

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Clare Conway for the degree of Master of Arts in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies presented on June 9, 2014.

Title: You Better Work: Negotiating Race, Sexuality, Gender, and Neoliberalism in Plus-Size Fashion Blogs

Abstract approved: _____

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Over the past decade, the explosion of social media has secured the Internet as a venue for political discussions of all sorts; as well as a realm of consumption and commodification. One population of women that has utilized social media in this way is the plus-sized fashion (“fatshion”) community on the popular multimedia blogging site Tumblr. Through posting personal photos of ‘outfits of the day’ (OOTDs), participants use Tumblr to address the lack of size representation in the fashion industry as well as to share resources for finding fashionable, plus-sized clothing. This project examines how contributors to fatshion blogs negotiate identities as well as how participation in these blogs both supports and defies a neoliberal economic system that casts participating in fashion as a right, without considering how it contributes to oppression of other groups of women. The project discusses blogs as spaces for combatting the effects of sizeism, for negotiating racist images of women of color in the media, and, to a certain extent, for situating fatness within hegemonic femininity, and it also investigates the extent to which these blogs register or ignore the oppressive effects of the fashion industry in the global South. Some bloggers express an interest in repurposing and thrifting clothing, but their

motivations are less explicit. The blogs provide clear answers to some of these questions and initiate only more questions about others, but regardless, the photos and commentary submitted to the blogs provide ample material for discussion. By attempting to answer these questions, it is possible to obtain a clearer picture of the relationship between systems of oppression and online environments, and how online communities might be used to challenge these systems.

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You Better Work: Negotiating Race, Sexuality, Gender, and Neoliberalism in Plus-Size
Fashion Blogs

by
Clare Conway

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts

Presented June 9, 2014
Commencement June 2014

Master of Arts thesis of Clare Conway presented on June 9, 2014

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Clare Conway, Author

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I want to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Elizabeth Sheehan, my thesis chair, for her unending patience, direction, and enthusiasm, as well as Dr. Bradley Boovy and Dr. Patti Watkins for their support and guidance throughout this process. This project is enormously personal and means a lot to me, and I am incredibly thankful for your support in seeing it through. I would also like to thank Dr. Mehra Shirazi for her guidance and encouragement early on in this project, as well as Dr. Judy Neighbors for her constant support and level-headedness from start to finish.

This project (and graduate school) never would have been possible without the constant love and encouragement from my mother, Jan, and brother, Will. Thank you for supporting me in this adventure, and I love both of you so much. I also would never have had the nerve to this without my father, who passed on to me his passion for learning and the courage to question everything. I've never doubted you would be proud of where I am today because you made sure I knew every single day you were alive.

My thesis would have never gotten off the ground and I would have never survived graduate school without the encouragement, love, late night phone calls, and early morning pep talks from Alice, Brooke, Clarissa, Hannah, and Melissa. Your friendship has always meant the world to me, but I'm especially aware that fact now, at the end of this degree. I lucked out in the friend department, and I can't wait to see where things take us in the next few years. I have no idea where that will be, but I know we'll have fun, and I know we'll be together. I love and admire all of you so, so much.

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INTRODUCTION

Overview of Project

Over the past twenty or so years, the Internet and the explosion of social media web sites have prompted scholars to rework definitions of communication, community, and activism. Wider use of the Internet and a greater reliance on social media has reshaped the ways people communicate, whom they are able to communicate with, and the discussions that are able to take place, although it has also reified existing boundaries and discourses. In this context, social media has become a viable venue for political discussions of all sorts, and, in part because social media is untethered to physical location, individuals using such sites are able to form communities around any number or combination of identities. One specific population of women that has utilized social media to create a community and address issues they face is the plus-sized fashion (“fatshion”) community on the popular multimedia blogging site, Tumblr. Through posting personal photos of ‘outfits of the day’ (OOTDs), participants use their “tumblogs” (Tumblr + blog) to address the lack of size representation in the fashion industry as well as to share resources for finding fashionable, plus-sized clothing. The highly visual and interactive format of Tumblr provides a space in which bloggers engage and negotiate identity categories, including race, gender, and sexuality, as they respond to, recapitulate, and challenge hegemonic discourses of femininity and fashionability.

This project will analyze the use of “fatshion” blogs as a way to challenge the exclusion of fat bodies from dominant fashion discourses in order to understand how such challenges also rely upon and reinforce dominant ideas of femininity and racial identity, as well support and sometimes challenge neoliberal ideas and practices of

subjectivity and consumption. It does so by focusing specifically on five blogs and the photos submitted to them, along with accompanying commentary. Three of these blogs, *Fatshion Kingdom*, *Fuck Yeah Chubby Fashion*, and *Plus Size Fashion*, cater to any individual who identifies as plus size, and the other two feature the fashion of two specific identity groups. *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls* is a fatshion tumblog that only posts photos of plus size black women, and *Fa(t)shion February* features the fashion of women who identify not only as fat, but also as queer and femme. It should be noted, however that *Fa(t)shion February* is different from the other four blogs in its format because, as its title suggests, it is most active during the month of February, when bloggers commit to submitting a photo to the blog every day. The popularity of the blog has grown since its creation in 2011, and is one of the most well-known (in fatshion communities) fatshion tumblogs. It should also be noted that most bloggers that traffic the blogs hail from the United States, Canada, and sometimes the United Kingdom, meaning the images and ideas presented on the blogs cannot be indicative of opinions and tastes from all parts of the globe. By analyzing the formats of and images submitted to these five blogs, this project will articulate how racial, sexual, and gender identity affect the ways bloggers participate in fatshion blogs, as well as offer some critiques of the neoliberal systems that validate participation in the blogs as viable ways to challenge systems of oppression. The four primary questions this research will work to answer are:

- ❧ In what ways do discourses of gender, race, and sexuality intersect and interact on fatshion tumblogs?
- ❧ How do fatshion blogs challenge and reinforce concepts of hegemonic femininity?
- ❧ In what ways do fatshion blogs queer femininity and the male gaze, as well as provide a space for fat, queer, and femme-identified women to challenge cultural norms and create alternative communities?

❧ In what ways do fatshion blogs challenge and reinforce neoliberalism and consumer culture, systems that are historically harmful to women around the world?

The blogs provide clear answers to some of these questions and initiate only more questions from others, but regardless, the photos and commentary submitted to the blogs provide ample material for discussion. By attempting to answer these questions, it is possible to obtain a clearer picture of the relationship between systems of oppression and online environments, and how online communities might also be used to challenge these systems. This project will also address and attempt to remedy some of the scholarly critiques of fashion research, and the complications that emerge from encouraging women to participate in consumption as a means of self-empowerment.

Methodology

In order to answer these questions, this project will be conducting a discourse analysis of the language used in posts on fatshion blogs and how it interacts with the images to create commentary on intersecting identities. In short, discourse analysis can be defined as analyzing the uses of language, and it contains many subfields with different methods of doing this (Hodges, Kuper, and Reeves). Because the content of fatshion blogs is constantly in flux as more posts are added, a qualitative approach to discourse analysis is most effective in this project, and a variety of posts have been selected for analysis based on their relevancy to the concepts being discussed. In addition to discourse analysis, this thesis will also be using an intersectional approach, in keeping with the feminist principles of acknowledging multiple, intersecting identities

(*Black Feminist Thought* 65). The intersecting identities of race, gender, and sexuality all influence how fat women experience their bodies and encounters with sizeism, and this research is committed to recognizing this diversity of experiences.

In the vast field of discourse analysis, its intersections with cultural and media studies are most pertinent to this project. In her work on using photography in ethnographic research, Sarah Pink speaks to the necessity of combining visual imagery with text in cultural studies to provide a more accurate, robust image (129). By analyzing the texts and images that make up a post on a fatshion blog within a theoretical framework, this research attempts to capture the full experience of participating in fatshion blogging. This multi-layered process of visual analysis is expounded upon by Lister and Wells, when they describe the layers of consideration that go into analyzing an image from a discourse analysis and cultural studies perspective. They highlight the importance of situating an image in “the cycle of production, circulation, and consumption through which their meanings are accumulated and transformed” (Lister and Wells 64), and that is the perspective from which this project analyzes the content of fatshion blogs. This project also draws on the field of semiology, in that images were chosen for analysis because they demonstrated a particularly noteworthy intersection of various identities instead of being statistically representative (Rose 73), and because their position within Lister and Wells’ accumulation of meanings seemed particularly promising.

The five blogs chosen for analyses were selected because they appeared to be well trafficked and were still active. Early on in the selection process, one blog was replaced because it had not been updated in two years. Three of the blogs, *Fuck Yeah Chubby*

Fashion, Fatshion Kingdom, and Plus Size Fashion, are general fatshion blogs in that they cater to any type of plus size fashion worn by any person, even though the majority of submitters appear to be female. The other two, *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls* and *Fa(t)shion February* cater to specific identity groups, African American women and queer individuals respectively. While there are certainly hundreds of tumblogs dedicated to queer fashion and the fashion of different racial identities, these two were chosen because they are what “conceptually interesting” and are not meant to be statistically representative of the wider fatshion blogosphere (Rose 73). As well, these blogs were chosen because they provide coherence for a study that seeks to show how fatshion blogs challenge hegemonic discourses, and this is essential for what Gillian Rose has distinguished as key to certain forms of “discourse analysis” (161). For instance, *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls* contains sections on health and wellness tips that were not found on many other fatshion blogs, so this blog was chosen for the perspective it might offer on intersections of race that are rare in mainstream fashion. By understanding how images create difference, it is possible to discern how racial, sexual, and gender identities are intersecting with fat identity within fatshion tumblogs.

Introduction to Tumblr

Tumblr is a multimedia blogging platform that was established in 2007, and it currently plays host to over 108 million blogs, from personal blogs to ones run by major television networks, and even the President of the United States. There are several reasons Tumblr is an ideal place to study fatshion communities. It supports blog posts containing a range of media, including audio files, videos, photos, and links, in addition

to standard text posts, meaning that posts are typically very visual, a format that lends itself well to the sharing of personal fashion photos. In addition to this, Tumblr allows readers to easily submit content to blogs, which makes fatshion blogs fairly simple to maintain and sustain. Tumblr's "reblogging" system also allows users to add commentary to posts when they reblog a post from another blog, and this allows users to engage in a dialogue with each other that is easy to track and contribute to. For instance, as a photo from a fatshion blog is reblogged and shared by Tumblr users, the post often accrues a lengthy discussion, concerning everything from where to find the best bargains for the featured garments to bloggers addressing sizeist comments that inevitably find their way into a post. Combined, these factors and more make Tumblr a hotbed for political discussion, community building, and awareness raising, more so than many other social media sites. This makes it possible not only to analyze the types of photos fatshion bloggers are submitting and posting, but also to observe and make inferences from the discussions that amass around any particular post, ensuring a plethora of rich material for study.

Fatshion blogs as they exist on Tumblr are also particularly interesting to research because of their relative accessibility. Not only does the web site support a wide range of media within its blogging format, all of the site's features and functions are free to all users, with the exceptions of custom domain names (the ability to take "tumblr" out of a blog's URL), and some of the more complicated blog layouts (a variety of layouts are still available to users free of charge). One user can run multiple blogs from a single account, meaning that it is quite simple for a Tumblr user in the fatshion community to run a personal blog, as well as moderate (or co-moderate) a fatshion blog. Likewise,

Tumblr is also very user-friendly when it comes to bloggers submitting posts to blogs that they do not necessarily moderate, as is the case with the fatshion tumblogs featured in this study. Tumblr allows users to completely write a post before submitting it to a blog, meaning the blog moderators have to do little in way of preparation before publishing a post to the blog. Unlike many blogging platforms, the moderators of tumblogs are not burdened with the pressure to constantly be producing original content, which is worth noting since the majority of fatshion tumblogs seem to be run by individuals in their leisure time. This allows many fatshion blogs to survive long enough to gain a following and become established among members of the fatshion blogging community. It is often the case that blogs comprising a Tumblr community like the fatshion community also reblog posts from each other (another feature that makes Tumblr highly interactive), and this allows for widespread discussion in Tumblr communities. This high level of sociability sustained on Tumblr also means that bloggers and blog moderators within any given community typically become familiar with each other, and it is not uncommon for bloggers to collaborate on different projects, contests, or events.

The submission process also allows blog moderators to view posts before publishing them and decide if the submitted post adheres to any submission guidelines that the moderators have set for the blog. For instance, some fatshion blog moderators are adamant about their blog being a space for sharing resources and information about plus size clothing, so any submissions that do not include information about the garments' prices and where they were purchased will not be published on the blog. *Fuck Yeah Chubby Fashion* has an extensive list of “why your submission might not get

published,” on their “Frequently Asked Questions” page, in which the moderators lay out guidelines for submitting photos to the blog (figure 1).

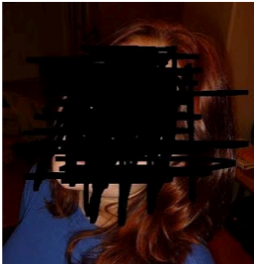
Tuesday, 10 May 2011

Reasons why your submission might not get published.

"Why haven't you published my picture?!"

I get this question or a variation of it at least ten times a week. I feel like I just keep repeating and repeating and repeating! With so many submissions, *there is just no way I can remember what photo/submission was yours*, so since I can't tell you a specific reason why your exact submission was not accepted, here are some reasons your photo might not get published:

- **Not following the rules of submission.** I made those rules for a reason, and I have zero tolerance on this one. If you do not include your size in your submission, **it will automatically get deleted**. If publishing your size on the internet scares you, let me know and I will erase your sizing info before I publish it.



- **If I can't see what you're wearing.** I'm not going to publish your photo. This is a fashion blog, not Myspace. For example, I get a lot of this type of thing (see above). Don't send in this type of photo. While I'm sure your face is lovely, I want to see what you are wearing. (By the way, the photo above was not a submission, it was something I found on Google. I obviously made it so you cannot see her face since I did not have approval to use her likeness.)
- **If there is something offensive in your photo**, whether on the clothing or in the background, it will not get published. Not a lot to explain here.
- **If your photo is blurry or hard to see in some other way**, it will not get published. Again, not a lot to explain.
- **I don't publish lingerie or underwear photos.** Nothing against them, but I want FYCF to remain a neutral area and I want to do *whatever I can* to keep the women who submit from being exploited in any way.
- In keeping with the statement above, I won't post a photo that is just showing off your boobs or your butt with a bit of outfit, too. I get a lot of these.
- **If you submit but do not properly include an image**, it obviously will not get published. If you think a submission didn't go through properly, try it again. I'd rather get two or three of the same submission and delete the extras than to get one that doesn't work.

