfyeHBEJpE
Megan Mapes	1,247	Fat Girl Speaks Plus Size Dating.... creeps on the internet Storytime	7,661	4/19/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_BHYKOA4c8
NaturallyFashionable	52,422	Top 10 Inexpensive Trendy Plus Size Stores To Shop At!	92,602	1/8/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsTRB4WG17E
NeneTanae	130,985	NEW Charlotte Russe PLUS SIZE Line?! Spring Try On Haul + Review	196,993	4/8/2015	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmrsgn1NslI
NicoleAmberrr	26,370	Plus Size Try On Haul! Rebdolls	1,815	10/24/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSQLaJhwMUQ
Posi Claudia	52,422	Universal Thread Plus Size Shorts Target Haul Try On Posi Claudia	8,724	6/27/2019	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sY9OI-e0W2k
Sarah Rae Vargas	1,238,288	Fall Dresses Lookbook Plus Size Fashion ²	1,663,255	9/26/2014	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCFNYpOnGmE

Table 8 Continued

Channel	Channel Subscribers (<i>n</i> =46, <i>M</i> =128,995, <i>Mdn</i> =26,370) ¹	Video Title	Video View Count (<i>n</i> =60, <i>M</i> =1,065,081, <i>Mdn</i> =60,441) ¹	Upload Date	URL
Sarah Rae Vargas	1,238,288	Swimsuit Lookbook 2015 Plus Size Fashion Sarah Rae Vargas ²	1,111,870	4/21/2015	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRoMqFR2pfo
Sarah Rae Vargas	1,238,288	Fat Girl On Tinder Ask Sarah	128,641	4/2/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgAk9PpnFXM
Shannon Miller	25,128	Dia & Co Winter Unboxing PLUS SIZE FASHION	1,979	12/26/2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gh1GA5eMWS0
ShapelyPetals	718	Plus Size Cute and Edgy OOTD ²	125	4/20/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6VW-tJ8gvU
Sometimes Glam	181,674	PLUS SIZE FASHION TRY ON HAUL haaavvee you met DEB?! DEBSHOPS!	74,142	4/10/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJL7oVt2ofY
Sometimes Glam	181,674	PLUS SIZE BIKINI LOOKBOOK march 2017 MALIBU, CALIFORNIA ²	16,839,285	3/28/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6lvJ-6zeio
Stephanie Vega	75,056	PLUS SIZE SPRING LOOKBOOK 2018🌻 ²	74,448	3/29/2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlwzP6M27l4

Table 8 Continued

Channel	Channel Subscribers (<i>n</i> =46, <i>M</i> =128,995, <i>Mdn</i> =26,370) ¹	Video Title	Video View Count (<i>n</i> =60, <i>M</i> =1,065,081, <i>Mdn</i> =60,441) ¹	Upload Date	URL
Stephanie Vega	75,056	SUMMER PLUS SIZE TRY-ON CLOTHING HAUL 🌞🌈 H&M, American Eagle, Torrid, and +Swimsuits	84,576	6/27/2019	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KpZVYX8HOZ4
TallGirlJ	101	Plus Size Stitch Fix #4	1,593	4/20/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ThIr1SpzpE
TerrCacilia	14,476	Chicest Of Them All: SOCIETY+ OOTD!	290	10/29/2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZE6BHZtaB24
TerrCacilia	14,476	#BTS: SKORCH Magazine x Forever21+ Lookbook! ²	4,012	12/11/2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aytBPYjtRyE
ThisisJessica Torres	44,024	Shein plus-size try-on (Model vs. IRL)	419,203	6/21/2019	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tT2fgerbPU
UNAPOLOGETICALLY AVIS	85,399	Plus Size Butt Lifer Try On and Latex Waist Cincher	688,585	8/25/2015	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTLnUQnxlmg
Vanessa Manley	235,166	Plus Size Festival Lookbook	23,067,767	4/23/2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXxP07X9Afk

Table 8 Continued

Channel	Channel Subscribers (<i>n</i> =46, <i>M</i> =128,995, <i>Mdn</i> =26,370) ¹	Video Title	Video View Count (<i>n</i> =60, <i>M</i> =1,065,081, <i>Mdn</i> =60,441) ¹	Upload Date	URL
Wednesday Fattams	5,573	Plus size Ross haul/try on	27,572	1/16/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWmRE5IQ1Xw
xBrittney89	170,971	PLUS-SIZE BIKINI LOOKBOOK 2016	8,140,941	5/6/2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEry-VFTTcw
xBrittney89	170,971	PLUS SIZE Inside the TARGET Dressing Room!	466,803	2/7/2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfIKGN2BZd0

¹ as of 8/2019

² video with no speech

Table 9. Individual View Counts of the Videos Analyzed¹

View Count	
	Videos (<i>n</i> =60)
<i>M</i>	1,065,081
<i>Mdn</i>	60,441
Range	125 - 23,067,767

¹as of 8/2019

Of the channels included in the content analysis, “Cora Diane” was the oldest – it was started in 2007. Two channels – “Amber Rose” and “Chrissyb Styles” – were created on YouTube as late as 2017 (see Table 10). The mean date for joining YouTube was 2013, and the median was 2012. Table 11 lists the subscriber numbers of each YouTube channel. This figure ranged from a low of 48 to a high of 1,855,702, with a mean of 128,995 and median of 26,370. The total channel views of the YouTube channels included in the content analysis ranged from 1,643 to 223,977,786 (see Table 12). The average number of channel views was 17,155,317, and the median was 3,258,451.

Table 10. Date Owners of Content Analysis Channels Joined YouTube

	Content Analysis Channels ($n=46$, $M=2013$, $Mdn=2012$)
Year	n
2006	0
2007	1
2008	1
2009	3
2010	1
2011	10
2012	4
2013	11
2014	5
2015	4
2016	4
2017	2

Table 11. Content Analysis Channel Subscriber Counts

	Content Analysis Video Channels ($n=46$, $M=128,995$, $Mdn=26,370$)
Channel Subscribers ¹	
0-99	1
100-999	4
1,000-9,999	11
10,000-99,999	18
100,000-999,999	9
1,000,000+	2
Not available	1
Range	48-1,855,702

¹ as of 8/2019**Table 12. Number of Total Channel Views of Content Analysis Channels**

	Content Analysis Channels ($n=46$, $M=17,155,317$, $Mdn=3,258,451$)
Total Channel Views ¹	n
0-9,999	1
10,000-99,999	4
100,000-999,999	10
1,000,000-9,999,999	21
10,000,000-99,999,999	8
100,000,000+	2
Range	1,643 - 223,977,786

¹ as of 8/2019

The differences between the subscriber counts of the interviewees' channels and the channels in the list used for content analysis can be found in Table 13. Although the YouTube channel in this study with the fewest subscribers is one used for content analysis, it can be seen that in the aggregate, the interviewees do have fewer subscribers overall (see Table 6). They also

have fewer total channel views (see Table 7). The mean and the median of the content analysis video channels' total view count is approximately 10 times larger than those of the interviewees' channels. This is unsurprising; it seems reasonable that the researcher was more successful in contacting "smaller" YouTubers, simply because they may still be able to open and answer more of their email/online communication. A very popular YouTuber may be routinely inundated with communications, requests, and the like, making it very difficult to respond to many (or most) of these communications.

Table 13. Subscriber Counts of Interviewees' Channels and Content Analysis Channels

	Interviewee Channels ($n=13$, $M=12,541$, $Mdn=4,906$)	Content Analysis Video Channels ($n=46$, $M=128,995$, $Mdn=26,370$)
Channel Subscribers ¹	<i>n</i>	
0-99	1	1
100-999	2	4
1,000-9,999	6	11
10,000-99,999	4	18
100,000-999,999	0	9
1,000,000+	0	2
Not available	0	1
Range	56-67,866	48-1,855,702

¹as of 8/2019

Types of Videos

Of the videos included in the analysis, there were eight general types. Video type was determined by examining the title, by the YouTuber's own words in the audio transcript (if applicable), and by the researcher's knowledge of popular video formats on YouTube (see Table 14). The most-common video format was the try-on haul, in which the YouTuber modeled all the items from a recent apparel purchase ($n=24$, or 40%). The second most popular type of video was the lookbook, which showed one or more complete "looks" (composed of garments,

accessories, and occasionally cosmetics) modeled by the YouTuber. There were 17 lookbooks (28%) in the video content analysis. Both dressing room try-ons and outfit of the day (OOTD) video types were represented by six (10%) of the videos. Dressing room try-on videos were filmed inside a store's dressing room and showed the YouTuber modeling garments, which she may or may not have purchased afterwards. The outfit of the day format showed a person modeling and describing what she was wearing for a particular day. The demonstration and try-on video format featured individuals demonstrating how to put on and wear garments that may not be familiar to their viewers or commonly worn, such as corsets and shapewear. There were four of these videos in the list (7%). The remaining types were rarer. There were two advice videos, where speakers gave advice on issues such as dating and in answer to questions from viewers (3%). The last two types had one video each (2%). One of these was a personal experiences video, and the other was a top 10 list. The personal experiences video showed the YouTuber discussing an online dating incident that happened to her as a plus-size woman. The top ten list video was a way for the YouTuber to order and discuss what she felt were the ten most inexpensive, yet trendy, plus-size retailers.

Table 14. Types of Videos in the Content Analysis

Type of Video	Description	<i>n</i>	
Try-On Haul (which includes the two specifically mentioned variants below)	After purchasing apparel, the YouTuber tries each item on and models it for the camera.	24	40%
<i>Collective Try-On Haul</i>	<i>"Collective" refers to purchases from several stores, all of which are tried-on in the same video.</i>	(3	5%)
<i>Unboxing and Try-On</i>	<i>"Unboxing" is sometimes used to describe opening personal styling boxes, such as Dia & Co. or Stitch Fix.</i>	(4	7%)

Table 14 Continued

Type of Video	Description	<i>n</i>	
Lookbook	One or more complete looks/outfits are modeled by the YouTuber, with information about brands, prices, etc. May be thematic, such as a video showcasing summer music festival looks, etc.	17	28%
Dressing Room Try-On	YouTuber films herself trying on clothes inside a brick and mortar store's dressing room. Items may or may not be purchased by the individual.	6	10%
Outfit of the Day (OOTD)	The look/outfit that the YouTuber is wearing that day. Usually includes description of each piece worn, where purchased, etc.	6	10%
Demonstration / Try-On	YouTuber demonstrates putting on particular types of clothing that are not commonly worn, such as corsets.	4	7%
Advice	The YouTuber gives advice in response to questions she has received from her social media subscribers / followers.	2	3%
Personal Experiences	The YouTuber discusses her personal experiences about a topic, such as dating.	1	2%
Top 10 List	The YouTuber's list of the best items, stores, etc., in a particular category.	1	2%

¹ One video was called a try-on haul in its title but was described as a lookbook in the transcript, so it is counted as both; thus, totals do not equal 60/100%.

As can be surmised from Table 14, most of these videos are concerned with consumption in some way: shopping, trying on garments that may have been purchased, and assessment of garment fit, quality, and style. Table 15 tallies the numbers of apparel products and “looks” shown in this body of videos. Across all 60 videos, 468 individual items were displayed. Seven videos did not feature apparel products¹⁶ (e.g., advice videos), and the video with the most items displayed 24 individual apparel pieces. The mean and median were similar, with 7.8 and 7

¹⁶ This figure also includes three videos where garments were displayed, but there was no indication or labeling, either in the video itself or in the video description box, of what exactly was being shown.

products, respectively. Over all of the 23 videos that featured “looks” – some kind of complete outfit, found in either lookbooks or outfit of the day videos – there were 89 looks represented. A video was considered to include looks if the video maker used that terminology. The mean and median figures for looks was also similar, with 3.9 looks per video as the mean, and 4 looks per video as the median.

Table 15. Number of Products and Looks Shown in Videos

Products and Looks Shown ¹		
	Products in 60 Videos (<i>n</i> =468)	Looks (in 23 videos: Lookbooks and OOTDs only) (<i>n</i> =89)
<i>M</i>	7.8	3.9
<i>Mdn</i>	7	4
<i>Range</i>	0-24	1-10

¹A video contained a “look” if it was so designated by the video maker. It typically refers to an assemblage of garments that comprise a complete outfit.