That's all I can think of at the moment. I apologize if your photo does not make it onto the blog, but it is nothing personal. With as many submissions as I get, I have to maintain some guidelines, and unfortunately not every photo will be approved. I hope you understand.

-Shelby

Figure 1: Submission guidelines for *Fuck Yeah Chubby Fashion*

This being said, most fatshion tumblogs ask submitters to include information about the sizes of the featured clothing and where it can be purchased, but how strictly these qualifications are enforced varies by blog. For instance, *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls* requests that mirror and phones and/or cameras not be visible in any submissions, but the blog still posts photos where bloggers did not follow this request. Fatshion tumblogs often have additional submission specifications concerning the content of the photos, such as refusing to post any photos showing lingerie or nudity or photos where the entire outfit is not visible. Overall, Tumblr is a user-friendly blogging platform that supports a high level of sociability among users, and it has great potential when it comes to the kinds of blogs users are able to create and sustain. Fatshion bloggers are using the site to

create a vibrant community where members can and do engage in discussions concerning race, sexuality, and body politics.

Women's involvement in fashion is hardly an under-researched or un-theorized topic, nor is women's growing involvement in online blogging communities, and these two areas merge in the form of fatshion blogging communities. Tumblr provides a place for fat women to discuss the issues they face when it comes to clothing, and these conversations often turn personal experiences with body image into political discussions about sizeism and body politics. However, when analyzing fatshion tumblogs and the discussions they facilitate, it is important to recognize which populations are able to participate in online culture and how an emphasis on participation in clothing consumption, in spite of its apparently liberatory possibilities, can reinforce certain systems of oppression. While the Internet is often seen as a great equalizer, it is also shaped by and perpetuates systems of oppression. This project will not only explore how fatshion bloggers address sizeism and negotiate other parts of their identity; it will also problematize the systems that cause women to see participation in clothing consumption as a right or as an ideal means for combating sizeism. It will also explore how these same systems encourage a disconnection between the consumption and production of fashion, and how this disconnection allows for the marginalization and oppression of women on the production side of fashion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist Approaches to Fashion and the Body

Women's bodies and their subjugation have been at the center of many feminist debates throughout the different waves of feminism. Whether it is through freedom from sexual assault, reproductive rights, or the negative influence of popular media, the female body has long been a feminist battleground. Because this project is rooted in feminist research, it is necessary to outline how feminist scholars have approached the topics of fashion, body image, and sizeism. The female body and how it is dressed have not always been areas of singular accord for feminists, and understanding these areas of agreement and disagreement is necessary for situating this project within feminist scholarship.

A Feminist Theory of Fashion

One feminist theorist who makes connections between the body, how it is dressed, and what both mean in a social context is Joanne Entwistle. In her book, *The Fashioned Body*, she establishes the body and fashion as subjects worthy of sociological study because "dress is an embodied activity and one that is embedded within social relations" (Entwistle 8). Anthropologists have acknowledged that clothing or other forms of dressing the body exist in all known human cultures (Entwistle 5), and as such, dress is often a key player in maintaining social order in any given society (Entwistle 7). Consequently, bodies and dress have the potential to disrupt social order, and questioning normative ideas about gender is but one way that fashion can facilitate social disruption (Entwistle 7). Entwistle gives the example of female body builders and explains how

“muscles are like clothes,” saying that the presence of muscle on a female body calls into question the types of bodies that U.S. culture considers feminine (6-7). In this same vein, this project works to examine how fatshion blogs operate to challenge social constructions about what constitutes a feminine body.

Entwistle further expands on the role of fashion in maintaining social order and its connections with European and Western society’s conceptions of gender by delving into the historical relationship between women and dress. Throughout European history, dressmaking and fashion have been closely tied to women and femininity in both a literal sense as dressmakers and shop girls and in a figurative sense that portrays women as decorative and superficial (Entwistle 146). This latter, more negative approach to women’s relationship with fashion can be seen as a patriarchal response to the power and renown women were gaining as commercial players in industrializing Europe throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as the effects of Judeo-Christian morality that had been problematizing the female body long before industrialization began (Entwistle 148).

Many scholars have been working towards creating a feminist theory of fashion, and many have speculated why feminists have not tried to do so sooner. In her essay, “Building a Feminist Theory of Fashion,” Ilya Parkins outlines the conundrum of feminist theorists tackling problematic (from a feminist standpoint) topics, such as capitalism, but not doing the same with fashion (501). She states, “that whether one ‘likes’ fashion, as a feminist, is irrelevant to fashion’s potential as a theoretical object that might helpfully intervene in highly significant debates in feminism” (Parkins 501), Parkins, drawing on Karen Barad’s work on agential realism, also explains how feminist scholars might look at clothing and fashion as situated phenomena, influenced by one’s

race, class, sexuality, and any number of identities (502), which is a perspective this research incorporates.

Besides making a case for why fashion is a topic worthy of feminist scholarship, other feminist researchers are examining the ways in which existing feminist fashion research might be lacking or overlooking certain issues. Angela McRobbie highlights how feminist research around fashion typically focuses on women's role as either producers or consumers, but not how the same group of women experiences both sides (75). Historically, feminist fashion studies have been neglectful of the experiences of poor women in fashion consumption, in that feminist fashion studies have focused on working class women only as far as they are concerned with the production of fashion (McRobbie 76), and not how they experience fashion consumption. In particular, as McRobbie points out, cultural feminists focusing on the symbolic value of clothing tend to focus on the experiences of middle and upper class women. McRobbie cites the feminization of poverty and how focusing on the experiences of upper and middle class women means ignoring how the majority of women in any given society are experiencing fashion consumption because in most societies women comprise the majority of the impoverished class (77). McRobbie also explores how other historically marginalized populations experience fashion consumption by explaining how contemporary Asian and black fashion designers often came into their profession by being raised in households where their mothers and grandmothers made money sewing and dressmaking as a way to avoid having to clean white people's houses (82).

McRobbie also critiques how, while acknowledging that cultural critiques of fashion typically focus on how upper and middle class women consumed fashion, these

consumerist studies that privilege the experiences of upper and middle class women also come from a burgeoning neoliberal discourse that views wealthy women's consumption as a means of empowerment and liberation and what focuses on the fear of "sexual freedom and transgressive pleasures" it consequently inspired in wealthy men (77). However, this singular perspective on wealthy women's participation in fashion consumption is "as much a projection of their [men's] fears and fantasies of female sexuality as it is any accurate reflection of what women are doing or thinking about as they walked around department stores" (McRobbie 77), meaning that more research needs to be done into women's motives as participants in fashion consumption, and not just what symbolic meanings can be inferred from their actions. McRobbie is calling for a more nuanced feminist analysis of fashion that explores women's fashion consumption as more than just a "site of false consciousness" (75), and one that more thoroughly examines how populations of marginalized women have participated in and been affected by fashion as "an almost wholly feminized industry" (84). This project aims to examine both the symbolic value of fat women's participation in plus size fashion blogs and their potential personal motives for participation. In addition, this project will attempt to bring the experiences of marginalized women who are often relegated solely to discussion of their roles in clothing production into the discussion of fat women's participation in fashion consumption.

Body Image, "Fat," and Feminism

In *Fat is a Feminist Issue: The Anti-Diet Guide to Permanent Weight Loss* (1978)

Susie Orbach offers one of the first feminist analyses of fat and women's body image, but

she still holds thinness as a woman's ultimate goal and sign of healthiness. Orbach argues that compulsive overeating and the subsequent weight gain are a woman's response to her inferior position within the patriarchy, and women must come to view weight loss as positively instead of as a punishment. According to Orbach, fat can symbolize any combination of three things: "a way to avoid being marketed or seen as the ideal woman" (9), "a way of saying 'no' to powerlessness and self-denial" (21), and as an expression of "the tension in the mother-daughter relationship" (21). Instead of using fat as way to fight or perpetuate patriarchy (fat, in a mother-daughter relationship, can be a way teaching one's daughter femininity), women must embrace it as something healthful and not to view food as the enemy. While Orbach's approach is similar to that of fat studies in their recognition of patriarchy as a cause for women's body image issues, Orbach still holds thinness as a woman's ultimate goal, instead of accepting all body types.

Just as feminist scholars have been hesitant to develop a theory of fashion, so have they been hesitant in addressing fat and sizeism. In her article, "Fat is a Feminist Issue, but it is Complicated," Patricia Roehling outlines a few possible reasons why feminist scholars have waited so long, given the burgeoning area of fat studies, to address the gendered nature of the bias faced by fat women. Sizeism and the lack of compassion shown towards fat people can often be attributed to the way fatness is viewed as a controllable condition. This allows fat people to be blamed for their situation, instead of viewing sizeism as systemic bias, such as racism and sexism (Roehling 596). Another possible reason feminists have been hesitant to address the struggles of fat women is that sizeism can be viewed as a wider social issue and not one that is exclusively situated in gender, as men are often the targets of sizeism as well (Roehling 596). However, many

feminist scholars also point out that the discrimination faced by fat women is often more severe than that experienced by fat men, suggesting that sizeism is a gendered phenomenon (Fikkan and Rothblum). For instance, women's clothing and the fashion industry is one area where sizeism is heavily targeted towards women. In women's clothing, the definition of what it means to be "plus size" is a complicated one because it differs based on brand, store, and whether one is referring to clothing or the models wearing it. For a model to be plus size, she need only be over a U.S. women's size 4, but the plus size section of most clothing retailers begins with a size 12 (Lovett). The futility of this system is only heightened when considering that the "average American woman" is a size 14 (Lovett). This project aligns itself with Fikkan and Rothblum by focusing specifically on how women and female identified individuals experience and combat sizeism on fat fashion blogs, and how sizeism intersects with other marginalized identities.

Fat Studies

Fat Studies is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that does not immediately problematize fat bodies but instead looks at them as culturally situated phenomena. The social sciences historically have examined fat in a way that consistently paints it as abnormal and concerning, but never as a neutral phenomena accompanied by varying discourses and realities in different societies. The budding field of fat studies has claimed this endeavor as its own and works to examine, in part, how societies react to the existence of fat and how fat individuals experience their surroundings because of society's reactions. Scholar Marilyn Wann outlines this mission for the field of fat studies in the introduction to *The Fat Studies Reader*, which brings together a variety of research

from across disciplines, from public health studies on the “obesity epidemic” to pop culture research on portrayals of fat characters.

In 2012, the first academic journal devoted completely to fat studies, *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*, made its debut, and charged itself with the task of critically examining “theory, research, practices, and programs related to body weight and appearance” and “exploring the intersection of gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, age, ability, and socioeconomic status” (“Aims and Scope”). The journal also claims a political stance towards fat and body image, and it explores fat as a system of oppression and seeks to find ways to liberate fat people from the oppression they experience across societies (“Aims and Scope”). By taking an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates scholarship from psychology, sociology, legal issues, the pharmaceutical industry, and more, *Fat Studies* “regards weight, like height, as a human characteristic that varies widely across any population” (“Aims and Scope”). However, as a field, fat studies has also been critiqued for being very U.S.-centric, even though, as fat activist and contributor to *The Fat Studies Reader*, Charlotte Cooper, says, “U.S. cultural dominance in the field is understandable” (Cooper 327). According to Cooper, fatness is veritable stereotype that is held by America around the world (327), but this does not justify the burgeoning field’s continuance of a U.S.-centered focus. This research, while aligning itself with the mission of fat studies also carries the limits of the field that Cooper outlines, in that it focuses primarily on individuals in the U.S. and addresses ideas about fatness that mostly come out of the U.S.

Online Fat Activism

Extensive research has been done on online communities and online activism, and fat activists maintain a very active presence in online communities. In her 2013 article, Catherine Connell provides a case study of *Fa(t)shion February*, a popular tumblog (Tumblr + blog) and one that was analyzed for this project that features the fashion of fat, femme-identified queer women throughout the month of February. In her discussion of the blog, Connell frames *Fa(t)shion February* as a counterdiscourse to mainstream fashion (212), and she aims to show how fashion, while being a site for reinforcing privilege, can also be a site of political resistance. Connell's intent is not to problematize the neoliberal discourse of consumption as liberation, but she does mention how some contributors to *Fa(t)shion February* were critical of participating in capitalism and instead promoted "upcycling" and repurposing clothing, as opposed to buying designer brands (214-215). Connell is adamant in her opinion that fashion too often goes unexamined in how its "meanings are mediated by bodies" (209), and that fashion often works to "produce[s] unique pleasures – and pains – with respect to gender, race, class, and sexual identities" (210). Instead of falling in line with traditional discourses that portray fashion as way to modify and normalize female bodies, according to Connell, plus size fashion blogs are challenging notions of authorship in the fashion world (who gets to create and wear fashion?) and privileging the bodies, experiences, and opinions of identity groups that are typically excluded from mainstream U.S. fashion, such as people of color, disabled people, as well as people who identify as fat (Connell 211). This intention of disrupting mainstream discourses of fashion "uniquely positions *Fa(t)shion February* [and other fatshion blogs] as a site of opposition and resistance" (Connell 211).

Lauren Downing Peters employs an approach similar to Connell's in her article, "Queering the Hourglass," in which she also discusses *Fa(t)shion February* and *Fuck Yeah VBO* (visible belly outline), which are both initiatives of the online fat activist community, Queer Fat Femmes (1-2). She analyzes these fatshion blogs using Joanne Entwistle's theory of dress as situated bodily practice and claims that fatshion blogs are offering a different discourse of fat bodies than those in mainstream fashion. Fat bodies are typically treated as problematic, and fat women are prescribed control-top underwear and "flattering" clothing. Therefore, fat women who dress to look thinner are indicative of sizeism in mainstream fashion, and fat women who dress to accentuate their size are not (Peters 3), or they at least stand in opposition to it. According to Peters, this act of dressing to accentuate the fat body is known within the fatshion community as "radical vanity" (1) because it constructs itself in direct opposition to style guides and traditions within fashion that tell fat women how to hide, cinch, and camouflage their fatness, or, in short, how to properly dress a fat body. This new wave of fat activists – ones that focus most of their resources on plus size fashion – have received criticism from the old guard of fat activists, who view the "current preoccupation with fashion as not sufficiently radical, overly commercialized and generally superficial" (Peters 2). Indeed the fat activist movement has its roots in the feminist movement, and critiques of engagement in fashion as "moral problem that 'reproduced sexist ideas and images of women and femininity'" (Wilson in Peters 2) remain influential. The feminist movement, and the fat activism movement by extension, have historically problematized clothing, or activism that relies on one's ability to purchase it, as a means for liberation. However, Peters argues that recent surges in the online fat activist community are engaging in queer

theoretical discourses and using the image-driven platform of fashion blogging as a means for “encouraging a collective celebration of fat bodies and the privileging of individual tastes over socially mandated plus-size dress codes” (Peters 5). It has also been found that participation in online fat acceptance communities can improve individual’s perceived mental and physical well-being (Dickins et al. 1685), and by creating a more “balanced, positive, and intuitive relationship with food” (Dickins et al. 1685), many individuals were able to resolve eating disorders brought on by dieting. By participating in online fat positive communities, fat individuals are able to deconstruct the stigmas of fatness that exist in the offline world and improve their overall health and well-being, as opposed to simply working towards the goal of thinness at all costs. However, fat positive communities are not the only resources fat individuals are encountering when searching the Internet for help and support. Fat individuals are just as likely to turn to fad dieting and other harmful practices as a result of Internet consultation (Lewis et al.), and the awareness being raised by the fat acceptance community, including fatshion blogs, plays an important role in providing resources that focus on health and well-being.

This project will add to this body of research by further analyzing how fatshion blogs both reinforce sexist ideas of beauty and femininity and how they serve as a site of resistance against fashion discourses that insist on disguising and hiding fatness. This project will also critique this dichotomy (is fatshion successful feminist and fat activism or not?) by suggesting that it ignores how participation in fatshion communities is complicated by racial identity and how fatshion blogs both reinforce and break down the neoliberal barriers between fashion production and consumption.

Intersectional Approaches to Fashion and the Body

Fashion blogs are not only a useful venue in combatting sizeism but also for showing how sizeism intersects with other systems of oppression and identity, including race, gender, and sexuality. Many fatshion blogs specifically feature the fashion of fat women of color and queer fat women. As a whole, the fatshion blogging community also seems very intentional about including individuals of all races, sexualities, and gender presentations. Yet, as this study indicates, this discourse of inclusion is undercut by the underrepresentation of women of color on many fatshion blogs. This orientation underscores the need to reflect on how scholars have studied the cultural discourses surrounding the bodies and fashions of people with marginalized identities (besides that of being fat).

The Racialized Body and Fashion

Women's body image as it varies by race has been well documented, from how the mainstream media portrays women of different skin colors to how beauty is defined within a specific race. Fikkan and Rothblum give an overview of the research done on these issues and more in their article "Is Fat a Feminist Issue?" Several studies have shown that fat women of color are more likely to face discrimination based on body size than fat white women (Fikkan and Rothblum), suggesting that these intersecting identities of being fat and being a woman of color combine to make the discrimination faced by these women more extreme. While these studies are indicative of a mainstream leniency towards fat white women, studies have also shown that African Americans and Latinas

are more accepting of fat women, and women of color are less likely to report having a “weight problem” than white women (Fikkan and Rothblum). People of color also are less likely to associate fatness with negative personality traits. However, the authors complicate these findings by reminding readers that sizeism faced by women of color might be overshadowed by other systems of oppression, mainly racism (Fikkan and Rothblum). Many of the arenas in which white women face discrimination, such as high-paying jobs, are ones that have historically been shut off to women of color (Fikkan and Rothblum). This apparent lack of size discrimination could also be due to the fact that being large in size supports racist stereotypes of black women being strong, independent, and nurturing (Fikkan and Rothblum).

It is also necessary to consider how race affects women of color’s ability to participate in various aspects of fashion. Minh-Ha Pham explains how systems of oppression, particularly racism, can be replicated and subverted in online environments like fashion blogs through the example of Asian-American and Asian-British designers and bloggers (14). Through fashion blogging, these designers challenge racist perceptions of Asians as “technical laborers rather than cultural innovators” (Pham 15) and force the fashion industry to wrestle with ideas of authorship, or which groups of people are considered credible trend-setters (Pham 2). In addition to negotiating race and one’s ability to be a fashion-maker, it has also been documented how race affects women of color’s experience with wearing certain fashions. In her discussion of the SlutWalk protests, in which mostly young white women staged public demonstrations clad in lingerie to speak out against sexual assault, Kathy Miriam provides significant insight into how such demonstrations were basically inaccessible and counterproductive for

women of color. Because American culture sexualizes women of color differently than white women, women of color “have been historically configured and concretely exploited as always already slut and thus unrapeable” (Miriam 264). In light of such history, one must consider the racialized politics of women of colors’s participation in an industry as historically misogynistic as fashion.

Intersectional Approaches to Body Image

Given the virtual inseparability of body image from cultural constructions of sexual desirability, it is hardly surprising that research has shown that one’s sexual orientation is often directly related to whether or not a person has positive or negative body image. In a 2013 study, Lisa Alvy reported that lesbian women reported less body dissatisfaction than heterosexual women, and lesbian women reported having a larger ideal body size (Alvy 525). This is not to say, however, that lesbian women do not experience body dissatisfaction, but that perhaps they experience different forms for different reasons. While lesbian women are generally less concerned about body weight than heterosexual women, they do experience levels of self-policing of appearance comparable to those of heterosexual women, and it has been theorized that this is due to internalized homophobia and controlling one’s perceived sexuality (Haines et al.). Positive correlations have also been found between lesbian women’s involvement in lesbian and feminist communities and positive self-image (Alvy 531). The comparative body image of gay men to straight men has also been researched, and studies indicate that gay men experience higher levels of body dissatisfaction than straight men (Tiggemann et al.). When placed beside studies comparing the body satisfaction of lesbian and

heterosexual women, this body of research suggests that dressing for the male gaze is a large component in body dissatisfaction across gender and sexual orientation. As far as fashion blogging is concerned, this research suggests, then, that lesbian and queer women's reasons for participating in plus-size fashion blogging might be distinctively different from those of heterosexual women. In her research on queer femme identity, Karen Walker differentiates between "queer femininity and femininity of the oppressed" (798), and this research explores the ways femme identity is politicized in opposition to hegemonic femininity within the fatshion blogs. While this is not an ethnographic study and fatshion bloggers were not interviewed about their reasons for participating on the blogs, it is able to offer some insight about how queer and femme identities are represented and discussed on the fatshion tumblogs.

Queer Visibility and the Homospectatorial Look

Because fashion photography, even at the amateur level, is so often charged with the male gaze and heterosexual desire, it is crucial in a feminist analysis to explore how this set-up – female subject being viewed and desirous of being viewed by the heterosexual male viewer – might play out differently when the viewer is female and the possibility for homosexual desire is introduced into the equation. In her work on "the homospectatorial look," Diana Fuss, drawing heavily from psychoanalytic and other cognitive theories, explains the paradox created by fashion photography when it asks women to view and identify with hypersexualized images of other women but remain within the confines of heterosexual identity. Fashion photography is one of the only venues in popular culture where women are encouraged to be the viewers of other women

(Fuss 713). Fuss connects this role of woman-as-viewer to latent homosexual desire by using Julia Kristeva's notion of the "homosexual maternal facet," which, in short, places lesbian desire as the result of a daughter's desire to reestablish a bond with her mother (Fuss 722). In spite of this, fashion photographs of women still serve to reinforce heterosexuality by "at once disavowing and perpetually calling attention to its abject, interiorized, and ghostly other, homosexuality" (Fuss 732). The homospectatorial look is very enlightening when analyzing plus size fashion blogs because not only are women being asked to view images of other women, but they do so in a manner that is not always hypersexualized, and Fa(t)shion February, the blog specifically for queer, femme identified fat women, openly acknowledges the potential for sexual desire between the female subjects and female viewers.

The homospectatorial gaze is even more insightful when placed alongside research on femme identity within lesbian culture. In her article, "The Future of Femme: Notes on Femininity, Aging, and Gender Theory," Lisa Walker addresses the assumption in many feminist circles that women who identify as lesbian are "inoculate[d] against beauty norms" (802), and she describes the struggles she has faced with as a femme-identified queer woman. She posits that because she and other femme women are attracted to other women and not men, it is assumed that heteronormative beauty standards for women should not pose any significant threat to queer women (Walker 802). Walker supports her contestation of this assumption by explaining the misogyny shown to femmes from butch-identified women in lesbian communities (804), and other feminist scholars, such as Anika Stafford, support these claims. Both writers agree that femme identity is often overlooked and under theorized by feminist and lesbian scholars,

and it is often written off as antifeminist; a woman cannot embrace traditional trappings of hegemonic femininity, tools of the patriarchy, and still hold herself to feminist principles (Walker 805, Stafford 87). This research aims to contribute to femme theory, and by analyzing how queer femme identity is carried out on plus size fashion blogs, show how femininity by choice and not compulsion can be just as revolutionary as the rejection of gender roles (Walker 807).

The Complication of Visibility, Representing Femininity, and Fatshion Blogs

This research posits that one of the main goals of fatshion blogs is to claim visibility and femininity for fat female-identified bodies. Fat bodies are essentially invisible in mainstream fashion media, and participation in fashion and its subsequent visibility are possible ways that fatshion blogs reject this invisibility. In order to articulate how fatshion blogs purportedly accomplish this, it is necessary to define visibility, its relationship to femininity, and how both are relevant to the analysis of fatshion blogs.

Conceptualizing Visibility

In the context of this research, visibility is given to mean the representation of any identity category in the mainstream media and popular culture, and sexual orientation is one identity category whose visibility or lack thereof has received a lot of attention from media scholars. In her 1994 work, "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture," Rosemary Hennessy, while acknowledging the positive potential of increased visibility, outlines how increased visibility often goes hand-in-hand with commodification (32). Queer

identities are often deployed in the mainstream media to attract viewers and increase profits, rather than reflect any current state of affairs for LGBTQ populations (Hennessy 32). This increased visibility and subsequent commodification of queer identity also depends on the audience's ability to identify with a subjective portrayal of certain types of queer identities, which are typically white, middle class, and homonormative (Hennessy 33).

Erin Rand corroborates Hennessy's assertions in a discussion of visibility through a case study of the activist group Lesbian Avengers and their relationship with the cultural phenomena "lesbian chic." She characterizes lesbian chic as a phenomenon which "produced images of lesbianism that were fashionable and marketable but ultimately insubstantial and depoliticized," and portrayed lesbians as women who are "sexy and desirable" but could ultimately be "domesticated and heterosexualized" (Rand 122). The Lesbian Avengers utilized this cultural phenomenon to increase lesbian visibility in many demonstrations, but, as Rand explains, engaging with this commodified version of lesbianism is a double-edged sword (122). Lesbian chic did score lesbians unprecedented visibility in 90s popular media, but this focus on white, middle-class, heterosexualized lesbians not only removed intersections of race, class, and gender representation from LGBTQ activism, but turned popular focus from more pressing LGBTQ issues, such as the spread of HIV/AIDS and institutionalized discrimination (Rand 125-126). Dana Heller further complicates these issues of visibility by explaining how an increase in the number of queer television characters does not necessarily make for more "queer shows" or a furtherance of LGBTQ activist agendas (666). She explains how popular television shows, such as Showtime's *The L Word* and ABC's *Modern*

Family, both which are known for featuring queer characters, promote regressive and homonormative ideas about gays and lesbians, and how often the most queer-friendly shows are ones that center on heterosexual narratives, like ABC's *Desperate Housewives* (Heller 668-669). It is helpful to keep this example in mind when analyzing the content of fatshion tumblogs; an increase in visibility is not always positively correlated to a furtherance of progressive agendas. This research will examine how fatshion tumblogs created specifically for queer femme women further the interests of LGBTQ activists and in what ways they serve to further commodify queer culture.

Conceptualizing Femininity

In addition to problematizing visibility, it is also necessary to understand the connections between visibility and ideas about femininity when analyzing fatshion blogs. In her article "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony," Mimi Schippers uses R.W. Connell's conceptions of multiple masculinities and hegemonic masculinity to construct a theory of multiple femininities. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as a configuration of gender practices that guarantees the dominance of men and the subordination of women, and he claims that there is no hegemonic femininity, only "emphasized femininity" that supports the existing patriarchy (Schippers 87). Schippers works to stretch this theoretical framework to define both a hegemonic femininity (gender practices considered feminine that support male dominance and female subordination) and marginalized femininities (gender practices considered feminine that do not support patriarchy) (86). She proposes, however, that marginalized, or subordinate, femininities instead be called "pariah femininities" because

the exhibited traits, such as sexual aggressiveness or outspokenness, are not necessarily inferior, but contaminate the difference between masculine and feminine when exhibited by women (Schippers 95). Conclusively, there can be no subordinate masculinities, but only hegemonic femininity exhibited in men (Schippers 96). However, before explaining how women's participation in fatshion blogs exemplifies both hegemonic and subordinate femininities, it is first necessary to articulate how visibility can be a trait of both hegemonic femininity (supports patriarchy) and subordinate femininity (does not support, but can subvert patriarchy).

Hegemonic Femininity and the Fatshionista as a Pariah Femininity

In her groundbreaking work on feminist film theory, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey introduces the concept of the "male gaze," which situates men as the perpetual viewers of media and women as the perpetual objects to be viewed. Mulvey argues that, because most popular media is controlled and created by men, most popular media will force the audience, regardless of sex, gender, or sexual orientation, to identify with heterosexual male desires (138), meaning women also come to view themselves as objects to be viewed. While Mulvey only takes her discussion of the male gaze as far as film, the concept of man as viewer and woman as object to be viewed has been applied to countless other types of media and areas of popular culture, and the fashion industries promotion of women as decorative certainly supports this idea. It is therefore possible to conceive how Mulvey's male gaze situates visibility as a part of Schipper's hegemonic femininity and how fatshion blogs support visibility as a part of hegemonic femininity by portraying fat women as objects to be viewed and as a kind of

pariah femininity by challenging which kinds of female bodies are available to be viewed. Analysis of the fatshion tumblogs supports this idea; by looking at the content of the photos and the commentary from bloggers that accompanies them, it is possible see how fatshion bloggers are both trying to place themselves within hegemonic femininity and challenge it.