Frequency of Particular Words

Several words were used repeatedly in these videos (see Table 16). “Fit” was one of the most common, and as has been discussed earlier, it was also found in the interviews. While interviewees mostly recalled not being able to find garments that fit them in the past and were now excited and relieved to see more and more brands and companies offering apparel in sizes that would fit plus-size people, speakers in the videos analyzed in this section were fixated upon fit in a different way; instead, they were evaluating particular items of apparel (which they had bought or were considering buying) and whether they fit on their bodies to their satisfaction. The most frequently used word in the transcripts of these videos was “size.”¹⁷ Just as these YouTubers were intent upon determining if a particular garment fit their body, they were also

¹⁷ and variants, such as “sizing,” “oversized,” etc.

evaluating if a brand’s sizing was as expected; that is, if someone typically wore a size 20 in jeans, and she was trying on a pair in that size from a new brand, a detailed review of how true to size this new brand’s jeans were would typically be a part of the transcript. Other commonly used words were also descriptive words, including “short,” “long,” “big,” “stretch,” and “comfort” (and their variants). Words of approval, such as “love” and “cute,” were also very common exclamations and were typically heard when expressing how much and why the YouTuber liked a particular garment. Finally, the two words “plus” and “body” round out the list. Of course, “plus” is half of the term plus size, which is used by both the video makers and the apparel industry to specify the range of sizes for fat women and by extension, to sometimes describe the women themselves.

Table 16. The 11 Most Frequently Used Words Related to Fashion and the Body in the Analyzed Videos

Ranked	Word	Frequency of Usage
1	“Size” <i>and variants (e.g., sizing, oversized)</i>	356
2	“Love” <i>and variants (e.g., loving, loved, lovely – related to apparel or people)</i>	302
3	“Cute”	202
4	“Fit” <i>and variants</i>	154
5	“Short” <i>(related to apparel or the body)</i> <i>(subsection of “Short” – specifically about a piece of apparel, aka “Shorts”)</i>	143 (99)
6	“Comfort” <i>and variants (e.g., comfortable, comfy)</i>	119
7	“Plus”	117
8	“Big” <i>and variants (related to apparel or the body)</i>	97

Table 16 Continued

Ranked	Word	Frequency of Usage
9	“Long” <i>and variants (related to apparel or the body)</i>	95
10	“Stretch” <i>and variants</i>	88
11	“Body” <i>(e.g., your body, my body)</i>	84

Shorts

The only word-usage note that ties into one of this study’s themes or subthemes has to do with the surprisingly frequent use of the word “shorts” (the article of clothing). This garment was mentioned 99 times in these videos, which is 69% of all the mentions of any word with the stem “short.” Fourteen (14), or 23%, of the videos mentioned shorts, while two specific videos mentioned the word 38 times and 20 times, respectively. As will be discussed in the next section, the wearing of shorts was clearly seen as a transgressive act for several YouTubers in the videos.

Video Content Analysis Themes

For content analysis, each video was watched and rewatched. Transcripts were read and coded for themes. As noted above, 13 (22%) of the 60 videos featured a musical backing track in lieu of any spoken word. Anything written in the YouTube description box (the box of text directly below the video image; it is posted by the YouTuber when the video is uploaded) and posts and responses in the comments section were also read and considered.

Data from the content analysis proved to be somewhat different from the interviews. It was not unusual for video transcripts of the try-on or lookbook type of video to stick strictly to descriptions of specific apparel items, at best touching on issues of fit, cost, or quality, without

mentioning other topics. Of the 60 videos analyzed, 21 (35%) were narrowly focused on purchasing, trying-on, and evaluating apparel, and neither the spoken word nor anything the YouTubers wrote in their video description boxes strayed from those topics. There were, however, some instances in the set of 60 videos analyzed that were clearly related to the themes and subthemes that the interviewees spoke about in depth. Videos that did include mention of concepts beyond a run-down of the garments displayed in the video are discussed subsequently. No new themes or subthemes were added to the coding list (generated by interview content) from the video content analysis.

For this research, some sections of Rose's (2016) approach to visual analysis were especially fruitful, namely the site of the image itself and the site of its audience. In the site of the image itself, some text graphics, overlaid onto the video footage, for example, may have discussed body positivity and self-acceptance, while a try-on haul of swimwear was shown, with only a musical backing track, and no spoken word, as accompaniment.

The site of audience yielded additional information as well. On YouTube, the most immediate gauge of a video's audience and its reactions can be found in the comments section that is found on the same webpage as a specific video (Rose, 2016). Not only does it yield evidence of "trolls" on particular videos, but it also can reveal the extent to which a YouTuber does indeed (or does not) take part in a community with viewers. And if the comment section has been disabled, or turned off by the YouTuber, this can also suggest meanings and motivations on the part of the vlogger.

Past and Current Attitudes of Plus-Size YouTubers Towards their Bodies

Body positivity, fat acceptance, and body politics. Fourteen (14) videos (23%) contained references to this subtheme, either in their transcripts or description boxes. The spoken

monologues in the 2014 and 2015 “Plus Size Swimwear Lookbook” videos, both posted on the “LoeyLane” channel, had nothing to do with the apparel worn in these videos. Instead, the transcripts both reveal the vlogger reflecting on her feelings and experiences in her journey to body positivity and self-acceptance. Similar to these videos is “Plus-Size Bikini Lookbook 2016” on the “xBrittney89” channel. This video had no spoken word elements, but it did feature various quotations as graphic overlays on top of the video footage and a message from the YouTuber in the credit roll at the end of the video. The credit roll message stated, “Remember – any body is a bikini body. Claim your confidence <3,” and the graphic overlays encouraged viewers to embrace themselves as they are. The “LearningToBeFearless” channel’s video “Plus Size Bikini Lookbook | Let Go of ‘Fat’ Insecurities” is effectively split into two parts, with the first being the lookbook and the second being a talk where the vlogger and channel owner, Alexandra Thomas, is shown speaking directly to the camera, referencing the looks she has modeled but also discussing body positivity and self-acceptance. At one point she stated,

I used to hate my body, and I'm never going back there.... I'm not going to go back to that place because I'm happy. I'm comfortable. And my size 14/16 booty is going to rock this bikini, which is gorgeous, by the way. I'm kind of obsessed with this bikini, but I'm happy. I'm not going to let anybody take that from me.

The third video on the “LoeyLane” channel in the list, “Plus Size Bikini Lookbook | Target 2016,” integrated the spoken word with the visuals. As the title implies, this is another video showcasing swimwear, referenced in the voiceover, but the monologue was also interspersed with a long reflection on body acceptance, including this excerpt:

I found that by overcoming insecurity and learning to love my body, I don't have to be afraid of missing out on life. I used to worry every time that I stepped out in a swimsuit, everyone was staring at me, judging the way that I looked.

Lane also pointed out that although she had made several swimwear videos in the past, this one, from 2016, was the first time she had ever been filmed modeling swimwear in a public place, which she said, “really pushed my comfort zone.” She was very pleased and proud that she had done it. “Universal Thread Plus Size Shorts Target Haul | Try On | Posi Claudia,” posted to the “Posi Claudia” channel, started out as a straightforward try-on haul of seven garments, but after the vlogger, Claudia Garcia, showed a pair of shorts that she was excited about wearing, she turned to discussing how she gained her body confidence and the ability to wear such revealing garments without fear. The video, “Orchard Corsets: Average vs Plus Size” by “jackofalltrades82,” shows Toya, the plus-size channel owner, demonstrating how a corset fit on her; at the same time, she explained to viewers that although she is corseting to get a slightly different silhouette, “I ain't trying to get on the ‘skinny train.’”

Cora Diane’s eponymous channel includes one video, “Plus Size Shorts & Crop Top Try-On Clothing Haul: Asos Curve, Torrid & Forever 21 Plus | Curvy Style,” which featured her addressing the topic of body positivity as a prelude to trying on garments. Cora Diane has a more nuanced view of body positivity:

At the same time I have body issues too, and I think that you can be body positive and still have things about your body that you feel self-conscious about. Just like you can be body positive and still want to lose weight or gain weight or whatever you want to do. It's about being comfortable in your own skin. It's not necessarily about thinking, “I'm so perfect, I never want to change, and I'm amazing and everything about me is perfect, and

I'm perfect, perfect.” That is being a narcissist, not loving yourself, which are different things.

Finally, there were four videos that made mention of body positivity only in their description boxes. This included a link to a body confidence YouTube playlist in two of Sarah Rae Vargas' videos with no further explanation. Similarly, the description of the video “Plus size jeans/Old Navy jeans” on the “Kmink” channel included the statement, “Thumbs up for body positivity,” without any other references to it in either the description box or the transcript of the video. “Sometimes Glam's” video, “Plus Size Fashion Try On Haul | Haaavvee You Met Deb?! Debshops!” contained an invitation to join in on an Instagram live show that the channel owner presented several times a week: “Often, we talk about body issues, weight gain and loss, body positivity, fashion, my secret tips and trips, finding your body shape, makeup must haves... anything you want!” However, inserting messages into video description boxes is not necessarily a sure way to communicate with one's viewers. By default, the contents of these description boxes are only partially visible when a viewer goes to a YouTube page to play a specific video, showing approximately three lines of text. Anything beyond that is invisible unless a viewer clicks on a “Show More” link to fully expand the description box.

One video in this list, “In the Dressing Room: Dillard's Plus Size Try On,” on the “Glitterandlazers” channel, recorded the YouTuber's mainly negative experiences at the Dillard's department store, especially the body shaming she perceived in how brands were marketing garments to her as a plus-size individual:

I didn't realize how every single tag on every single piece of clothing that I tried on in the department store reminded me that I wasn't good enough. At first I saw it on two of the pieces that I tried on, and then I went looking for it. It was just kind of everywhere. It

made me feel really icky. I'm like, I'm shocked this is a method for selling me things.

Why would brands sell me clothing that makes me feel inadequate from the get go? It's just not fun.

This included the Democracy brand's Ab*solution shorts, which were designed with "slenderizing panels"; Anna O'Brien, the owner of the channel, noted, "It's just that you're starting with the premise (of purchasing a garment) that you are not good enough and that you are trying to hide it." She found the entire Dillard's trip to be quite depressing.

The nexus of appearance, health, weight loss, and eating. Considering the reticence of some of the interviewees to talk about cooking or eating on their channels, it is not surprising that this topic was only mentioned in one video, "Plus Size Waist Training Review feat. Your Fashion Frenzy," and only in passing. Charmaine, the owner of the "BeYouBeautiFULL" channel, explained at one point why she had not worn her waist trainer on a certain day by saying, "I was a bad girl, and I did not eat right," thus again demonstrating society's linkage between morality and one's eating habits.

Apparel Industry and its Changes

It must first be said that without the greater availability of plus-size styles in the marketplace, it is doubtful that the online plus-size fashion community, inclusive of these YouTube vloggers, would be so robust, as otherwise there would be so much less to talk about. Thus every video that includes trying on, purchasing, or reviewing plus-size fashion can be seen as partially stemming from the greatly enhanced plus-size retail environment of today. Beyond this general observation, there were two videos in which the changes in the apparel industry were specifically discussed. In Amanda Allison's video, "Inside the Dressing Room: Ashley Nell Tipton for JCPenney Boutique+ #HereIAm," she described her happiness about the opportunities

afforded to the plus-size designer and Project Runway winner, including the launch of a collection for JCPenney:

I'm here because Ashley Nell Tipton's collection comes out on the 6th, and I'm hoping, fingers crossed, that they have the pieces early. She has a docu-series out right now here on YouTube. JC Penney followed her around to give you a behind-the-scenes on her adventure, her journey to creating the collection. It's a really dope series. I've already seen a couple episodes, and I've definitely shed some happy tears because I am an emotional wreck when it comes to plus-size fashion and self-acceptance, and it's just wonderful to see that in her and her designs.

Along with describing a relatively new fashion brand, Lovesick, Arlena Cheyenne stated that its fashion was on par with that of non-plus-size brands in the video, “Lovesick Plus Size Fashion Haul + Try On.” Having fashions and trends appear in plus-size apparel that reflect similar trends in misses/juniors fashion and in a similar timeframe was very important for the interviewees, and was highlighted by Cheyenne:

Just a little background on Lovesick: It is a fairly new brand. It is a sister brand to Torrid, aiming at a younger and more trendy, I guess you could say, fashion. It's the latest trends in fashion that you will see in other mainstream clothing stores, but they do aim for women's sizes 10 to 26 – they are a plus-sized clothing brand.

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Community. The idea of community was also present in the videos used for content analysis. However, interviewees placed more emphasis on it, and described more direct, two-way communications with their viewers than what was apparent in the video transcripts, description boxes, and comments that were analyzed for content. But the channel owners of the content

analysis videos did claim community with their viewers. Discussion of or related to community was typically combined with sharing personal stories and encouraging and giving advice to viewers.