Just as Rand describes the complications of achieving visibility through the lesbian chic phenomenon, fatshion blogs walk the line between reinforcing and subverting the male gaze through women's participation in fashion. Plus-size fashion blogs play into the hegemonic feminine ideal of putting female bodies on display, but at the same time, they also subvert hegemonic femininity by altering the types of female bodies being presented, and by altering the audience to which female bodies are presented, whether it is to queer women or other women in general. In addition to this, just as visibility depends on subjective assumptions about the audience (Hennessy 33), fatshion blogs also thrive on classist and even racist assumptions made about their audience. Fatshion blogs assume readers have the disposable income and time necessary to participate in both the consumption of fashion and online communities. Fatshion blogs also assume women to be purely consumers of fashion and do very little to acknowledge the role of women in the global South as (exploited) producers of fashion. In summation, plus-size fashion blogs arguably assume the following about their audience:

- ☞ The audience has or desires to have the disposable income necessary to purchase plus-size clothing.
- ☞ The audience has the leisure time or desires the leisure time necessary to participate in blogging and for assembling outfits.
- ☞ The audience primarily identifies as female.
- ☞ The audience identifies as consumers of fashion or desires to consume fashion and does not identify as producers of fashion.

Problematizing Neoliberalism

While fat women may experience participating in fatfashion blogging as liberatory in certain ways, it is necessary to consider how the blogs are also encouraging women to participate in the often-exploitative practice of consumption by urging them to buy more clothing. In order to better understand this, it is essential to place clothing consumption in the wider, neoliberal global economy. Neoliberalism is defined by scholar David Harvey as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (3). In short, neoliberalism assumes that what is best for the economy is best for the individual, and this can be achieved with little to no interference from the state (Steger and Roy 10). Under these definitions, consumption is viewed as a means of exerting power and in the best interest of the individual and society. This neoliberal concept, consumption as power, is one that Julie Guthman calls the “leitmotif of the current era” (187), and the blogosphere in which this particular example of fashion consumption occurs allows bloggers to distance themselves from the repercussions of their participation in the neoliberal system, whether it is purchasing clothing made in sweatshops or contributing to an industry that has historically commodified women’s bodies. In scholarly endeavors, women in the global North are largely examined as either consumers or producers within a given economic system, especially when it comes to fashion (McRobbie 78), but little attention is paid to how singular groups of women experience both fashion and consumption. Moreover, scholarly discussion around fashion typically only addresses women of the global South as producers of fashion, and

there is “no suggestion that the women and child laborers of these exploitative systems are or can also be participants at some level in consumption” (McRobbie 83). This research attempts to bridge this scholarly divide between women’s clothing production and clothing consumption by analyzing how fatshion blogs both deepen this divide between production and consumption, as well as how some fatshionistas have responded to sizeism in the fashion industry by taking a more active role in the production of their clothing.

For instance, the clothing retailer, Old Navy, is one of the more well-known, moderately priced stores in the United States that carries a selection of plus-size clothing (many styles of pants that the store carries run up to a size 22). However, Old Navy and other retailers under Gap Inc., such as Gap and Banana Republic, along with numerous other companies, recently came under fire in a class action lawsuit that accused the defendants of several atrocities in a factory on Saipan, an incorporated U.S. territory 120 miles north of Guam, including refusing to pay workers for overtime, forcing women to have abortions to keep their jobs, and unsafe working conditions (Strasburg). This particular factory depends on the cheap labor of migrant workers, mainly young, unmarried women from China who have been promised employment in the United States (Strasburg). This modus operandi is not uncommon, and a global market of unregulated trade allows it to flourish. In the neoliberal system, however, companies like Gap, Inc. are hailed as enterprising and modern (McRobbie 76). On an individual level, this same system also frees the women who consume clothing made under these conditions from any type of accountability or sense of sociopolitical responsibility. Because of the neoliberal focus on personal advancement over a common good (Steger and Roy 10),

there is little in the United States consumer culture that calls for women (or any consumer) to consider their clothing's origins; so long as the feeling of personal happiness and liberation is achieved, then little else should be considered. By recentring the focus on women not located in the United States, it is possible to understand how the fashion industry, while seen as a liberatory goal for fat women in the United States, means quite the opposite for women in the global South.

In her article, "Bridging the Gap: Feminism, Fashion, and Consumption," Angela McRobbie outlines how fashion is a field where, "perspectives on production and consumption are rarely brought together." In her book, *The Beautiful Generation*, Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu provides an example of this bridge between production and consumption by showing how younger generations of Asian-American fashion designers have left the sweatshops where their mothers and grandmothers toiled to become some of the most prominent names in fashion design and retail (10). As McRobbie and Tu show, the discussion surrounding women, fashion, and consumption is too often one-dimensional, and this research hopes to avoid that by considering how fatshion blogs both support and subvert the separation of production from consumption.

By studying the ins and outs of fatshion blogs, it is possible to glimpse a microcosm of wider society and come to a better understanding of how technology and culture operate and influence each other in a rapidly globalizing society. Technology, in this case social media, allows for the rapid, widespread dissemination of culture (like fatshion), but it also makes people very susceptible to tunnel vision. With these technologies, people are able to cocoon themselves in online communities of people who think the same as they do, and if someone voices divergent opinion, all it takes to silence

it is closing a browser tab. Pair this with the neoliberal idea of consumption as liberation and the third wave feminist focus on personal empowerment (as opposed to political consciousness), and fatshion bloggers are able to post their “outfit of the day” (OOTD) with little to no thought as to why they find purchasing clothes so empowering or the women who had to be exploited to get that OOTD on the rack to begin with.

ANALYSIS

Representations of Race and Fatshion Blogs

In spite of disclaimers welcoming women of all racial and sexual identities to submit to the fatshion blogs, women of color appear to be significantly underrepresented on the four blogs that are not dedicated specifically to African American women. For instance, *Fa(t)shion February*, the blog dedicated to fat, queer women, features only a small number (around 3) posts featuring women of color within the first 6 pages (approximately 10 posts per page, covering a date range of approximately a month). That said, users rarely self-identify according to race on blogs that are not dedicated to those of a particular racial group, so it is impossible to determine on a case-by-case basis how users understand their own racial position. Nevertheless, this underrepresentation of women of color is striking. Moreover, this absence is not aligned with certain styles of clothing, as there seems to be no discernible difference in the types or styles of clothing or photos submitted by white women and women of color; all five blogs feature a variety of personal styles and aesthetics, though there is an emphasis on markedly feminine fashions. If it is not an obvious matter of style preference that keeps women of color

from submitting to these for blogs, then what might cause women of color to self-segregate into separate fatshion blogs?

It is well-documented that systems of racial oppression are replicated in online environments, and that the Internet is not the great equalizer many claim it to be (Kurubacak, Pham 2, Steinfeldt et al.). While scholarship on the social effects of the Internet can be divided into two phases, the first of which views the Internet as a “vector for progressive change” and the current phase that views the internet as a reflection for the current racist, sexist, and classist state of affairs (Nakamura xii), Lisa Nakamura articulates in her extensive research on race and the Internet that before settling such debates it is more pertinent to “first narrow the focus a bit and examine the specific means by which identities are deployed in cyberspace” (xiii). In her article, “Blog Ambition: Fashion, Feelings, and the Political Economy of the Digitally Raced Body,” Minh-Ha Pham draws on Nakamura’s work and explains how the Internet is “fundamentally antidemocratic,” (Pham 2) in that which data is accessible through web searches is determined by how much money an individual is willing to invest in search engine optimization services. This makes it difficult for marginalized groups without strong financial resources to create thriving, well-trafficked online communities. The self-segregation of African American women into separate blogs seems to support this idea of racial identity being deployed in online environments, and this project will attempt to analyze how existing systems of racial oppression structure African American women’s engagement with fatshion blogs.

While Pham is not focused on fatshion blogs, her work explores how Asian American and British Asian designers are using fashion blogs to “create new subject

formations, reveal hidden histories, and reconstitute public culture” (Pham 2-3). By bringing this history to the forefront and focusing on issues of racism and racial representation in popular fashion, Pham highlights a long past of fashion participation that women of color have not had access to in mainstream, U.S. discourses of fashion. In fatshion tumblogs, women of color are making a case not just for the admission of fat women into mainstream fashion, but also case for women of color of any size. They accomplish this by the way the blog is laid out, the stipulations for submitting photos put in place by the blog moderators, and the poses and outfits that bloggers choose for their photo submissions. This project offers a new facet of analysis for Nakamura and Pham’s ideas about how race is portrayed and negotiated in online environments, especially because Tumblr is so highly visual and provides ample means for controlling what image is put forth for public viewing.

Given these observations about race as it is represented on these five blogs, a few distinct questions emerge:

- Why are so few women of color featured on plus-size fashion blogs not specifically dedicated to a racial identity?
- What can be learned from looking at some of the places online where women of color are participating in plus size fashion?

To answer these questions, there are several factors that must be taken into account. It is important to recognize and be critical of how racism has affected the way Western society views black women’s bodies and their sexuality. It is also helpful to look at how these ideas about black women’s bodies mean that black women’s interactions with fashion often involve negotiating a politics of respectability, as well as a hegemonic association between fashionability and white femininity.

A Politics of Respectability: Responding to “Controlling Images”

In order to better understand the racial dynamics of fatshion blogs, it is helpful to look at the racial discourses that might shape women of color’s participation in the blogs. One very telling part of each of the five blogs analyzed is the instructions for submissions that the blog moderators post for readers. *Fuck Yeah Chubby Fashion* requests that readers not submit lingerie photos or photos that focus on a specific body part, such as the bust or face, citing a desire to “avoid exploitation” as the grounds for this request. *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls*, is the only blog of the five, however, to ask that photos not contain any photo collages, photos from Instagram, or any photos where a cell phone or mirror is visible. Even though the moderators do not closely follow these stipulations (many submissions have mirrors and cell phones visible), the fact that the blog moderators make this request is worth noting. The other four blogs that were analyzed ask very little of readers in the way of the professionalism of photos, presumably because there is an understanding that the majority of readers do not have the time, resources, or even the inclination to stage the most modest of photo shoots. Assuming, then, that the majority of fatshion bloggers on Tumblr are subject to similar limitations (not enough time to recruit a friend to take the photos, access to a quality digital camera that is not on a cell phone), why might the moderators of *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls* decide to make these requests of no visible cell phones and mirrors to their readers, when these tools are typically what make these spontaneous images possible? To begin answering this question, it is helpful to consider the cultural discourse surrounding black women’s bodies and sexuality and the history of so-called “respectability politics.”

Before making connections between the stipulations placed by the moderators of *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls* and the history of respectability politics, it is essential to analyze the racist discourses surrounding black women's bodies and sexuality in U.S. culture because these are presumably influencing the ways black women in the U.S. participate in fatshion blogs. In her landmark text, *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins articulates several "controlling images" that exist in the American discourse of black women's bodies, such as the mammy, the matriarch, and the welfare mother (69), but possibly the image most relevant to this analysis is that of the jezebel, or the "sexually aggressive black woman" (81). Central to this jezebel image is the supposed sexual deviance and aggressiveness of black women. This racist assumption serves to not only bolster the supposed moral superiority of white women, but has been and is used to validate and even encourage the exploitation of black women's bodies (*Black Feminist Thought* 132). This discourse that surrounds the bodies and sexualities of black women has its roots in slavery, when black women were literally bought and sold based on their ability to work and bear children, or produce more slaves (*Black Feminist Thought* 82). This idea has been coated in extrapolations about black women's sexuality and white women's moral superiority (read: chastity until marriage to a white man). Collins explains how this idea is constructed around white men's desire to control black women's bodies, and that the result is black women perpetually being considered "bad girls," in spite of any evidence to the contrary (*Black Feminist Thought* 134).

As the social climate surrounding race in the United States changed over the decades, from the abolishment of slavery to coining of the term "welfare queen" in the 1980s, black women have been charged with the task of combatting racist images, like the

jezebel, as a means of advancing and surviving in an oppressive society (*Black Feminist Thought* 45). The image of the jezebel, the sexually deviant and aggressive black woman, is still a controlling image that is alive and well in U.S. popular culture today, and fatshion tumblogs are but one arena where black women are grappling with and challenging this image. The fact that a simple Internet search of “big beautiful black girls” brings up more links to pornography and sexual fetish sites than it does fashion and lifestyle blogs is a testament to the pervasiveness and economic power of the jezebel image in U.S. culture. It is in the shadow of sexual objectification that the moderators and readers of *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls* endeavor to increase the visibility of plus size black women in the fashion industry. *BBBG*, which is exclusively run by and for black women, creates a space that privileges bodies that are excluded from mainstream fashion not just because of their size, but an industry that is situated in a wider history that exploits and hypersexualizes black women’s bodies.

Big, Beautiful, Black Girls is dominated by images of black women in clothing fit for wide array of occasions, from professional outfits to eveningwear, and most of the women stare directly into the camera in powerful stances, such as hands placed on hips, shoulders and hips squared, and more. This is not to say that the photos submitted to *BBBG* are devoid of sexuality, but if the blog were to have a stance on sexuality, it seems it would be that sexuality is but one facet of the lives of the women presented on the blog. For example, in Figure 2, the Tumblr user featured is hardly de-sexualized, as evidenced by her pose (ankles crossed, hands on hips), her attire (split skirt, platform heels), and her painted, puckered lips. However, she is also facing the camera head-on, and she is presented as an entire person, instead of being spliced up and having any singular body

part objectified. Combined, these aspects create an image of a woman in control of her own body and the terms by which it is displayed.



Figure 2: Submission to *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls*, dated April 27, 2014

The images of *BBBG* contrast with the images found on the other blogs in this research (ones that are not dedicated to specific racial identity) in the ways the women choose to pose themselves in the photos and the ideas about sexuality and femininity into which they seem to be trying to incorporate fat bodies. While these differences might also be attributed to the different specifications enforced by the blog moderators, it is still worth noting the marked differences between the blogs. For instance, while the image of black women and sexuality presented in figure 2 is the most prevalent on *BBBG*, the ideas about sexuality portrayed on the other four blogs are just as likely to portray women as sexually submissive and demure. For instance, in figure 3, a Tumblr user has submitted a series of photos to *Fuck Yeah Chubby Fashion*, in which she models a series of six

outfits. In all of the photos, the woman is looking away from the camera, either down at her feet or off to the side.