The 2014 “Plus-Size Swimwear Lookbook” video’s description box text included an exhortation to viewers to post, use, or remember the monologue Loey Lane spoke in her video about being thankful for her body. The text encouraged readers:

Remember that there is nothing wrong with you or your body. I love all of you more than you know.

Likewise, Lane’s 2015 “Plus-Size Swimwear Lookbook” had a similar focus as she reflected on her experience living in a larger body. She then addressed her viewers:

Embrace it. All of it. Every second of every day. Wear what you want, and do what you want. Be happy and grateful for another day in a body that is not flawed, but flawless.

The text in the description box is similar:

I want to know why YOU are flawless. Celebrate the body you have and the things you love about yourself. Let's spread this message of body positivity and loving yourself and influence the world to do the same. Use it on Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr and everywhere in-between. I'll be liking a lot of your posts and keeping up with the hashtag as much as I can. Love all of you. I'm proud of what you've done and what you'll continue to do.

As mentioned above, “Universal Thread Plus Size Shorts Target Haul | Try On | Posi Claudia” included a digression into a pep talk to her audience about developing confidence and facing one’s fears about wearing somewhat revealing clothing in public, like shorts:

I get asked a lot, “What do you do, Claudia, to face your fears? I want to be able to wear these things but I don't have the confidence....” This haul is turning into a confidence

talk. I'm sorry, but I know some people needed to hear it and appreciate this talk. But sometimes you just have to face your fear and step out of your comfort zone in order for you to realize that it's not bad. It wasn't bad. It was a great experience after all. And that's what happened this summer. And yo girl, rocking shorts, I can't wait to go to California and be like 'hey girl, hey,' you know?

Lane's and Garcia's overt exhortations to viewers were somewhat unusual in the analyzed videos. A more typical mention of and appeal to community was contained in the last paragraph of the transcript from the video "Plus size jeans/Old Navy jeans" posted on the "Kmink" channel. In the last few minutes of the video, the vlogger answered a question that she has received from several people about a particular clothing item and noted that she had put links (URLs) to the jeans she tried on in the description box. She ended the video by thanking people for their support and encouraged them to contact her on social media:

Really quickly, ladies, y'all have been hitting me up on everything: Snapchat, Instagram, everything. "Where's your waist trainer from? Where's your waist trainer from?" So my waist trainer is from BodyFab.com.... I will answer any comments that you guys have in the comment bar. The link to every pair of jeans that I had on as well as this waist trainer will be down below. Thank you, ladies. I appreciate all the love and support, honestly I do, and feel free to hit me up on Snapchat if you have any questions or you just want to talk to me. Feel free to hit me up.

This acknowledges some type of community around the video channel, but it does not quite suggest the depth of engagement extolled by the interviewees. However, the vlogger did respond to 46 of the 93 comments left by viewers, demonstrating some level of commitment to engaging with individual viewers. Compared to the mean as listed below in Table 17, the owner of the

“Kmink” channel was more engaged in responding to her viewers as compared to the other YouTubers whose videos were in the content analysis.

Table 17. Comments on Videos in the Content Analysis List¹

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	Range
Total Comments Posted	16178	270	98.5	0-1526
Comments Posted by Channel				
Owner Only	900	15	4	0-225
Hearts ²	273	5	0	0-47

¹ as of 8/2019; six of the 60 videos had comments disabled.

² Channel owners can affix a heart to a comment posted to a video by a viewer. It is a shorthand to show that a YouTuber likes a comment or wants to highlight it. Often a comment is “hearted” without the channel owner typing any kind of response in words to the commenter.

Another way of referring to a relationship to viewers was shown by Arlena Cheyenne in “Lovesick Plus Size Fashion Haul + Try On.” She explained why she was showcasing the Lovesick brand and online store: it is a brand

for the plus-sized community. I do like to put out there clothing brands that are directly for plus-sized, because it's targeted for us...

Again, this verbally connects the viewers of the video with the video maker, even if the bulk of the video is the speaker reviewing the garments she has purchased as to cost, quality, and fit.

Online fashion opinion leaders. Cece Olisa’s “Plus Size Shopping at Universal Standard | Dressing Room Confidential” is one of the six dressing room try-on videos in the list. As such, it unsurprisingly featured the vlogger modeling several garments sold by the brand Universal Standard. The video is not at all unusual in its overarching focus on consumption through the activities of shopping for, purchasing, and wearing new apparel. What makes this video unusual is that while most commenters liked the brand and the garments the YouTuber modeled, a minority complained quite a bit about the prices of the styles. This is the rare instance of any kind of talk in these videos (and their attendant comments) related to socio-economic status and

disposable income. To be sure, most apparel hauls feature fairly inexpensive fast-fashion purchases, so a video on Universal Standard, which was described by Cece Olisa as a brand that specializes in more “elevated” investment dressing, is different from the norm.¹⁸ However, the actual prices of the garments presented were never mentioned in the video or its description box. As of late 2019, the Universal Standard website offers a dress for \$160, a work blazer for \$210, wool trousers for \$180, and winter coats for \$330-\$350, among its styles.¹⁹ A few commenters supported the vlogger and implied that viewers who disliked the brand for its higher price tags were all adolescents who were not mature or sophisticated enough to understand why the idea of buying investment clothing was preferable to simply purchasing apparel from a fast-fashion company. Of course, this is a facile explanation. Not all young women prefer or buy cheaper apparel, and not all post-adolescent women can afford or even want more expensive garments. The breezy assumption on the part of the commenters ignores structural inequities that are often associated with fat bodies. Being fat and thus wearing plus sizes is correlated with lower socio-economic status and often overlaps with being a member of races and/or ethnicities that experience less privilege in society (Farrell, 2011; LeBesco, 2010).

Trolls. In keeping with Rose’s (2016) admonition to look at the site of the visual document, in Table 18 are a selection of negative or inflammatory comments from “trolls.” Comments on a particular video are located directly underneath the video and its description box. This is a sampling from two of the videos analyzed for content of some of the types of comments that plus-size YouTubers can receive. As noted above, in six of the 60 videos (10%), the

¹⁸ “Investment dressing” is seen here as the opposite of buying a lot of fast fashion – with investment dressing, one buys fewer pieces of apparel, but what is bought is of higher quality, lasts longer, and each item is more expensive than its fast-fashion substitute would be.

¹⁹ <https://www.universalstandard.com/>

Youtuber disabled the ability to leave comments. Why videos had comments disabled was not addressed in either transcripts or description boxes, but it may be that the channel owner simply did not want to read or deal with commenters that hoped to upset them.

Table 18. A Selection of Trolling Comments¹

Video/Channel	Comment
“Plus Size Festival Lookbook” / Vanessa Manley	<p>I would eat you like a ripe peach</p> <hr/> <p>are you married sweetheart ??? I need your love</p>
“Plus-Size Clothing Haul Modcloth Spring '17” / FatGirlFlow	<p>I hate these comments.... Stop glorifying this. These people who are like yes girl do you are just hiding the fact that they know this girl is unhealthy. This is why people hate Americans. This isn't plus sized this is obese. I'm not sorry for saying I'm disgusted this video is what constitutes as "plus-size" Kim Kardashian is plus sized. I dime hate this girl as a person but I hate what she is producing for the public and young girls who might be overweight and are then like oh she can do this and so can I. No . Nobody in the 50s looked like this. Put the bread down.</p> <hr/> <p>Being confidant is good, wearing what you want is good, not caring what others think about you is good. BUT it's NOT healthy to be this big, and it's NOT okay to tell someone they're okay being this big, if someone dies from health complications from being this large I bet everyone who said " you're beautiful! You don't need to lose weight you look wonderful!" Will either feel bad or incredibly stupid. It's NOT OKAY to enable OBESITY or ANOREXIA ! Encourage people you actually CARE ABOUT to be healthy and exercise! People who are you telling you you're okay the way you are DO NOT CARE ABOUT YOU BECAUSE SOMEONE WHO ACTUALLY CARED WOULDNT LIE TO YOU.</p> <hr/> <p>[A commenter’s reply to a trolling comment]: newsflash to you: people already know it isn't as healthy to be quite big. Also newsflash to you, there isn't anything wrong with liking how you look like, whether you are in a weight loss journey or not. Your self-esteem does not depend on how healthy you are, else cancer patients should be condemned to feel horrible for looking mutilated.</p>

Table 18 Continued¹

Video/Channel	Comment
“Plus-Size Clothing Haul Modcloth Spring '17” / FatGirlFlow	[A different commenter replies to a troll]: news flash dumbass...FAT PEOPLE KNOW THEY ARE FAT! wow!! she doesn't need CONSTANT reminders from STRANGERS telling her she needs to lose weight. BTW THIS IS NOT A VIDEO ABOUT HER WEIGHT THIS IS A VIDEO ABOUT PLUS SIZE CLOTHING! you need to realize if someone is happy with themselves then you have NO RIGHT to tell them they should BE UNHAPPY. telling someone that they look great is not ENABLING OBESITY OR ANOREXIA! please learn that fat people are humans who deserve to be RESPECTED and treated with KINDNESS. spreading hateful shit and shaming women and men for loving themselves is ENABLING OBESITY AND ANOREXIA. NO ONE IS GOING TO STOP LOVING THEMSELVES FROM NICE COMMENTS, NO ONE IS GOING TO GORGE ON FOOD OR STARVE THEMSELVES FROM NICE COMMENTS. if you seriously fucking think you're being a good Samaritan by repeatedly telling someone they are unhealthy and going to die, then you're going to feel like an idiot if they die. so, please, do us all a fucking favor and quit being fucking retarded. also, ITS SPELT CONFIDENT. maybe you should learn a thing or two from the woman in this video.

¹ All comments are presented exactly as written from the videos.

As can be seen, there are comments that can be classified as “health-concern” trolling, and two that hypersexualize a YouTuber. The table above also includes two comments that were replies to trolling comments. These response comments are not from the YouTuber herself, but from indignant viewers who are supportive of the YouTuber.

Agency

Transgressive acts. One of the most interesting facts about the sixty videos on this list is how often the YouTubers are trying on, purchasing, and talking about garments that fat women are not supposed to wear, at least by the unspoken rules of contemporary U.S. society – that is, more revealing clothing, especially swimsuits (including bikinis), shorts, and crop tops. Twenty-six videos (43%) feature some kind of transgressive dress through a veritable parade of modeled bras, bralettes, panties, crop tops, shorts, and bodycon²⁰ dresses. Eleven videos (18%) feature

²⁰ A bodycon garment is a type of purposely closefitting apparel that reveals the body/body shape underneath.

swimsuits, including bikinis. In the “Plus-Size Clothing Haul | Modcloth Spring '17” on the Fat Girl Flow channel, Corissa Enneking not only tried on a bikini with a low-rise bottom, she also stated,

The cool thing about this swimsuit is that it actually comes with a low-rise bottom. In the past I have mentioned that I'm really into, of course, the high-waisted bikini thing, but also I want my belly to hang out. I'm tired of having half a tanned mid-section. People get so offended by large bellies with gut overhang, and I just think it's silly, because it's so comfortable to have your belly out. That is so freeing and so amazing. I want to do it regularly in low-waisted bikinis.

She also happily modeled the bikini to show how it fit. A fat woman purchasing and wearing a bikini is transgressive, but perhaps even more transgressive is a woman admitting that her stomach hangs over the bikini bottom, and that she is completely unperturbed by the fact.

Amber Rose's “SPRING PLUS SIZE TRY ON HAUL PT.2 | FT. GSLOVESME” included this aside about a sheer crop top:

Now this next purchase, I totally went on a whim when buying this because normally, I wouldn't buy something like this, but it's really in style, and I really wanted to try it, and it was so affordable that I couldn't pass it up. It's basically a black crop top halter top, I think that's what they're called, and it's black. It is a little see through, but I'll just wear a black bra with it, and it should not be too bad. I got it in a 2X and it was only \$8.99, but definitely out of my comfort zone. But you know, you've got to try different things once in a while.

A few YouTubers stated that they had no issues with wearing revealing types of garments. The video “Miami Ready | Swimsuit Try-On | Rosegal | Plus Size” by Daquana White

is one such vlogger; White said that it has never been difficult for her to wear swimsuits in public.

Adrienne Starr's "Braless Outfit Of The Day | OOTD| Plus-Size | Running Errands" is another example of transgressive dress choices. Starr seems to be neither insecure nor concerned about going out in public without a brassiere, stating,

The reason I'm making this is because I do like to go braless sometimes.... As you can see, I am showing a little bit of nipple, so if you're uncomfortable with that, you can wear something to cover up.

As an OOTD, the video merely serves to document what she was wearing on that particular day, but her matter-of-fact attitude belies the fact that larger-breasted adult women (whether plus-size or not) in the United States do not typically go braless in public unless their breast shape closely approximates the shape defined as perfect and perfectly desirable by media images.

Both the "Sometimes Glam" and "NicoleAmberrr" channels shared hauls that included crop tops, and neither YouTuber mentioned having to overcome any personal issues to purchase or wear them. Crystal Coons, the owner of the "Sometimes Glam" channel, showed two crop tops in the video, "PLUS SIZE FASHION TRY ON HAUL | haaavvee you met DEB?! DEBSHOPS!" She stated,

... I mean, I love crop tops. I've always loved crop tops, but I've been really ... I think it's just because the weather is getting nicer, I'm really feeling crop tops.

Nicole of "NicoleAmberrr" also presented a haul that included two crop tops in "Plus Size Try On Haul! | Rebdolls," and she, too, made no mention of any insecurities or emotional baggage in relation to purchasing or wearing this type of garment.

Fashion as Barrier or Transformative Tool

On her channel, Loey Lane has modeled swimsuits in several videos. However, she herself admitted that the “Plus Size Bikini Lookbook | Target 2016” was very special, because while I have filmed many a swimsuit lookbook in my backyard, in a park, in various private locations, I had never filmed one in a public setting.

It was a watershed moment for her, in that she felt not only physically exposed, but emotionally very exposed. However, Lane told her viewers that the experience had been very positive and rewarding for her. She also stated:

Being a bigger girl, being plus size, I've always been hyper aware of my body, and afraid of the judgements of other people. I kind of kick myself looking back on all of the situations I missed out on due to my own insecurities about my body. Trust me when I tell you, there is no outfit that looks better than confidence, and it is a one-size fits all suit. *But that being said, having something you feel cute in doesn't hurt either.... When I feel good in what is on my body, it definitely helps to boost that confidence* [emphasis added]. And when I'm confident in myself, I'm not missing out on life because I'm worried of what people are thinking of me. See, it all comes together.

Lane understood the connection between self-confidence and having access to apparel that the wearer likes, that is, being able to choose from apparel offerings and not just grabbing something because it was the only thing that fit. Her fashion choices bolstered her own confidence and self-esteem.

On her channel, Cora Diane posted one video, “Plus Size Shorts & Crop Top Try-On Clothing Haul: Asos Curve, Torrid & Forever 21 Plus | Curvy Style,” where the bulk of the apparel pieces she modeled would commonly be regarded as inappropriate for plus-size

women.²¹ She mused at the start of the video about the confluence of apparel, revealing one's body, and self-esteem. First, she stated that she wanted

to unpack some of the baggage as a plus-size woman wearing shorts.... Because with shorts it's something that I've always been self-conscious about, not so much for showing my legs.... But the part of my body that I'm self-conscious about is my stomach. It's just something that I'm self-conscious about, and when you wear shorts, there's nowhere to hide. You can't really wear any kind of shape wear.

I love crop tops, and I usually wear them with some kind of skirt, and I usually don't have very much belly skin exposed. I just decided to break out of that, try something different, really kind of challenge myself. And you know what I've discovered is that crop tops and shorts for the most part are actually incredibly flattering. They call a lot of attention to the smallest part of my body, which is my waist.

The experience of wearing of these types of garments, crop tops and shorts, led to her altering her opinions and viewpoint about what was flattering on her body, which positively affected her self-concept.

Transformation was not just for the wearer of the garments, however:

You get a lot of compliments [wearing shorts and a crop top together] You have the people who are just like, "Oh, you look great," and that's just a nice compliment, thank you. And then you get the compliment that sounds like this. "Wow... That looks so good on you...." and it's like, a question? And really the subtext of that is, "Wow... I didn't know a fat girl could dress like that."

²¹ Similar to Loey Lane in the previous video, Cora Diane modeled these looks outdoors in what appear to be public places.

So on the one hand, that is kind of offensive, let's be honest. But on the other hand, it's that you're challenging someone's notions. You're challenging what people see fat people looking like.... it's just something that's unexpected for them.

This YouTuber was very aware that she could affect others who saw her dressed in this unexpected way. In the same video, Cora Diane made another very interesting statement, as she introduced another outfit:

So this next outfit is one that I will fully acknowledge is not a flattering outfit. But again, clothes don't have to be flattering – you just wear what you love, what feels good.

Cora Diane is admitting that she purposely chose to wear (and be filmed wearing) an outfit that did not necessarily make her look her best. The freedom and ability to purposely choose ugly or comfortable or plain garments, if that is what one wants to wear, is the exact opposite of having extremely few apparel options to choose from and likely ending up with something not attractive. This is also deeply nonconforming when one considers traditional gender role dress, with role demands that women are supposed to care very much about making themselves as attractive as possible to fulfill their decorative function in society (Damhorst, 1991; Kaiser, Lennon, & Damhorst, 1991).

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to study the experiences, opinions, and work of plus-size YouTubers who make videos about fashion. Thirteen plus-size people (12 women and one non-binary individual) who make fashion-oriented YouTube videos were interviewed, and 60 videos about plus-size fashion were analyzed for content. Data from these methods were analyzed by employing the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In Chapter 5, overarching and emergent themes, links between themes found in the data analysis, and relationships to theory will be discussed.

The Crucial Role of the Online World

The critical importance of the online world was evident in two of the themes: the changes in the apparel field and what it means to be a fat fashion social media “guru.” This goes beyond the simple fact that this study focuses on one of the most popular social media platforms worldwide, YouTube. Beyond existing as one retailing channel among others from which to purchase goods, ecommerce was acknowledged by interview participants as instrumental in increasing their access to plus-size apparel. ASOS, boohoo, Fashion Nova, Gwynnie Bee, and Dia & Co are just a few of the online businesses that were cited as substantially impacting plus-size fashion – ASOS, boohoo, and Fashion Nova through their plus-size ranges, and Gwynnie Bee and Dia & Co. through their plus-size clothing subscription services. For stores that had both a physical store channel and an online channel, interviewees were uniform in describing the online store as containing more offerings overall, including more styles and sizes. In contrast,

brick and mortar stores very often continued to be as unrewarding as shopping trips in the past had been for interviewees.²²

The nature of the internet can benefit niche market retailing (Allen & Fjermestad, 2001; Min & Wolfinbarger, 2005). Consumers can use Google or a similar search engine to find company ecommerce websites with products specialized or abstruse, regardless of the company or customer's actual physical location. Thus, finding and buying from a retailer that sells one's desired type of product is no longer constrained by geography. Consequently, a niche retailer can sell to interested customers around the world. Historical sword replicas, Japanese pens and stationery, and "working" Star Wars-inspired lightsabers, as three examples, are all highly specialized product offerings that are not easily found in a typical physical store in the United States, but searching online for purveyors of these goods yields several internet stores that specialize in precisely those types of products. If the world is a company's trade area, that company can potentially be quite successful as an online retailer even, or especially, with the most obscure types of products.

The internet, through social media, was also credited by the interviewees as permitting them to virtually meet and socialize with other individuals who were like themselves, which usually referred to other plus-size women. One of fourth-wave feminism's defining practices is the use of online technologies, such as social media platforms, by people to communicate, organize, protest, discuss, and publicize issues and experiences (Rivers, 2017). In the history of the size acceptance movement, both political agitation and social support were important activities of such size acceptance groups as NAAFA (National Association to Advance Fat

²² This viewpoint was also discussed in detail in one of the videos used for content analysis, Glitterandlazer's "In the Dressing Room: Dillard's Plus Size Try On."

Acceptance) (Sobal, 1999). Even if their online communities were small and not overtly political, interview participants valued their communities as a place to find and give social support. These communities allowed interviewees (and presumably viewers and followers) to no longer feel isolated because of their size. In addition, several of the interview participants did use their platform for more political ends. They would often raise issues that fat women (and fat people in general) faced in society, and they advocated for change in the plus-size apparel industry, in the mainstream media, and often in society overall. Although only two of the interviewees overtly identified as feminists, the impulse of participants overall toward transgression by breaking unspoken societal rules about what fat or plus-size individuals should wear or how they should behave is clearly in alignment with feminist principles.

However, social media is not a perfect product. Social media platforms are owned by corporate stockholders; users of a given platform do not necessarily have any power to decide company policies on how the platform is run. For example, the respective managements of Facebook and YouTube have introduced many updates, including changes to layout and design, monetization rules, and the use of users' data, without consulting the people who use their sites. Facebook's Beacon program is one of the more notorious examples of a platform's management implementing changes to the platform without any input from users and without clearly disclosing what was happening. Beacon automatically posted user data and activities (such as online purchases) on the user's Facebook newsfeed and other websites without the user's knowledge or consent (Metz, 2009; Perez, 2007). Recently, YouTube implemented a change to their verification program with little advance knowledge or explanation. Verification of a channel certified that it was actually owned and run by the actual person depicted in the channel title – thus, parody channels or a channel owner trying to impersonate a celebrity would not

receive certification. Many YouTubers received emails informing them that they were losing their verification with little explanation, and enough complained that the company was forced to rescind the changes (Roettgers, 2019). Social media is not a utility run for the express benefit of society, even if most people think of it as such. In the long run, freedom and agency within YouTube may well run into some insurmountable constraints when one is using a medium run by a corporation that takes the desires of its users into consideration only as an afterthought.

Social Comparison, Body Acceptance, the Thin Ideal and Plastic Body

A great deal of research has found that selfie takers, adolescents, and other users of social media may experience a lowering of their self-esteem and a growing dissatisfaction with their bodies because of upward social comparison (Chua & Chang, 2016; Cohen, Newton-John, & Slater, 2017; Festinger, 1954; McLean, Paxton, Wertheim, & Masters, 2015; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014; Wood, 1989). But what if a social media user does not subscribe to the thin ideal or is in opposition to the dominant conceptions of beauty in society? The YouTubers interviewed in this study, as well as many of the channel owners in the content analysis, may not wholeheartedly endorse the thin ideal anymore. In addition, some may also have stopped believing in the idea of the infinitely malleable body. Shedding both of these beliefs can be seen as a fairly profound transgression as it refutes some of the primary tenets related to the “normal,” ideal, and beautiful body in contemporary mainstream Western society. The size-acceptance movement, in existence since the late 1960s, clearly had individuals and groups who doubted or disbelieved these two tenets, but media coverage of these groups and public discussion of these topics that did not parrot the prevailing societal conceptions were much more rare before the advent of participatory media.

Although the visceral backlash against fat people loving themselves and showing themselves online without shame is still very evident in the comments section of many plus-sized fashion videos, the fact remains that these videos have been created and are publicly viewable online. Some of the interviewees were aware that some of their viewers were not fat themselves and that these viewers consumed their social media content for other reasons – they liked a YouTuber’s style or sense of humor, or they could empathize with a particular situation, etc. Isabella had discussed her desire to feel “super feminine” in romantic relationships with men in a video and received an especially supportive comment from a woman who was not fat, but who was very tall. Isabella also noticed that many people would “come out of the woodwork and be like, ‘This is how I feel about myself even though I’m not fat or even though I am different from you,’” as they empathized with something she had discussed in a video. Fat people having a media diet of mostly non-fat people has been the norm due to lack of representation in mainstream media, but non-fat individuals watching fat people and liking it is very much a novel situation. Perhaps this is a hint of a wider change in society, that more diverse bodies may at least be tolerated.

Intersectionality

The intersection of various oppressions was rarely mentioned by the interviewees and the video narrations in this study. However, that does not mean it does not exist. Intersectional oppressions were noticeable (in both interviews and video analysis) in the interplay between socio-economic status, fatness, and race. Although the idea of participatory media suggests a more equitable representation of races and ethnicities, in actuality, the overarching societal prejudices regarding race and ethnicity are also reflected in who typically gains the most fame

from YouTube; thus, one interviewee noted that making a career out of YouTube would be especially difficult for her, due to race and size intersectionality.

Economic issues were found in both the interviews and the content analysis. The high cost of apparel overall and the especially high costs of particular brands were two topics mentioned by interviewees; mentions of high costs were also found in the video transcripts used for content analysis and the videos' comments section. Many of the interviewees could not or did not plan to have a career consisting of social media only, and often an important consideration was the economic risk associated with a social media career.

Since its inception in the late 1960s, the size acceptance movement has been linked to the middle class, yet fatness is correlated with a lower socioeconomic status (Sobal, 1999). Poorer fat people may feel that the size acceptance movement does not speak for them because of this disparity. Unequal access to the internet (also called the digital divide) still exists in the United States to a certain extent; people who live in rural areas, racial and ethnic minorities, those of lower socio-economic status, and older people may have more difficulty accessing the internet (Anderson & Kumar, 2019; Warf, 2019). Thus, even though social media may be a good source to find representation of a variety of plus-size people, it still remains that many fat individuals may not be able to access the internet and social media on a regular basis or at all.