Figure 3: Submission to *Fuck Yeah Chubby Fashion*, dated March 22, 2014
 In the first photo, she has her eyes closed and her mouth opened in a sexually suggestive manner, and in all of the photos except two, she has raised one or both of her arms over her head, presumably to draw attention to her breasts. This set of photos, all part of a single submission, creates an image of female sexuality that is markedly different from the one portrayed on *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls*. The Tumblr user from *Fuck Yeah Chubby Fashion* portrays an image that certainly demonstrates sexuality, but includes a greater emphasis on voyeurism, rather than control and consent. However, it is worth noting that while submissions to *BBBG* tend to portray a more empowered idea of sexuality, they also mostly exhibit conventional modeling poses, much like the one shown in figure 4, and some of these play with suggestions of submission and

vulnerability. While the poses in two of the images incorporate the voyeuristic feeling found in figure 3, all three images feature full body shots of the bloggers, rather than fetishizing particular body parts, even if permission to be viewed is not necessarily signaled by the women. As well, all three photos portray an image of confident, relatively empowered sexuality. Two of the photos feature midriff-baring tops and in one the blogger has her lips puckered (figure 4), but these allusions to sexuality manage to escape a certain degree of fetishization by not breaking the body into singular parts (Fuss 720). In the image furthest right, the blogger appears to be walking somewhere, smiling confidently, portraying her as an active being with agency. However, in the image furthest left, the blogger conveys vulnerability and availability in the way she is pressed against the wall, eyes cast downward. This does not negate the image of control she is also expressing, but it simply shows that these tropes can peacefully coexist in the same photo.

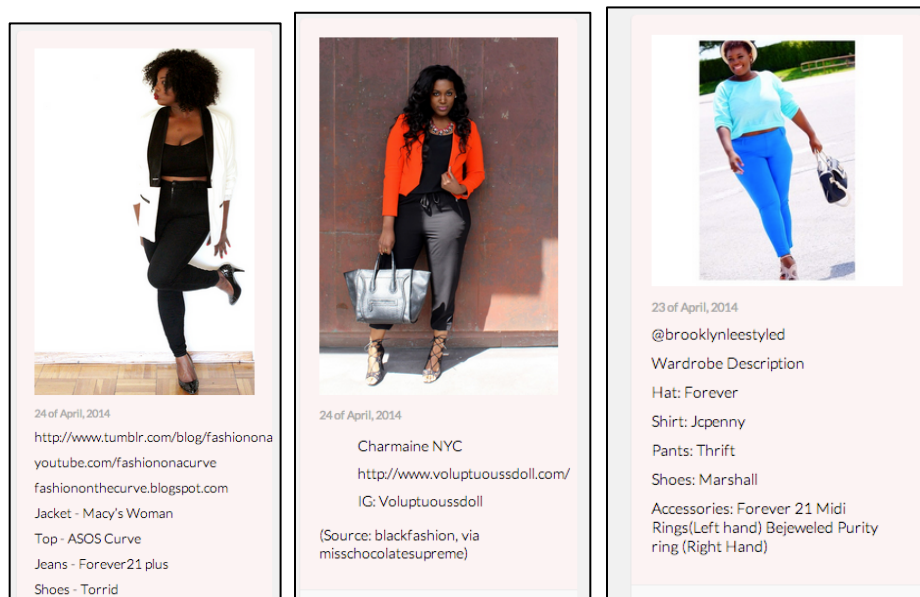


Figure 4: Three submissions to *BBG*

One cultural response to the jezebel and other negative images of African American women and men is respectability politics. Respectability politics can be seen as a method of self-preservation that arose during the Great Migration during the first half of the twentieth century, in which middle class African American communities in the northern United States feared that the influx of migrant blacks from the Southern states would “disrupt their precariously harmonious relationships with whites” (Craig 32). This concept, analyzed most influentially by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (*Black Sexual Politics* 71), evolved from its historical roots to describe the drive within African American communities to prove the morality and virtue of their race, and that they are therefore deserving of respect and equality. Broadly speaking, respectability politics can be applied to the submission requirements on *Big, Beautiful Black Girls* in that they can be interpreted as showing the blog moderators’ desire for a professionalism that exceeds the now-standard bathroom mirror “selfie.” Participation in fashion communities and beauty practices as a means for establishing respectability among African American women is not a new concept. In her book, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*, Maxine Leeds Craig documents the use of beauty pageants in African American communities as a way to not only cast black female bodies as beautiful and desirable, but also as a way to establish respectability (in this case, good grooming) and combat the widely circulated racist images (Craig 34).

It is also worth noting that *Big, Beautiful Black Girls* is also the only blog of the five analyzed to have additional sections dedicated to health and nutrition. While including such information on a plus-sized fashion blog is certainly in keeping with the politics of the Health at Every Size movement (Burgard 46), which promotes health and well-being

as the goals of diet and exercise instead of thinness, this incident begs the question of why *Big, Beautiful Black Girls* is the only blog of the five to include such a section (figure 5).

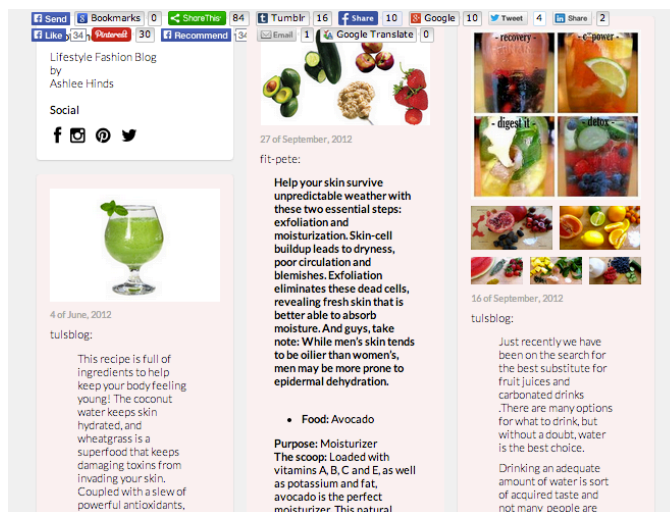


Figure 5: “Health, Hair, and Food Facts” page from *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls*

The answer to this question might lie in the history of black feminists’ focus on access to healthcare as a goal of feminist activism. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant analyzes this intersection of race and attitudes towards healthcare in her critique of the “strong black woman” stereotype, where she explains how this stereotype is actually harmful to African American women because of the “intense selflessness mandated of ‘strong black women’” (105). Beauboeuf-Lafontant then connects this mandate of selflessness to the high rates of overeating and weight-related health problems faced by black women, saying that the latter is a “muted protest” against the former (105). In spite of the seeming opposition between overeating and a focus on nutrition and healthcare, both can be seen as counters to the strong black woman stereotype because both call for black women to focus on their own needs and desires instead of being wholly selfless.

Big, Beautiful, Black Girls' health and nutrition page includes articles on how to detect skin cancer, information on cervical cancer screenings, and recipes for an array of healthy dishes (figure 5), from fruit smoothies to lasagna, and this promotion of well-being and self-care can be seen as inherently political when considering the ways controlling images of black women have influenced their access to healthcare. Access to such online support systems has proven highly effective in improving the outcomes and success rates of fat individuals seeking to improve their health (Dickins et al. 1685), and the situating health and well-being as the goals for exercising and eating healthier, as opposed to thinness, is an idea promoted on *BBBG*. Only a few of the posts in the "Health, Hair, and Food Facts" section mention weight loss as a reason to eat healthy foods, and instead they focus on side effects such as combatting depression, clearing up one's complexion, and "feeling better" as reasons for eating the suggested foods. These suggestions are in line with the goals of the Health at Every Size movement in that they focus on health and well-being and do not center weight-loss as a cure-all for health complications. The page acknowledges and encourages the pleasure that people receive from eating food, and offer suggestions about how to make foods healthier. For instance, in a post containing a recipe for shrimp fettuccine alfredo, the author of the post states, "Everybody knows Italian food is delicious, but heavy, creamy dishes like fettuccine alfredo can pack a ton of calories," and goes on to offer lighter options for the noodles and sauce, saying, "not only are these substitutes healthy, but they're tasty too!" The post does not try to shame bloggers for enjoying high calories foods, and this lack of judgment is essential for creating a successful, fat positive environment (Dickins 1686).

Claiming Fashion, the Femme, and Femininity for Fat Bodies

Besides raising issues about how women of color engage with fatshion and its online blogging community, the five blogs analyzed for this project also raise some questions with regard to how bloggers engage with femininity and femme identity. The bloggers are negotiating traditional conceptions of what feminine bodies are supposed to look like by presenting their fat bodies in ways that are culturally conceived as feminine, whether this is through styling (make-up, hair, clothing choices), alluding to historic icons of hegemonic femininity, poses, or words used in the photo's caption to describe the outfit. As well, fat women who also identify as queer and femme use the fatshion blogs as a space to privilege not only fat bodies but also their femme identities, which are sometimes marginalized in lesbian communities. These blogs do not simply reproduce the male gaze as they invite women to look at other women. As Fuss's analysis of fashion helps us to see, this invitation for fat women to view other fat women's bodies is decidedly sexual (Fuss 713). There is evidence of bloggers both embracing hegemonic femininity and challenging it, and they combine to create a complex conversation about culturally constructed ideas of sexuality and gender identity.

Rewriting Femininity for Fat Bodies

Central to the discourse being created on plus size fashion blogs is negotiating notions of hegemonic femininity, whether it is claiming hegemonic femininity for fat bodies or whether it is queering the role of feminine bodies in visual fashion media. Because these fatshion blogs are primarily visual mediums, it is essential to analyze factors such as the tumblogs' perceived and/or intended audience, how posts (photo +

commentary) on the blogs conform to and challenge the male gaze, and how bloggers use their posts to claim hegemonic femininity for fat bodies or subvert these same ideas of hegemonic femininity (arguably, these could be one and the same). For instance, because U.S. culture portrays a slender silhouette as being the most desirable and the most feminine, by privileging fat bodies on the blogs and presenting fat bodies with markers of hegemonic femininity, fatshion blogs are challenging what bodies can be considered feminine.

One of the primary ways fatshion blogs both conform to and challenge hegemonic femininity is by emphasizing visibility as essential to femininity while changing the types of female bodies that are typically made visible in the media and throughout U.S. culture. Accordingly, we can combine Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze with Mimi Schipper's theory of hegemonic and pariah femininities to highlight the ways fatshion blogs both challenge and reinforce visibility as a part of hegemonic femininity. At the core, fatshion blogs are about increasing the visibility of fat bodies in the fashion industry and popular media. While they challenge the male gaze and hegemonic femininity in many ways, they still maintain that the exclusion of fat bodies from popular fashion media, an industry that historically commodifies and denigrates female bodies, is an injustice that must be corrected. However, in spite of the damage that the fashion industry does to women's body image, many bloggers note in their posts how participating in fatshion blogging, making their own bodies visible and being submerged in positive images of other fat women, increases their feelings of self-worth. This phenomenon is also documented and corroborated in Dickins' research on the "Fatosphere," where she describes how participation in such fat positive communities

significantly improves health outcomes and feelings of confidence among its participants (1688). For example, in figure 6, an individual who has been submitting images to *Fa(t)shion February* (figure 8) explains how participating in the blog has “helped [her] confidence immensely.” The sentiment expressed in figure 6 is echoed in figure 7, where a fatshion blogger discusses how her purchase and wearing of the pictured dress is an expression of self-love and an exercise in confidence building, and she encourages her audience to “stop waiting to wear something” and to “be brave.”

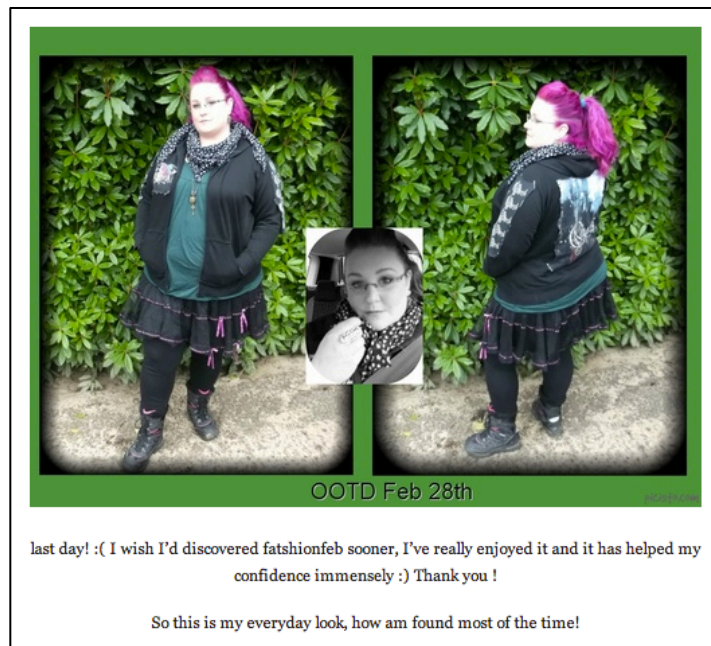


Figure 6: Submission to *Fa(t)shion February*, Dated February 28, 2013

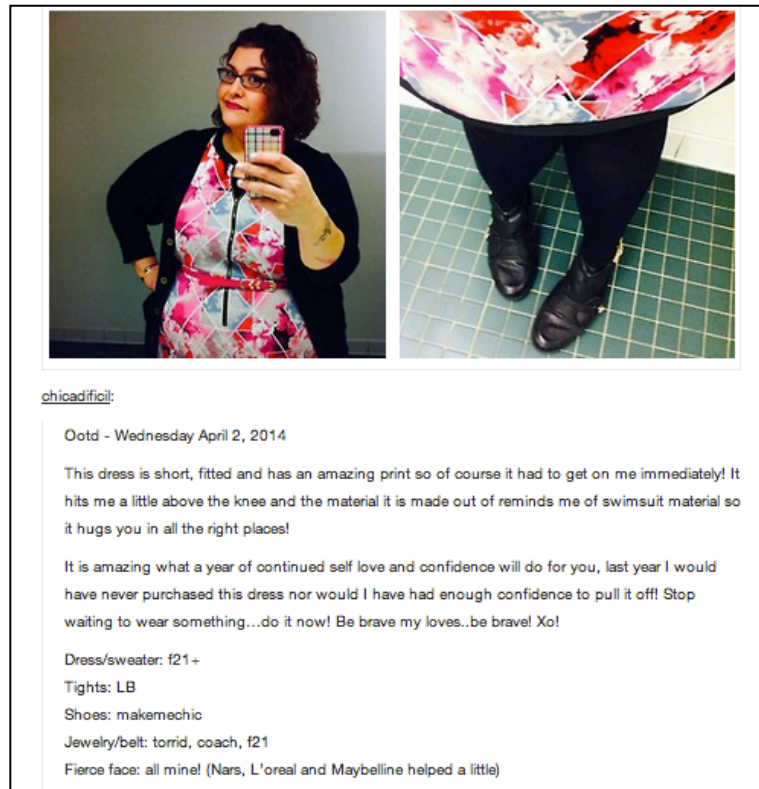


Figure 7: Submission to *Fatshion Kingdom*, dated April 2, 2014

In addition to giving these encouragements, the blogger also addresses her audience as “my loves,” and greets them with a confident, conspiratorial smirk, which evokes a sense of community, familiarity, and sentimentality towards other fatshion bloggers (figure 7), and, as Dickins articulates, this sense of community and support is a crucial part of what makes fat positive online communities such a meaningful experience (1685). The blogger in figure 7 also creates her air of confidence by saying the “fierce face is all mine,” while still acknowledging that she is also fashioning her face as well as her clothing, and this is only heightened by the fact that she has taken the photo herself. The blogger in figure 7 also expresses her enjoyment and enthusiasm for participating in fashion and fashion consumption when she says, “it had to get on me immediately.” While fatshion blogs in some ways still support visibility as a part of desirable

femininity, it is undeniable that they are doing just as much work when it comes to combatting the effects of a fashion industry that privileges thin bodies by facilitating a fat positive community where the bloggers' typically invisible bodies are praised and normalized.



Figure 8: Blog header for *Fa(t)shion February*

Claiming visibility by submitting personal photographs to fatshion tumblogs is not the only way bloggers claim hegemonic femininity for fat bodies. The commentary that often accompanies a submitted photograph is just as ripe for analysis as the image. When submitting a photo, bloggers will often include information about where the featured clothing can be purchased (some blog moderators require this), for what kind of occasion the outfit was chosen (work, school, a night out, etc.), or why the blogger enjoys wearing this particular outfit. Bloggers also use the commentary that accompanies their photo to situate themselves in current fashion discourse, and this often includes using very feminine adjectives to describe their outfits. For instance, in one submission to *Fatshion Kingdom*, a blogger presents her self in a pin-up style red and white bikini (often called “fatkinis” in the fatshion community), accompanied by the caption “your

loss,” surrounded by hearts (figure 9), and, interestingly enough, posed in front of what seems to be a self-portrait.

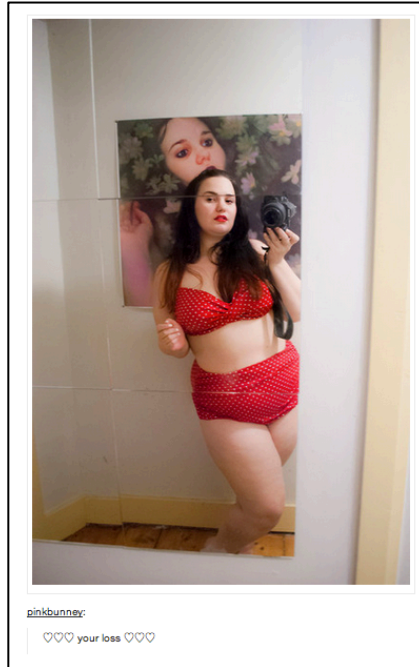


Figure 9: Submission to *Fatshion Kindgom*, dated April 2014

By captioning her photo in this manner, taking the photo herself, and posing in front of a self-portrait, the blogger is positioning her body as not only sexually desirable, but also as artistically inspiring, insinuating that if any person should consider her to be otherwise, it is their “loss” (figure 9). Fatshion bloggers use the commentary accompanying their photos to situate themselves within hegemonic femininity in other ways, by using descriptive words like “cute” and “hot” (figure 10). Of particular interest when it comes to analyzing the content and format of various posts, is the prevalence of a particular genre that Agnès Rocamora calls “photographic self-portraiture” (414), but the more common, colloquial term for this type of photo is a “selfie.” Self-portraiture has always been a topic of interest to those who research identity formation, but another facet is

added to this exploration when considering the relatively new addition of computer screens as a factor into the mix (Rocamora 414). On the fatshion blogs, especially *Fatshion Kingdom*, selfies, where a phone, camera and/or mirror is visible are extremely common (figure 9, figure 10), and this raises questions not only about identity creation and self portraits, but also about how the audience of the photos might be influenced by being able to see the device being used to take the photo. According to Rocamora, the mirror, and consequently its contemporary, the computer screen, can be used in portraiture to assert the male gaze and situate women as objects to be viewed (416). However, by showing women taking the pictures themselves, as is the case with most selfies, the bloggers are able to show their “operational power in their own portraiture and the full independence, creativity, and control this power enables” (Rocamora 419). By taking control of the image into their own hands and away from men, the women fatshion bloggers are subverting the male gaze, and by having cameras or phones visible in the photographs, they are, in a way, returning the gaze and making the audience the viewed (Rocamora 419). This placement of the blogger, the woman in the photograph, as the viewer gazing back at her audience is also heightened by the way many bloggers address readers in the texts of their post, as in figures 7 and 9. Instead of being a passive subject to be viewed, fatshion bloggers are talking back to their audiences and exerting power over how the photo is viewed and interpreted. As well, by including this conversational aspect, bloggers are creating a sense of community with each by offering advice (figure 7) and sharing stories (figure 16). The use of selfies can also be seen as an assertion of self-confidence on the part of fat women because they are actively increasing the visibility of their own bodies and asserting that they think they are worth looking at.

In these ways, fatshion bloggers are challenging mainstream fashion discourses by not just making fat female bodies visible, but also in the ways they challenge the passive objectification that has been forced upon women in types of portraiture throughout history.

Calling on Figures of Hegemonic Femininity

Fatshion bloggers also draw on images and styles that signify hegemonic femininity in the collective contemporary cultural consciousness. It is not uncommon to peruse fatshion blogs and come across submissions that hearken back to the likes of Marilyn Monroe as their style inspiration or draw on the retro, pin-up style of the 1950s (figure 9, figure 12, figure 14, figure 15). In one outfit featured on *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls*, a fatshionista sports a shirt that draws on the standard of iconic feminine consumption set by Marilyn Monroe in the 1953 film, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, when she proclaimed that “diamonds are a girl’s best friend” (figure 11).

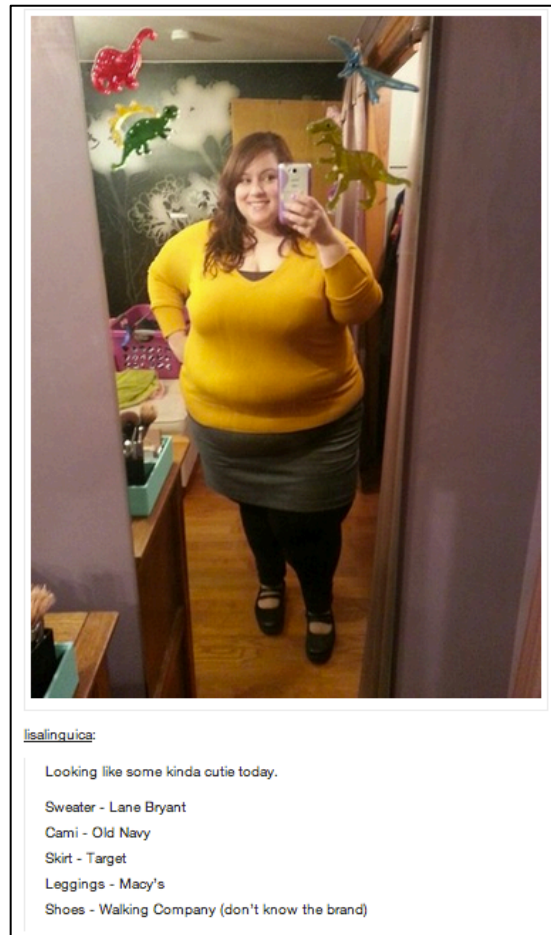


Figure 10: Submission to *Fatshion Kingdom*, dated April 2014

Another blogger, in figure 12, has styled herself after another icon of femininity: Audrey Hepburn à la *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, among other fashions of the 1950s. She has titled her collection of photos “Being Fat and Glam,” and this furthers the desire expressed in the photos to insert fat bodies into ideas of hegemonic femininity – in this particular instance, glamour. In her article, “Trousers and Tiaras: Audrey Hepburn, a Woman’s Star,” Rachel Mosley explores the appeal of Audrey Hepburn, and cites the star’s ability to “offer boyish-ness in conjunction with femininity” as being the key to her appeal (45). Because of this, Hepburn is acknowledged by many women to exude a more approachable femininity than that of other stars, such as Marilyn Monroe (Mosley 44),

and this casual femininity is hinted at throughout figure 12, from the candid scene of the blogger gabbing on the phone, to the spunky pose at a bowling ally. While Hepburn's slender figure was key to her "boyish-ness" (Mosley 46), the blogger in figure 12 achieves a similar feel through the playfulness in most of her photos. Mosley also discusses how the majority of Hepburn's film involved a Cinderella, rags-to-riches motif, and ensure "that the values of 'ordinary' and 'special,' central to stardom, are held in play (39). These factors make Audrey Hepburn a very approachable figure of hegemonic femininity, and this is evident in the way the blogger in figure 12 has used Hepburn as her style inspiration. Additionally, in figure 13, the blogger is wearing a dress featuring a portrait of Cleopatra, drawing on another icon of hegemonic femininity and her expression of regality.



Figure 11: Submission to *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls* dated April 6, 2014

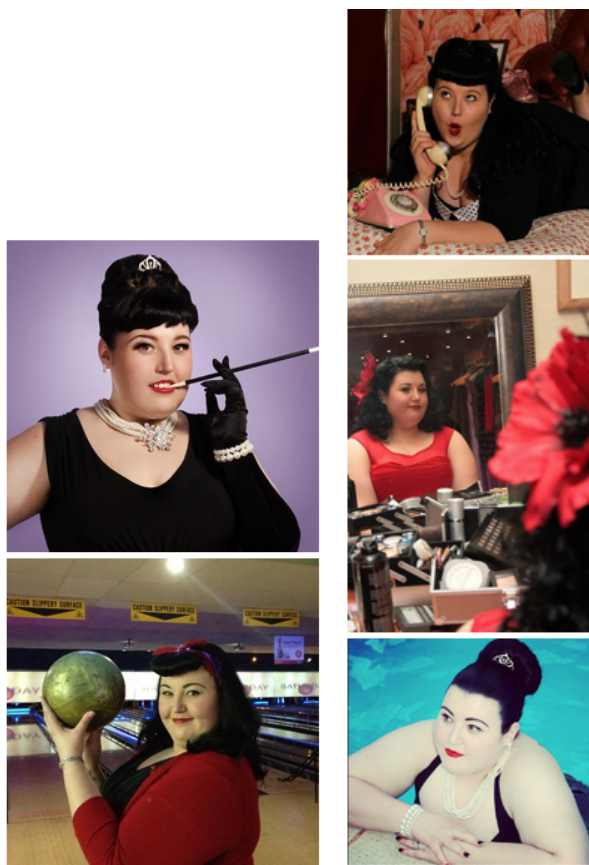


Figure 12: Submission to *Plus Size Fashion*, not dated

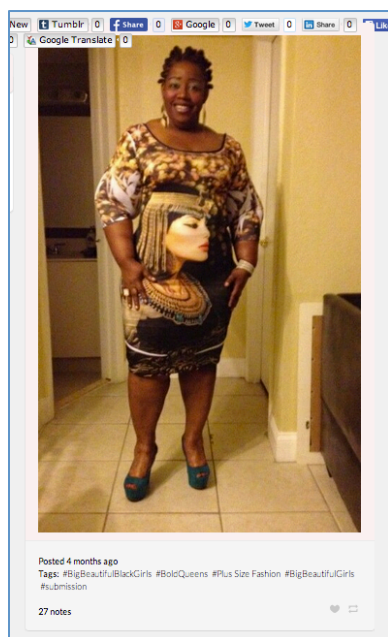


Figure 13: Submission to *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls*, not dated

Other fatshion bloggers may not call directly on specific figures like Marilyn Monroe or Cleopatra, but make space for fat bodies in ideas of hegemonic femininity by relying on certain styles and images. For instance, many fatshion bloggers draw on the aesthetics of 1950s pin-up magazines, using the markers of bright lipstick, expertly coifed hair, and hyper-feminized clothing, whether it is bright floral prints or lacy lingerie (figure 14, figure 15). These styles are not gracing the cover of every fashion magazine today, but the fact that fatshion bloggers are choosing these particular aesthetics from U.S. fashion history is a testament to the power such images still hold in contemporary ideas of hegemonic femininity. Fatshion bloggers are hearkening back to a time of rigid gender roles and placing themselves solidly within that framework.

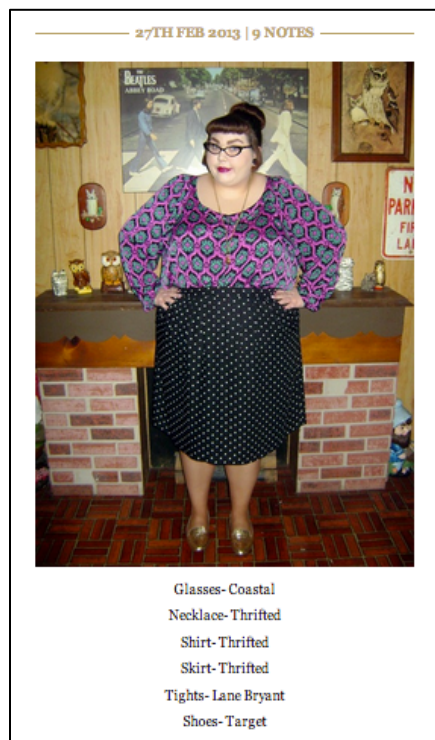


Figure 14: Submission to *Fa(t)shion February*, dated February 27, 2013

Many scholars have researched this nostalgia for bygone eras in media and consumer culture, and Deborah Tudor analyzes this phenomenon as it pertains to the television series *Mad Men*, which is set at a New York advertising agency in the early 1960s. Television shows like *Mad Men* and other pop culture artifacts like it allow consumers to “shift from nostalgia for *Mad Men*’s fashion, sexism, and racism of the 1960s, to the importation of the neoliberal idea of post-sexism/racism that makes celebrating the series’ sexism/racism acceptable” (Tudor 334). In short, these nostalgic pieces of pop culture, including a penchant for 1950-60s inspired clothing, allow consumers to participate in very specific aspects of a historical time period without any of the day-to-day consequences of living in the era (Tudor 334). In the case of fatshion blogs, bloggers are able to partake in the fashions and iconic images of the 1950s, but are left relatively undisturbed by the rampant sexism and racism faced by women who actually lived through the 1950s. While taking on these images does allow fat women to place their bodies within hegemonic feminine ideals, it is necessary to recognize how this ability to pick and choose which parts of history to acknowledge is a crucial piece of the neoliberal consumerist economy.



Figure 15: Submission to *Plus Size Fashion*, not dated, with picture of pin-up model

Negotiating Queerness and Privileging Femme Identity

While fatshion blogs provide a medium through which fat women can insert themselves into fashion media and hegemonic femininity, they also provide a place to privilege queer identity, particularly queer women who identify as femme. *Fa(t)shion February* is distinct from the other four blogs consulted for this research not only because it is the only one that dedicates itself to fashion worn by fat women who identify as queer and femme, but, as its title suggests, it conducts the majority of its business in the month of February. Since its inception in 2011 (figure 8), fatshionistas from all over the Internet have been submitting a photo a day (usually) for the entire month, inundating the Internet with a celebration of fat, queer, femme identity and fashion.



An essential part of hegemonic femininity is the situated male viewer, with the female as the object to be viewed (Fuss 730), so what does it mean when the primary audience of fatshion blogs is women, and in the case of *Fa(t)shion February*, women that identify as queer? In her work on femme identity, Lisa Walker speaks to challenges faced by femmes, such as misogyny in lesbian communities and not having a place to express their enjoyment of femme identity because it is often seen as inherently anti-feminist (804). *Fa(t)shion February*, and arguably other fatshion blogs, provide such a space where femme identity is privileged and celebrated, distanced from misogyny and the male gaze. As *Fa(t)shion February*'s popularity has grown, femme identity seems to be less of a focus; most posts contain a list of featured garments and a bit of commentary with little to no mention of the person's affinity to femme identity. A search of the blog's tagged posts for the tag "femme" yields no posts, and a search of the tag "queer" actually yields posts from bloggers who identify as queer, but not femme (figure 16). These two

posts stand out among other submissions to *Fa(t)shion February* not just because they veer from the theme of femme identity, but also because they each contain a narrative of all the activities the bloggers will do in the outfits. Although other posts on all of the blogs do this to a certain extent, the two featured in figure 16 are particularly descriptive. One blogger describes how they enjoy wearing their outfit to auctions and “peacocking around,” and the other explains how they will wear the pictured outfit to butch choir practice and other activities (figure 16). From these commentaries, it is apparent that these two individuals experience a degree of confidence and freedom by wearing their clothes, and by sharing these images and narratives with the fatshion community, they are able to become more confident in their sexualities and gender expressions (figure 16).

Central to femme identity is the concept of embracing aspects of hegemonic femininity by choice, and not compulsion (Walker 806), and this politicizing of femininity is a concept that is embraced throughout the fatshion blogging community. While there is certainly an element of wanting to fit into notions of hegemonic femininity present on the blogs, women directly challenging notions of femininity are just as common. For instance, in figure 17, a blogger describes an experience where she dressed in a way that accentuated her fat body, recognizing that doing so might insight anger from people she encountered. By dressing in a midriff-bearing top, a garment designed to expose the female body, as a fat woman, the blogger intentionally challenged notions of hegemonic femininity and politicized her female identity (figure 17).

Posts tagged QUEER

— 24TH FEB 2012 | 204 NOTES —

mmmajestic:

Fatshion February: Off to the Auction Edition

I don't really like to spend money at auctions, I just like to get dressed up and peacock around. Everything on my bod is thrifted, except the brooch that I borrowed from JLUX and the hat I stole from Addison.

stay classy,
Majestic

(Source: [heavymuffintop](#))

— 1ST FEB 2012 | 17 NOTES —



thededucer:

I'm doing Fatshion February! I've been feeling a bit men in the sartorial department, so I'm taking this month to allow myself to spend time working on outfits and making myself look/feel hot.

Tonight I'm going to butch choir practice, and then maybe a queer dance party afterwards. I'm wearing suspenders from h&m, an old brown plaid shirt, grey skinny jeans that I got from majestic, and my oxblood redwing boots.

XO

Figure 16: submissions to *Fa(t)shion February*, tagged “queer”



Figure 17: Submission to *Fatshion Kingdom*, not dated

Like many of the posts on *Fa(t)shion February*, this image from *Fatshion Kingdom* still manages to politicize female identity. In her work on fatness and sexuality, Samantha Murray explores the ways the fat female body is constructed as asexual, and how, by challenging Foucault's ideas about "aesthetics of existence" from *The Use of Pleasure*, certain sexual fetishes around fat female bodies give women little to no control over their own sexual pleasure (Murray 237). Fat female bodies are seen as "symbol[s] of gluttonous obsessions, unmanaged desires, and the failed self" (Murray 239), and, as figure 17 demonstrates, when fat women choose to flaunt or accentuate their fatness, it can often incite a reaction. The fetishization of fat bodies is also something fatshion bloggers are very aware of (Murray 241), and many bloggers include in their posts a request to not be approached by fetish or pornography blogs (figure 18). The

intersections of fat, sexual, and queer identity are played out on fatshion blogs, and blogger find many ways to subvert the control that hegemonic ideals of bodies and gender try to exert.

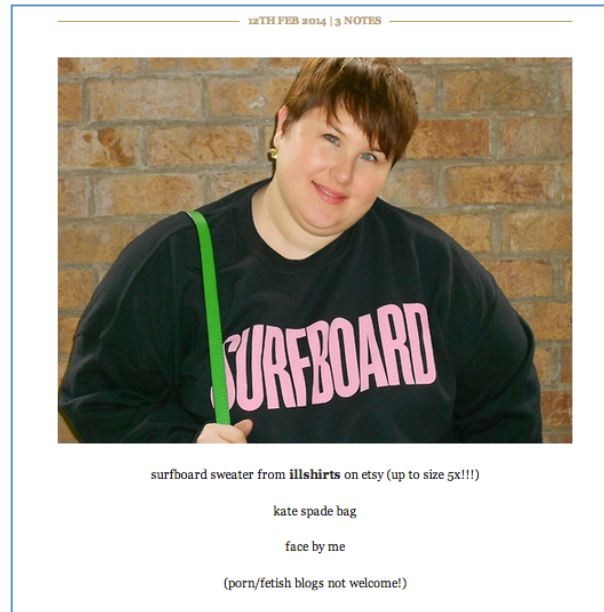


Figure 18: Submission to *Fa(t)shion February*, dated February 12, 2014

Every Dollar is a Vote: Fatshion, Transnational Feminism, and Neoliberalism

Plus-size fashion blogs do provide a community of acceptance for fat women and an arena in which to discuss issues of sizeism and how they relate to one's gender and/or racial identity. In a contemporary global economy dominated by neoliberalism, however, it is necessary to examine how an institution as dependent on consumerism as the fashion industry also contributes to the inequalities that are part and parcel of such an economic system. In this system focused on individual profit instead of any sort of public good (Steger and Roy 12), clothing manufacturers, government officials, and local business

people based in both the global North and South create an economy of non-diversified labor and exploitation.

Although the contemporary neoliberal global economy allows for a disconnect between consumers and producers in the fashion industry, there are also some distinct ways in which fatshion tumblogs, blogs outside of Tumblr, and individuals within the fashion industry that bridge this gap and work to create a history of fashion participation. It is not uncommon for “fatshionistas” to share patterns and tips for creating do-it-yourself (DIY) fashions and repurposing clothing, often secondhand, to fit fat bodies. For instance, in figure 19, a contributor to *Fa(t)shion February* submitted a photo where her outfit is “all thrifted,” and the blogger featured in figure 20 is wearing purple that she dyed herself. While these items were not made by the bloggers themselves from scratch, they are evidence of a desire in the fatshion community to take more charge in the production of clothing, even though they do not necessarily demonstrate an awareness of unjust labor practices in the global South. The DIY movement in contemporary fashion is one that walks the line between necessity and desire. While the origins of DIY projects, which can include anything from making clothing to home maintenance, can be traced back to the economic necessity born of the Great Depression, DIY as it exists today exists also as a form of conspicuous consumption (Atkinson 2). The creation of personal plus size fashion, whether it is adding panels of fabric to expand a t-shirt or reworking a bra into an adequate bathing suit top, does not fit neatly into either of these categories.

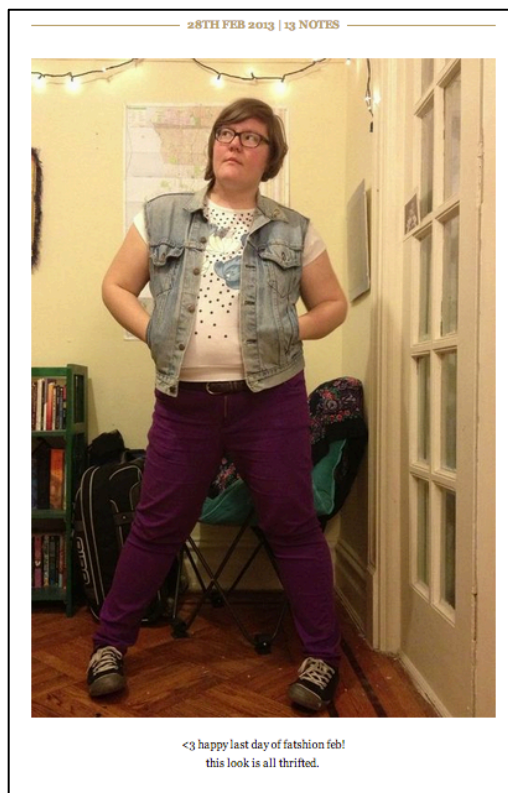


Figure 19: Submission to *Fa(t)shion February*, dated February 28, 2013

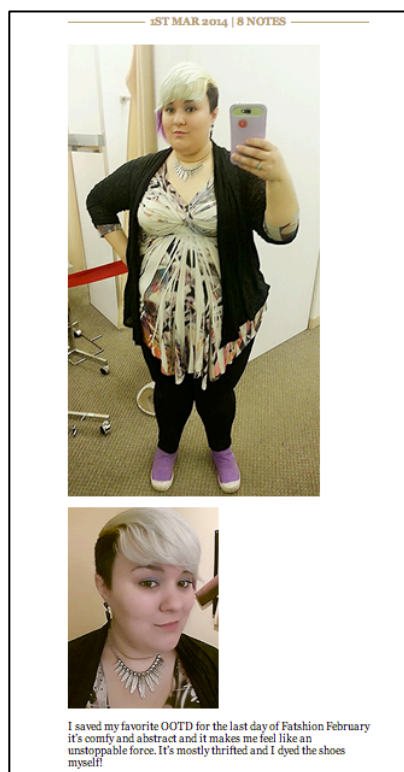


Figure 20: Submission to *Fa(t)shion February*, dated March 1, 2014

Plus size clothing, which can be anything over a size 12 or 14 depending on the brand, typically costs more off the rack, and many retailers do not carry these sizes in-store (Clifford). While the engaging in DIY projects does hold some value as conspicuous consumption among individuals of greater economic means (Williams 271), it is arguable that most DIY fatshion occurs because ready-made plus size garments are scarce and expensive. In this way, parts of the fatshion blogging community are bridging the gap between production and consumption, but they are still relying on materials created under unjust practices by women workers in the global South. In her article on *Fa(t)shion February*, Connell touches on the blog's desire to create a counterdiscourse against the consumerist aspects of the fashion industry by encouraging bloggers to repurpose clothing, make their own, or purchase it secondhand (215), but this is where her discussion on the topic ends. What Connell and fatshion bloggers are neglecting is to consider how participation in fashion, plus size or not, contributes to the exploitation and oppression of women in the global South. The divide between fashion production and fashion consumptions that McRobbie outlines is evidenced in Connell's article and on the fatshion blogs in that their consideration for consumerism goes no further than how it affects the woman purchasing and wearing the clothing. Connell says of the thrifted, homemade, or repurposed clothing on fatshion blogs: "In these moments, the elitist, label-conscious values of hegemonic discourse are reversed, and the extent to which one can thrift, remix, and self-create become the predominant markers of status" (215). This statement diminishes the divide between production and consumption, but only in regards to what it means for the women consuming the clothing. Connell's sentiment is echoed by fatshion bloggers in that fashion production is only mentioned as a means for saving

money, obtaining desired clothing in the appropriate size, and sometimes lessening one's impact on the environment. In this way, the discussion of production and consumption remains focused on mostly middle-class white women from the global North, and the discussion on fatshion blogs and elsewhere would be well-served by incorporating the experiences of women in the global South who do the bulk of the world's clothing manufacturing.

There are fashion scholars and fashion bloggers who delve a bit further into the bridging of discussions on production and consumption, and many of these efforts involve highlighting the ways women of color and women from the global South have been both significant producers, avid consumers, and more recently, up and coming creators of fashion. Many women of color in the fashion blogosphere (this includes blogs not dedicated specifically to plus size fashion) are addressing issues of inclusion and creating spaces for women of color to rewrite racial scripts to include fashionable women of color. This work includes creating and uncovering these "hidden histories" of fashion (Pham 15), and there is evidence of women of color doing this. The tumblog *Of Another Fashion* documents vintage fashions worn by women of color and strives to provide "a glimpse of women of color's material cultural histories - a glimpse that no doubt only begins to redress the curatorial and critical absence of minoritized fashion histories." The blog moderator is very clear about the political intent of the blog and its related projects, which include funding an exhibit of women of color fashions, and calls out other fashion exhibitions that claim to focus on the intersections of identity and nation, but only feature clothing worn and designed by "bourgeois white women." While these efforts are not tied directly to the fatshion blogging community, they are evidence of a desire among

some fashion bloggers to increase the visibility of women of color in discussions of fashion history and media.

Blog Formats' Contributions to Neoliberalism

The format of *BBBG* also differentiates it from the other four blogs, in that it resembles a fashion magazine spread, and focuses less on the narratives that usually accompany posts on the other four blogs. The blog is formatted in such a way that most pages show 16-20 posts at one time, as opposed to other blogs that typically show around 10 before having to click through to the next page (figure 22). This format encourages readers to pay more attention to the images on the blogs, as opposed to any text by increasing the visual nature of the blog. *BBBG's* format also encourages this in the way that it allows readers to continue on to the next page. While the other four blogs have a link or set of links to click to “older” or previous, numbered pages (figure 21), *BBBG* has a bar at the end of page that reads “load more posts” (figure 22). While both formats ultimately serve the same purpose, they each create a very distinct feel. The format used on *BBBG* creates the illusion of endless scrolling, looking at image after image, and the formats used on the other blogs, like *Fa(t)shion February*, create the illusion of flipping through the pages of a book, drawing more focus to the narratives of the blog.

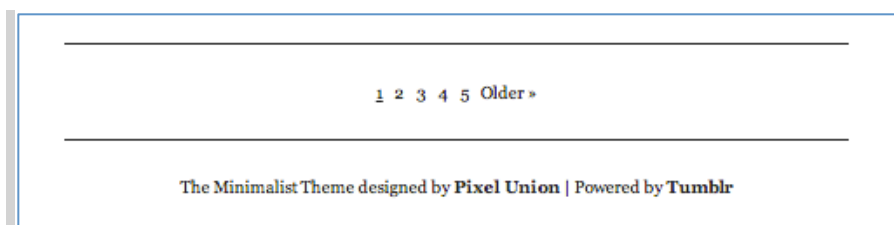


Figure 21: links to previous pages and posts on *Fa(t)shion February*

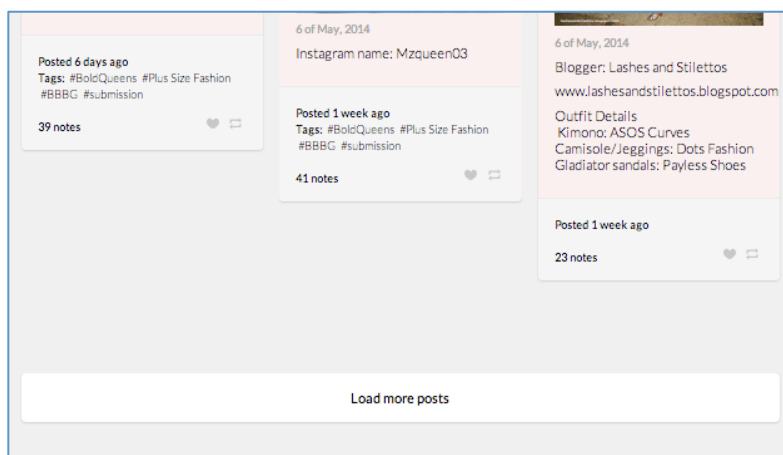


Figure 22: Link to additional posts on *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls*

By using this format that draws more attention to the images, *BBBG* lends itself more to a consumerist ability to shop for inspiration, rather than reading each individual post in the way the blog moderators have chosen to present it. This concept, the ability to skim the blog and choose which posts to read, aligns itself with neoliberal ways of thinking, in that bloggers are able to examine individual posts out of context as they see fit.

Contrastingly, three of the blogs, *Fuck Yeah Chubby Fashion*, *Plus Size Fashion*, and *Fa(t)shion February*, use a blog format that situates the posts one underneath another, with approximately ten posts being visible before clicking to the next page (figure 25); however *Plus Size Fashion* does allow continuous scrolling (figure 24), but does still force readers to view images one after the other. This forces the reader to view each post in its entirety before proceeding to the next one, and this differs from the format of *BBBG* and other fashion blogs in that it draws equal attention to the narrative and commentary accompanying a photograph, creating a more personal connection between reader and blogger and giving the moderators more control over how readers interact with it. This is not to say that the other four blogs do not also engage in neoliberal consumerist

discourse; they only engage with these discourses in a different way. While the format of *BBBG* and *Fatshion Kingdom* allows readers to view multiple images at once (figure 23), and works to blend images into ones that might be found on a mainstream fashion blog, the one-by-one format of the other three blogs works to break away from this type of layout and draw focus to the entire post and narrative. Fatshion blogs challenge neoliberal consumerism by encouraging bloggers to engage more in the production process of clothes and in the way some of the blogs are laid out, but overall they offer no acknowledgement of the exploitative labor practices that make the majority of plus size fashion possible.

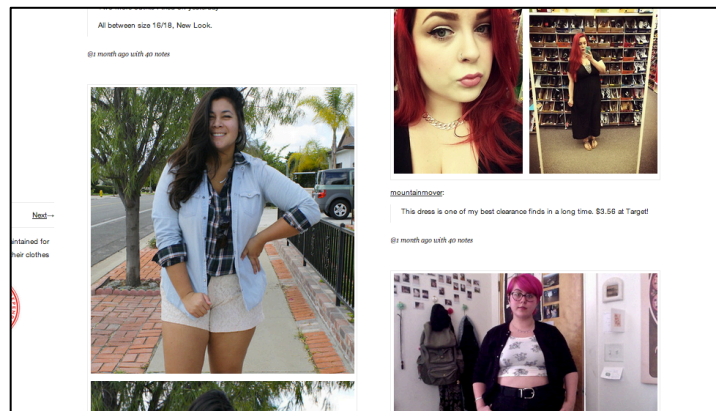


Figure 23: *Fatshion Kingdom*'s layout

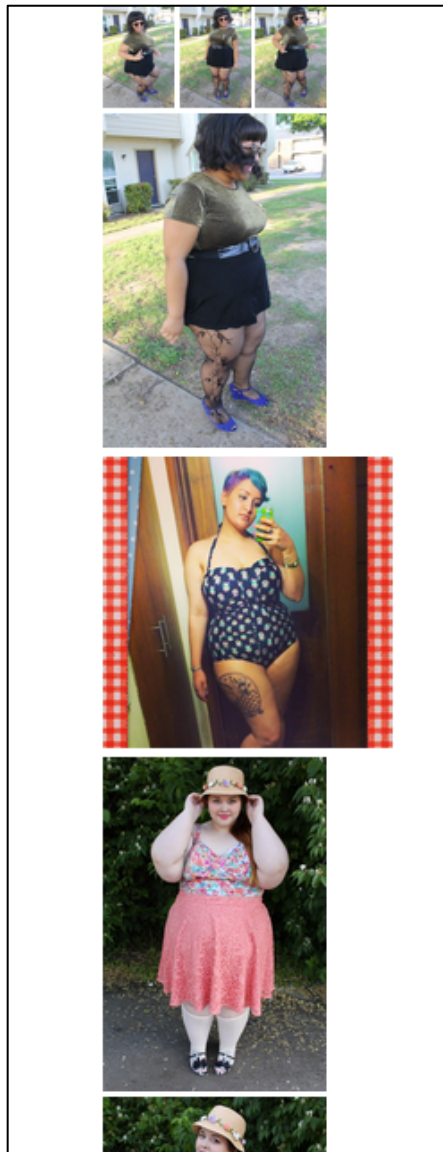


Figure 24: Layout of *Plus Size Fashion*

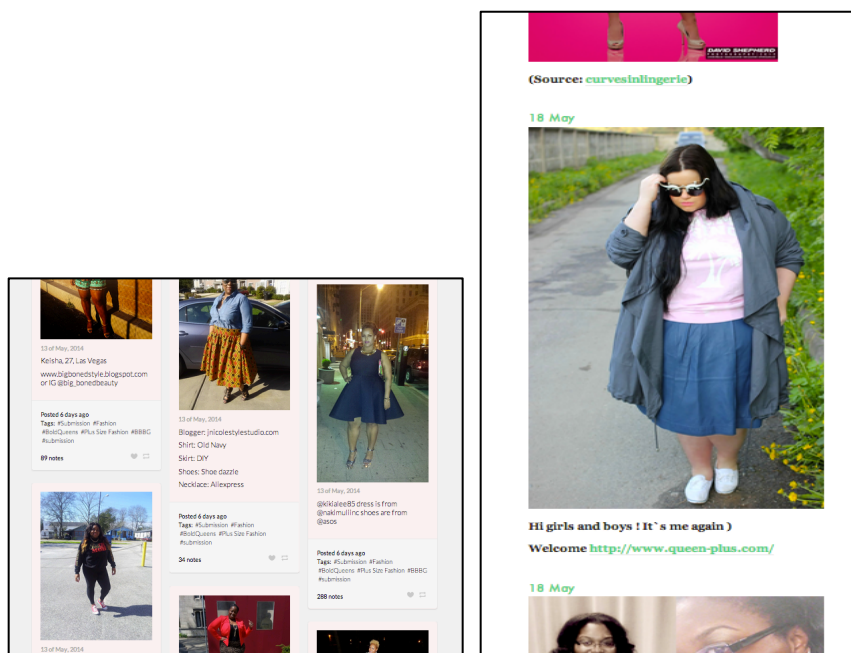


Figure 25: Comparison of *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls* (left) and *Fuck Yeah Chubby Fashion*'s (right) layouts

CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Fatfashion tumblogs provide an arena for fat women to create a community from which they can better challenge the sizeism that runs rampant in the fashion industry and media, and they also create a space to explore and negotiate how their identities as fat women intersect with racial, gender, and sexual identities. As this thesis has shown, it is necessary to draw on a variety of literatures, including the interdisciplinary fields of fat studies, media and visual culture studies, feminist theory, and culture studies in order to better understand this phenomena. This research approaches sizeism in the fashion industry and the fatfashion community's response to it in ways that align with both fat studies and feminism. It avoids treating fatness as an "epidemic," and approaches it as a normal, physical characteristic that is stigmatized in different way in different cultures.

Through fatshion blogs, fat women are challenging ideas of hegemonic femininity to include fat bodies, and the way this is done is shaped by a woman's racial and/or sexual identity. On *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls*, fatshion bloggers are not only rejecting sizeism, but they are also negotiating prevalent images of black women and their sexuality as well as respectability politics. Women who identify as queer and femme are addressing sizeism as well, but they are also challenging stigmas and misogyny that are often faced by femme women in lesbian communities. While many women profess to experience fatshion blogs as liberatory the movement also encourages women to participate in consumerism and an industry (fashion) that has been and still is very harmful for women both as consumers and producers. In the neoliberal global economic system, women across the global South are exploited in the factories that create many of these plus size brands that fat women use to achieve their liberation.

As research into all kind of fashion proceeds, it is essential, from a feminist perspective, to also explore the way fashion industries exploit certain populations are rely on certain notions of race, gender, and sexuality to survive. For instance, this thesis has shown the ways in which hegemonic femininity is connected to consumerism; that is, ways in which United States culture (or any culture) encourages women to consume things like fashion as a way of participating in and demonstrating femininity. What is it about U.S. culture that makes women believe that they being done a massive injustice by not being allowed to participate in consumer culture to the same extent as smaller women? This research begins to chip away at the effect of social media's growing popularity on community and identity formation, and the power such communities could possibly be able to exert over entities like the fashion industry has enormous potential. In

2013, plus size fashion blogger Gabi Gregg debuted a collection of “fatkinis” with online clothing retailer Swimsuits for All, and the collection sold out in only two days (Johnson and Dodge). As the fatshion community becomes more vocal and gains a larger presence on social media, will fashion retailers tap into this demanding demographic?

To return to the four research questions posed in the introduction, this thesis has made a substantial attempt at analyzing how various identities intersect on fatshion tumblogs. On the fatshion blogs, submissions by women of color are scarce on blogs not dedicated specifically to women of color. On *Big, Beautiful, Black Girls*, many fatshion bloggers are responding to dominant discourses of black women’s sexuality, and it is helpful to frame some of these responses in the context of respectability politics. Fatshion bloggers also use the blogs to challenge notions of hegemonic femininity by using certain words to describe their photos, posing their bodies in certain ways, and drawing on different styles and celebrity icons for fashion inspiration. In addition to inserting fat bodies into hegemonic femininity, fatshion bloggers are also using the blogs as a means for queering fashion and femininity, privileging femme identity, and challenging the male gaze. On *Fa(t)shion February*, bloggers subvert the male gaze by openly acknowledging that women often view other women in a sexual manner, and Diana Fuss’ homospectatorial look shows how this is often true in fashion media, regardless of whether the blogs are specifically targeting queer women. As well, by privileging queer femme identity, *Fa(t)shion February* is challenging concepts of hegemonic femininity and misogyny that are found in mainstream media and queer communities. This thesis has also shown how fatshion blogs rely on many harmful neoliberal concepts, as well as finding ways to subvert them. Fatshion blogs situate the

ability to consume fashion as a crucial part of participating in femininity, and sizeism in the fashion industry is challenged mostly because it prevents fat women from participating in consumption. Fatshion blogs do all of this without acknowledging the ways fashion consumption contributes to the neoliberal global economy and the subsequent exploitation of women working in sweatshops in the global South. Fatshion bloggers do encourage each other, at times, to take a more active role in the production of their clothing through thrifting, repurposing, and DIY, but this is usually done with the intent of making desired clothing more accessible, instead of as a political statement against exploitation in the fashion industry.

This project, while limited in scope, offers a glimpse into the vast potential of the fatshion blogging community for research and the furtherance of the fat acceptance movement. The information collected here could be greatly expanded by including a quantitative analysis of the sizes of different blogs and demographic information about the women who traffic them. As well, more could be learned about women's reasons for participating in the blogs by conducting interviews with both the bloggers and blog moderators. Only so much information can be gathered by perusing the blogs and reading bloggers' commentary, so speaking to bloggers about the choices they make as they prepare a post to submit to a fatshion blog and their experiences in the fatshion community could be extremely enlightening. As it is, though, this project aims to expand the conversation about fat activism, sizeism, online communities, and fashion culture, and to begin shedding light on the vibrant, varied work (and play) being done by the fatshion blogging community.

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