Visibility and Representation

These two concepts emerged inductively from the data and constitute two of the overarching themes for this study. Piercing the invisibility that fat people all too often endure in social situations and having more fat individuals represented in media were incredibly important to the interviewees. Fat people, like others in our society, may have completely internalized disdain and visceral disgust toward the ideas of fat and fatness. In Goffman's (1963) writings on

stigma, owners of fat bodies would be classified as discredited persons, because their supposed failing is clearly visible. In contrast to the discreditable person, whose shortcomings are not immediately perceivable and may successfully be hidden to a certain extent, a person discredited due to overall physical characteristics cannot pass as a “normal” person. Instead of passing, Goffman suggested that discredited people will try to “cover,” or to downplay the stigma as much as possible. Ashamed and embarrassed people who have internalized the societal message that people like them are inferior and grotesque because of their bodies may prefer to “cover” by dressing to obscure the body underneath apparel and to draw as little attention to their physical selves as possible. In contrast, the interviewees often dressed to stand out. One of the outfits Claire wore to New York Fashion Week was a custom-made hot pink fringed jumpsuit. This is not the uniform of a shrinking violet or a discredited person trying to cover. The very fact that interview participants create video content in which their clothed bodies are on display and publish these videos on YouTube also suggests an enduring desire to be visible and noticed. McMichael (2013), discussing the writings of fat writers and activists Marianne Kirby and Lesley Kinzel, noted that both emphasize visibility as a primary strategy to resist current definitions of beauty and to normalize the fat body.

In addition, representation, especially through the existence of plus-sized role models in media, was an extremely important topic for the interviewees, who maintained that they found role models much more easily after the advent of social media. Most interviewees, moreover, were proud to serve as role models for others. The creators of the plus-size fashion videos used for the content analysis were especially interested in examining the fit and sizing of the apparel items they featured by showing and evaluating fit on their own bodies. With the continuing scarcity of representation in traditional mass media and advertising, seeing another fat person in

media who has a similar body size and shape is still quite surprising. Viewers who left comments on two of FatGirlFlow's videos specifically addressed this:

this isn't related to the video, but you're the first person i've found that actually looks like me? if that makes sense. (comment on "PLUS SIZE CLOTHING HAUL - simplybe // fatgirlflow.com")

WE ARE SO SIMILAR IN SIZE AND I'M SO GLAD I FOUND YOU FLAIL
(comment on "Plus-Size Clothing Haul | Modcloth Spring '17")

Being visible and serving as a role model are not only actions that affect the performer of these actions – if repeatedly performed by a multiplicity of people, they could potentially start to raise the consciousness and change the mindset of others. Butler's (1990) theory of performativity states that gender is not an essential part of a human being; rather, gender is created and maintained through repeated performances. Here, the technique of performativity – as seen in the repeated visible enactment of unashamed fatness – may be used to represent fatness as a human characteristic that is just as viable and "normal" as the thin ideal. Perhaps a viewer is at first shocked to see a large woman modeling a bikini and laughing – and even playfully jiggling her own stomach. The fact that this plus-size individual is not apologizing for her size but rather is comfortable and happy with herself is deeply at odds with our society's mainstream conception of how one should act and feel when inhabiting a body that does not match the definition of a "correct" body. bell hooks (2000) described consciousness-raising groups as instigating an inner search in its members so that they will face "their internalized sexism [and] their allegiance to patriarchal thinking and action" (p. 12), which would include oppressive standards of physical perfection for women. While it may seem that YouTubers'

relationships to their viewers are not precisely equivalent to a consciousness-raising group, the interviewees' statements as to their feeling of a real community that has sprung up around their channels suggests that some consciousness raising is possible in their communities. Moreover, the fact that the interviewees are presenting themselves through a visual medium, YouTube, may add power to their ability to normalize body sizes that are not thin. Repeated imagery of thin female bodies in the media certainly helped enshrine that conception of a woman's body as the only acceptable one in mainstream Western society (Bordo, 1993). A multitude of videos featuring women with a variety of body types, combined with those women speaking directly to viewers about their lives and experiences, could indeed serve as a very powerful tool to combat the oppression of the thin ideal (Cheng, 2010). hooks (2015) described the political desire to transform how blackness was portrayed in media as requiring work beyond critique. Actual alternatives to the dominant racist images routinely put forth in the media are necessary, because "making a space for the transgressive image... is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation" along with "shifting paradigms, changing perspectives, [and] ways of looking" (hooks, 2015, p. 4). Fat oppression is clearly not the same as racist oppression, but the desire to reimagine fatness through visual transgression can and should be an important tool in the resistance to the oppressive standards of the hegemonic culture.

Agency through Transgression

Breaking the rules by being unashamedly fat in public or in the media is one obvious transgression that the interviewees practice on a regular basis. Beyond that, both interviewees and the YouTubers featured in the video content analysis regularly committed transgressive acts through what types of apparel they wore. Not only do they not "cover," in Goffman's (1963) parlance, but many of them were excited about wearing trendy, body-baring garments such as

shorts, bikinis, and crop tops, even though some of them admitted that the idea of wearing these types of apparel made them uneasy at times. These YouTubers are in effect performing an ongoing cultural criticism, even if that is not a conscious motivation of all of the vloggers. One of the channel owners who was included in the content analysis, Cora Diane, went even further.²³ She stated unequivocally that she knew a new outfit she was modeling, Bermuda-length shorts and a ripped t-shirt, was not particularly flattering on her, but that “clothes don’t have to be flattering” for a person, even a fat woman, to wear them and enjoy them. While this may seem to be a fairly innocuous act of resistance, it is in actuality deeply transgressive. Beyond revealing the plus-size body underneath her clothes, it also stands in contrast to traditional gender role theory, where women play the hedonic role as they strive to beautify their physical selves through dress and adornment as much as possible (McKinley, 1999; Weitz, 2001). Knowing that an outfit does not make oneself look especially becoming, yet being satisfied enough with it to wear it publicly, is something that not all women are comfortable doing because of the continuing impact of traditional gender roles.

Fashion’s Two-Sided Sword

Interview participants described patterns of being rejected and barred from participating in the fashion cycle while they scrambled to find those very few things that would fit their bodies. They did not have the luxury of having much choice as far as style. These experiences created a bittersweet relationship between them and clothes/fashion. They may have loved following fashion trends in media since childhood, but when it came to clothing themselves, they had experienced the status of outcasts. Peters (2014), in her article “You are What You Wear,”

²³ In the video, “Plus Size Shorts & Crop Top Try-On Clothing Haul: Asos Curve, Torrid & Forever 21 Plus | Curvy Style”

discussed dress as an extension of the self and as a means to highlight the various identities that make up an individual. The greater availability of plus-size styles, brands, and stores now permits plus-size individuals the ability to experiment with apparel, perhaps for the first time in their lives. They can play with fashion and express themselves and their identities as they never could before.

Contributions to Theory

Fat Studies

This study contributes to several theories and areas of research. First, it adds to the discipline of fat studies as it documents some of the experiences, activities, and thoughts of fat women and non-binary individuals who are active online. As a depiction of plus-size people who are visible in social media through their work on YouTube and other platforms, this research adds more insight into the contemporary fat experience. It also sheds light on the development of plus-size community support resulting from activity on online platforms.

Feminist Theories and Visual Culture Studies

The topic area is in alignment with fourth-wave feminist thinking that sees online technologies and participatory media as advancing its goals to protest oppression, organize for change, and spread knowledge. Fourth-wave feminism is also concerned with issues of the intersectional nature of societal oppressions, which inform this study as well (Cochrane, 2013; Rivers, 2017). The interviewees did not all describe themselves as feminists with fourth-wave objectives. However, most of them seemed to be acting as at least intuitive feminists as they break ground in transgressive vlogging activity.

Because of the visual nature of YouTube, this study contributes to visual culture studies. The nature of plus-size video products allows for a sociological examination of the people and

culture that produced them, and issues related to feminism can be gleaned from the visual elements of these videos. The YouTubers profiled in this study take center stage in their respective videos, serving as host, critic, model, and any other necessary roles in front of the camera. They display their clothed plus-size bodies, discuss their lives, and seek to communicate directly with their viewers. The interviewees played an active role in their videos and are subjects, unlike what earlier theorists (such as Berger, 1972; Goffman, 1976; and Mulvey, 1975) observed in film and advertisements in decades past. Even as a vlogger shows herself modeling a new purchase, it is done of her own volition, and she typically is not intending to titillate viewers. Interview participants who did have male viewers objectifying them (and leaving comments related to that objectification) often blocked the trolls from commenting in the future; they stated in their interviews that their videos were not for men at all, but were in fact for women or non-binary people (all of whom would not necessarily be fetishizing or sexualizing the vloggers without their permission).

Dress in/and Social Media

Dress scholars have found social media to be a fertile field for research. To date, most work has concentrated upon blogs and selfies; the blog, especially, is one of the oldest forms of participatory media, so it makes sense that there is a well-established body of knowledge about that format. The current research will extend the study of dress in social media to a very popular and influential social media platform, YouTube. As YouTube is the second most popular website in the world (Alexa Internet, 2019), it has the potential to impact culture profoundly.

Communications scholars studying the online world have suggested that it can play the role of a “third place,” a term designating a social space that is distinct from both home and work settings (first detailed by Oldenburg, 1989). They assert that virtual online communities on a

variety of platforms can and do fulfill this function (Moore, Gathman, & Ducheneaut, 2009; Soukup, 2006; Williams, 2006). Oldenburg (1989) depicted a third space as a public gathering place “in which all feel at home and comfortable” (p. 22); moreover, in a third place, there is “friendliness, support, and mutual concern” among the regulars (Oldenburg, 1989, p. 41). Third places set in the physical world could be any type of gathering spot, such as coffee shops, bars, places of worship, or hair salons. The evocation of virtual third places also brings to mind Kaiser’s meditation on dress and bodies intersecting with space and location (2012). In essence, the interviewees’ YouTube fashion videos have been used to create a new space, where fat YouTubers along with their followers are free to engage with fashion, play with identities, and enjoy the aesthetics of their bodies inside their community. In these communities, social support and encouragement have been important interchanges between members, and the rewarding nature of participating in these communities was also a feature mentioned repeatedly by interview participants. Kaiser (2012) wrote of a “belonging [that] can span beyond a given location” arising from the “highly globalized world” (p. 191), a belonging that these vloggers have experienced online and that may help to establish a more positive space for fat women in the offline world.

CHAPTER 6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This qualitative study was undertaken in an effort to investigate the phenomenon of plus-sized individuals who make YouTube videos about fashion. To date, there has been very little academic focus on plus-size individuals who create content on social media primarily about fashion. This study specifically explored: (a) the relationships fat YouTubers have with their bodies, both in the past and currently, (b) how their interest in fashion manifested in their lives, (c) what it means to be a fat fashion social media “guru,” (d) the social media activities of interviewees as part of, or separate from, their careers, and (e) if the data from the two parts of the study, interviews and video content analysis, differed from each other in important ways.

Summary

The study was comprised of two parts. First, 13 plus-size individuals who make fashion videos on YouTube were interviewed. There were several criteria used to select interviewees. First, a YouTuber had to self-identify as plus size or fat in some way, such as purchasing and trying on plus-size apparel in a video. An interviewee had to be independent and not primarily a spokesperson for a particular company. Channels with content focused predominantly on weight loss or male fashion or that had male hosts/owners were excluded from the study. Finally, interviewees had to have lived in the United States or its territories. Potential interviewees were contacted through email or social media messaging. Only 13 agreed to participate in an interview, but saturation in response content occurred over the 13 interviews.

Interview data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Findings from the interviews focused on eight themes: (a) past and current attitudes of plus-size YouTubers toward their bodies, (b) manifestation of interviewees’ interests in fashion, apparel, and style in their lives, (c) changes in the apparel industry, (d) being a fat fashion social media “guru,” (e) social

media as a career, (f) visibility and representation, (g) agency, and (h) fashion as barrier or transformative tool. The last three themes surfaced inductively from the data.

Sixty YouTube plus-size fashion videos were analyzed for content in the second part of the research. To determine the videos to be analyzed, searches using the keyword terms “fat fashion” and “plus size” were conducted through the YouTube search feature. These searches were filtered in a variety of ways in order to assemble a wide-ranging list of videos about plus-sized apparel. The researcher endeavored to include both older and more recent videos, videos that were less popular, and more channels beyond the most-viewed videos. Forty-six separate YouTube channels were represented in the list.

Videos were scrutinized for both denotative and connotative meaning. Employing Rose’s (2016) framework, the researcher focused her analysis on the site of the image, which refers to the elements in the video frame, and on the site of the audience, which in the case of YouTube is represented by the comments section. The video content analysis added no new themes to the list of eight generated from the interviews; however, it did expand upon several of the themes.

Data from the video content analysis were slightly different from the interview data. Some videos (35% of those analyzed), especially try-on hauls or lookbook videos, were only focused on reviewing apparel pieces for fit, cost, or quality, and the vloggers in those videos did not touch upon any other issues or topic areas. However, while the video content analysis did not add any new themes or subthemes to the data, it did reinforce the importance of several concepts, most notably the ideas of developing body positivity, using fashion as a transgressive act, the interacting with followers to create community, and serving as online fashion leaders for their viewers.

Many interviewees grew up knowing they were different because their body size was clearly at odds with society's thin ideal. They received this information from family, friends, and others in their lives. Knowing they were different because of their size was not necessarily accompanied by feelings of inadequacy or shame, however, especially if an interviewee felt accepted by her family. However, participants also uniformly remembered finding it almost impossible to purchase apparel that both fit them and was also stylish or in fashion. The inability to find attractive clothing was frustrating and embarrassing; the lack of apparel choices served as a clear sign of the plus-size individual's marginalization. For those who had experienced being ostracized or shamed for being fat, the lack of apparel choice was an additional marker of stigma. What made the situation more poignant was that many of the YouTubers interviewed had developed a real passion for apparel and fashion fairly early in life, which meant that they, in contrast to the average consumer, were more aware of the disparity between what they actually could wear and what was seen as desirable and attractive at any given time.

As they grew up, some (but not all) of the interviewees began to become more comfortable with their larger bodies, thus developing their own sense of body positivity. Often this led to reappropriating terms, such as "fat," that had been used widely as slurs by non-fat people. Talk about body positivity was found in 23% of the videos.

Since the 1980s, the numbers of apparel brands, companies, and styles focused on plus sizes has grown steadily; most interviewees personally noticed a great increase in plus-size styles and stores within the past 5-10 years. This increase was associated with the rise of ecommerce by the interviewees; very often, their preferred stores were online only. While the interview data suggested that participants found the current landscape for the plus-size shopper to be the best it had ever been in their lives, some hoped for more. They wished that fashion trends would appear

in plus-size apparel at the same time they appeared in juniors and misses sizes, and some interviewees hoped that all stores and brands would extend their size ranges to encompass plus sizes.

There were several motivations for becoming active on YouTube. First, some participants evinced a desire to find others who were like them in some way; generally, these other people were plus-size/fat individuals who were interested in fashion, but depending on the interviewee, it could also encompass women of color, queer people, or people of any size who loved fashion. Through the course of making videos and connecting with viewers and other YouTubers, relationships and community were nurtured, and participants who spoke of community were universally positive about its existence. Community was mentioned in several of the videos that were analyzed for content as well. Interviewees were also very motivated to talk about fashion, which often translated into videos in which they shared information about brands and stores catering to plus-size consumers and videos in which they would review recent apparel purchases. Through these types of videos, interviewees believed they served as fashion opinion leaders; viewers frequently commented that the YouTubers had influenced their apparel purchasing habits. Finally, most interviewees (and a lesser number of channel owners in the video content analysis) seemed to want to present themselves unashamedly to the world via social media and serve as inspiration to others to do the same.

Most interviewees had decided against trying to make YouTube their sole career. A few of the participants preferred to approach social media as a hobby and were not very concerned about profiting off their respective channels; while most interviewees did desire to make money off their channel if possible, they typically did not think it was reasonable to make it their only

source of income, so they had a “day job” that was not affiliated with social media or fashion. Only two of the interviewees saw social media as their primary career.

Overarching Themes

Three themes – visibility and representation, agency, and fashion as a tool – were discovered inductively through the process of this research. Fat individuals in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first have had very little positive representation in mass media. The comic sidekick, the butt of jokes, the sad, dumpy “before” image on a weight loss advertisement – such were standard depictions of fat people in mass media. Interviewees agreed that the greatest increase in the visibility of fat individuals has been in social media. With the phenomenon investigated in this research, the much-vaunted promise of social media championing those previously underrepresented in mass media has, at least to some small extent, been fulfilled (Anarbaeva, 2011; Burgess & Green, 2009b; Grossman, 2006; Strangelove, 2010; Thulin, 2013). Representation in society was seen by the interviewees as a crucially important benefit of YouTube and other social media platforms.

Depictions of agency, especially as expressed through transgressive acts, were found throughout both the interviews and the video content analysis. One act of transgression was deliberately pointing out the unspoken rules about what plus-size women are “allowed” to wear and then breaking those rules by donning body-baring apparel such as bikinis and shorts. Interviewees also spoke of “using” fashion for their own ends of personal expression, identity, and entrepreneurship; this was a turnaround from their previous expressions of powerlessness as they faced a profound dearth in apparel choices.

Finally, the concept of fashion as alternately a barrier and a tool for transformation emerged from the interview data and the content analysis. In the past, having so little choice in

apparel that they had to purchase whatever actually ended up fitting them contributed to these fat individuals' marginalization, because it visually set them apart from non-fat people. This was in addition to any stigma they might have experienced because of their size. In stark contrast, with the more recent influx of brands, stores, and styles catering to plus-size customers, interviewees came to understand that they could use fashion as a tool for identity exploration, self-esteem building, and self-expression.

Significance

Approximately 70% of the United States population is categorized as overweight or obese (Weight-control Information Network, 2012), and long-term maintenance of any weight loss is, in fact, extremely rare, as at least 95% of people regain the weight they have lost after dieting (LeBesco, 2004; Stunkard & McLaren-Hume, 1959). Despite this, fat and fatness still have highly negative connotations in mainstream U. S. society. Mass media has historically endorsed the ideal of the thin body (Jung, 2006; Kim & Lennon, 2007; Stice & Shaw, 1994). Instead of mass media, this study concentrated on the relatively new social media platform, YouTube, and a particular subsection of its users who are plus size and make videos about fashion. Because social media is hypothetically able to be used by anyone with an internet connection (and a video camera, in this case), the researcher wanted to see if any evidence of an alternative to the thin ideal could be found. Thus, fat fashion video makers were chosen as a potentially rich source of information. Moreover, there is little scholarship about fashion and fat bodies on social media, so this research fills a gap in the literature.

While the study focused on the plus-sized, the thin ideal and a visceral hatred of fatness are widespread in U.S. society, therefore affecting people of all sizes. A thin person who continually diets may also be deeply affected by the decrees of the thin ideal. If increased

representation of diverse body sizes in media leads to a greater tolerance of different sizes in real life and a dethronement of the thin ideal, then perhaps some of the obsession, anxiety, shame, and stigma related to bodily appearance may be mitigated or eliminated. The YouTubers profiled in this study have started to accomplish this, even if their communities of viewers are relatively small as compared to the United States as a whole. The comments left by viewers reveal two notable types of reactions to these videos. First are the hateful trolling comments, which attempt to disrupt and belittle the fat fashion YouTubers. The troll seems to be an especially virulent representation of the continuing anti-fat sentiment of much of the mainstream U.S. population. However, the other notable type of comments are those expressing surprise, relief, and gratitude from viewers. It is not unusual to find a plus-size vlog viewer commenting that she has finally found, for the first time in her life, a person in the media (social media, in this case) who is as big as she is and who has had similar weight-related experiences. For those who may have felt isolated because of their size, those who struggle with body acceptance and self-esteem, and those who do not know where to get desirable plus-size fashion or how to dress their bodies now that they do have a variety of apparel options, the positive impacts of these videos can be great.

Apparel Marketing

Much of the activity depicted in these fashion videos is related to trying on and purchasing apparel; therefore, apparel marketing is an arena in which this study will contribute. The study builds on work focusing on fashion bloggers' desires to work cooperatively with fashion companies, often by including advertisements and creating sponsored posts that typically include an endorsement of a new product, brand, or product line (e.g., Kennedy, 2011; Luvaas, 2013; Mendoza, 2010). Even the most politically engaged among the interviewees expressed a willingness to partner with and be sponsored by pertinent companies – as long as the relationship

allowed the vloggers to retain their authenticity and creative freedom. The ability of interviewees to influence viewers' purchase decisions was frequently mentioned in the comments sections on their videos. This should be useful (and welcome) knowledge for those companies looking to sell to the plus-size market. The vloggers who focus on plus-size fashion are very enthusiastic about the options they currently have in apparel and would be excited to help make the industry more successful by sharing information about specific products with their communities of viewers.

Recent industry survey data suggest that 20% of Americans have made purchases because of online influencers' recommendations (Augustine, 2019). Retailers that have begun to work with influential social media personalities typically focus on traditional celebrities (such as film or television stars) who incidentally happen to be very active online, as well as individuals who have become well-known primarily through their work in social media. In comparison to celebrities, people who have made a name for themselves by virtue of their social media work are usually classified by consumers as more trustworthy and credible (Shan, Chen, & Lin, 2019). Fashion Nova, a relatively new and highly popular online ecommerce company, has made extensive use of influencers, including smaller social media content creators; in fact, 20% of the influencers with whom Fashion Nova has partnered had 50,000 or fewer followers associated with their social media accounts (Wassel, 2019). Compared to celebrities, certainly, it may be less expensive to work with smaller social media influencers such as the interview participants. Moreover, one of the factors related to the success of their product recommendations is the perceived intentions of the influencers (Shan, Chen, & Lin, 2019); in the case of the interviewees, their continuing desire to serve as a resource to viewers and to discuss their excitement at finding new apparel options suggests that they would serve as very effective promoters for plus-size fashion companies.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, as qualitative research, none of the findings can be generalizable to an entire population, nor was that the goal of this research. Rather, this study sought to find out about the particular experiences and thoughts of some of the people who constitute the world of plus-size YouTube fashion vloggers, a previously unstudied group of individuals. The open-ended interview process allowed for flexible exploration of thoughts and stories told by the participants.

The interviewee sample size may be criticized as being too small. Out of 144 potential individuals who initially seemed to meet the criteria for taking part in this study, the researcher was able to contact 104 of them, and of those, 13 agreed to participate in the study. Thus, only 12.5% of those who were contacted accepted the invitation to be interviewed. The YouTubers who did participate in the interviews tended either to have joined the platform more recently or had smaller subscriber counts than the average channel owner on the video content analysis list. Thus, this is another reason why their responses should not be generalized to the entire population. Similarly, more channels could have been added to the content analysis. However, in coding both the interviewee data and the content analysis data, the researcher believed she had reached saturation with these numbers of interviews and videos; if this were not the case, then either more interviews or more video analysis would have been undertaken.

Future Research

There are many possible ways to extend and deepen research in this topic area. A visual framework depicting potential future research stemming from this topic is depicted in Figure 1.

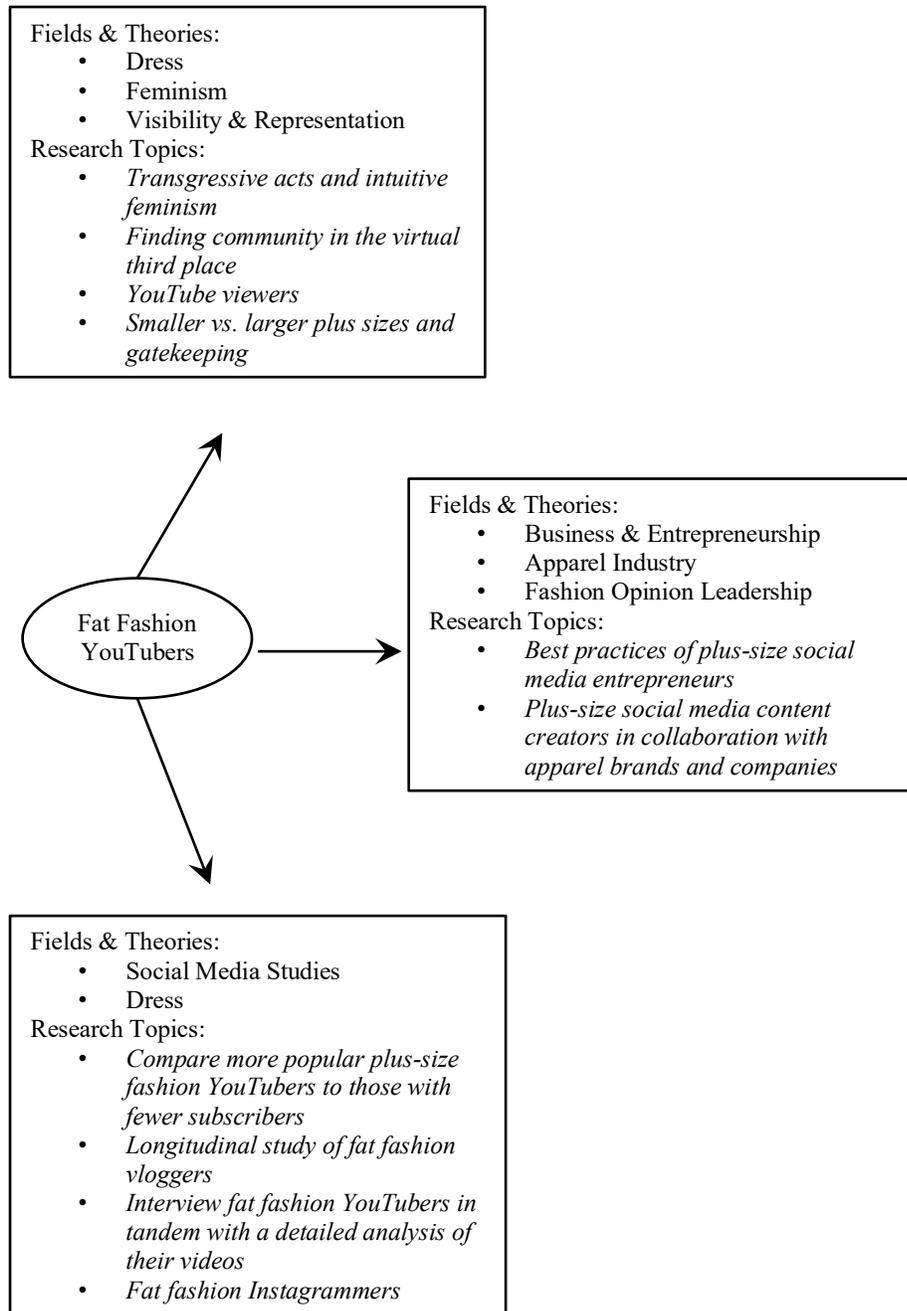


Figure 1. Directions for Future Research

First, interviews of some of the more popular plus-size YouTubers could allow for a comparison between them and smaller channel owners such as the ones studied in this research. A longitudinal study of plus-size social media content creators could be quite instructive to examine, for example, if their self-images change over time, if their feelings about social media and their followers change, and if they have increased or decreased their involvement with social media. One potentially fruitful avenue of research would be to interview fat fashion YouTubers in tandem with a detailed analysis of their videos. This would necessitate using interviewees' real names. In this study, interviews and video analysis were decoupled for confidentiality reasons.

Some of the specific themes found in the data should be studied further, such as YouTubers serving as fashion opinion leaders to their viewers. As many interviewees mentioned having a presence on other social media platforms, especially Instagram, focusing on fat fashion content creators on that platform might serve as a useful counterpoint to this study.

While only two of the interviewees in the current study approached their social media work with an entrepreneurial mindset, future research could focus more directly on this type of social media content creator with a goal of explicating the best practices of successful practitioners. Monetizing multiple income streams, for example, was mentioned by entrepreneur Claire as one important strategy to succeed in her social media activities.

As more plus-size individuals become active and visible in media, a recognition that the terms "plus size" and "fat" encompass a wide diversity of sizes and shapes is critical. One interviewee, Kate, who was at the smaller end of the plus-size spectrum (and wore size 14/16) noted that some of her viewers tried to argue about whether she was in fact plus size. Although reports of this type of gatekeeping by viewers was not common in the interview data gathered for

this study, it warrants further investigation. Perhaps some plus-size viewers perceive fashion vloggers who are not very similar in size and shape to them as limited in authenticity.

Finally, studying the viewers of these videos should also be considered. The interviewees repeatedly commented upon the importance of their communities of viewers; exploring the viewers' experiences of, perceptions, and reactions to the videos could be very useful in understanding the phenomenon of plus-size fashion YouTubers and the relationship of the vlogs to fashion shopping. This study is a valuable start to the study of a relatively new topic area.

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APPENDIX A. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL LETTER

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
2420 Lincoln Way, Suite 202
Ames, Iowa 50014
515 294-4566

Date: 5/1/2017

To: Arienne McCracken
31 MacKay Hall

CC: Dr. Eulanda Sanders
31 MacKay
Dr. Mary Lynn Damhorst
1068 LeBaron Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: #fatshion: Stigma Resistance and Fashion Opinion Leadership Among Plus-Size Vloggers

IRB ID: 17-196

Study Review Date: 5/1/2017

The project referenced above has been declared exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b) because it meets the following federal requirements for exemption:

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey or interview procedures with adults or observation of public behavior where
 - Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects cannot be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or
 - Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could not reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to their financial standing, employability, or reputation.

The determination of exemption means that:

- **You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.**
- **You must carry out the research as described in the IRB application.** Review by IRB staff is required prior to implementing modifications that may change the exempt status of the research. In general, review is required for any modifications to the research procedures (e.g., method of data collection, nature or scope of information to be collected, changes in confidentiality measures, etc.), modifications that result in the inclusion of participants from vulnerable populations, and/or any change that may increase the risk or discomfort to participants. Changes to key personnel must also be approved. The purpose of review is to determine if the project still meets the federal criteria for exemption.

Non-exempt research is subject to many regulatory requirements that must be addressed prior to implementation of the study. Conducting non-exempt research without IRB review and approval may constitute non-compliance with federal regulations and/or academic misconduct according to ISU policy.

Detailed information about requirements for submission of modifications can be found on the Exempt Study Modification Form. A Personnel Change Form may be submitted when the only modification involves changes in study staff. If it is determined that exemption is no longer warranted, then an Application for Approval of Research Involving Humans Form will need to be submitted and approved before proceeding with data collection.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review. **Only the IRB or designees may make the determination of exemption**, even if you conduct a study in the future that is exactly like this study.

Please be aware that **approval from other entities may also be needed.** For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **An IRB determination of exemption in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**

APPENDIX B. PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER

Sent as an email

Hello [Potential Interviewee],

I am a PhD student at Iowa State University who is conducting research on the increasing visibility of fashion-loving women on social media who wear plus sizes. I am a plus-size woman myself and have especially become interested in the more visual social media platforms, such as YouTube. I have really enjoyed your videos!

I am emailing because I would love to interview you for my research (by Zoom or Skype). I would love to hear your views and experiences as a plus-size and fashion-loving woman on YouTube (and on social media in general). There has not been much academic study about the intersection of fashion, social media and size acceptance, and I believe it is a very important topic. The interview would take about one hour, and your name would be kept confidential. I totally understand if you are not interested or able to take part, but I hope you will consider it!

My study has been approved by the Iowa State University Institutional Review Board (ID #17-196). I attach the official informed consent document, which gives more information about the rights of participants in the study.

If you have any questions or concerns about the project, please let me know! I hope to speak with you soon. Please let me know if there is someone, such as a manager or management company, I should contact first.

All the best,

Arienne

—

Arienne McCracken [REDACTED]
Lecturer and Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management
Iowa State University

APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: #fatshion: Stigma Resistance and Fashion Opinion Leadership Among Plus-Size Vloggers

Investigators: Arienne McCracken (Ph. D. Candidate)
Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management

[REDACTED]

Dr. Mary Lynn Damhorst
Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management

[REDACTED]

Dr. Eulanda Sanders
Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management

[REDACTED]

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to explore the phenomenon of fashion-loving women at the crossroads of the size-acceptance movement and social media. To do this, plus-size women who make YouTube videos related to apparel and beauty will be interviewed. You are being invited to participate in this study because you meet the study criteria of being a plus-size female YouTuber. We are very interested to know your views and experiences.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in a one-on-one interview conducted via telephone, Skype, or Zoom. You will also be asked to provide demographic information such as age or ethnicity. It will take approximately one hour for the interview.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks from participating in this study.

BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study, there are no benefits for you personally. However, there may be benefits for plus-size women in general. These may include helping apparel and beauty companies better understand the plus-size consumer's interests and desires and shedding light on the experiences overall of plus-size women in the contemporary world.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION

There will be no compensation for this study. All participation will be voluntary.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide not to participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or negative response from the researchers.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All answers will be anonymous, and all demographic information will only be used for sample description purposes. Confidentiality will be maintained. **If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.** Your name and addresses will not be recorded on or stored with your interview or demographic data. Analyses will be conducted on transcribed, written versions of the interview. Audio recordings will be destroyed by December 31, 2019.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information about the study, please contact Arienne McCracken, [REDACTED], [REDACTED], Iowa State University, 1074 LeBaron Hall, 626 Morrill Road, Ames, Iowa. You can also reach Dr. Mary Lynn Damhorst at [REDACTED], [REDACTED], Iowa State University, 31 MacKay Hall, 2302 Osborn Dr., Ames, Iowa or Dr. Eulanda Sanders at [REDACTED], [REDACTED], Iowa State University, 1052 LeBaron, 626 Morrill Rd., Ames, Iowa.

If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011.

Please sign below if you consent to take part in this study.

Your signature

Date

Please print your first and last name

I consent to having my interview recorded and transcribed. *(Note: Audio recordings will be destroyed by December 31, 2019.)*

Your signature

Date

Please sign and return to Arienne McCracken via email: [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**Demographic Questions**

Age

Race/Ethnicity

Occupation

YouTube Channel

When did you first discover YouTube and the YouTube beauty/fashion community?

How long have you made videos?

How would you describe your YouTube channel to someone who has never seen it?

- What kinds of videos do you make? How would you describe them?
- Who is it for?

Why did you decide to start making videos?

What are the favorite videos you have made, and why?

What are the least favorite videos you have made, and why?

Are you active in other social media? Which ones? How?

What do you like best about being...

- A YouTuber?
- A visible plus-size woman in social media?

What do you like least about being...

- A YouTuber?
- A visible plus-size woman in social media?

What is your relationship with your (a) subscribers (b) commenters (c) fellow YouTubers?

What has been your experience with the people commonly referred to as “trolls”?

- How do they affect you?
- Do you do anything to deter them from your channel?

What is the most important thing that helps you be successful with YouTube?

Apparel and Beauty

How did you first get into clothes/makeup?

How did you learn about style and how to dress/do makeup?

How would you describe your style...

- In fashion?
- In makeup?

Are there any people who are/were your style and beauty influences? Family? Celebrities? Why?

What are your favorite [brick and mortar] stores? Shopping websites? Do you usually shop in stores more or online?

What do you think about the state of plus-size retailing today? Has this changed over time? Is it getting better?

What things, if any, do you have trouble finding/purchasing? Why are they difficult for you to find?

Are there any stores/designers/brands you wish carried your size? Why?

Would you consider yourself someone who helps to set trends? Do you adopt trends early? Do you wait until a trend is established? Other?

Do you think you influence your viewers? How do you know?

If you could tell your plus-size viewers 1 thing about clothes/makeup, what would it be?

Weight/Size/Fat

How do you describe your size? Are you plus-sized, big, curvy, fat, thick, overweight, other?

When in your life did you first realize you were plus-sized/big/curvy/fat/etc.?

How do you think about your body now? Do you accept it?

Did you ever hate your body shape or size? Why? When?

How did your experiences as a plus-size woman affect your interest in beauty/fashion?

What are your thoughts about being plus-sized in US society?

Has there ever been a time where you had a negative experience because of your weight/size?

What happened?

Did you set out to make any kind of statement with your YouTube/social media activity about fat women? Do you now?

Do you want to affect society with your YouTube/social media work? How?

Entrepreneurship

What are your goals for your YouTube channel?

- In the future, would you like to do YouTube only?

Do you plan out how to increase your viewership/social media presence?

Do you belong to a network? What does it do for you?

Do you have a manager? An assistant? What do they do?

Do you ever work with brands/stores/companies? How does that work?

Have you had retail experience in the past?

Would you ever be interested in collaborating with a brand/store/company? How? (developing a makeup palette, designing, spokesmodel, etc.)

In the future, would you want to work as employee for a currently existing company, brand, or store? Create your own company/brand/store or work as a designer in the future?

In general, what do you want to do in the future?

APPENDIX E. CODING GUIDE

The coding guide is used with interviews, videos with transcripts, and the information box in videos.

1. Specific memories
 - a. Memory: being weighed in school
 - b. Memory: fashion magazines
 - c. Memory: shopping with parents/family (often when interviewee was a child)
 - d. Memory: shopping with friends

2. Historical and current attitudes of the interviewees towards their bodies
 - a. Family influences
 - i. Family members' attitudes or interactions with interviewee
 - ii. Family members' size or weight loss attempts
 - b. Friends' influences
 - i. Friends' attitudes or interactions with interviewee
 - ii. Friends' size or weight loss attempts
 - c. Acquaintances/Passersby
 - i. Their attitudes or interactions with interviewee
 - ii. Their size or weight loss attempts
 - d. Words and comfort in using them
 - i. Fat, curvy, thick, plus-size, etc.
 - ii. Reasons why YouTuber uses "fat," or doesn't/can't use "fat" (e.g., it's just a descriptive, etc.)
 - e. Issues around weight loss, eating, and health
 - i. Appearance versus health
 - ii. Weight loss for health reasons
 - f. Plus-size population inequalities and problems
 - i. Size privilege (Super-fat and mid-fat people versus smaller plus-size people)
 - ii. Body shape privilege (e.g., preference for hourglass shape or larger derrieres)
 - iii. Colorism with women of color (WOC with lighter skin colors seen as more desirable than darker women of color)
 - iv. Dichotomy in U.S. – a nation with a majority of fat people hates fat/fat people

- v. Femininity (does the YouTuber see/dress herself as feminine/girly – or other terms related to being especially feminine-presenting? Are there problems with that?)
- g. Self-acceptance/Body acceptance
 - i. Body acceptance/love (or the opposite – body hate). This can include body confidence/self-confidence, body positivity, self-esteem/self-worth (e.g., “own the woman I am”/”Love yourself as is”), body hate, and self-consciousness (often about size or appearance or not fitting in)
 - ii. Body liberation/body politics (less personal, more looking at society in general; often interviewee will use these specific terms)
3. How interests in fashion, apparel, and style manifest in interviewees’ lives
- a. Buying apparel that fits as opposed to buying apparel that is fashionable or that interviewee wants to wear
 - i. Age-appropriate clothes (or “old-lady clothes”)
 - b. Want to wear what non-plus-size people wear
 - c. Opinion leader/market maven in real life (e.g., real-life friends ask her for advice on how to dress)
 - d. Loved fashion since they were young
 - e. Love of fashion as a lonely pursuit
4. Being a fat social media “guru”
- a. Community/community activities– the relationships they have with viewers/followers and other social media creators (camaraderie, communication, interact, etc.) and what happens between YouTuber and community (advice, empowering, encouragement, entertaining, help, inspire, support, talk about problems/experiences, resources, storytelling, share)
 - i. Role models
 - 1. People who were role models for interviewee (or lack of them)
 - 2. Interviewee wants to be a role model for others
 - b. Channel subject matter (hauls, lookbooks, vlogs, cooking, day in the life, “I post what I enjoy,” etc.)
 - i. Channel is showcase for many aspects of the YouTuber’s life, not just fashion

- c. Online opinion leader/market maven
 - i. They help set trends
 - ii. They are early adopters of fashion trends
 - iii. They influence viewers' buying decisions
 - d. Authenticity/truthfulness/being real ("my opinions are my own," "I want to be real," etc.)
 - e. Non-fat people who are allies
 - i. Appear in interviewee's videos
 - ii. Watch interviewee's videos
5. Social media as/versus career
- a. Role of channel in their income
 - i. It's for the YouTuber herself primarily (e.g., personal, a journal, a hobby, etc.)
 - ii. A secondary source of income
 - iii. Primary source of income
 - iv. YouTuber sees herself as an entrepreneur
 - 1. Mentions of "my company," "my brand," or "my production company," etc., that is tied into social media work
 - b. Economic considerations of YouTube/social media as a job
 - i. Non-White, non-thin non-conventionally attractive creators not optimally set up for social media success, etc.
 - ii. Working with brands (with sponsored videos, etc.)
 - iii. "Pay to play" on some platforms
 - c. Conflict between social media work and one's real world or real-world "day job"
 - i. Fear of judgment re: "fat people shouldn't like fashion"
 - ii. Discomfort or even paranoia about letting the social media work get recognized by real-life work colleagues
 - iii. Online popularity versus privacy
 - iv. YouTube/real-life balance (often manifests as not having enough time to devote to social media to be successful in it)
6. Pluses and minuses of social media
- a. Positives
 - i. Social media changes lives
 - ii. Social media helps plus-size people
 - iii. Social media lets a person see other possibilities

- b. Negatives
 - i. Social media/apps as hurtful to mental health, self-esteem, etc. (Being overly “self-critical” over posted photos, etc.)
 - ii. Social media and narcissism
 - iii. Trolls (trolls: people who don’t actually care about the YouTuber or the video, but just want notoriety, to stir up trouble, or to upset the YouTuber)
 - 1. Anti-feminist trolls
 - 2. Creepy guy trolls (male viewers who make inappropriate, typically overly sexual comments)
 - 3. Gatekeeping (people who say that smaller plus-size YouTubers are not plus size)
 - 4. Health-concern trolls (people who comment on any video regardless of subject to express “concern” about the YouTuber’s weight and e.g., demand the YouTuber lose weight because they’re killing themselves being so fat)
 - 5. Overly demanding viewers with inappropriate boundaries (they think the YouTuber and they are actually close friends when they are not; they think they can demand a YouTuber make videos)
 - c. Social media v. old media (like film, television, newspapers, magazines)
7. Plus-size fashion industry
- a. Change noticed by interviewee over time (e.g., has improved greatly, etc.)
 - b. No options/no choices in plus-size shopping/apparel (this type of phrase is typically seen when interviewee is talking about the past)
 - c. Increase/decrease in number of brands/stores selling plus-size apparel
 - d. Increase/decrease in availability of styles/options/variety/silhouettes/types of garments
 - e. Online stores versus brick and mortar stores
 - f. All apparel stores/brands should also carry plus sizes
 - g. Plus-size clothing styles/SKUs versus those for misses/junior people (e.g., plus-sizes should have the same designs as missy/juniors, or plus-size fashion trends are behind those of misses/juniors)
 - h. Inexpensive/expensive
 - i. Quality/lack of quality
 - j. Consumer ambivalence
 - i. For plus-size models
 - ii. For spending money on plus-size clothes (e.g., because consumer wants to lose weight first)

8. Overarching issues

- a. Visibility
 - i. We see ourselves in the world now, esp. through social media/visibility
 - 1. Noticed/noticeable
 - 2. Representation
- b. Transgression
 - i. Wearing clothes that you “shouldn’t” wear or show what you “shouldn’t” show (such as bikinis/bathing suits, crop tops, large upper arms, etc.)
 - ii. Use fashion for your own goals/desires (“wear what you want,” “don’t hide,” “don’t follow rules”)
- c. Fashion/apparel (and access to it) closely intertwined with self-esteem and body acceptance

APPENDIX F. VIDEO ANALYSIS INSTRUMENT

This instrument is to be used in combination with the codebook to analyze videos.

Check all that apply.

VIDEO NUMBER _____

Video Setting

1. Location: Where was the video filmed?

- Inside
 - Bedroom
 - Living room
 - Non-specific domestic interior
 - Hotel room
 - Restaurant
 - Store (among products, in aisles, etc.)
 - Store dressing room
 - In a car
 - Other _____
- Outside
 - Street
 - Lawn
 - Hotel pool
 - Hotel balcony
 - Set in/among nature (trees, shrubs, flowers, a yard)
 - Beach
 - On a bridge
 - Outside of a house
 - Near/on a sidewalk
 - In front of a storefront
 - Shopping with an outdoor vendor
 - Other _____

2. Number of people in video?

- Only vlogger
- Vlogger is with one other person (who is also on camera).
- One or more people is visible besides the blogger.
- Other _____

3. Closeness of vlogger to other people in video

- Other person/people are in shot(s), but vlogger is separated from them.
- Other person/people are in shot(s), and vlogger is among them.
- Only vlogger is in video.
- Other _____

4. Actions done by vlogger

- Speaking
- Standing, posing
- Smiling
- Walking
- Dancing
- Driving
- Eating
- Putting on/taking off clothes
- Holding up garments
- Other _____

5. Words and music

- The vlogger speaks in the video.
 - Her speaking is done at the time of filming.
 - Speaking is done after filming – it is a voiceover.
- The vlogger does not speak in the video.
- Music has been added to the video.
- There is no music in the video.

6. Any closeups of the body?

- Face closeup
- Head to knee shown
- The bust area
- Head to waist
- Shoulder to derriere
- Midback to derriere
- Other _____

7. Other filming techniques?

- Slow motion/sped-up motion
- Headless shots
- Stills of garments inserted (from website, from the vlogger wearing them)
- Channel intro included (Plays at the beginning of a video; similar to the intro credits on a film or TV show, this includes information about the artist/channel that doesn't change from video to video, like Instagram name, etc. Often has its own special music, captions, and/or fonts.)
- Channel outro included (Plays at the end of a video; similar to the credits on a film or TV show, this includes information about the artist/channel that doesn't change

from video to video, like Instagram name, etc. Often has its own special music, captions, and/or fonts.)

- Words on screen (such as captions or quotations) If yes, go to #8.
- Filmed on iPhone (probably)
- Other _____
- n/a

8. Video word graphics on screen (captions added after filming)

- Show title of video
- Show name of vlogger/channel and contact/social media info
- Show where garments were purchased
- Price paid
- Description of/title of garments discussed (aka “skintight pink leggings” or “green bell sleeve top”)
- Size bought
- Cards with words separate sections of the video
- Caption leads viewer to look at description box below or card to top right for more information
- Other _____
- n/a

9. Is this a sponsored video?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Appearance and Dress

10. What is worn and is visible to the viewer?

- Swimwear, such as bikinis, one-piece bathing suit, or a swimming coverup
- Dress (all lengths, including e.g., maxi dress)
- Skirt (all lengths, including e.g., mini skirt)
- Shirt/blouse/t-shirt/tank top
- Sweater/cardigan
- Pants, trousers, jeans
- Leggings
- Sweatpants
- Shorts
- Jacket/coat
- Sunglasses
- Bodysuit
- Shapewear/corset
- Brassiere/sports bra/bralette
- Panties (lingerie)
- Shoes/sneakers
- Boots/booties

- Hat
- Belt
- Purse/handbag
- Tights
- No panty hose
- Other _____

11. Hair

- Hair appears clean and vlogger has attended to it in some way
 - Up in a bun
 - Other up do
 - Down but “done” (attended to by vlogger, she is coiffed)
- Hair looks like it needs to be washed (either up or down) and/or attended to in some way
 - She apologizes about her hair (for needing to wash it or style it, for example)
- Wearing hair ornaments like bow, headband, scrunchy

12. Makeup

- Vlogger is visibly made up
- Vlogger does not appear to be wearing makeup
 - She apologizes for not wearing makeup

13. Jewelry worn

- earrings
- face/body jewelry
- bracelet(s)
- ring(s)
- necklace(s)
- Other jewelry worn
- No jewelry
- Nail polish worn
- Unsure

14. Appearance of race (most vloggers don't identify their race in a given video)

- White
- Latina/Hispanic
- Black/African American
- Native American
- Asian
- Unable to discern

15. In your opinion, is the vlogger conventionally pretty?

- Yes
- No
- Other
- Unsure

Counts

16. Number of items shown in the video: _____

17. Number of looks shown in the video
(for lookbooks and outfit of the day videos only): _____

18. Number of (item below) shown/worn:

Swimsuits	
Crop tops	
Shorts	
(Other)	

19. Total number of comments (disabled?): _____

20. Number of comments from the YouTuber: _____

21. Number of “hearts” given by YouTuber in comment section: _____

22. Interesting comments of note: _____

Word Usage

(asterisk after a word: include all variants of the stem, e.g., afford, affordable, afforded, etc.)

Advice	
Afford*	
Authentic	
Beaut* (about garments)	
Beaut* (about people)	
Big* (body or garment)	
Body (e.g., your body, my body)	
Bodycon/body con	
Cheap	
Collab*	

Comfort*	
Comfy	
Confident/confidence	
Cozy	
Curve/y	
Cute	
Fat	
Fit*	
Flatter* (ing)	
Flowy / flow	

Free (no cost to buy something)	
Health	
Honest*	
(In)expensive	
Large* (body or garment)	
Long (re a garment or the body)	
Loose*	
Lov* (e) (related to garments)	
Lov* (e) (related to people)	
Lovely (related to garments)	
Oversize(d)	
Plus	
Price	
Quality	
Real (as in authentic)	
Sale	
Send/t	
Sheer	
Short (re a garment or the body)	
Size	
Sizing	
Small* (body or garment)	
Snug	
Soft	
Sponsored	
Stretch*	

Styl*	
Thick	
Tight*	
Trend*	
Value	
(Other here)	

Other

Any additional comments about the video: