WEIGHING THE RISKS: FAT EXPERIENCES OF WEIGHT STIGMA DURING COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The bodily control of women is a core part of patriarchal systems, which can be seen today through diet culture and its dissemination via social media. This project examines the experiences of weight stigma during the COVID-19 pandemic by those assigned female at birth (AFAB) and female TikTok users. This project seeks to answer the following: How does COVID-19 complicate an existing discussion around the effects of weight stigma on the social and physical well-being of women and AFAB individuals who are likely to experience misogyny? How does social media use affect experiences of weight stigma for fat individuals, who may be subjected to misogyny, and their ability to cope with the impact of such stigma? In other words, what does it mean to have a body deemed part of an epidemic, amidst a pandemic? This project utilizes two forms of qualitative methods, in-depth interviews and a TikTok content analysis. Research included 13 interview participants and analysis of 5 TikTok content creators. My findings demonstrate that an increase in body neutrality/acceptance content on TikTok during COVID-19 was matched with an increase in engagement with and adoption of these principles. Participants also reported a change in the type of weight stigma they experienced; fewer in-person experiences of stigmatization, with a greater emphasis on social media based stigmatization. While there was a reported decrease in experiences of certain types of weight stigma, new and different types of weight stigma emerged during COVID-19. Further, my results explain that due to its unique algorithmic function,

TikTok was the only social media platform capable of producing such rapid social change for body acceptance over expectations of thinness within the span of the pandemic, and through this, was able to create a growing dialogue counter to hegemonic understandings of health and fatness. This project does not suggest that TikTok is free from the negative effects of social media; the novel finding of this project is that there can be positive experiences of community building and engagement on apps like TikTok. By exploring how participants were able to find and cultivate online communities that support protection and aid against stigma, researchers can apply these principles to other systematic social issues to determine whether the same kind of digital community is helpful in other instances. The implications of this study are a) understanding of TikTok as an educational platform and b) increased knowledge of algorithmic or short video social media as potentially positive to body image and self-worth.

INTRODUCTION

My project, *Weighing the Risks: Fat Experiences of Weight Stigma During COVID-19* examines how an emphasis on fatness, seen through the addition of 'obese' as a high-risk category for COVID-19, affects young women and those assigned female at birth (AFAB). Their experiences of stigma prior to and during the pandemic, as well as how TikTok (and social media more broadly) impacts the reception and internalization of this information is of importance to this project. My interest is in expanding the current

dialogue surrounding feminism, fatness, intersectionality, Health At Every Size (HAES), and the effects of social media on body satisfaction and the power of social media users to build constructive, digitally mediated community conversations. This project uses two sources of qualitative data, combining 13 in-depth interviews with a comprehensive content analysis of the videos of five TikTok creators from March 2020-May 2022. I utilized these methods to compare the experiences shared with me through the interview process and the TikTok content selected from the time period in question to explore if and how these social media conversations impacted participants in real time[1]. Further, my methods work to understand how the social shift to distancing and increased technological use, present during the pandemic may have altered participants' experiences or perceptions of weight stigma. How does COVID-19 complicate an existing discussion around the effects of weight stigma on the social and physical well-being of women and AFAB individuals who are likely to experience misogyny? How does social media use affect experiences of weight stigma for fat individuals who may be subjected to misogyny and their ability to cope with the impact of such stigma? In other words, what does it mean to have a body deemed part of an epidemic, amidst a pandemic? By recording changes participants reported in experiences of weight stigma, researchers and activists can understand how social views around fatness and body diversity continue to shift and be reshaped.

1 In real time refers to immediate impact by social media or news outlets as they are taken in by the viewer.

This thesis will begin with a literature review examining key elements of existing research on the themes of control, patriarchy, body image issues, body acceptance, social media, intersectionality, disability, weight stigma, eating disorders, and wellness. These themes are divided into three main sections, Patriarchy, Control, and the Feminine Body; Intersectionality, and The Sociology of Health; and finally, Weight and Stigma. Each section acts as a backdrop from which I build upon my analysis and findings. It will also highlight the limitations of the literature available on these topics and any gaps I feel could benefit from further research.

Following the literature review, my methods section will provide an overview of how TikTok functions in order to provide readers unfamiliar with the platform the tools to comprehend both the TikTok-sourced data and the cultural context of my participants' social media centered responses. Further, I will incorporate past research on TikTok, and studies that include TikTok analysis as part of their methods, to illustrate why this platform is well-suited for answering my research questions. I will also detail the flow of my interviews and explain the kind of data each question aimed to draw from participants. Finally, I will explain why this project benefits from this methodological approach and explain why other types of methodology would be less well suited.

My findings and analysis organize the data I collected into three key sections. The first section (Health Care) addresses themes of healthcare access for fat women and AFAB persons, including definitions around health, the social dialogue around health and

thinness, experiences advocating for health care, early access to the vaccine, fear of medical weight stigma, and experiences of medical weight stigma. This section provides a basis for understanding how participants and creators view their bodies within a dominant 'health' discourse, and how they have traditionally navigated health care as fat individuals. The second section (Diet Culture's Grasp) explores themes of diet culture narratives, body image, disordered eating and eating disorders, the 'Pandemic 20/Quarantine 15,' insecurity and social media, and the cult of thinness. This second section builds upon the discussion around health and explores how participants interact with hegemonic narratives of thinness and the effect of these narratives in their lives. Finally, section three (Resisting Hegemonic Cultural Ideologies) addresses how TikTokers and my participants resist hegemonic narratives surrounding bodies, health, and wellness. This final section includes discussion of participants' personal definitions of health, body acceptance, representation, advocacy, and the impacts of social media. I conclude this portion of my analysis by discussing counter hegemonic narratives of bodies, size, and health as they appear and are circulated on TikTok. This project's findings work to understand how young women/AFAB individuals are impacted by social media during times of social upheaval, specifically forms of social media that, like TikTok, are extremely popular. By exploring how participants were able to find and cultivate online communities that support protection and aids against stigma, researchers can apply these principles to other systematic social issues to see if the same kind of

digital community is helpful in other instances. In totality, this thesis will provide an understanding of gendered experiences of weight stigma during COVID-19, and examine the significance of TikTok as an educational tool for counter cultural narratives, and explore the emerging discourse of weight, separate from size.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much literature informs our current understanding of femininity, fatness, and health. Within these topics is weight stigma, body neutrality, fat activism, and an understanding of the gendered effects of media, both social and mainstream, and the nuances of this experience on different platforms[2]. This literature review will take readers through three distinct academic conversations that lay the foundation for this project, illustrate where we are missing adequate research, and make clear where this project fits into the existing discourse. A discussion on feminist theory, centring women in social time and place, will aid readers in understanding the social expectations for women and the theory that grounds academic understanding of gendered issues (Kite & Kite, 2020; Harrison, 2019; Bordo, 1993; MacKinnon, 1997; Dworkin, 1987; Orbach, 2005; Meyer, 2020; Zucker, Harrell, Miner-Rubino, Stewart, Pomerleau & Boyd, 2001; Coleman-Minahan, Stevenson, Obront & Hays, 2019; Peterson, Tantleff-Dunn, & Bedwell, 2006). This section will also include review of literature available on the effects

[2] The gendered effects of media exist for all genders, however, this project is referencing the nuanced experiences that would differ for women and those AFAB individuals still experiencing the pressure of gender binaries through media.

of social media on women, where it intersects with expectations of femininity and centers women in its analysis (Kite & Kite, 2020; Harrison, 2019; Fardouly & Holland, 2018; Gioia, Griffiths & Boursier, 2020; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Wykes & Gunter, 2005; Puglia, 2017; McLean, Paxton & Wertheim, 2016; Lazuka, Wick, Keel & Harriger, 2020; Lonergan et al., 2020; Lund & Gudmundsdottir, 2019). From there, I will discuss intersectional feminist research (Crenshaw, 1989; Taylor, 2018; Thompson 2018; Gay, 2018; Strings, 2019, Udorie, 2018; Tovar, 2018; Dionne, 2018; Shippers, 2007; Gibson, 2020), specifically surrounding female experience that does not conform to societal expectations (Brownmiller, 1984; Mairs, 1990; Chrisler, 2011; Darwin, 2017; Inkel, 2017; Garland-Thompson, 2005; Hunter, Dispenza, Huffstead, Suttles & Bradley, 2020; Velex, Campos & Moradi, 2015), incorporating studies that demonstrate the tangible consequences of breaking feminine social norms (Shentow-Bewsh, Keating & Mills, 2016; Velex, Campos & Moradi, 2015). Finally, I will discuss literature surrounding the sociology of health and how it relates to weight stigma, including discourse surrounding quality of life, to clarify how this project defines ‘health’ and weight stigma, informing the results of this project (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Bunton, Nettleton & Burrows, 1995; Hunger, Smith, & Tomiyama, 2020; Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015; Tomiyama et al., 2018; Schvey, Puhl & Brownell, 2014; Mustillo, Budd & Hendrix, 2013; Tomiyama et al., 2018; Brewis, Hruschka & Wutich, 2011; Hesse-Biber et al., 2006; Herrick, 2009; Gilbert, Keery & Thompson, 2005; Lonergan, et al., 2020).

This research adds to the limited qualitative, first-hand data from fat women and AFAB individuals on the effects of social media and weight stigma on their lives and explores how this is further impacted during times of social crisis, such as COVID-19. Additionally, COVID-19 created a unique experience of increased time spent indoors, and on social media. As TikTok is a fairly new SNS (Social Networking Site) there is little data on its impacts, and next to none that examines both the impacts of the platform *and* the content producing these impacts. My project seeks to address this gap by providing a mixed method analysis of the cultural conversation of health and bodies taking place during COVID-19 on TikTok. While my project sits within that gap, it will not address all the information we are missing, nor could any one project. I will provide my recommendations below for future research in an attempt to address this gap.

Patriarchy, Control and Feminine Bodies

To engage with this project, it is crucial for readers to understand how feminists view patriarchy as affecting women's bodies. Patriarchy, as defined by Syliva Walby, is "a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (1998, p. 214). While this offers a simplified definition of patriarchy, many feminist theorists have illustrated a multitude of effects of a system in which women and AFAB individuals are systematically disenfranchised. One such example is the bodily control and oppression of women and those AFAB, due to the power imbalance of the

patriarchy. Second wave feminist theorists, such as Susan Bordo (1993), Catherine A. MacKinnon (1997), and Andrea Dworkin (1987), investigate how the patriarchy uses and extends control over the female body, keeping in place power structures that benefit men and masculinity. When patriarchal systems are left unchallenged, or operate subtly, women must work harder to achieve the same results as their male counterparts or work just as hard to receive less (Bordo, 1993). The effects of patriarchy can be seen beyond arenas of bodily control (Mackinnon, 1997; Dworkin, 1987; Bordo, 1993), such as law making, and marketing schemes (Thompson, 2018; Taylor, 2018). When women and AFAB individuals are not given an equal voice to men, their bodies become sites of objective or theoretical discussion, excluding the individuals with lived experiences inside of those bodies. This results in decisions, such as restrictive reproductive laws (Meyer, 2020), medical institutions operating on the basis of male anatomy and symptomatology alone (Mairs 1990; Chastian, 2017), and media that depicts unrealistic, and detrimental expectations of beauty that women must chase, at the risk of losing social capital (Fardouly & Holland, 2018; Gioia, Griffiths & Boursier, 2020; Kite & Kite, 2020; Zucker, Harrell, Miner-Rubino, Stewart, Pomerleau & Boyd, 2001). By understanding how patriarchy oppresses women and those AFAB by limiting their bodily autonomy, we see how the body exists as a site of control, privileging those with (gendered) power. From a patriarchal perspective, female bodies must be limited in order to keep dominant

power structures in play, benefitting a gendered structure which creates and sustains male and masculine privilege.

Gender-based oppression and bodily control also includes sexual violence and rape and the categorizing of some female bodies as ‘pure’ or ‘virginal’ and others as damaged, and therefore unable to be ‘ruined’ by the same violence (Mackinnon, 1997; Brownmiller & Gabbert, 1975; Dworkin, 1987). While some (Mackinnon, 1997; Brownmiller & Gabbert, 1975; Dworkin, 1987) are considered radical in their views of sex and violence as being intrinsically linked, these theorists do point to a similar control of the female body. Catherine A. Mackinnon speaks on the idea of ‘rapeability' or ‘being rapeable,’ a position that is unique to children and virginal women, all other women being previously ‘ruined’ or ‘used’ by profession, sexual conduct, or marriage (Mackinnon, 1997). While a contested understanding of sex, her work, along with that of Andrea Dworkin’s (1987), attempts to access the core of rape culture and objectification of women to understand control, tracking it back to the negative effects of patriarchy. All these theorists see the oppression of women, oppression based on gender, as one of the most pertinent issues to address for a more equitable society. However, while the theorists mentioned above provide a strong basis of study, feminism is used expansively to understand the experiences and treatment of women; feminist studies reach far beyond blatant control and investigate even minute details that reveal gendered structures that support and create the oppression of women and marginalized genders across the world.

Cultural standards surrounding beauty and femininity are a particularly central way in which women and AFAB bodies are controlled and oppressed under patriarchy (Bordo, 1993; Brownmiller, 1984; Mairs, 1990). Susan Bordo calls the female body, in her article "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity," "a *practical*, direct locus of social control" (Bordo, 1993, pp.90-91). Her article provides a foundational theoretical discussion of the female body as a "docile body," bodies that can be changed, 'improved', shaped, or controlled externally (1993, p. 91). Similarly, Harrison speaks about this in her book, *Anti-Diet*, and explains that she began dieting to fit in with the women and girls around her. She explains that we are taught that dieting is part of the female experience, and that she felt "a missing piece of…[her] social life seemed to fall into place" once she began dieting too (2019, p.5). Here, Harrison is speaking about feminine bodies as docile bodies, and a revelation that they are *supposed* to be changed, if you want the social goods that accompany avid dieting. While Bordo's work in its entirety is central to a discussion on bodies as sites of control, her work on anorexia as a "construction of contemporary femininity" (1993, p. 95) demonstrates how some women cling to social norms as a means of personal protection. Bordo positions anorexia in two contradicting and yet coexisting ways. Firstly, it is a traditional example of the feminine, a body designed to feed others and not itself as, "self-nurturance and self-feeding [are seen] as greedy and excessive" (1993, p, 96). Secondly, the anorexic body is a picture of the masculine traits' that are expected to be displayed in the public workplace by all

genders: control and self-mastery (Bordo, 199, p. 96). Bordo states that these emaciated bodies are an image of a fight for bodily control, the anorexic body being a site of both outward and personal control over social expectations. Food becomes the one thing that is controllable in an otherwise uncontrollable life (1993). This desire to control food can be traced back to a fear of fatness, one that many women believe cannot be separated from expectations of femininity (Harrison, 2019).

A study conducted on 188 female undergraduate students in the US revealed a correlation between smoking for low-weight management and a lack of feminist consciousness (Zucker, Harrell, Miner-Rubino, Stewart, Pomerleau & Boyd, 2001). They traced this connection between smoking and thinness back to products such as *Virgina Slims* and ads that recommended cigarettes over “sweets" (2001, p. 234). This particular study connected expectations of thinness, unrealistic expectations of beauty, and smoking as a weight management tool largely to magazine advertisements. They found that when women are not equipped with feminist understandings, such as media literacy, and resilience to diet culture (Kite & Kite, 2020), they may become susceptible to marketing that attempts to control their bodies and sway their purchasing power. Rachel D. Peterson, Stacey Tantleff-Dunn, and Jeffery S. Bedwell (2006), discuss the importance of feminist education in their writings. Their results showed that greater exposure to feminist discourse can have a mediating effect on body image dissatisfaction and appearance-related anxiety. Their findings, coupled with the work of Zucker, Harrell,

Miner-Rubino, Stewart, Pomerleau & Boyd (2001) gives sustaining empirical research to the effects of a feminist consciousness against societal control of women. Still, this mediating effect requires women to a) be aware of the benefits of adopting this consciousness, and b) continually work to counter the social narratives and expectations of femininity (Zucker, Harrell, Miner-Rubino, Stewart, Pomerleau & Boyd, 2001; Peterson, Tantleff-Dunn, & Bedwell, 2006). Both are easier said than done.

Women and AFAB individuals also face bodily control via governmental institutions. Lauren Gurrieri, Josephine Previte, and Jan Brace-Govan (2013) explore the negative impacts of social marketing campaigns pushed by governments in the name of health, specifically the areas of breastfeeding, weight management, and activity (2013). They explain that the traditional view of these campaigns marginalizes women whose health practices are counter to the dominant media message (2013, p. 128). Drawing on embodiment theory, their study examines how neoliberalism and social marketing makes women's bodies sites of control. Gurrieri, Previte & Brace-Govan (2013) critique existing social marketing campaigns for being individualistic and call for macromarketing strategies (broader views) that would encompass a wider range of 'health' for more women. They examine the social effects of existing campaigns depicting idealized female bodies with little room for difference (p.128). They encourage marketers to look at these campaigns through a feminist lens, "to take on a more encompassing agenda that responds to the experience of bodily injustices" (Gurrieri, Previte & Brace-Govan, 2013,

p. 139). They continue, encouraging marketing firms to be “co-creative” and include those they may marginalize in existing micro-marketing strategies (focused on one body/product type alone). They state, “by being more encompassing, more inclusive perspectives on health will be generated that do not have the effect of creating moral work for women in the goal of attaining social good” (2013, p. 139). Gurrieri, Previte & Brace-Govan (2013) touch on important concerns in this sentiment– the ‘moral work’ of thinness norms pushes women, through these ads, to engage at all costs or be labeled as lazy, ‘immoral’ or bad for living as they are.

Beyond daily expectations, female oppression and control appears most concretely through reproductive laws and myths around female sexuality (Meyer, 2020). One of today’s largest sites of control of the female body is situated around abortion and whether the development of the fetus should supersede the rights and autonomy of the mother (Meyer, 2020). This can be seen at present with the protests surrounding anti-abortion laws passed in the state of Texas that leave no exception for situations of rape, age, or inability to carry to term (Rabin, New York Times, 2021). And now, with the supreme court's decision to revoke *Roe vs. Wade*, access to safe abortions is no longer a constitutional right, putting millions of women and individuals with uteruses at risk, restricting access to safe abortions and/or life-saving medical treatment following a miscarriage (Totenberg & McCammon, 2022, NPR). Writings like *The Wandering Uterus: Politics and the Reproductive Rights of Women* (Meyer, 2020) specifically

examine the issue of reproduction, and acknowledge the overarching issues of control over the female body, outside of and including, reproductive laws. Similarly grounded in these concerns, one empirical study used telephone interviews to uncover young Texan women's (16-19) experiences pursuing judicial bypass for abortions (Coleman-Minahan, Stevenson, Obront & Hays, 2019). Their study found that while this process was intended to protect young women from the social stigma around abortion, the process itself was humiliating and shameful, and concluded that the process could harm young women's health (2019). Studies such as this one reveal that control of the female body begins young, and that having legal proceedings in place *meant* to provide women with safe medical resources are often insufficient. Beyond that, this study demonstrates that the patriarchy as a social system has very visible physical effects on the lives of women, from birth to birthing and beyond.

The Role of Social Media

Social media impacts how individuals experience and navigate the world, with gender greatly affecting how social media targets different audiences. Feminist literature helps illuminate how social media has, and continues, to shape and affect the way women view, and feel in, their bodies (Fardouly & Holland, 2018; Gioia, Griffiths & Boursier, 2020; Kite & Kite, 2020). As research on social media in the social sciences continues to expand, so too do the conversations and concerns among academics on the key issues

within this area. From a technical standpoint, there is rapidly expanding data on the intricacies of TikTok as an algorithmic social networking site (SNS) (Ceci, 2020; Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021; Kennedy, 2020; Li, Guan, Hammond & Berrey, 2021; Masciantonio, Bourguignon, Bouchat, Balty & Rimé, 2021; Ostrovsky & Chen, 2020; Unni & Weinstein, 2021). Examining the effects of social media, some theorists focus efforts on the link between poor body image and exposure to media content that promotes and/or monitors bodies (Fardouly & Holland, 2018; Gioia, Griffiths & Boursier, 2020; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Wykes & Gunter, 2005; Puglia, 2017; Kite & Kite, 2020). Others focus their interest on education of cautionary social media engagement and subsequent best practices (Lund & Gudmundsdottir, 2019; Bunton, Nettleton, & Burrows, 1995; Valdmane, 2016), as well as progress being made in social media-based social movements (McLean, Paxton & Wertheim, 2016; Lazuka, Wick, Keel & Harriger, 2020). Each academic discussion on social media aids in understanding the brief, but fraught, relationship many individuals have towards social media as linked to body image and/or weight stigma.

While there is research on the general effects of social media (Puglia, 2017; Gioia, Griffiths & Boursier, 2020), and research on the more common forms of social and general media such as Instagram (Kite & Kite, 2020; Lazuka, Wick, Keel, & Harriger, 2020; Lonergan, et al., 2020), TV and magazines, there remains little to no research on how rapid video forms of social media impact women's body perception and well-being.

TikTok, unlike other forms of social media, presents short, consumable interactive social media content that was widely used during the pandemic. In 3 months alone (between March 15th and May 22nd, 2020) the rate of TikTok engagement rose from 4% to 12% for all ages and from 10% to 28% for those 15-25 years of age (Ceci, 2022). Feminist analysis of and research on this specific area of social media will allow future researchers to understand whether, beyond still photos, short, rapid videos impact women's perception of their bodies and social well-being differently or similarly to traditional/dominant media platforms. Does video, rather than still photos, allow for a more detailed interrogation and discussion of the depiction of the female body in its various shapes and sizes, as seen on SNSs? Is representation and movement of different bodies more helpful on apps like TikTok, or does it have the same effect on participants as a SNS like Instagram? Some work has been completed on the body image effects of moving images, largely television programming and commercials. Phillip N. Myers Jr. and Frank Biocca (1992), studied the effects of "ideal body" in television programming and commercials, and saw a conflict between "actual body size…ideal body image and an unstable self-perceived body image" (Myers & Biocca, 1992, p.108). Their work is helpful in highlighting the intricacies of moving vs. still images, and how body image is complicated through interactions with television. However, the dated nature of this work means it cannot fully answer SNS specific concerns regarding these different mediums. To fully understand how young women today are exposed to body acceptance, and how

they learn to process weight stigma, body perceptions, and represent themselves online, more research must be done to grasp how TikTok differentiates from traditional SNSs.

Further, in a desire to grasp the intricacies of social media, the negative consequences of social media have become of great concern to social scientists. A predominant concern of this research is the impact of social media on body image for women. Jasmine Fardouly and Elise Holland investigate the impact of idealized thin bodies on social media, and the influence, or lack thereof, that disclaimers of image altering have on the mood of viewers of said content (2018). Their study found that women had a less positive view of the creator of the image when given a disclaimer of editing and that attaching disclaimers in an attempt to mediate body comparison, was "ineffective at reducing women's body dissatisfaction and negative mood" towards altered images (Fardouly & Holland, 2018, p. 4322). Another study found a correlation between media exposure to the thin ideal and body image dissatisfaction among women (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). Grabe, Ward, & Hyde's (2008) project furthered existing research around body dissatisfaction and media by examining experimental and correlational research, as well as meta-analysis. They explain that the most difficult part of analyzing this research is an inconsistent standard of what constitutes body dissatisfaction and eating disorder behaviour (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). This study is significant as it refined the existing data, creating a system of analysis that subdivides the reason for each study, how body dissatisfaction was measured, the assessment of the thin

ideal, and the categorization of eating disorders and beliefs (2008, p. 436). Using a quantitative analysis, this study found an "overall…decreased level…of body satisfaction for women" due to media exposure (p. 469). Like these theorists, Kite and Kite (2020) in their PhD work, focused on what they've coined *self-objectification*: the process of turning oneself into an object or a prize, largely connected to appearance anxiety. They found:

> "In all, 71 percent of women ages eighteen to thirty-five who participated in our doctoral research very clearly self-objectified without even knowing it. But among those who felt negatively about their bodies, that number soared to 91 percent…82.5% of women stay home from events or activities, or sit out of opportunities, because of their appearance anxiety. That statistic – eight out of 10 women – tells us too many women live in a near constant state of body monitoring" (2020, p.107-108).

Another study investigated the impacts of print media, specifically fashion magazines, on body dissatisfaction on young women (Wykes & Gunter, 2005). They show evidence of a division between beauty and health as portrayed in the media, and that which is available to young women. They quote one participant as stating "girls feel being slim is more important than being physically fit; they just want to be attractive, not actually healthy … Most girls just starve, not exercise, to lose weight" (Wykes & Gunter, 2005, p. 10) (ellipses used in original). Their study shows that while the media may attempt to promote 'health,' the consistent presence of a thin body, regardless of intention, pulls young women towards the thin ideal of beauty (2005). This research by Wykes and Gunter, discussed above, is dated back to the early 2000's, and yet the importance of this

data and research has hardly changed. There has been, and is, an obvious need for research on the way women interact with and are affected by media and yet the available literature on this issue has not translated to public action and policy capable of limiting the need for future and continuous work on this topic. It prompts me, as a social scientist and researcher to ask: Is it the rapidly changing nature of media? Is this research dated due to its medium (TV, magazines, etc.) that are all but becoming obsolete? Is the missing link between this research and social change the *kind* of media use being analyzed? As mentioned above, theorists do seem to be shifting to a more modern form of content analysis examining image editing perceptions (Fardouly & Holland, 2018), but will this research also be dated before long? While feminist media analysis may provide a lens into media which aids women in reclaiming social and physical health, it may be an uphill battle in an ever-changing digital age, creating many gaps in our knowledge of social media, consistently in need of further research.

These same concerns of rapid changes to the most prominent forms of social media prompted one study by Francesca Gioia, Mark D. Griffiths, and Valentina Bousier (2020) to explore the relationship between body image control in photos and problematic social media use (Gioia, Griffiths & Boursier, 2020). This study defined problematic media use as "unhealthy, and potentially addictive use of SNSs" (social networking services) (2020, p.774). Coupled with body control (consistently monitoring and critiquing one's body, and therefore, photos) this study found only partial confirmation

that body shame was correlated with problematic social media use, however, this relationship did "strongly predict body image control" (editing and curating content that supports a preferred public perception) in social media photos (2020, p. 773). The research on feminist media analysis and the effects of social media on girls and young women shows that social media does impact its viewers perception of their own bodies when presented with an ideal body entirely unlike their own.

Theorists confirm the notion of control through social standards of feminine beauty and have developed further into examining "healthism," also seen through the 'wellness lifestyle' trends on social media revitalizing the face of restrictive dieting (diet culture), that continues to place women's bodies as "sites of control" (Gurrieri, Previte & Brace-Govan, 2013; Bunton, Nettleton & Burrows, 1995; Harrison, 2019). Furthermore, women's bodies being additionally manipulated and controlled through the media, depicting a thin ideal through marketing, social media, and film, has been linked to poorer mental health and high body dissatisfaction (Fardouly & Holland, 2018; Gioia, Griffiths & Boursier, 2020). Bodily control through social media becomes increasingly significant as its constant presence expands and permeates the everyday lives of most young women. Harrison writes, "In that sense, wellness influencers are the Gibson girl of the twenty-first century—supposedly liberating images of beauty and vitality that are actually oppressive" (2019, p.76). The idea of, and working on, 'correcting' or

‘perfecting’ the feminine body implicitly slips into every platform and advertisement (Puglia, 2017), and often translates to being limited in all other areas of their lives.

Despite the harm that social media is able to cause, media literacy and agency can be a helpful tool in mediating some or most of this effect on young women. Some theorists have taken interest in studying social media to discern how we can prevent the harm social media can cause before it happens. As technology becomes more prominent, youth are taught as students, to some degree, how to interrogate the media they consume. Studies have shown that high levels of media literacy (an inclusion of media interrogation and critical thinking) decrease the likelihood of adopting a thin ideal or an upward comparison of one’s body to others (Kite & Kite, 2020; McLean, Paxton & Wertheim, 2016). Further, studies in education acknowledge the importance of media literacy in promoting agency in children (Valdmane, 2016) and how that agency can also be seen in how young adults learn to solve problems through media, using their acquired media literacy skills (Lund & Gudmundsdottir, 2019). Stuart Hall, in his seminal article “Encoding/Decoding” (1973), speaks about a chain of meaning making that aids audiences in interpreting media. His work is foundational in the understanding of media literacy, and while it does not explicitly connect with body image, eating disorders, or modern social media, it certainly informs theorists’ research and remains a dominant theory of how cultural media messages are produced (encoding) and received (decoding) (Hall, 1973). Due to an emphasis on agency through media literacy (Kite & Kite, 2020;

McLean, Paxton & Wertheim, 2016; Valdmane, 2016; Lund & Gudmundsdottir, 2019), and the ways in which we receive and process media messaging (Hall, 1973), young women can also choose not to engage with thin-ideal, diet culture, and consumerized messaging while still engaging with their preferred media sources[3].

Evidence about how social media messaging impacts viewers demonstrates the need for continued and rapid research on the effects of social media and body image. This diverse body of research shows that while there is a relationship between (social) media and body image, that relationship is continuously evolving. As social media rapidly expands and infiltrates our daily lives, it is critical to continue this line of research. There remains new and evolving information on the impact of social media's effect on marginalized individuals that requires academic inquiry to inform policy and create programs that protect marginalized populations from the potentially worsened impacts of marginalization through media. As platforms and algorithms change, so too will the pace at which women are controlled and shaped by diet culture and weight expectations through the media. Unfortunately, the current data or rate of accumulation of data are insufficient for the nature of this century's technological advances.

3 While it is true that young women *can* choose not to engage with this content, it is important to note that it is incredibly hard to clear all diet culture messaging from one's social media accounts. Beyond obvious diet culture marketing, there are subtle forms of indoctrination and guilt, even through posts from friends and family. Finally, ads on some SNSs, such as YouTube, cannot be removed without a subscription, leaving many users inundated with dieting ads for programs such as Noom before each video.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality allows for the understanding that gender alone is not a sufficient lens through which to understand the experiences of all AFAB people and women. Initially created to look at the intersections between gender and race, intersectionality is now used to understand social change and experience in a wide variety of contexts (Udorie, 2018). Intersectionality as a concept was introduced in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw to illuminate the 'double bind' of Black women who were neither represented by the fight for gender equality, nor anti-racist efforts. She employed intersectionality to explain that there was never a time when a Black woman could either be Black, or a woman, but that this joint experience impacted their entire lived experience, and marginalization (1989). Today intersectionality has expanded as a lens that can analyze any number of marginalized experiences including, but not limited to, fat women and AFAB individuals. Given this, it is critical to remember that a white woman's experience of fatness would differ from a Black woman's experience, or an East Asian woman's experience. Furthermore, beyond race, gender and fatness, any manner of combinations of identity would prove a different experience of life as a fat person, including sexuality, socio-economic status, and ability.

Intersectionality has also been used to interrogate the experiences of gendered marginalization for women, specifically women of colour and trans women of colour, in the academy (Avils et al., 2018). Truly, intersectional theory has been used to understand

everything from gender issues in the Black Lives Matter movement (Dionne, 2018), to marginalization of trans women by women and within the LGBTQ+ community (Jacques, 2018), to the fat female body (Thompson, 2018). Intersectionality can be misunderstood to mean dissecting the smaller parts of the whole, or as only additive to the experiences of cis, straight, rich, white men who hold the most privilege within our present social systems. However, a fuller understanding of intersectionality prompts valuing and understanding all facets of a person equally, simultaneously, and in relation to each other. Each aspect of an individual's identity is built upon all other facets of identity, creating a lived experience that genders disability, or fattens feminism. Looking at the varied experiences of women and AFAB individuals through intersectionality allows social scientists to account for their multidimensionality, yet it is key to remember that all individuals experiencing multiple forms of oppression always remain "uniquely whole" (Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008). Intersectional analysis reveals that people experience all aspects of their identity concurrently, each aspect creating an interwoven, multifaceted, lived experience that society often fails to account for when isolating one aspect of a person as primarily relevant. This project employs a feminist intersectional framework, introduced by Crenshaw, to ensure that, while based in feminism, this project does not fall prey to the legacy of excluding marginalized voices facing multiple facets of oppression, or fail to account for how intersections of identity shape gendered and/or embodied experiences (Orbach, 2006; Strings, 2019; Udorie; 2018; Thompson, 2018).

Feminist literature has a legacy of excluding already marginalized bodies in its fight for gender equality (Orbach, 2006; Strings, 2019; Udorie; 2018; Thompson, 2018). Like intersectional feminists, critical fat studies theorists acknowledge the one-dimensional nature of traditional feminism that has failed to include other marginalized identities (Udorie, 2018; Thompson, 2018; Jacques, 2018). Theorists who explore the fat female body push for the understanding that fat women experience life and gender differently than thin women, due to the systemic oppression of fat individuals (Taylor, 2018). Sonya Renee Taylor is a leading radical self-acceptance feminist in the field of fat studies. Her book, titled after her organization of the same name, *The Body is Not an Apology*, aims to reclaim the watered-down, social media-based, body positivity movement for women of colour. In fact, her work asks readers to push past the threshold of positivity, into a world of radical self-acceptance, something she posits is stronger than simply loving one's body (Taylor, 2018). Her writing challenges basic social understandings of the world around us (how we talk to ourselves, how we imagine a default person in our own or society's preferred image) and combats diet culture. While she is not an academic sociologist, her work holds a sociological lens to the world of thin, white media that excludes Black fat (read: or queer, disabled, poor, trans, etc.) bodies like her own. Most radically, Taylor refers to diet culture and external regulation of the body as "body terrorism" (Taylor, 2018, ebook ch.3.3, p.16). As a writer and activist, Taylor is highly concerned with external expectations of bodies and beauty and the impact they

have on individual wellness. Her work is significant to this project as it illuminates that even within what can appear to be an inclusive theoretical framework (fat studies), there is still marginalization, shame, and hierarchy (Taylor, 2018, p. 17).

Thompson, in her article "Fat Demands," discusses her "entangled" experience as a fat Black woman (2018, p. 43). She explains that as she attempted to separate fatness from blackness, fatness from health, and fatness from femininity, it became much messier than if she regarded it as wholly interconnected. Furthermore, she writes about a social model of disability, which "argues that no single body is abnormal, that there are limitless variations of what our bodies can be, and that we are disabled not by these variations, but instead by societal attitudes that do not accommodate them" (p. 45). She explores a concept that is delicate but crucial. When applied to fatness, a social model of disability shows the issue is not fat individuals who are 'lazy' and nonconforming to a thin world but a world that chooses not to make the necessary accommodations for all body sizes. Garland-Thompson and Thompson's work posits fat individuals not as the problem, but simply "another variation" of a human being that society must learn to adapt for (Thompson, 2018, p. 45). While it is dangerous to conflate the experiences of disabled individuals with fat individuals as their experiences are distinctly different, a disabled reading of the marginalization of the fat body during COVID-19 is paramount to understanding how the treatment of fat people during the pandemic is emblematic of

systematic marginalization. COVID-19 itself is a 'disabling' disease, a mark that often follows even the 'healthiest' (a subjective marker) of (fat) bodies.

Further, Tameeka Hunter, Franco Dispenza, Mary Huffstead, Mackenzie Suttles and Zachary Bradley (2020) take a look at "queering disability" in which they regard how queer disabled individuals may differently approach and experience resilience. Their work illuminates an unexplained gap in negative health outcomes for both marginalized communities and adapts an intersectional framework to understand how disabled people living as part of a sexual minority may experience worsened mental health effects. Each of these studies (Darwin, 2017; Schippers, 2007; Garland-Thomspon, 2005; Hunter, Dispenza, Huffstead, Suttles & Bradley, 2020) employs the core understanding of intersectionality as Crenshaw (1989) intended. Factors of marginalization do not exist in a vacuum and understanding how these identities interweave to affect lived experience is the key to deeper social scientific research of the effects of inequality on marginalized groups, and the variable co-construction of categorically separated identities in lived experience.

Similarly, Virgie Tovar in her book *You Have the Right to Remain Fat* discusses the role of race in fatphobia and anti-fat sentiment (2018). She explains that the difference she sees between fatphobic sentiment towards white people versus fatphobic sentiment towards Black people is "a racist act of blaming and pathologizing Black people in the name of public health" (Tovar, 2018, p.86). She goes on to say that the real

‘obesity epidemic’ or issue with ‘obesity’ is the social issue of “racism, poverty, and weight-based bigotry” that isn’t being met with grass-roots level solutions for improvement (p.86). Despite her book being about fat bodies and their right to exist uncontested, Tovar also contends that the issue, whether for white people or POC, is not individual and that fat shame and personal blame is literally “kill[ing] people” (p. 86). Sabrina Strings, in her book *Fearing the Black Body* writes, “the phobia about fatness and the preference for thinness have not, principally or historically, been about health” (Strings, 2019, p.6). Examples of intersectional analysis regarding race and oppression but pushing past the issue of workplace equity as initially theorized by Crenshaw, can be seen in the studies mentioned above, both through academic research/private practice, and individual lived experience.

Mirroring both Taylor and Thompson (2018), Gemma Lucy Gibson writes about the relationship between the body positivity movement and fat activism (2020). Her work centers around the narrow focus of the movement, one she also argues has been co-opted by midsize white women. She identifies the 5 pillars of the social movement as it is known today: whiteness, femininity, heterosexuality, health, and self-love (2020). Her article pushes for a more ‘liberatory’ body positivity movement, one that would finally include a wider range of individuals, including most theorists whose work informs fat activism and fat studies (Gibson, 2020; Taylor, 2018; Thompson, 2018; Mairs, 1993; Tovar, 2018; Strings, 2019).

Fat studies academics have historically looked at the pressures of thinness placed on women (Bordo, 1993; Gibson, 2020; Lazuka, 2020)[4], and while many reject shrinking the female body, some continue to place focus on weight and the physical appearance of the body in feminist discourse (Orbach, 2006). For example, theorists such as Susan Orbach and her work *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (2006) talk at length about weight loss and weight management in relation to recovery from compulsive eating disorders. Orbach states that her book is published to help women address the thinness ideal, become a natural size (read: lose weight) and *regain* their lives (p.19-21). Her use of the term "regain" connotes a personal belief that to be fat or more commonly phrased, 'get' fat, is to lose something significant in one's womanhood. She later states, "Being fat isolates and invalidates a woman" (Orbach, 2006, p.23). Contradictory to what many fat theorists advocate for and what research shows to be true, theorists like Orbach, and arguably Evelyn Tribole in her earlier editions of *Intuitive Eating* (Tribole & Resch, 1996), push a subliminal message of weight loss and manipulation of the female body, despite their work being grounded in health, body acceptance, and freedom from gendered oppression. Thompson mentions the direct negative impact that Orbach's (2006) work had on her as a fat Black woman. Orbach's advice was something Thompson could not afford nor accept: keep a pantry full of a variety of foods, including those diet culture

[4] These studies, while focused on women, do aid in analyzing the experiences of AFAB individuals in this project as the gendered experience is still part of the lived experience of those assigned female at birth who do not identify as female today.

refers to as ‘sinful’ or ‘bad,’ that would eventually limit the ‘temptation’ and desire to overeat. She explains “[Orbach] had not seen that my womanhood was broke and single. And she had definitely not seen that my womanhood might not want to lose weight” (Thompson, 2018, p.41). This critique is one that also follows Tribole’s work; the goal for many fat individuals is not to lose weight but to find a space where they can exist unapologetically. Further, in intuitive eating and recovery in general, there is a large critique of classism, stating it is a system that assumes finances are not an issue in the journey of reclaiming a relationship with food (Taylor, 2018; Thompson, 2018; Harrison, 2019). As intersectionality shows, there is no moment where someone who is fat and under the poverty line can ignore or suspend their financial struggles to stock a pantry fit for complete food freedom. Tribole’s work is limited in its scope, but there is extensive work on intuitive eating and recovery with less problematic origins and more accessible suggestions (Harrison, 2019).

Other feminist theorists have examined the way that the female body is stigmatized, or even more so feared, for everything from its biological function of producing bodily fluids to the ability to grow (read: too much) hair (Chrisler, 2011; Darwin, 2017). Chrisler examines our “world of contradictions,” which boasts the longest lifespan in history and yet pushes anti-aging products to hide this accomplishment (Chrisler, 2011, p.202). She discusses the activism of accepting the female body as it is through the fat acceptance movement, menstrual activism, and activism promoting

positive aging. Kay Inckle, in her work "Scarred for Life: Women's Creative Self-Journeys through Stigmatized Embodiment," analyzes three women's perspectives on self-harm scars and femininity and their alternative approaches to female embodiment (2017). Like Chrisler, Inkel examines women who live outside of the accepted parameters for feminine beauty. Inckle's work specifically counters marketing strategies, such as *Bio-Oil* as a company and bio-medicine more generally, that stigmatize signs of living as 'imperfections' such as scars on the female body. Chrysler and Inckle's works are critical to understanding true body acceptance and speaking about (unfortunately) still tabooed subjects in North America such as menstruation, fat, scarring, and aging bodies. Lindsay and Lexie Kite in their book *More Than a Body,* write on the cultural fascination with cellulite:

> In light of current tiny waist/big booty beauty standards, one of the most ludicrous expectations for women's bodies is that they be voluptuous yet smooth, free of any unsightly lumps and bumps. The very scientific-sounding word for those tiny lumps and bumps, "cellulite", was first introduced into the US lexicon in 1968 by *Vogue* magazine.
> (Kite & Kite, 2020, p. 64)

One term through which to examine the small range of acceptable femininity is the "pariah feminine hierarchy" (Darwin, 2017). Helena Darwin voices concern that while a 'real woman' can now be fat, it remains taboo to be feminine and hairy (Darwin, 2017). Her work on the pariahs of femininity is particularly interesting for this project as, while fat women become tolerable, there is still an expectation of *how* fat AFAB individuals and women can present themselves, and indeed, how fat they can be (Kite & Kite, 2020).

There is an emerging field of fat studies scholars looking closely at the experiences of fat individuals, moving away from fear of fatness into a radical acceptance for fat bodies and Health At Every Size (HAES) (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Harrison, 2019; Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Taylor, 2018). These theorists see the harm of traditional, thin, white, feminism, on fat bodies of all kinds and move toward a body acceptance model, specifically for fat women, that is radically different from the bodily control of diet culture, and the limitations of an un-intersectional feminism (Thompson, 2018; Udorie, 2018). Lauren Downing Peters, in her article "You Are What You Wear: How Plus Size Fashion Features in Fat Identity Formation," speaks to the significance of fashion for fat women as an "intimate" process of creative self-expression (2014, p. 45). She speaks to how the plus size fashion industry has failed women and explains how fat women make associations with their body and self-worth early on, meaning that many end up assuming a negative association (2014). Her work states the importance of size expansion, and good clothing for fat women on a social level, specifically pressing the importance of social experiences, like shopping, in creating this identity. Peter's work evidences the need to move away from cold shoulder tops[5], stretch jeans, flowing dresses, and other plus size fashion that conceals or minimizes fat bodies, in turn, stigmatizing fatness. Peter's work highlights the importance of fashion that allows fat women to be as expressive and content in their clothing as their thin counterparts. This restriction of

[5] Refers to a women's tops with holes in each shoulder and has a small sleeve. Heavily produced in plus size fashion, and used as a way to conceal cellulite or saggy skin on the arms. This again feeds into the stigmatization of fat individuals and the 'socially unacceptable' features of their bodies.

clothing for fat women/AFAB people affects how they are able to present themselves in social settings, which as Peter's notes, positively correlates to decreased body satisfaction. Something as seemingly trivial as clothing can have a tangible consequence to the health of fat individuals, demonstrated in the level of engagement with, and discussion of, fat fashion on SNSs such as TikTok, as will be discussed below in the results of this project.

However, embodied research that is not directly tied to fatness, but to other instances of lacking accommodation in modern society, can aid fat studies researchers in highlighting *how* fatness is vilified and excluded. Nancy Mairs, in her article "Carnal Acts" writes about her experience as a disabled woman, one who, despite social expectations of disability and femininity, still has sexual desires (1990). Her article speaks into a dialogue on the disabled body, which by proxy speaks into the experience of many marginalized individuals, that makes the owner of said body *the* body, and by proxy, seen as 'undesirable'. She writes, "I *have* a body…you don't say, I *am* a body" (Mairs, 1990, p. 298). Here, Mairs is speaking to her experience of being "rammed back into her body," being treated as her disability rather than being a person who experiences it (p. 289). She continues, "we treat our bodies as subordinate, inferior in moral status…in fact, we treat our bodies with very much the same distance and ambivalence that women have traditionally received from men in our culture" (p. 289). Her writing masterfully explains the convergence of disability, the body, and the feminine experience.

Though her work is in reference to her MS, her writing is a powerful lens through which to understand fat individuals, often reduced to their fatness and their bodies. Similarly, Rosemarie Garland-Thompson discusses this topic in her article "Feminist Disability Studies," on how the fat body becomes disabled by its marginalization. She says that fat bodies are discriminated against in two ways "first, fat bodies are subordinated by a built environment that excludes them; second, fat bodies are seen as unfortunate and contemptible" (Garland-Thompson, 2005, p. 1582). This is not to mention the ableist discussion within diet culture's view of 'health', that excludes anyone with a terminal illness or disability from achieving their prescribed standard. When viewed in conjunction, Garland-Thomspon and Orbach conflict in their view of fatness as a social issue. Against the disability lens that Garland-Thompson offers (a lack of accommodation for fat bodies and subsequent marginalization), Orbach's reading of fatness falls short, even through the feminist lens Orbach's work claims to bring to this discussion.

Messages of control that dictate how women/AFAB *should* look/act are constantly visible on SNSs. It is important to remember that modern movements of diet and wellness culture are reliant on media as a reliable mode to disseminate information quickly and continuously (Harrison, 2019; Kite & Kite, 2021). Social media remains a capitalist venture, and the fat bodies, or accepted fat bodies, that Gibson mentions do not sell as well as thinner, whiter, 'healthier,' 'acceptable' bodies (Thompson, 2018; Harrison, 2019). The body positivity movement emerged out of a necessity to liberate

Black women from Eurocentric and fatphobic ideals of beauty (Taylor, 2018; Harrison, 2019). While it is unfortunate that the work of theorists like Thompson (2018), Tovar (2018), Taylor (2018), Gibson (2020), and Gay (2018) have yet been unable to reclaim the movement towards its origins, it is not surprising that it has been co-opted and diluted by thinner, whiter writers and influencers as a means of acquiring capital. Kite & Kite (2020) recognize this struggle to reclaim the movement into a space for truly plus size women, and more specifically women of colour. They critique capitalist materials using the body positivity movement for only showing 'midsize' women; "those women aren't the ones facing the greatest stigma, even if they have also struggled" (2020, p.9). However, Thompson (2018) provides an interesting way to examine this issue. She states that body positivity has become/or more likely is about consumption, both of content that represents our bodies, and products that support weight maintenance or change. Harrison also speaks to the link between diet culture and consumerism in her work, stating that "inconspicuous consumption" has become a show of wealth, in which "comparatively small luxuries" (fitness classes, free range meats, microgreens, supplements, etc.) become the true show of wealth over individual high ticket items (Harrison, 2019, p.125). Finally, Kite & Kite draw a link between consumerism and diet culture. They write "Grassroots, activism oriented #BodyPositivity has been co-opted by companies… we call [this] *commodified* body positivity" (2020, p.275). When social justice movements become about profit, as these theorists state, they lose some of their radical power, even if it gets

more individuals (namely women) talking about these issues. As sociologists, looking past the individualist mindset is critical, and Thompson's (2018) work calls for an anti-capitalist, feminist lens to be applied to issues surrounding gender inequality. Capitalism, while not the sole reason for the issue of inaccessibility for fat individuals (policy, discrimination, fear of fatness, etc. also play key roles) it does widen the divide between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' bodies within fatness; some fat bodies are made 'acceptable' to profit from, and others are not (Taylor, 2018).

Within the realm of critical fat studies many scholars acknowledge HAES and push for the acceptance of fat, over the fear of fat (Taylor, 2018; Thompson, 2018; Harrison, 2019). Through an intersectional lens, critical fat studies theorists have examined how the oppression of fat women continues to develop and be exacerbated through other factors of marginalization, such as ability and race (Taylor, 2018; Corrigan, 2014). The core of critical fat studies is not inherently intersectional, though it does frequently address intersecting identities. Studies have examined how the labeling of 'fat' is often more harmful than the fat itself (Mustillo, Budd & Hendrix, 2013). Researchers saw that, in fact, Black children who had previously been fat were able to regain more self-confidence than white children in the same situation, but still initially experienced the same stigma from weight and labeling as their white peers (Mustillo, Budd & Hendrix, 2013). Others examine the 'triple bind' created at the intersection of race, gender, and ability and aim towards a new critical fat theory and feminist perspective that

sees, like Crenshaw alludes to, a simultaneous experience of the Black body as already disabled and one that 'cannot feel suffering' (Mallow, 2017). Largely, work in this field looks at where fat bodies are excluded from the dialogues of race and gender studies and acknowledges that being fat is its own experience and form of marginalization. Theorists have attempted to amplify the voices of fat individuals that have traditionally been ignored and have attempted to ascertain the roots of an unfounded 'obesity epidemic' fueled by weight stigma and marginalization (Hopkins, 2012; Ellison, McPhail & Mitchinson, 2016; Brewis, Hruschka & Wutich, 2011). The key issue that critical fat theorists address that is fundamental to my project is society's fixation on 'correcting' fat bodies, positing fat bodies as wrong or broken.

Intersectional approaches to understanding fatphobia and the persistence of diet culture can be tangibly seen in works examining specific cultural approaches to weight and body size modification. Brandon L. Velez, Irma D. Campos, and Bonnie Moradi (2015) discuss the relationship between control and eating disorders in their work on the sexual objectification and racist discrimination of Latina women. Using a quantitative methodology, they examined 180 Latina women and, based on existing objectification literature, stated that, "positive correlations were predicted among experiences of sexual objectification, internalization, body surveillance, body shame, eating disorder symptomatology, and depressive symptomatology" (2015, p. 911). Their study found a unique connection between internalization (adopting social standards or ideals as one's

own) and body shame. Further, they found that experiencing racism correlated with body shame, eating disorder symptomatology, and depressive symptomatology, all of which lead to poor quality of life. Another study examined Black women and how an inclusion of culture into understandings of feminine control via restrictive food intake demonstrates significantly different results (Exum, Templin & Fazzino, 2022). They attribute ethnic discrimination, expectations of strength for Black women, and culturally differing standards of beauty to greater stress in Black women, leading to more instances of disordered eating. This study found the locus of control to be in the lack of understanding of socio-cultural impacts, leaving an expectation for Black women that they cope and operate based on a colonial expectation of femininity and appearance, disregarding the use of cultural tools (2022).

These studies provide empirical research to support Bordo's theoretical notion; the control of women's bodies are exhibited in areas such as eating disorders, fueled by social obsession with (read: control of) body size. Eating disorders and their effect on women/AFAB individuals are discussed in greater detail below, as they relate to societal preoccupations with thinness, social media, and their impact on overall health.

A review of the literature on intersectionality shows that Crenshaw's original framework can be employed in a variety of projects to understand the complexity of intersecting forms of oppression. I examined the work of prominent modern, fat, Black activists (Taylor, 2018; Gay, 2018; Thompson, 2018; String, 2019), fat studies theorists

(Gibson, 2020; Tovar, 2018; Kite & Kite, 2020), those concerned with the stigmatization of bodily difference, even within the fat liberation movement (Inckle, 2017; Chrisler, 2011, Darwin, 2017), disability theorists discussing body size (Garland-Thompson, 2005), concluding with empirical studies of the relationship between race and dieting (Exum, Templin & Fazzino, 2022; Velex, Campos, and Moradi, 2015). This literature shows that facets of identity like race, socio-economic status, ability, and age have a significant effect on how individuals are affected by issues of body image, self worth, and dieting through a social and interpersonal lens. The following section will address the relationships between these findings and the negative health effects demonstrated by those experiencing weight stigma, such as likelihood of eating disorders, higher cortisol levels, and reduced access to adequate health care. While distinctly different, these sections, and the theorists within them, overlap in their areas of interest, and aid in crafting a well rounded understanding of how academics address issues relating to bodies, weight, and health related quality of life.

The Sociology of Health, Weight, and Stigma

Defining Obesity

The medical definition of "obesity" according to the World Health Organization (WHO) is "abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health. A body mass index (BMI) over 25 is considered overweight, and over 30 as obese" (World

Health Organization, n.d.). This standardized definition speaks to the USA's decision to mark early access to COVID-19 vaccinations at a BMI of 30, the marker for 'obesity' which meets their national health risk criteria. This also positions Canada's criterion of access to early vaccinations based on a BMI of 40 as comparatively well *over* the social definition of 'obesity' and definition of a health risk, which raises intrigue on how this criteria was determined, given that it does not align with the WHO'scurrent criteria. As Harrison points out in her work, the American Medical Association's (AMA) committee tasked with understanding 'obesity' "ruled it should *not* [*sic*] be considered disease" as BMI, the marker by which we define 'obesity' is "deeply flawed" (2019, p.49). Despite the committee's recommendation, the presence of the 'obesity crisis' reveals that this recommendation was ignored because the 'crisis' in question is founded on 'obesity'[6] as disease. Further, Hunger and his colleagues' work also demonstrates a link between fat and social indicators of health (Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015; Hunger, Smith & Tomiyama, 2020), which BMI cannot and does not take into consideration. Therefore, this leaves a gap in the understanding of the true health concerns associated with fatness (poverty, stigma, racism, ability, homophobia, etc.) (Hunger, Smith & Tomiyama, 2020; Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015; Tomiyama et al., 2018) and additional factors

[6] Due to emerging discourse around the use of words such as 'overweight' and 'obesity' this will be the last time these words appear in this text outside of direct quotations. Instead, this same marker of body size will be represented as fat or fatness, and these terms will be omitted or replaced with the term "'O' Word" to protect readers marginalized by size, and ensure that this project does not play into stigmatization through language that can commonly befall academic writing.

such as genetics, chronic illness, or fat bodily autonomy (Taylor, 2018; Harrisoon, 2019; Kite & Kite, 2020).

Health and Weight

Through examining weight stigma, theorists arrive at an understanding of intentional weight loss as perilous and unsustainable. In a similar vein, in their work that investigates weight stigma, Jeffery Hunger and his colleagues, Joslyn P. Smith and Janet A. Tomiyama (2020), discredit the assumptions traditionally made by the medical industry and broader society, that weight loss is both desired and sustainable for fat individuals (Hunger, Smith, & Tomiyama, 2020; Harrison, 2019). Instead, Hunger, Smith, and Tomiyama's (2020) work on weight stigma challenges the base assumptions that all fat individuals wish to, should, or can lose significant amounts of weight. They state, "Dieting has been shown to impair cognitive function, especially executive function, which is the very thing needed to control behaviors" (Hunger, Smith, & Tomiyama, 2020, p.80). Furthering this work, Christy Harrison in her book, *Anti-Diet* writes, "Not just *re*gain…as many as two-thirds of people who embark on weight loss efforts end up gaining more weight than they lost in the long run" (Harrison, 2019, p.6). She continues, "it simply is not evidence-based medicine to say that people need to lose weight for any health reasons, because *we have no safe, sustainable method of producing weight loss*" (p.158). This directly challenges the dominant belief that fat individuals are

lazy, ‘out of control,’ or lacking ‘willpower,’ as is often marketed in weight loss ads. Hunger’s research focus and activism is significantly influenced by his mentor, Lindo Bacon, showing that weight loss is not a healthy measure to improve quality of life and that most individuals who lose significant weight will experience weight gain in excess of their initial loss or additional complications around health and eating behaviours (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Harrison, 2019). Lindo Bacon, is known as a prominent contributor to the HAES approach (Health At Every Size), and their work attempts to move away from weight-loss focused health, into health independent of size. HAES (both as an ideology and professional association) also pushes for body neutral health policy, one that would ethically advocate for health for all, while acknowledging “systemic health inequities in order to improve population-wide health outcomes and reduce health disparities, making use of the evidence on the strong relationship between a person's social positioning and their health” (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011, p.8). Bacon‘s work on HAES and their dedication to fighting medical and academic presumptions on the efficacy of weight loss has certainly forwarded the importance of this area of research and medical practice, as shown through their successor Jeffery Hunger’s work. Bacon and Aphramor continue to state:

> Stress itself alters metabolism independent of a person’s lifestyle habits. Thus, it has been suggested that psychological distress is the antecedent of high metabolic risk, which indicates the need to ensure health promotion policies utilize strategies known to reduce, rather than increase, psychological stress.
> (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011, p.8).

Harrison, whose work is deeply grounded in HAES, writes "Hippocrates (or possibly one of his disciples) also wrote 'in all maladies, those who are fat about the belly do best'" (Harrison, 2019, p.19). She continues to state that society's insistence that 'skinny' is best is actually so far off course that thinner individuals (read: those with fewer fat stores) are less likely to heal from/survive difficult surgeries than those considered fat (2019). She also discusses the correlation between increasing BMI or body size and dieting. She writes, "any true uptick in the national average BMI over the years tracks nicely with the continued growth of the diet industry…including the emergence of public health initiatives…so that people will cut their consumption of fast food and other high calorie options" (Harrison, 2019, p.55). She continues to state that the BMI scale is "deeply flawed," supported by her own research as well as the American Medical Association's recommendation *not* to classify "obesity" as a disease (2019, p.49). Bacon, Hunger, and those who operate from HAES based knowledge, continue to push for public health policy that comprehends the intricacies of this research, and that acknowledges weight itself is neither a reasonable indicator of health in individuals, nor is it an individual issue (Hunger, Smith & Tomiyama, 2020; Tomiyama et al., 2018).

The sociology of health also aids in understanding how fat individuals have been traditionally treated in the health care sector as well as how social indicators of health, specifically weight stigma, can permanently affect the overall health of fat individuals. The sociology of health allows academics to explore health outside of a traditional

medical lens, considering the impact of social determinants of health on the overall well-being of an individual. This research provides an evolving understanding of how society affects a person's well-being dependent on social shifts, such as global pandemics. Looking at the socio-cultural indicators of health, we can gain understanding of how fatness came to be, and remains, associated with morbidity (Bunton, Nettleton, & Burrows, 1995), and better analyze research that claims a direct link to ailments such as diabetes, heart issues, and even COVID-19, when based solely or predominantly on fatness (Arjun, Farraj, Yeroushalmi, Desai, Paz, Gomez, Jaehyuck, Javed, 2020).

Further, this branch of research encompasses socio-cultural issues with food and the marketing of health, thinness, and 'wellness' largely to women, examining the ways in which this impacts health through eating disorders and poor body image (Herrick, 2009; Harrison, 2019; Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). Negative messages around body size have shown to be damaging both mentally and physically, not only for fat individuals, but thin individuals that fear fatness as well, an issue that disproportionately affects women (Herrick, 2009; Harrison, 2019; Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). Sharlene Hesse-Biber and her colleagues (2006) challenge the dominant belief that eating disorders/disordered eating are symptoms of a psychological issue and instead understand them as the product of social issues (2006). Their work states that to understand eating disorders as a social issue we must first understand "the systems of capitalism and patriarchy that are a part of the socio-cultural and economic context" (p.212). She continues to explain that capitalism

(the profits made from the 'cult of thinness') and patriarchy (the male-dominated society that purports an ideal of beauty) are why eating disorders and disordered eating are so rampant today. Her work dissects the many facets of the diet industry, from fitness memberships to weight loss programs, to cosmetic surgery, all designed to control and change the female body for profit (over $72 billion annually) (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006, pp.212-216; Harrison, 2019). This study suggests a "re-visioning of femininity" that would build a new understanding of femininity away from capitalism and patriarchal ideals of beauty. However, they also allow that many women may not be willing to fight for this change. They write:

> Some may be unwilling to give up the hard earned social and economic awards they have gained by following the societal message of ultra-thinness. Other women may continue to buy into the system believing that the rewards they have worked for, and trained much of their lives for are justified. They are the 'winners' of this cultural game.
> (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006, p.219).

She presents a crucial element to remember; that while social change is needed to move away from a culture of women starving to meet a social ideal, that ideal is so highly rewarded that many women are heavily implicated in that same oppressive system. As such, these women often unknowingly aid in replicating this system of fatphobia—fueled by the fear of losing the social goods they've sacrificed for. As sociologists, it becomes easier to see social phenomena, such as dieting, as irrational but beyond the financial and 'wellness' aspects of dieting, there truly is a cult following of thinness as suggested in this work (2006).

Navigating through the discourse around the negative impact of social media, another prominent area of interest for researchers is the relationship between social media use and eating disorders. Studies have revealed that the use of social media in young adults can trigger body-related behaviors such as body checking (the process of comparing one's body to others and consistently monitoring one's body for minute changes), and eating disorders (Gioia, Griffiths & Boursier, 2020; Lonergan et al., 2020). Alexandra Lonergan et al. explores the possible link between social media behaviours and eating disorders, specifically whether gender played a role in moderating this relationship (2020). They examined four social media behaviours: "avoidance of posting selfies, photo investment, photo manipulation, and investment in other's selfies," to determine what, if any, was the relationship between these behaviours and developing eating disorder behaviours (Lonergan et al., 2020, p. 492). They state, "findings support the transdiagnostic model of eating disorders, whereby over evaluation of weight and shape to one's self-worth leads to disordered eating" (p. 492).

This study is significant because it shows a relationship between photo social media use and eating disorders/poorer body image and yet it does not convey the full experience of these adolescents struggling with social media use and eating disorder behaviours. While these findings did show a relationship between photos on social media and the likelihood of being diagnosed with an eating disorder, it does not show *why* these individuals struggled, what factors developed causing their body image to deteriorate,

and the social impact this had on their lives. Quantitative data has its merits in sociological research, and for this reason I include mention of this data in this project. However, for a discussion on lived experiences, qualitative sociological data provides more comprehensive and in-depth data to answer my research question. Further, while Longeran et al. does show the impact of unfettered social media use, their study fails to convey that social media acts as a representation of society and that the impact of images viewed by youth and adults alike is due to a reflection of existing ideals. This is to say that the impact of social media studies on body image can show *how* that information is being disseminated and impacting viewers, but that the issue or impact comes from social expectations of thinness and not the platform itself (Harrison, 2019). Discussion on media literacy can posit the platform as the problem, but the ideology behind 'healthism' and restrictive dieting is a pre-existing dialogue that was harmful prior to the rise of this technology (Harrison. 2019; Lazuka, Wick, Keel & Harriger, 2020). These behaviours, associated with social media, are connected to how social media contributes to subtle control around young female bodies (Gurrieri, Previte & Brace-Govan, 2013; Bunton, Nettleton & Burrows, 1995; Bordo, 1993; Brownmiller, 1984; Harrison, 2019; Kite & Kite, 2020).

Deanna R. Puglia examines the impact of eating disorders and body image, specifically in women, stating "the lifetime prevalence of eating disorders among U.S. adult women ranges from 0.5-3.5%...This number is significantly higher than the lifetime

prevalence among U.S. adult men, which is only 0.1-2.0%" (2017, p.1). The purpose of her study was to examine college age women and the link between body esteem and social media use. Her study found that participants tended to use social media for the purpose of body comparison which negatively correlated with body esteem (2017). This study is significant to this project as it shows that social media is a tool for the control of women's bodies. Women who are comparing their bodies to other women, which media literacy shows to often be altered or distorted images of a person's body and life, have less time/energy for civic engagement, protests, or community participation (Gioia, Griffiths & Boursier, 2020; Harrison, 2019). This is a continuation of the same concept discussed by Bordo above, surrounding the historical control of women's bodies through health crises. Social media acts as a vessel for the continuation of this attempted control, which, while ever present, is now met with constant visual reminders of the societal expectations for beauty, along with a pressure to fulfill them (Puglia, 2017; Gioia, Griffiths & Boursier, 2020; Harrison, 2019).

Eating disorders act as social ideals of what a woman *should* be (read: look like) and become internalized, which can lead to deterioration of one's mental health. Further they prove an intersectional understanding of how racialized bodies are manipulated and have shaped colonial cultures and the societal expectations that often do not align with their own culture's traditional understanding of beauty and bodies (Velex, Campos & Moradi, 2015; Exum, Templin & Fazzino, 2022). Velex, Campos & Moradi (2015)

provide an example in their work on Latina intersectional experiences of sexual objectification and racism, and how it links to mental health and eating disorders. Exum, Templin and Fazzino (2022) also use intersectional thought to examine how cultural heritage and tradition affect body satisfaction, something they noted resulted in very different outcomes from similar research conducted solely on white women. Both Strings and Tovar's theory, and this empirical research (Velex, Campos & Moradi, 2015; Exum, Templin & Fazzino, 2022), push for a broader view of how anti-fat sentiment hurts women. It extends beyond gender to historical connections with race, socio-economic status, and a hierarchy of bodies attached to worth (Strings, 2018; Tovar, 2018).

Concerned with both poor body image *and* social media's connection to the development of eating disorders, Stephanie C. Gilbert, Helen Keery, and J. Kevin Thompson review decades of literature on the link between media and body image on women and girls (2005). Their study examines the prevention and intervention techniques successful in mediating body comparison through social media and reducing the likelihood of eating disorders. Among these techniques they named media literacy, empowerment/activism for body acceptance, and dissonance training (Gilbert, Keery & Thompson, 2005, p. 47-48). Their results showed that while viewing images on the thin ideal on social media was not enough to ensure extreme dieting or disordered eating, when coupled with comparison of those photos to the viewer's body it was a significant indicator of eating disorder behaviour (Gilbert, Keery & Thompson, 2005). In their

recommendations, these theorists pushed for an even greater inclusion of feminist media analysis in future research, specifically writings that fight against the thin ideal (Wolf, 1991; Taylor, 2018; Harrison, 2019; Tovar, 2018) that could aid in intervening in the construction of poor body image. While this review of the research was conducted over 15 years ago, their call for immediate action to address the impacts of social media on body image remains pressing: "in years to come, new media sources…can be expected to bombard girls and young women[,]…the pervasive body dissatisfaction…today will only continue to escalate unless effective prevention and interventions efforts are put into place" (Gilbert, Keery & Thompson, 2005, pp. 50-51). Research efforts, like this project and the work of theorists that continue to publish in this field today, aid in this call to push forward these strategies to aid women, girls, and those AFAB from struggling through the same fate.

Weight Stigma

Social stigma surrounding fatness leads to a moralization of body size and can result in social ostracization, bullying, and weight stigma, which have been shown to produce physiological responses such as increased cortisol levels[7] (Hunger, Smith & Tomiyama, 2020; Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015; Tomiyama et al., 2018; Schvey, Puhl & Brownell, 2014). Weight stigma has historically been used as a medical

[7] Cortisol is the stress response hormone and effects, metabolism, weight gain, mood (anxiety/depression), high blood pressure, etc.

tool, believed to encourage patients to 'want' to lose weight under the assumption it will benefit their health (Harrison, 2019). As Harrison (2019), Hunger et al. (2015; 2020), and Schvey, Puhl & Brownell (2014) explain, the association with weight and stress is that increased stress (which is the chief result of stigmatization, be it based on race, weight, socio-economic status, etc.) leads to heightened cortisol levels, which often leads to weight *gain*. Our current social understanding around weight, is that we have the ability to control it long term, which leads to a social stigmatization of those who don't control their weight (read: who are fat). That stigma itself increases the individual's chance of weight gain through feelings of shame and judgment. This treacherous cycle leaves individuals (such as my participants and TikTok creators) feeling demoralized, living in a fat body and stuck in a cycle that does not respect the body as a vessel for life but focuses on appearance related 'health.' Further, this cycle penalizes them, either by impacting their health through weight cycling, surgeries, and disordered eating, or through social exclusion due to fatness. Social expectations of thinness and stigmatization of fatness are important for understanding fat women's relationship with health, medical care, and fatness both prior to, and during, the pandemic.

Jeffery Hunger and his colleagues, working in the field of weight stigma research, seek to examine how weight stigma affects social well-being (Hunger, Smith & Tomiyama, 2020; Kite & Kite, 2020). Hunger's work originated from an interest in the treatment of fatness in the gay male community but expands to the broader public of fat

individuals affected by this issue. Hunger and his colleagues introduce a "social identity threat model," an understanding that weight stigma leads to poorer health outcomes (Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015). Further, they explain that weight stigma often *causes* weight gain given the stress experienced by these marginalized individuals (p.255). Hunger and his colleagues are forerunners in their attempt to disprove the long-held notion that fat shaming or weight stigma is helpful in reducing fatness, proving that in fact, it is the catalyst to the health issues this notion claims to fight against. This article explains that one tactic of/response to the social identity threat model is to avoid locations that are likely to house experiences of stigmatization such as gyms, family gatherings likely to involve fatphobic sentiment, and most concerningly, health facilities for routine medical appointments (Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015; Harrison, 2019). The key issue that author Hunger demonstrates is that many arenas that are known for weight stigmatization, "are also those that can promote health and well-being" (Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015, p.261). They continue, "experienced and anticipated weight stigma may also contribute to healthcare underutilization and avoidance. High levels of explicit and implicit weight biases among medical trainees and professionals are well-documented" (Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015, p. 261). This presents a tangible issue of access to health care; not only is weight stigma itself proven to be harmful to health outcomes for fat individuals (Harrison, 2019), but those same individuals may actively avoid receiving pertinent medical care to avoid

marginalization. Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller (2015), continue to state that this may even prevent fat individuals from accessing preventative imaging/medicine, leading to long term health effects from initial fear of weight stigma. Jeffery Hunger's (2015; 2020) work is crucial to this project because it adds, in many cases, social-scientific data that represents lived experiences reported by fat individuals. To say that weight stigma kills may sound hyperbolic, and yet, so called 'well intentioned' fat shaming can act as a deterrent to life saving/preventative medicine open to, and accessible by, thinner patients.

Other work demonstrates that weight or fatness appears as the scapegoat to the social problem of marginalization and fear of fatness (Puhl & Peterson, 2015; Guardabassi, Mirisola, & Tomasetto, 2018). One group of researchers observed children who were bullied for their weight; the negative impact on their health-related quality of life came from the bullying based on weight, not the weight itself (Guardabassi, Mirisola, & Tomasetto, 2018). Their study found that stigma "underlie[s] the concurrent reduction in HRQoL [health-related quality of life] at increasing levels of body weight in children" (2018, p. 178). Similarly, Rebecca M. Puhl and Jaime Lee Peterson examined the effects of weight stigma throughout life, from as young as 3 to 5 years old in preschool settings and found that weight stigma, and weight-based mistreatment often follows individuals throughout their lifetimes, into romantic relationships, employment, medical care, and interactions with family and loved ones (Puhl & Peterson, 2015, p.188). There has additionally been research surrounding the physical health implications of weight stigma.

Natasha A. Schvey, Rebecca M. Brown, and Kelly D. Brownwell (2014) conducted a study on the cortisol levels of women, of all body sizes, after exposure to weight-stigmatized content (Schvey, Puhl, & Brownell, 2014). Their study examines 123 women who were shown either a stigmatizing video or a neutral video around a fat person. Those who were exposed to the video exhibiting weight stigma showed highly elevated cortisol levels compared to those who were shown a body neutral video, regardless of the viewer's body size (Schvey, Puhl, & Brownell, 2014, p.160). This disproved the initial hypothesis of the project, that fat women would exhibit higher cortisol levels than thin women consuming the same content (pp.160-161). Finally, these researchers found that "stigmatizing stimuli that is not intended to be upsetting may still promote physiological reactivity and negative affect among viewers of all weight strata" (p. 161). This study is significant in showing that weight stigma does affect women of all sizes. While these (Schvey, Puhl, & Brownell, 2014; Puhl & Peterson, 2015; Guardabassi, Mirisola, & Tomasetto, 2018) studies above add to the literature on weight stigma, and are supported in stating that weight stigma has substantial influence on fat individuals (Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015), they also employ a tone of judgment towards the group they are studying by employing 'O' words (outdated/stigmatizing language) to describe their participants[8] (Tovar, 2018; Kite & Kite, 2020; Harrison, 2020). This sort of language presumes that there is an 'ideal' or 'healthy'

[8] The medical definition of "obesity" according to the World Health Organization (WHO) is "abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health. A body mass index (BMI) over 25 is considered overweight, and over 30 as obese" (World Health Organization, n.d.).

weight that these individuals fall outside of, which both continues to stigmatize those they are studying and can be viewed as counterproductive to the work they are doing in the area of weight stigma. The inclusion of this study in this literature review is to illustrate the perilous nature of this line of research. While weight stigma researchers offer some significant scientific evidence for fat activism and policy, there are studies such as these that in some ways negate the good work they are attempting to create. By using stigmatizing language such as outdated terms, and measurements such as BMI, this study demonstrates a lack of understanding around the impact of stigmatizing language, specifically in research.

Adding to the Literature

A review of the literature reveals that there is significant work available on the experiences of women, and to a lesser extent fat women, in areas of social control, the social expectations for women and the theory that grounds our understanding as academics of gendered issues (Kite & Kite, 2020; Harrison, 2019; Bordo, 1993; MacKinnon, 1997; Dworkin, 1987; Orbach, 2005; Meyer, 2020; Zucker, Harrell, Miner-Rubino, Stewart, Pomerleau & Boyd, 2001; Coleman-Minahan, Stevenson, Obront & Hays, 2019; Peterson, Tantleff-Dunn, & Bedwell, 2006). Further, I examined the literature on women, self worth, and social media, linking the expectations of femininity and highlighting work that centers women in its analysis (Kite & Kite, 2020; Harrison,

2019; Fardouly & Holland, 2018; Gioia, Griffiths & Boursier, 2020; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Wykes & Gunter, 2005; Puglia, 2017; McLean, Paxton & Wertheim, 2016; Lazuka, Wick, Keel & Harriger, 2020; Lonergan et al., 2020; Lund & Gudmundsdottir, 2019). I pursued a discussion of intersectional feminist research (Crenshaw, 1989; Taylor, 2018; Thompson 2018; Gay, 2018; Strings, 2019, Udorie, 2018; Tovar, 2018; Dionne, 2018; Shippers, 2007; Gibson, 2020), specifically surrounding female experience that does not conform to societal expectations (Brownmiller, 1984; Mairs, 1990; Chrisler, 2011; Darwin, 2017; Inkel, 2017; Garland-Thompson, 2005; Hunter, Dispenza, Huffstead, Suttles & Bradley, 2020; Velex, Campos & Moradi, 2015), incorporating studies that demonstrate the tangible consequences of breaking feminine social norms (Shentow-Bewsh, Keating & Mills, 2016; Velex, Campos & Moradi, 2015). Finally, I examined literature surrounding the sociology of health and how it relates to weight stigma, including all important data in this discourse surrounding quality of life, providing the definition of 'health' and weight stigma used throughout this project (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Bunton, Nettleton & Burrows, 1995; Hunger, Smith, & Tomiyama, 2020; Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015; Tomiyama et al., 2018; Schvey, Puhl & Brownell, 2014; Mustillo, Budd & Hendrix, 2013; Tomiyama et al., 2018; Brewis, Hruschka & Wutich, 2011; Hesse-Biber et al., 2006; Herrick, 2009; Gilbert, Keery & Thompson, 2005; Lonergan, et al., 2020).

While there is much research on these topics, there remains too little qualitative, first-hand data from fat women on the effects of social media and weight stigma on their lives. Additionally, COVID-19 created a unique experience of heightened time indoors that, with restrictions on in-person social interaction, saw an increase in the use of social media for attempted connection. As TikTok is a fairly new SNS, there is little data on its impacts, and next to none that examines both the impacts of the platform *and* the content producing these impacts. My project seeks to address this gap and add to the literature on lived experience, media, and weight stigma, by providing a mixed method analysis of the counter cultural conversation of health and bodies taking place during COVID-19 on TikTok. To restate my research questions: How does social media use specifically, TikTok, affect experiences of weight stigma for those fat individuals who may be subjected to misogyny and their ability to cope with the impact of such stigma? How does COVID-19 complicate an existing discussion around the effects of weight stigma on the social and physical well-being of individuals who are likely to experience misogyny? This research works to understand how young Canadian women and those AFAB engaged with this content, and to explore the effect it has had on their relationships with their bodies, accessing health care, and engaging with media. The significance of these findings to the existing body of research is that they move away from the predominant concerns regarding the effects of social media to show the presence of a positive relationship for some young fat individuals. I explore a sub-culture taking place on social

media producing a subversive movement away from hegemonic expectations of the feminine body. Further, this project illuminates the consumer/creator bind of fat individuals taking solace in social media, while simultaneously refraining from directly engaging with (creating content for) that community. To truly understand how TikTok differs in its impact on young women consuming it, researchers must grasp the central components of the content created on the app and how it produces different meaning making and cultural conversations than post-based (Twitter, Redditt, Facebook) or still-photo social media (Instagram, Facebook). Only with this type of research can social scientists understand how social movements, body image, and even recovery from experiences of marginalization like weight stigma may *improve* through engagement with certain forms of social media yet simultaneously be harmed by others. Without research into the effects of positive, or neutral, effects of social media, we risk lumping together new technology for its potential dangers and missing the possibilities it offers for social change.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

This project aims to put stories behind the numbers, statistics, and research around weight and COVID-19 to amplify the experiences of women and those AFAB that otherwise might go unheard. Using a feminist intersectional lens, this study explores the questions: How does COVID-19 complicate an existing discussion around the effects of

weight stigma on the social and physical well-being of women and AFAB individuals who are likely to experience misogyny? How does social media use of affect experiences of weight stigma for fat individuals who may be subjected to misogyny and their ability to cope with the impact of such stigma? In other words, what does it mean to have a body deemed part of an epidemic, amidst a pandemic? Qualitative methods are well-suited to address these types of questions about meaning and experience. Thus, to answer my research questions, I conducted qualitative interviews with women and AFAB individuals who self-identified as fat, and a qualitative content analysis of social media (TikTok). I describe each below.

INTERVIEWS

I initially chose in-depth interviews as the sole methodology for this project. This project is concerned with the effects of weight stigma on young, female, and AFAB individuals, making it paramount that their lived experiences be at the center of this project. Further, their words also influenced the way in which I undertook the TikTok content analysis, listening to which creators they found influential before proceeding. The data below is influenced by the language and frames used by the individuals who agreed to be interviewed for this project and to convey their experience. Without their words, this project would be insufficient in its ability to analyze the impact of the pandemic on *people* and instead only represent the virtual spaces this time period created.

Sample and Data Collection

For my interviews, I recruited using a multi-faceted strategy. The criteria for participation in this project was that participants be 18-35, Canadian, self-identify as fat, a TikTok user, and have had previous experiences of weight stigma. I posted to my personal social media using Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. I advertised my study to student groups connected to Memorial University of Newfoundland, such as *The Sociology Society page* and *MUN Course Advice*. I hung printed posters in coffee shops, both chains and local cafes, at the University library, and in the tunnel system under campus through which students frequent to travel to and from class, specifically in the winter months. Through my recruitment process I learned that I had reached participants from all three efforts, some through social media, others through community placed posters, and from those found on campus. I found this recruitment strategy effective because it had a broad reach to find participants that were both willing to be interviewed and who met the criteria listed for the project. In terms of sampling, I did not turn anyone away from the study. I did hope to attract those representing marginalized groups, however, they were not asked about this criteria before being welcomed into the study. Fortunately, I did end up with a sample from across Canada; a group that represents different racial identities, genders, sexualities, and abilities. This included one Black participant, two Indigenous participants, two non-binary participants, seven LGBTQ+

participants, and four disabled participants. These identity markers came up in interview data, and may not be a complete representative summary of the identities within my participants.

In regards to the experience of conducting the interviews, a boom of COVID cases and provincial restrictions were active at the time of my interviews (December 2021-February 2022) and meant that only 3 of my interviews were held in-person. While in person interviews are certainly preferred for qualitative research, participants were not refused based on a discomfort or inability to interview in-person. While there are, of course, drawbacks to Zoom interviews, such as bad internet connections leading to choppy responses, delayed reaction times, and a lack of body language visible on screen (Oliffe, Gonzalez Montaner & Yu Ko, 2021), overall, the use of Zoom as a platform allowed greater accessibility for data collection, and of course, allowed the project to continue during outbreaks of COVID-19.

As the project relies on participant provided data, it is important to revisit the individuals at the centre of this project to give readers a better understanding of whose responses comprise the data I analyzed below. The women/folk in question are, overwhelmingly, those who were/are fat children, fat friends, and fat partners. Each of my participants came to this project with a different "history of fatness." Each of their lived experiences and experiences of the pandemic are shaped by the social context they grew up in and how they view their fat bodies, which I discerned both through direct

acknowledgement and the ensuing analysis of their data. Ten out of the thirteen participants interviewed reported that they had always been bigger, or that weight and weight fluctuations held a major influence over the course of their lives. Due to the participant criteria I selected for this project including "self-identification as fat," it is not shocking that so many of my participants found their weight to be impactful. Indeed, this high proportion may not even be a high enough representation for the general public, as American statistics reveal that "91% of women are unhappy with their bodies and resort to dieting to achieve their ideal body shape" (Palmer, 2013). While this statistic is geared towards body image, it reveals how many American women focus on their body size.

I should also mention that gender identification is part of the criteria for participation in this project. Two of my participants, while assigned female at birth, no longer identify as women but as non-binary. They were both, however, able to speak to experiences as fat women because they had each lived the majority of their lives presenting as female and, more significantly to this research, being socially perceived as women (AFAB). The rest of my participants did identify as women at the time of the interviews and spoke to their relationships between fatness and femininity from a past and present mindset. This is in no way to say that I believe that the data received from the non-binary participants is less valuable to this project's analysis or understanding of femininity. In fact, these participants provided a fascinating understanding of femininity. However, their experiences do not and cannot speak for the whole non-binary community

on this issue. Further research with a much greater number of participants would need to be undertaken to ascertain how existing outside of the gender binary affects experiences of fatness. For the purpose of this project, they provide a differing intersectional view.

Participants were asked a variety of questions about their experience as a fat individual relating to medical care, weight stigma, social stigma, and social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview structure was divided into five sections: *Background and Social Media Use*, *Understanding Fatness*, *Early COVID*, *Access to Vaccines*, and *Re-Opening*. To begin the interview, I aimed to establish a background of how each participant knew and had experienced fatness. This section of the interview also questioned how/if dieting had been a part of their lives, and participants often offered concerns of familial influence on dieting and their relationships with their bodies. Finally, I aimed to see where social media would interlace with their other experiences around stigma, where what they had consumed on TikTok might have related to person-to-person experiences, and if TikTok had ultimately changed or informed their experiences during the pandemic.

Section two of the interview, *Understanding Fatness*, proceeded to address their experiences as women and AFAB individuals, if/how they saw fatness and femininity as connected, and finally, participants were asked to describe their most prominent experience of weight stigma to date. As stated above, weight stigma was defined as *an experience of marginalization perceived to be based on weight. That could include*

inaccessible places such as transit or waiting rooms, or experiences of job discrimination, differential medical treatment, etc. (Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015; Hunger, Smith & Tomiyama, 2020; Harrison & Hunger, 2019; Harrison & Chastain, 2017). This line of questioning gathered data on how weight stigma is presented in the daily lives of fat women and those AFAB, the situation around these encounters, and if these experiences produced a long-lasting impact on the participant (by their own account).

The third section of the interview focused on the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic relating to the release of health-related data/information, fear, weight stigma, and public perceptions, *Early COVID-19*. Continuing from the previous question on the participants' most prominent experience of weight stigma, participants were asked to share an experience of weight stigma they deemed impactful during COVID-19, specifically during the early days of the pandemic, although any example was accepted. I wanted to understand how weight stigma might have informed behaviour, ability, or desire to access health services, experiences living with family, social media use, etc. I aimed to collect Canadian and fat-specific information on challenges and choices based on information available during the pandemic—a time when social opinions of comportment were loud, and highly scrutinized via social media comments (Biddlestone & Douglas, 2020).

The fourth section of the interview discussed access to health services, such as early access to vaccinations based on BMI (established at 40 in Canada and 30 in the US) and accessing medical services as a fat individual, *Access to Vaccines*. Participants were then asked if they were able, and/or did, take advantage of this early access, and their rationale in accessing the vaccine as soon as it was available to them. Here I allowed participants to speak from experience or simply to share their theoretical approach to this choice. I continued to ask participants if they had ever feared accessing medical services due to being fat prior to and/or during the pandemic to ascertain if fear of medical institutions might underlie these fears.

The final section of the interview*, Re-Opening*, asked participants about their experiences as they re-engaged in in-person spaces. I was interested to learn if the pandemic had influenced my participants' perceptions about their bodies, how they did or were willing to interact in public spaces, and how COVID-19 (both as a virus and as a cultural shift) impacted their view of health, bodies, and being. Participants were also asked, as fat individuals, if they perceived social media to have been helpful or harmful during the pandemic. This concluded the interview by tying social media into their overall experiences of the pandemic and explored how they had chosen to move forward post COVID-19 lockdowns.

Together, these five sections provide a comprehensive view of the nuances for young fat women and AFAB individuals, using TikTok, during the early months of

COVID-19. The interview script was designed using open-end questions to allow participants a narrative arc in which to relate their experiences and gave the opportunity for participants to provide additional information wherever they wished. Further, the final portion of the interview allowed ample space for additional comments participants felt should be included in the project. This resulted in extended conversations that may not have related to the original questions but gave insight into the participant's experiences and added data to the project.

Data Analysis

To code interview data I used *Nvivo* to find and organize themes. Using an open coding method, I allowed the themes to emerge form my discussions with participants. *Nvivo* allowed for an easily accessible review of the data within each theme that I could reference and re-code as needed. Nearly thirty themes arose, but were reduced into smaller categories for analysis such as 'diet culture,' 'weight stigma,' 'femininity,' 'weight loss/the cult of thinness,' and so on. Once dominant themes were apparent, I curated direct quotations that offered insight and provided evidence of participants' experiences more individually. Finally, I compared my findings to the literature and produced a narrative flow that takes readers through pertinent findings and experiences that lead me to the conclusions of this project.

Largely, I analyzed my data during the writing process. I undertook this project as my first experience of researching and creating, rather than engaging with, data. As I tried to integrate my findings into my written work I saw how these instances interacted with each other and worked to rethink how I viewed the raw data through my own biases and expectations.

TIK TOK

As the research on social media discussed above makes clear, social media is often a catalyst to body dissatisfaction, especially for young women and AFAB individuals (Harrison, 2019; Kite & Kite, 2020; Fardouly & Holland, 2018; Gioia, Griffiths & Boursier, 2020; Gilbert, Keery & Thompson, 2005; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Wykes & Gunter, 2005). I was interested to see what impact this apparent large-scale increase of content creation *and* content consumption would have on fat women. The algorithmic nature (Schellewald, 2022) of TikTok presents a unique possibility for often marginalized voices to be amplified, meaning there is potential for body acceptance advocates to drown out fatphobic sentiment, or vice versa. My interest was in the relationship between TikTok and COVID-19, and if this time period would produce a push for the body acceptance movement that could impact young fat women or whether it would be lost in a sea of other pressing pandemic information. I was curious to

uncover what kind of content each creator was producing, what elements of the issue they primarily chose to address, and how often they felt the need to speak on these issues.

TikTok is a unique social media platform in both its exceptionally engaged following and its wide-reaching influence beyond the platform. Launched in September 2016, TikTok replaced its predecessor, Vine, in creating short video-based social media. However, TikTok provides longer content possibilities and has proved to outlast Vine, which was active for only 4 years. YouTube, a long standing SNS, provides longer videos (up to hours on end) and often hosts similar content creators to TikTok. However, YouTube does not appear from my research and lived experience to have the same highly engaged follower base. TikTok provides greater insight for this project than YouTube because of its algorithmic capabilities. YouTube users must navigate content on their own to find information or creators they wish to engage with, whereas the TikTok *fyp* (for you page) generates content for the user to consume without searching. Therefore, TikTok becomes easier to engage with as it requires less effort to personalize than other SNS platforms. Masciantonio, Bouchat, Balty, & Rimé (2021) discuss the importance of separating forms of social media in research to understand usage and effects on well-being. They reported that Facebook, being one of the most prominent long-standing forms of social media, had negative effects when used passively, and that it did hold sway during the pandemic as a form of information sharing and social connection (2021, p.6). However, TikTok uniquely disseminates information beyond those an individual is

connected with, unlike on Facebook, by using an algorithm, and therefore extends the possible reach of creators' content (Appadurai, 1997). As stated above, lumping all social media into one category oversimplifies how young adults receive and interrogate information, and limits our understanding of how post-based social media affects users differently than algorithmic video social media. This is of concern to this project because the specificity in exploring TikTok's information dissemination possibilities is for the practical purpose of understanding if some forms of social media can produce positive social effects lacking from more permanent forms of SNSs.

TikTok applies to my target audience for this project of young women between the ages of 18-35, with approximately 47% of users being women, 50% of users being under the age of 34, and 69% being under the age of 25 (Li, Guan, Hammond & Berrey, 2021; Aslam, 2021; Kennedy, 2021). While it is true that TikTok is largely marketed to younger individuals between the ages of 10-19, my own experience on the platform has revealed a significant Gen Z (born between 1997-2012) and Millennials (born between 1981- 1996) user presence, with many major creators speaking on the experiences of fatness falling into the older age range (Aslam, 2021). TikTok features short videos, 30 second, 60 second, and 3-minutes in length that feature anything from dancing, to comedy, to social activism. Its popularity boomed during COVID-19, acting as *the* pandemic social media, and is one of the most popular social media platforms operating today (based on user engagement) (Zhang & Lui, 2021). As of November 2021, there

were “more than 2.6 billion downloads worldwide and 100 million users in the US” (Zhang & Lui, 2021, p.846). The platform is based around two ‘pages.’ The first is a *for you page* (commonly referred to as FYP), which shows content that the platform feels may be of interest to that specific user (Li, Guan, Hammond & Berrey, 2021; Schellewald, 2022). Andreas Schellewald discusses the rise of algorithmic content feeds and social media sites, with TikTok being at the forefront of this shift. From a sociological perspective, Schellewald explores the double bind of the FYP and how it is both a locus of “surveillance and affective control, yet also a source of entertainment and pleasure” (2022, p.1). Schellewald engages an “algorithms as culture” approach in his work to understanding how we socially understand algorithms. His work aids in understanding the social power of algorithms and how my interview participants and average TikTok users become exposed to body acceptance content. However, my research is less concerned with the function of the TikTok algorithm and more concerned with the cultural conversation it allows. Still, work like Schellewald’s (2022) and rapidly emerging publications on TikTok are exceptional for contextualizing the discourse I wish to study within TikTok as a whole.

Further, the *for you page* (FYP) may show users videos they are not interested in, or may expose them to creators they otherwise may not have previously been aware of (Schellewald, 2022; Zhang & Lui, 2021). The FYP allows users to mark content they do not wish to see by choosing “not interested” and also provides the ability to follow a new

creator of interest right from the FYP. The second page is labeled *following* and houses the newest content of accounts that users have already chosen to engage with. The FYP is largely used for discovery and the content that appears on a person's FYP is most often linked to their personal political views, personal identity (ability, economic status, sexual/gender identity, etc.) and likes/dislikes (Zhang & Lui, 2021; Schellewald, 2022). This page is curated as interaction with videos on the platform increases, the algorithm learns what makes the users linger on a video and where they skip past, becoming increasingly curated through searched for and liked content. This makes the FYP a sort of 'window' into an individual's digital landscape and often reflects types of content interacted with elsewhere. In my interviews I asked each participant to describe what their FYP looks like to discern what communities of TikTok they were interested in, or felt they were a part of. The importance of the FYP for TikTok in terms of information dissemination cannot be understated. One such community that is of key importance to this project is *FatTok*. This subset of the TikTok community contains fat activism, fat fashion, dating while fat, struggles of living as a fat individual in a fatphobic world, and much more. Other major examples of "sides"of TikToks or TikTok communities that were raised during my interviews include mental health TikTok, *TraumaTok*[9], and Indigenous TikTok.

[9] TikTok communities that appear in italics represent areas of TikTok with colloquial names that are used to reference that content within the platform itself.

Finally, there are several other unique and relevant features of TikTok.The first is *dueting* which is the process of one creator responding to another creator's video. This allows both creators to speak at the same time (though the videos are recorded separately) and to engage on the same topic. The second feature of note is *stitching*. This involves taking a short clip of another creator's video, followed by the creator of the current video speaking after it. The *stitch* provides context of what the new creator is addressing and also credits the original creator. Finally, there are *reaction* videos in which a creator will *duet* another creator but provide a silent engagement with the original video, often by nodding along or including written commentary on-screen. Each of these features were prevalent in my data collection/analysis of TikTok and offers a glossary for understanding the intricacies of TikTok findings.

While representative data does have its benefits, namely that it shows a summarized version of widespread experiences, it can often be a cold retelling of deeply personal experiences. However, while qualitative interviews offer a wealth of information for researchers to analyze for patterns of wider social events, COVID-19 presented a unique moment in history where face-to-face human interaction was replaced by media and electronics. I knew that without some media specific content, this project would not be a true reflection of the issue I wish to study. Further, TikTok bloomed into one of the most widely used social media platforms during the pandemic despite it being targeted and overwhelmingly used by young Gen Z’s prior to the lockdowns. I was interested in

discovering whether this was a coincidence of a purely functional app that served this moment in history's need for entertainment, or if there was an element of TikTok that has social or cultural significance, as I had suspected. The results for this project analyzed TikTok specifically for its short consumable videos, under the assumption that these videos were able to spread experiences of marginalization, fear, health, social expectations of femininity and thinness, and weight during the pandemic differently than other platforms.

Sample and Data Collection

I initially chose four TikTok creators for analysis to represent young, fat, and feminine creators, two of which would exhibit or speak on other intersecting identities such as race, sexuality, ability, etc. Due to the short nature of this project, I wanted a number large enough to show some variety in lived experiences, but one achievable to examine *all* the creators' content within the span of March 2020-July 2022. I felt that four creators, producing between 10 and sometimes up to 60 videos a month per creator, over the course of a year and a half would balance well with interview data from 13 participants. They were chosen based on the following criteria: residents of Canada or the USA, 18-35, female identifying, fat identifying, with a following of over 10,000 people. The creators chosen were @theabbybible, @mariellegreguski, @heyseantaylor, @kendramorous. I selected creators whose content spoke specifically to body

acceptance/neutrality/positivity. Other creators may have had more engagement, but spoke more to different issues, such as fashion accessibility, daily life, or aesthetics. Further, in selecting my creators I did research others with larger follower bases, which would likely be those to appear in a randomized search on a new TikTok account, however, those creators did not display active engagement in content for the categories of interest for this project. However, despite these creators representing a major part of the body acceptance dialogue, meeting the selection criteria as young, fat, feminine creators, they did not include a Canadian perspective. So, based on participant reports during the interview process, I decided to add @aliciamccarvell's content to the analysis. I chose @aliciamccarvell over other body acceptance, Canadian creators because she is a truly plus size individual, which my participants spoke to, and research states, affects the qualitative experience of weight stigma. It may be tempting for non-TikTok users, or non-TikTok researchers to assume that when searched, the algorithm provides access to all or *most* of the creators feeding into those forms of content, however, the algorithm repeatedly showed me the same fat creators through multiple videos on the subjects in question. Even finding a fat black creator like @kendramorous was challenging; this alludes to the concerns (to be discussed below) that TikTok censors certain bodies, racial identities, or political ideologies on the app. Finding fat women that met my criteria was challenging enough, but finding a fat black woman took much more effort and determination. The decision to use all five TikTok creators comes from a large overlap in

following on the platform. By choosing four varied creators, and later including a popular Canadian creator, I ensured the follower base of these creators would be as varied and far reaching as possible for the short nature of this project.

Due to the focused criteria of my research, I did not use an unbiased account to select the creators. Other researchers using TikTok as their primary social media source for analysis often chose to create a new account to allow the algorithm to choose research-focused content without any personal use bias (Bruno, 2020). However, the creators I chose were not randomly selected from the FYP as Bruno employed for their project. While it can be argued that using unbiased accounts gives a broader sampling of creators, the creators I selected were chosen purposefully and many of them were mentioned as impactful to my interview participants. Perhaps quantitative work on TikTok benefits from an unestablished algorithm (Bruno, 2020), but for this content analysis, purposeful sampling from the body acceptance community was key for uncovering the crux of conversations that influenced young fat women and AFAB individuals in Canada during COVID-19.

Also, as mentioned above, I aimed for a maximum of two creators that represented traditionally privileged individuals (white, straight, able bodied, affluent, ect.), allowing space for the others to represent factors of marginalization such as race, sexual identity or disability. Sociology, specifically the concept of intersectionality as discussed above, tell us that factors of marginalization change our lived experiences, and

how we are able to move through the world (Crenshaw, 1989; Thompson, 2018). In all, despite a focus on diversity in my selection, 1 of 5 creators is a person of colour, 3 of 5 are part of the LGBTQ+ community, and none reported a disability in their content (though this does not suggest that none of them are in fact disabled). Finally, the reality of cancel culture[10] and the nature of TikTok as a platform created a significant possibility that had I chosen my creators in the fall, their content could be gone (deleted, or disbanded from the platform) or have been canceled by the very communities on TikTok this project aims to represent.[11] In any case, at the time this paper is read these creators may no longer be at the forefront of this issue and yet the data gathered here will speak to this period within the pandemic and the experiences of these specific creators and their followers. Their impact will remain true regardless of how society shifts as we reopen into a world with different social parameters and a lessened need for social media as a dominant form of connection.

Further, the individual lived experiences of the TikTok creators that I analyze below affect how they relate to, and choose to present, that information. Contextual information about each creator is necessary to understand both their social media

[10] Cancel culture refers to a social movement of, largely Gen Z, media users "canceling" or boycotting a creators platform due to, what they deem to be, unjust or problematic behaviour.

[11] I delayed the selection of my TikTok creators until I was prepared to gather my results. While this may seem counterintuitive as a researcher, TikTok, and now social media in general, is enveloped in cancel culture, the practice of vocally and publicly "cancelling" or boycotting creators who do not act in accordance with that community's morals or values (Ng, 2020; Duque& LeBlanc, 2021; Bouvier, 2020; Bouvier & Machin, 2021). Some creators who find themselves as the focal point of cancel culture continue to fight, defend themselves, and make content, while others are banned from sites, remove videos, or pause their content creation careers (Ng, 2020; Bouvier, 2020). For this reason a delayed selection process became the only viable option for a current view into the TikTok discourse.

presence and the varied lived experiences they represent and speak to in their content. @theabbybible is a 24 year old, fat model and makeup artist based in the US. At the time of data collection she had 72.5 thousand followers on TikTok, but my most recent check revealed a two thousand follower increase in less than a month. She and @kendramorous have the smallest follower base, and produce the least amount of content both generally and regarding body image and weight stigma. @kendramorous is a 26 year old Black curve model living in the US. Most recently she has seen a jump of 51.1 thousand followers, bringing her to a grand total of 132.2 thousand followers. Next is @heyseantaylor, a 25-year-old American who grew in popularity on TikTok after her appearance on the Netflix reality show *The Circle*. @heyseantaylor boasts one of the smallest growths of followers, but still holds the third greatest at 152.1 thousand followers. @mariellegreguski presents an interesting perspective to this project. She is a performer and model based out of New York City and is a mid-sized individual where all other creators are plus size.[12] She also speaks to her experiences as a bi woman and her engagement with the gay community. Despite a deep dive into her other forms of social media, I could not pinpoint her exact age, though sources estimate she is between 27-30 years old. @mariellegreguski currently has 380.4 thousand followers on her TikTok account. Finally, @aliciamccarvell is a 32 year old, Canadian, plus size model. She has the largest following of the five creators and due to this, is also an influencer for body

[12] Mid-size is most commonly referred to as a size 10-16 where plus size would be 18 and above, with the most inclusive brands stopping at a size 30

positive and plus size brands. @aliciamccarvell also identifies as bi and has 4.6 million followers on TikTok and is growing that number daily. Without question, she has the largest content base I analyzed; she includes a substantial amount of advocacy and body acceptance content. However, due to the aforementioned brand deals, some of her content has become inauthentic over time to increase the sales for these companies. As I hope for this project to be transparent and helpful to readers who may be on a body acceptance journey, I wanted to highlight some of the drawbacks to @aliciamccarvell's content. Her brand deals, ads, and more commercialized body positivity content have been consuming many of her videos since the beginning of 2021. None of the remaining creators are as implicated in brand deals as Alicia, meaning that those who engage with and analyze her content must be cognizant of the fact that there are significant capitalist implications connected to her output. As such, I have excluded any #ads from this analysis[13].

Data collection of TikTok involved examining the entirety of my creators' videos from March 2020 – July 2022 for instances of body acceptance, weight stigma, trolling (bullying through social media comments), fat fashion, and advocacy. While these categories became themes for data collection, I initially began this process with an open coding framework, and developed these five areas of interest as they emerged as significant. By beginning with an open coding system. I allowed the TikToks themselves to display the meaning behind the larger scheme of content work for each creator, which,

[13] Ads: videos labeled as #ad for any company sponsoring the creator

after my data collection, revealed to what extent the five creators emphasized each theme (Williams & Moser, 2019). By understanding how these creators added to the discourse, almost like a literature review of TikTok content, I was able to analyze the importance of the information being disseminated on the platform and at what rate they appear. These five categories appeared in each creator's content on the platform, and the conversation on body acceptance and fat activism. While some of these themes are not featured prominently in my findings, they were evident as categories of consistency in what creators chose to create in ways that connected to my research. Through extracting data based on these five themes or categories, I found and analyzed the rich content that is shown below in my findings. The short nature of TikTok videos can aid in education as they are able to be quickly absorbed and evaluated. However, TikToks can also be extremely harmful if they are only partially engaged with (meaning partially watched or skipped entirely) or be lacking critical details and information from which users may form ideas/opinions without full understanding.[14] In some ways, this acts as an honest display of how social media effects young adults when presented at rapid fire rates; the possibility of negative effects on their mental and social well-being in a struggle to create understanding of complex issues or lived experiences hidden in the onslaught of content is largely significant (Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021; Ostrovsky & Chen, 2020). Vaterlaus &

[14] TikTok watching culture generally is rapid and often results in videos being skipped, or half-engaged with and adopted without hearing a creator's whole message. Many users do interact with a video and watch it in its entirety one or multiple times, but not finishing videos is also possible and frequent from my discussions with other TikTok users.

Winter (2021) and Ostrovsky & Chen (2020) both examined the ways in which TikTok has the potential to spread misinformation, and how this relates to the health and well-being of young individuals using the app (Ostrovsky & Chen, 2020). While the results of this project do reveal positive findings regarding TikTok and community, it is important to note that there remains a real potential for harm from TikTok as an SNS if users cannot engage with it critically.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the TikTok videos themselves took place alongside data collection. As I collected instances of each category, I recorded notes on the dominant messages within them and the dates of the video's publication for future access of the data. In doing so, I created a spreadsheet of each creator's total instances of the themes and was able to see which theme was favoured by each creator in terms of most content published, further divided by month and year. After collecting this data, I chose prominent examples of each creator's content for all five areas of interest, focusing on body acceptance, weight stigma, and advocacy and supplementing the three key sections of my findings with fat fashion and trolling where appropriate. I used these specific videos to act as quotations, like those from the interviews, to provide a detailed explanation of how TikToks are crafted and the kinds of information the creators shared. The majority of analysis was done concurrently with the writing portion of this project.

LIMITATIONS, ETHICS, AND PARTICIPANT REPRESENTATION

The significance of this project lies in its ability to put forward the voices of traditionally marginalized individuals, and therefore, relied on person-first language and data to guide this project's results to be specific to individual lived experience. It is important for the nature of this research, specifically in a health-related, data-heavy pandemic, that the voices of those socially affected be heard and respected as a cornerstone of knowledge and expertise. For this reason, quantitative data, while useful for a more representative sample, has the potential to erase the details or the 'whys' of this kind of research. The limitations of this project lay in the short time frame available for my master's thesis. From the date of my ethics approval, there were only 7 short months to reach participants, organize meetings, conduct interviews, and harvest TikTok data. This project would have benefited from more time, or even several months after initial data collection, to monitor the development of content on the themes on TikTok. Further, as a new researcher, and a new resident of Newfoundland, this project was in some ways hindered by my ability to attract and collect participants. Greater diversity in this project would have allowed for an even deeper intersectional analysis than was accomplished. With more time and resources, this project could have analyzed a greater number and diversity of women across Canada, and a fuller sampling of major body acceptance creators on TikTok. However, this project was worked to the best of my

ability to offer a range of perspectives in an initial examination, for the purpose of addressing a timely question.

As mentioned above, I used Zoom to conduct my virtual interviews. Due to the need for a majority of virtual meetings, I also used the platform *WaiversElectronic* to distribute and collect all consent forms. This platform allowed for a personalized consent form to be created and stored while my account was active. Once I had collected all consent forms, my account was canceled and I continued to store downloaded copies for my records.

It is important to note one uniqueness in how participants are referred to in the findings. In the consent form, each participant was given the option of being represented anonymously, under their own name, or by a pseudonym. While I would be aware of who the anonymous participants were, I offered the option for those uncomfortable with being named in any capacity. Only one participant availed of this option, but still consented to having direct quotations used in this thesis. For this reason, that participant will be referred to as *Anonymous*, despite the fact that they were not anonymous to myself as a researcher, nor were their direct quotations omitted from these pages.

Further, at the start of this project there was very little published academic work on TikTok, even less on its merits within qualitative research. Within the last year, there has been a wave of work incorporating TikTok (Li, Guan, Hammond & Berrey, 2021; Aslam, 2021; Kennedy, 2021), both examining the platform itself and using videos to

enhance other research projects. While this research becomes very helpful in navigating TikTok analysis, there is still a lack of research on TikTok analysis paired with other qualitative methods.

Another major limitation for this project was the rapidly changing nature of TikTok and those who engage with it. It becomes very difficult to analyze content that can be so easily removed, banned, or canceled. Further, this project is limited in that it cannot be applied to other age groups, and while three participants are racialized, a larger sample of greater racial variation could provide a more rigorous racial analysis. Much of TikTok's power rests in those who most heavily interact with the content, being Gen Z and Millennials. Other social media could be examined for studies on older individuals, however, there is a strong chance that the positive community and impacts TikTok provided for my participants was linked to those in question being deeply engaged with social media: Intensive social media use usually being linked to younger individuals with more time and fewer responsibilities. Finally, the number of creators analyzed for this project did not allow this data to be generalizable. These limitations are a key component of TikTok and therefore cannot be compensated for. Any research involving this platform falls prey to these issues. The drastically and rapidly changing nature of TikTok has the ability to significantly change planned analyses of the creator's content and skew findings. However, despite this limitation, staying true to the content the creator shows to

viewers is critical in accurately understanding the breadth of content available to TikTok users, and how they are impacted by that content.

This study would be ineffective in representing the lived experiences of fat women and AFAB individuals during COVID-19, specifically on social media, if only the opinions and activism of the privileged were represented. Yet, through my selection process I witnessed a push of white, and privileged creators by the algorithm, I had to search much harder to encounter creators of colour speaking on these issues. This presents concerns that the algorithm or the TikTok moderators are pushing this content, or that the TikTok user base is more apt to listen to these privileged creators over marginalized folks sharing similar content. This points back to Sabrina Strings work (2019), *Fearing the Black Body*, and other intersectional writings that acknowledge the white washing of the #bopomovement (body positivity movement) that has its roots in Black female liberation (Taylor, 2018; Thompson, 2018; Harrison, 2019; Tovar, 2018; Gay, 2018). Further research would be required in this area, studying the user base instead of creators to validate the claims (of users and creators) that Black, disabled, gender queer, etc. creators are being silenced on the platform.

CONTEXT

To best understand the following results, readers must grasp the social context within which participants and creators are located. Several persistent experiences were evident in my data collection that give context to how participants navigate the world. Although these experiences do not work to answer my research question, they are foundational to understanding the results. Past experiences of *bullying, intersections of fatness and femininity, fear, and social media* inform how participants relate to and answer interview questions pertaining to weight stigma experiences during COVID-19.

My participants came to their interviews at many stages along the body acceptance/body dissatisfaction journey. Some who identified as fat would likely be considered so under medical terminology, while some smaller-bodied individuals still chose to self-identify as fat. All participants who felt significantly impacted by a history of fatness spoke to a history of that experience in the beginning of the interviews. This presented a very interesting discourse relating to weight stigma; experiences of weight stigma (any social mistreatment based on weight) has negative impact on how women and AFAB individuals relate to their bodies regardless of body size (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006; Harrison, 2019; Kite & Kite, 2020; Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015). However, the ten participants who spoke to a history of fatness all agree on what one participant put so succinctly. Beth explained at the onset of her interview, “weight has

influenced the majority, a major part of my life. Um, probably even every part?" (Beth, 27, Student). In our society, weight and appearance are major concerns for young women (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006; Harrison, 2019; Kite & Kite, 2020; Gay, 2018; Tovar, 2018). It is not an exaggeration for Beth, or any participant, to posit that weight has impacted every part of their life. Theorists such as Harrison (2019), Kite & Kite (2020), Tovar (2018), and Gay (2018) explore in their works, not only the impact of weight on young women socially but their own journeys that were inextricably tied to weight and worth. While this reveals a small section of my results from the project, I have included this here to give context to how these individuals arrived at this project. I hope it will contextualize the impact of weight for those women and AFAB individuals under our current understandings of thinness and beauty.

Bullying

A common experience for young, fat children, raised in a thin-obsessed society, is bullying on the basis of weight (Harrison, 2019; Kite & Kite, 2020; Guardabassi, Mirisola & Tomasetto, 2018). Nine of my participants reported instances of childhood, or young adulthood bullying due to weight. Blue best described it when, after being asked if there was anything further on marginalization they wished to share, said, "other than you know, kids are bastards" (Blue, 32, Retail Manager). Kids can in-fact be ruthless with their peers regarding anything 'different,' including, but not limited to, weight, race, and

disability. A change of behaviour or dress was a common coping technique to avoid marginalization and bullying that my participants spoke to in their interviews. Josie told a story about her size leading to an assumption that she was gay which led to relentless bullying. She explained to me that this was torturous as she didn't "want to give the boys any more reasons not to like her" (Josie, 25, Event Planner). Being labeled as 'different' as a child is a terrible fate for those just trying to get by. Especially in a world that deems fatness as disease and 'treatable', being the fat kid is a sentence of harassment and shame.

Fatness and Femininity

As the above detailed review of feminist literature illustrates, this project is based on a feminist understanding and is primarily interested in how femininity and fatness intersected during the early months of COVID-19, and the impact TikTok played in that experience. Ten of my participants noted a significant relationship between femininity and fatness in their lives. Additionally, femininity and a feminine presentation that was expected of participants, was also significant within this discussion. Seven of my participants spoke about expectations of femininity that didn't resemble their own lives.

My participants shared with me a range of ways in which they felt they did not present themselves within the guidelines of femininity, and the experience of existing outside of it, especially as fat women and AFAB individuals. Two of my female identifying participants shared experiences of assuming more masculine or androgynous

presentations to ease the burden of these feminine expectations. Others simply shared a disappointment that they wouldn't be accepted due to their fatness. Further, four of my participants reported feeling that fatness and femininity were socially dissonant (Taylor, 2018; Gay, 2018). Josie shared, **"**they would always be like the reason she doesn't have a boyfriend is because she's like gay and she's fat and like, because like in the media all the like fat women in the movies were like butchier characters" (Josie, 25, Event Planner). For Josie, her weight brought on unwanted attention to a sexuality she wasn't ready to explore or expose. She reported resenting the expectation that she was gay due to weight, and shied away from any association between her size and homosexuality. In her interview, she also shared something poignant on being fat and female: the struggle of *space*. It is one that other participants, such as Blue and Jess, spoke of as well. She explained:

> One thing… [I] found is a lot of people are kind of like shaming you into this little, it feels like people are like, trying to make you small, like not only are you trying to physically be small, but you feel like everybody points out your fatness so that you're taking up too much space, taking up too much room and a lot of women they feel this even if they're not fat, but especially if you're fat. (Josie, 25, Event Planner).

For Josie it was hard to be fat and feminine because she felt part of the intrinsic female experience was to attempt to shrink oneself, physically and socially, something that Bordo (1993), Chrisler (2011), and Gay (2018) agree on. Gay, in her memoir *Hunger*, writes:

> "As a woman, as a fat woman, I am not supposed to take up space. And yet, as a feminist, I am encouraged to believe I can take up space. I live in a contradictory space where I should try to take up space but not too much of it, and not in the wrong way where the wrong way is anyway where my body is concerned" Gay, 2018, pg 113 epub)

Gay's memoir is an extensive account of the contradictions of being fat and feminine, and it leaves readers with as many questions as it answers. However, Josie's and Gay's accounts make clear that women are socialized to feel that being small is best, in every way.

While these participants speak to the expectations of thinness they feel a failure to meet, mental health issues such as anxiety and eating disorders present consequences associated with attempting to conform to social ideals that are out of reach (Bordo, 1993; Harrison, 2019). For Josie, this is the reason that she feels she falls outside of the feminine sphere despite feeling feminine, she feels she will never be 'small enough' to fit the true social position of *woman*. Josie and the other participants who participate in femininity in their unique ways struggle to own the space they occupy. If women must be 'x' number of pounds to be beautiful and socially accepted, but we know from research that intentional weight loss is unsustainable and that our "weight set point" is largely genetic (Harrison, 2019, p.94), then how are fat AFAB/women supposed to remain unaffected by these unrealistic expectations? The expectation of femininity as thin, dainty

and white leaves those whose bodies are none or only some of those things on the margins. They are left with the choice to either change at any cost, where physically possible, to meet the standards of femininity, or live counter-culturally and produce a new form of femininity separate from weight, race, ability, etc. paradigms and embrace the social dissonance.

Fear

Four of my participants spoke about a societal fear of fatness that impacted their relationship with their bodies over the course of their lives. They explained that it made them feel undervalued as individuals due to their body size. Josie eloquently put it "it's ugly and it's awful. And it's the one thing everybody like, it's like, everybody is scared to get cancer and everyone's scared to get fat" (Josie, 25, Event Planner). Josie sees the fear of fatness as something that is viewed as terrible as death. A fear of fatness is consistent with the above discussion on the cult of thinness (Harrison, 2019), there is nothing more terrifying than fatness to those who buy into diet culture's messaging. For those living in fat bodies this communicates that they themselves are not valuable to society, as thinness buys privilege and power (Harrison, 2019).

Experiences on Social Media

Finally, it is important to address how participants related to social media, generally, at the time of their interviews. The TikTok algorithm is a powerful tool that impacted my participants' consumption of media in a largely positive way. This is a feature that makes TikTok personalized as discussed above, giving constant new content, introducing users to topics they feel they may be interested in. Significantly, eight of my participants found TikTok to be a positive source of body acceptance content, and a safe community for fat women and AFAB individuals. Participants also spoke to time spent inside and increased social media use as a catalyst to their introduction to more radical content. COVID-19 affected the emphasis put on social issues through social media, and allowed creators almost unlimited time to connect into these issues and create their own responses and educational content to material they themselves were engaging with. COVID-19, as a time of social isolation, pushed individuals to find new, or reconnect with existing, areas for social interest, civic engagement, and for many American creators, money.[15] This led social media users, like my participants, to experience a push of content that had not been as present prior to the pandemic.

However, social media as a broader concept of apps and sites still demonstrates a negative impact for eight participants. However, those social networking sites accredited with negative impacts (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) did not number TikTok among

[15] While Canadian creators can certainly make money as influencers through brand deals and sponsorships, American creators actually make money for increased user engagement with their content, which supports more content creation.

them. One participant (Victoria) explained that her frustration with social media was that it often negatively impacted her mood. She said, “and I think that's why I wasn't initially sold on it [TikTok] because I was like I can just go to Instagram and feel like shit why do I need TikTok to do that?” (Victoria, 25, Project Manager). SNSs like Instagram tend to have a competitive nature that promotes upward body comparison, leaving users who do not meet these curated standards of beauty feeling inferior (McLean, Paxton & Wertheim, 2016). Further, TikTok’s algorithm specifically made it possible for participants to be part of a social media community for fat women and those AFAB and encounter new examples of representation that empowered them, shown through responses of nine participants. Finally, the wealth of content shown through the creators, @theabbybible, @heyseantaylor, @kendramorous, @mariellegreguski, and @aliciamccarvell reveal a following and engagement with the content participants flagged as helpful, on a platform-wide level.

FINDINGS

I embarked on this project to discern how young Canadian women and AFAB individuals were impacted by weight stigma during COVID-19, and the role social media (TikTok) played in these experiences. As mentioned above, due to the rapidly changing nature of both COVID-19 and social media, the methods I employed for this project

needed to be malleable to allow for a realistic, accurate, and current analysis. I recorded a substantial increase in the amount of body acceptance content available on TikTok during COVID-19 from the five creators analyzed. The creators examined for this project demonstrated an increase of greater than 5x the body acceptance/neutrality related content produced between 2020 to 2021.[16] I did note a decrease in content from 2021 to 2022, however, data was only collected into April of 2022.[17] Based on these patterns, there would still be an expectation of some decrease in content in all of 2022, but this pattern still reveals a drastic increase since the onset of the pandemic for these five creators.[18] A possibility for this reduction in content could be less social media engagement due to more in-person interaction. Moreover, in the context of COVID-19, weight stigma created a barrier that divided how those fat individuals were able to be social, which becomes exceptionally impactful to mental health, isolation, social connection, and self-worth when these individuals must fear the impact of simply appearing as they are on screen.

The findings below are separated into three sections: 1) *Healthcare*; 2) *Diet Culture*; 3) *Resisting Hegemonic Cultural Ideologies*. The first section, *Healthcare*, addresses access to vaccinations and health care for young fat women and AFAB

16 In the below above, red represents the projected creation of body related content by the end of 2022, based on my findings from January to May.

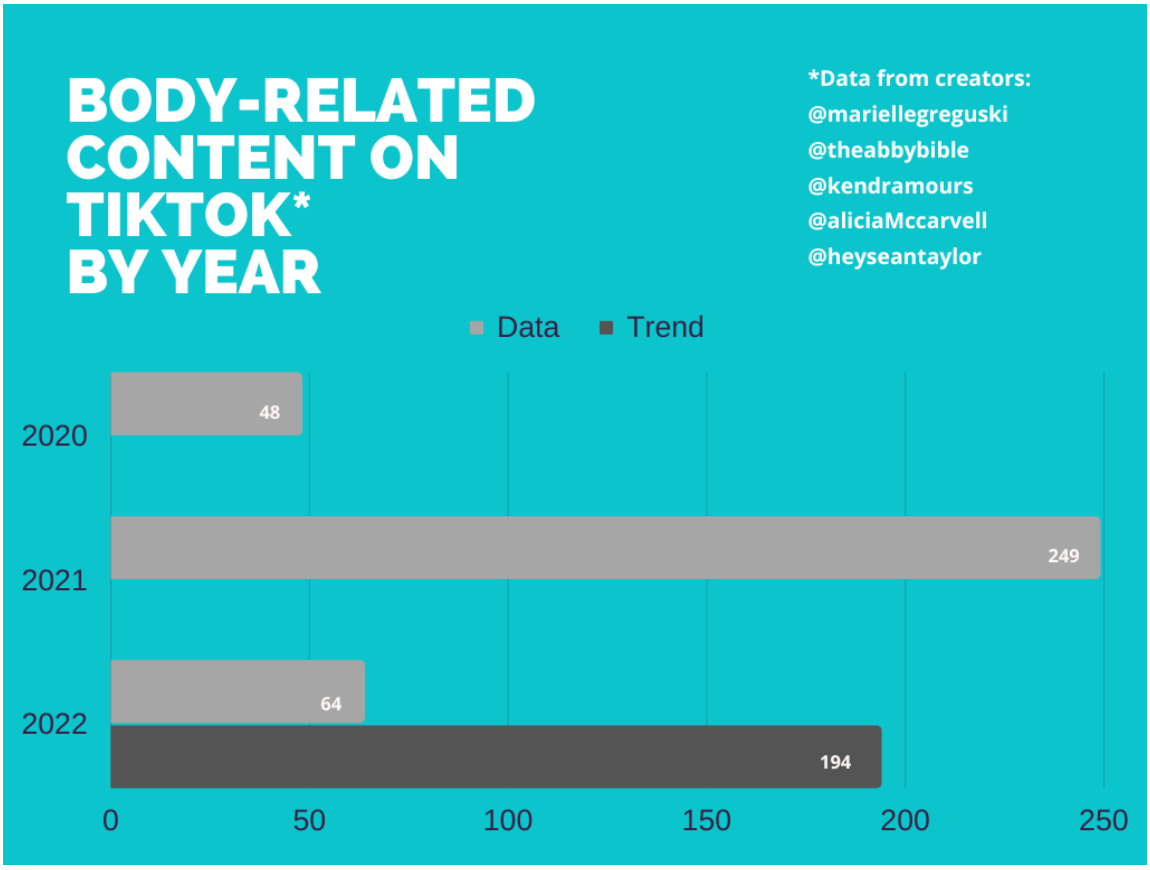
17 At the end of data collection (April) there were 75 instances of body acceptance/neutrality content in 2022 for the creators

18 While only an estimate, the 2022 content projection would still show a 4x increase of content on TikTok from 2020

individuals during COVID-19. This section explores issues surrounding access to quality health care for fat individuals, participants' take on the early access criteria based on weight, and experiences of medical weight stigma. The second section, *Diet Culture*, addresses diet culture, the 'Quarantine 15,' the cult of thinness, and body image that both the creators and participants spoke to, most visibly on social media. Finally, section three, *Resisting Hegemonic Cultural Ideologies*, examines the emerging discourse on TikTok that works against hegemonic understandings of bodies, weight, and health. This is predominantly seen through creator's content, but additionally through participant reports of the impact this counter cultural movement has had on their own body acceptance journeys.

My findings demonstrate that an increase in body neutrality/acceptance content on TikTok during COVID-19 was matched with participant reported increase in engagement with and adoption of these principles. Participants also reported fewer personal experiences of weight stigma, and yet still spoke to stigmatization in media, at home, and in systemic institutions. While there was a reported decrease in experiences of certain types of weight stigma, new and different types of weight stigma emerged during COVID-19. This change led participants to negotiate tensions between weight stigma/diet culture rhetoric and body acceptance/neutrality ideology. Further, from the perspective of my participants, TikTok's unique algorithmic function of providing and curating content to users may have made the platform capable of producing rapid social change for body

acceptance over expectations of thinness within the span of the pandemic, and through this, was able to create a growing dialogue counter to hegemonic[19] understandings of health and fatness around body acceptance, and neutrality. However, those who refrained from posting to SNSs or creating content due to past experiences of, and fear of future weight stigma, experienced a barrier to social media and interacted as consumers, but not consumer-creators— impacting their ability to socialize during the pandemic. Finally, it



[19] Hegemony is described as "Hegemony designates a type of domination based primarily on dominated people's and groups' consent rather than purely on a leader's coercion and exerted force" and is used in sociological discussions of issues ranging from masculinity, to health, to ability (Glassman, 2009).

is of note that AFAB individuals and women in my sample who were heavily indoctrinated into diet culture and who struggled with body image were prominent among those who found and adopted the counter hegemonic discourse on TikTok during the pandemic.

HEALTH CARE: ACCESS AND TREATMENT

The COVID-19 pandemic represents the most prominent health crisis in the last century and is the only society-halting issue that those represented in this study (Canadian Gen Z, and Millennials) have known. For this reason, health care, health, and access to related resources are a prominent feature of this project. Additionally, the research available on effects of weight stigma explain that previous experiences of stigma often lead to a fear of future experiences of stigma (Hunger, Smith & Tomiyama, 2020; Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015; Tomiyama et al., 2018). This section will address weight as a medical concern, social links between fatness and health, fear and fatness, early access to vaccinations against COVID-19 offered solely based on weight in North America, experiences of medical weight stigma, and changes to weight stigma during COVID-19. Fear appears as a subsection in these findings as it explains participants' mindsets and expectations of stigmatization during this period.

The focus of this project is to determine how COVID-19 impacted or altered young women's and AFAB folks' experiences of weight stigma. Only by understanding how discussions around fatness and health impact young women and AFAB individuals,

specifically the use of fatness as a looming morbidity diagnosis, can we understand how COVID-19 may have entangled these young individual's relationships to their bodies, to later analyze counter hegemonic experiences of social media discourse.

Accessing the Vaccine

A major point of interest that brought about this project was the social perception around early access to vaccines based solely on BMI (Body Mass Index). As mentioned above, a BMI of 40 or greater was required for Canadian early access, whereas the US required a BMI of 30 or greater. Further, one respondent, Blue, explained that upon accessing this criteria to get the vaccine, there was no need to prove her BMI was above 40, stating , "and of course, like no one asks you [your weight] at the vaccine clinic they just started like, are you in group one?" (Blue, 31, Retail Manager). By US standards (a BMI of over 30), many straight sized individuals and athletes, such as body builders, were technically eligible for early access to the vaccine under this criterion. Similarly, there was discourse around early access on TikTok. Most prominent were thinner creators joking that they were giving up their newfound diets and eating more to boost their BMI's to get early access to the vaccine.[20] @theabbybible was the only creator who openly spoke about taking advantage of this criterion (Bible, 2021). Perhaps others were able to acquire the vaccine through early access but chose not to make that decision

[20] Due to TikTok's algorithmic function, this dialogue appeared prominent to me, but upon further research for this project, was not a dominant discourse for TikTok as a whole.

public. Abby showed that she was taking advantage of this criteria by showing off her outfit for the vaccine (2021). I wanted to document a general perception of this criterion from participants during the interview process. Two participants were personally able to gain access to the vaccine due to their weight, with one other participant sharing that her parents had been able to do the same. Due to the higher BMI requirement in Canada, I was not surprised at these results. Yet, I was surprised that four of my participants were unaware of this availability prior to the interview for this project. Due to the intensity with which the government pushed that everyone be vaccinated as soon as eligibility requirements were met in early 2021, it was unexpected to hear that any of my participants had not retained through media engagement, or were entirely unaware of, this criteria for early vaccination.

In a discussion on access to vaccines for fat individuals, Bridget shared some discomfort with how it was conveyed to the public and what that portrays about how public health views fat individuals. She asked:

> And now that especially we're having a lot more body positivity, that grew questions of, where's the medical threshold? If you're not, you know, are you counting BMI? Are you counting just general weight of a person?...What does that look like? And then who does COVID affect if it affects fat bodies? (Bridget, 21, Student).

Fatness as a health risk is so embedded into our media messages that it seems acceptable to say “fat people will x” with little justification, as discussed by Harisson (2019). It is encouraging to see participants question this rhetoric, but the presence of personal

opinions on social media and myths around health and size still impacted my participants in how they chose to navigate the world during COVID-19.

One participant (Beth) spoke to an intersection between her weight, race, and access to medical care, specifically the vaccine. Beth gave insight into the complications her race played into her experience and fear of the pandemic. In reference to early access to vaccinations she said:

> Well, my main thing was first nations as a high-risk category. And then I have this whole, like, conspiracy theory that the government gave us the vaccines first to try it on us so that we can die first if there's anything bad. So, I didn't actually pay attention much to the obese part because I actually didn't know about it until you said it.
> (Beth, 27, Student).

For Beth, the impact of race was so significant that the struggles of another facet of her identity became a secondary concern. Her indigeneity had to become her focus during the early days of vaccine rollout to ensure she was safe, both from COVID-19 and by her own report, the vaccine itself.

Participants were then asked whether or not they had previously been aware of the BMI criteria and to explore a hypothetical situation with me. Each participant was asked if they had known about the BMI criteria at the time, and if they met the criteria, would they have made the choice to take advantage of early access to the vaccine or would they opt to wait for their appropriate age group. Some participants declined to engage in this hypothetical on the basis of incomplete knowledge of the situation and insufficient time to form an opinion. Four of my participants said they would have taken

advantage of early access to the vaccine had they been able to, regardless of social stigma. Caleigh explained that she was on the fence with this decision:

> "I think the part of me that has been taught to almost fear fatness--thinks that it's a good idea to have obesity as a category for early vaccinations. But the logical part of me thinks that it's just an excuse to further chastise fat bodies. And the more important thing, it shouldn't, it shouldn't be the weight it should be, do you have asthma? Do you have high cholesterol or heart problems?" (Caleigh, 20, Student)

Caleigh captures the debate present in this line of questioning. The results of this question were almost an even split suggesting that this was as contested a choice as I had previously imagined. Finally, five of my participants explicitly said they would not have accessed the early vaccine even if they had met the criteria. Josie justified this choice by saying, "I don't want to advocate the, like, fatphobic kind of narratives that some places are considering it, because some provinces considered it and some provinces didn't" (Josie, 25, Event Planner). For Josie, it was more important to stand by her morals and her personal understanding of her health and well-being. She continued to explain, "your average height versus weight is this like, what does that tell anyone that, absolutely, like unless you're trying to figure out someone's like centre of gravity. It makes no sense" (Josie, 25, Event Planner). Like many individuals who reject diet culture and choose a more HAES (Health At Every Size) focused life, Josie expressed frustration at using BMI as a criterion or indicator of anything truly meaningful. Josie's view reflects Harrison's

(2019) findings: BMI is not an indicator of health. Josie felt moved not to access the early vaccine based on weight as she knew it was not a criteria she medically needed to take advantage of, choosing instead to wait for her age group.

Understanding why my participants felt torn creates opening for dialogue around the medical mistreatment of fat bodies (Chastain, ep.119, 2017). When fat individuals are so used to being overlooked or dismissed due to their size, an opportunity for access to equitable health care is impactful. The split in my participants' responses as to whether they would have chosen to access the vaccine (assuming they met the criteria) speaks to that desire to be a forethought in the medical industry, even if that decision did not align with personal body acceptance ideals or was not medically necessary for their health.

Fear

Fear manifested itself in four major categories for my participants. These included fear of getting COVID-19 as a fat person, fear of dying from COVID as a fat person, fear of future weight stigma, and a social fear of fatness. My participants spoke to these fears repeatedly, worrying that past experiences would repeat themselves, or that the news articles would be right: they would be the ones targeted in the next wave of the virus. This fear is illustrated in how Jess navigated grocery shopping early in the pandemic. She explained “I was absolutely terrified. And, ah, I was trying to keep it together for [my son] because I didn't want him to be scared. And like there was a point where he didn't

want me to go get groceries because he thought I would get COVID and die" (Jess, 26, Artist/Musician). While she shares her son's fears, Jess further explained that she was worried what the illness would mean for her and her family in the beginning, and felt that it could be life threatening to her because of her size. This fear was impactful to participants because it became a basis for decision making, specifically where the virus was concerned which directly impacted their health related experiences.

Many of my participants displayed a very real fear of the virus. Nine of thirteen of my participants feared they, or someone they loved, would catch COVID-19 and experience worse health outcomes based solely on their weight. They often cited the news, as well as word of mouth via Facebook, that placed them at the center of 'risk' for catching and being harmed by COVID-19 as the basis for this fear. This fear left many participants afraid to engage with the world, and some did fear that they would be worse off than their thin peers. Maddison explained, "it's related to all the Facebook posts about like, oh, the only people who get really sick or die are the people who are bigger" (Maddison, 24, Young Professional). This fear originates from a very tangible reality for many fat people, especially women, that they won't be taken seriously or properly cared for if they do become sick. Josie spoke to this in her interview, worrying that if she did get sick, there would be no one to properly advocate for her as a fat woman (read: as a person with health motivations beyond weight) (Josie, 25, Event Planner). Something that also bothered Maddison was the lack of humanity offered in these discussions and news

articles. She admitted, “What I'm very tired of seeing is people who are like, oh, only people who are, you know, fat or obese are going to be the ones who die. And I'm like, ‘Guys, do you realize you're talking about human beings right now?’” (Maddison, 24, Young Professional). She highlights the tone-deaf nature of these comments and news articles while simultaneously holding onto the fear that these messages might be true[21]. The significance in this statement lies in the fact that she was only one of the nine participants to actively call out marginalization, but simultaneously feared that the news could be true. Despite this not being a representative sample, the prominence of this fear that as fat people they would fare poorly or die from the virus is highly concerning. This points to a likelihood that there is a large portion of young people whose fear of COVID-19 roots in medical fatphobic bias that was consistently iterated via personal opinion social media posts during the pandemic (Harrison, 2019; Hunger, Smith & Tomiyama, 2020). While this discourse did appear on some *sides* of TikTok, participants spoke specifically to facebook as the locus of these stigmatizing comments and misinformation.

Weight stigma, as the key concern to this project, sits at the core of this analysis. The concerns around fear relating to COVID-19 that I have discussed above, all feed into

[21] It is of note that fat individuals were seen as disposable or at fault for contracting COVID-19 during the pandemic. Fat individuals became a sheild for a fear of the virus, ‘acceptable’ deaths, in the face of wide spread fear. The flippant language both in media and in interpersonal relationships that framed fat lives lost as disposable during the pandemic is another facet of the effects of being fat during COVID-19 and a vivid example of weight stigma. While inclusion of this finding would have reached beyond the specificity of my research questions, it is possible that an analysis of mainstream news and media could provide a fuller explanation of other components relating to weight stigma during COVID-19.

weight stigma and the experiences my participants have had that affect their feelings of marginalization and exclusion in society as fat individuals. Each of my participants were explicitly asked to recount a story of weight stigma in their lives, and if they had experienced any weight stigma during COVID-19.

A fear of weight stigmatization in medical contexts was a repetitive pattern in my research. This was not a surprise; Hunger (2015; 2020) speaks about this in his research that shows a relationship exists between past stigma and routine medical avoidance to limit further stigmatization. Seven of my participants expressed a fear of future medical weight stigma. In Blue's interview they told me "I haven't had a pap smear in probably 10 years" (Blue, 31, Retail Manager). Ten years of avoidance of a routine medical exam that can be life saving for the early detection of cervical cancer has a huge impact on Blue's life due to previous weight stigma. Katie explained an instance where they broke their wrist and feared how others might view their injury due to their size. They said, "Like, I felt like I had to justify every time I told someone that I broke my wrist because they would have assumed I fell due to my fatness or something like that. Which was annoying" (Katie, 25, Student). Katie feared that the medical weight stigma they had experienced earlier in life would lead others to judge and marginalize them if they didn't preemptively explain their injury. Individuals they interacted with may or may not have assumed their injury was due to their weight, but even so, the added emotional labour involved is often associated with individuals experiencing factors of oppression (Bordo,

1993; Gay, 2018). Those with thin privilege may take for granted that they will be believed and shown pity or empathy for their injuries while Katie worried it would simply prove that their body was prone to injury solely due to size.

Medical Weight Stigma Before and During COVID-19

Understanding the history of medical anti-fat bias that both my participants in this project and theorists (of all body sizes) report and/or experience acts as context for understanding how COVID-19 changed expectations of how/when weight stigma would be received for many women and AFAB individuals. Regan Chastain, in a discussion with theorist Christy Harrison on her Podcast *Food Psych*, specifically discusses medical dismissal as a fat woman as she attempted to be treated for strep throat only to be discussing weight loss with yet another medical professional. She says:

> I went to the doctor for strep throat, and he asked me what I was doing to lose weight. And told me that I should lose x pounds and I was like so just blown away. And it didn't feel good. And so finally like we argued about it, and I was like, what do you give thin people with strep throat? And he's like, well antibiotics. And I was like so let's try some of those. Just on the off chance that they also cure strep throat in fat people.
> (Chastain, 2017, 40:10, ep. #119)

Chastain's experience is an example of a common occurrence for fat people in weight-centric medicine, as will be shown below through my results. (Harrison, 2019; (Chastain, *Food Psych Podcast*, ep.119, 2017)).

Five of my participants had experiences of medical weight stigma as their "most prominent experience of weight stigma." This included all sorts of dismissals, misdiagnoses, and improper comportment for a medical professional with their patient. Anna (21, student) shares a story about her frustrations and sadness concerning subpar medical care for fat women. She provided an example of weight stigma that occurred for her at only eleven years old. She explains that the doctor asked her mother, as she sat by, what they were doing about her weight in a discussion on body pain. Anna explained her confusion, "just the idea of looking at like a little 11 year old girl and saying , Oh yeah, it's your diet. That's why you're in pain" (Anna, 21, Student). She continued, "I wasn't in control of my diet, I, I just wanted help" (Anna, 21, Student). The social stigma of fatness posits fatness as a social/moral failing and can cause feelings of failure or humiliation for those who don't exist in thin bodies naturally (Harrison, 2019). Anna eventually got the diagnosis she was looking for, after years of fighting with medical professionals to believe her experiences of pain, but this early display of weight stigma still affects her. She said, "It really like, it impacted me a lot. And it made me a little resentful towards doctors and not wanting to seek medical care" (Anna, 21, Student). Anna speaks pointedly to why fat women avoid medical care, She continued to say, "And like, the worst part is, when that happened to me, I wasn't a fat woman, I was a fat girl. I was--I was so young. I was 11 years old" (Anna, 21, Student).

Blue shared their own story of stigmatization inside the doctor's office. They recounted, “Um, so the doctor on a, on like a prescription sheet…She signed it and everything. Ah, prescribed me a dog that I could walk twice a day” as a weight loss measure (Blue, 31, Retail Manager). Further, these instances of stigma follow fat individuals into adulthood as Jess shared with me in her interview. She explained her doctor said “to get it [COVID-19 vaccination] ASAP, because I am in a few risk categories, the top of one being the obesity and I was like, oh, cool, thanks” (Jess, 36, Artist/ Musician). It is important to note here that Jess’ final words, “oh, cool, thanks” were followed by a restrained laugh. For Jess, as for most of my participants, experiences of weight stigma in medical facilities have become routine and anticipated, but that does not suggest they lose their sting. Having one’s size attributed as morbidity, especially in the case of a global pandemic, is a burden to carry.

@heyseantaylor shares an experience of medical weight stigma on her TikTok regarding finding a body neutral doctor as a fat person. She explains that after moving to New York she was in search of a doctor, one that wasn’t fatphobic as her previous two doctors had been, and she set up an appointment with a practitioner that she felt would listen to her medical needs and not focus on her weight. She explains that the appointment with the doctor went well enough despite a push towards weight loss. However, the experience of weight stigma that Sean describes occurred with the nurse during blood work. As she took her blood the nurse commented on Sean’s blouse and

said she liked it. She then proceeded to say “I used to be big, and people don’t even realize it” and then repeatedly remarked, “like I respect big women. I respect big women” (2021-10-26). Sean repeats this phrase four or five more times in her retelling of the story. For @heyseantaylor this was a devastating end to what she felt was a win for her medical care because this ‘reassurance’ actually communicated to Sean that rather than respect her, the nurse pitied her for remaining fat.

Aside from poor medical treatment experienced by fat individuals generally, many fat women/AFAB individuals are dismissed or refused care due to their size and gender presentation. Maddison related a story of medical dismissal surrounding a breast reduction surgery. She explains that she was told she was too large for the surgery to be “ethical” and sent away with direction to lose weight before she would be considered. When I asked if she felt this was connected to weight, femininity or both, she stated “Um, in my opinion, there's a lot of, um, overlap between, um, just healthcare not being taken seriously [for fat people] and then also just being a woman” (Maddison, 24, Young Professional). Her assumption supports theorists who study the medical mistreatment of women—that gender plays into if patients will be believed, how soon they will be believed, and if they will receive adequate medical care (Bordo, 1993; Strings, 2019; Chastain, *Food Psych Podcast*, ep.119, 2017).

I saw a correlation between medical weight stigma and trolling during the analysis of TikTok. Nearly half of the recorded one-hundred and twenty-six instances of trolling

across the creators were related to ‘health advice’ or weight based discrimination. As a size twenty-four, @theabbybible experiences a lot of comments on her weight via video comment sections. A term that circles TikTok discourse is *TikTok Doctors* which refers to users giving unsolicited, and unfounded, medical advice via TikTok comments. On January 30th, 2022, Abby addressed a comment left on one of her videos regarding breast-related back pain. The comment reads “more likely your back hurts from carrying around 350 lbs and that chip on your shoulder that thinks obesity is attractive and should be catered to” followed by a laughing-crying emoji “😂” (01-30-2022). Abby responds to the video by looking into the camera and saying “oh, you think hating me is original? How about you get a new personality trait?” Finally, the video is captioned, in response to the comment about weight, “nah I have my boy toys to carry that around for me” (01/30/2022). @mariellegreguski also addresses unsolicited health advice on TikTok. She writes on-screen “when TikTok doctors come into fat people's comments saying they’re ‘glorifying obesity’ by loving their bodies and diagnosing them as ‘unhealthy’” (2021-10-21). The audio placed with this writing is “that shit don’t even make no sense. That’s stupid, it’s weird, it's goofy, goofy is what it is” (Greguski, 2021). Finally, she captions this video, stating “lemme see ur phd [*sic*] if you wanna diagnose us so bad” (Greguski, 2021). These responses reveal a few important things. Firstly, despite what many of us were taught as children about playing with fire, fighting fire with fire becomes a socially acceptable and vital tool to fight trolls on TikTok. Secondly,

@theabbybible's response reveals that this mistreatment or cruelty about her size is a regular occurrence for her as a fat model/creator. This alludes to a fatphobic underpinning of TikTok discourse and the social acceptability of these kinds of comments, evident in that they are not removed by the moderators of the platform.

However, Abby's true run in with 'TikTok doctors' is captured in a separate video, and her response is an incredible 'clap-back' (retort) to those who do not believe fat women can also be healthy women. The trolls comment on Abby's video, which she responds to , reads "*stares in high blood pressure*." The judgment underlining this comment is that Abby's size alone causes health concerns such as high blood pressure. Again, Abby's response to this comment alludes to the frequency with which she has had to defend her own well-being to strangers. She opens the video by explaining that all of her recent lab work has come back clean, however, she presumes that angry trolls in her comment section won't accept her word alone (2021-10-1). She cuts to a clip of a phone call with her doctor, recorded with permission as she states on the screen, and her doctor proudly announces, "all of your tests came back and they look good!" (2021). It is incredibly powerful for Abby to share this information with her followers, information that supports the literature that finds weight is separate from health (Harrison, 2019; Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015; Hunger, Smith & Tomiyama, 2020; Bacon & Aphramor, 2011). However, it also demonstrates that Abby's word as a fat woman is

viewed as unreliable, that others (read: thinner others) *must* know better about her health; she could not possibly be educated on matters concerning her own body due to her size.

COVID-19 changed the types of experiences of weight stigma reported by my participants. In fact, four of my participants explained that they felt their experiences of weight stigma had diminished during the pandemic due to their lack of in-person interaction. While, as illustrated above, they continue to experience weight stigma and see its impact on others through trolling comments and misinformed Facebook posts, the change from overt in-person experiences of weight stigma led some to consider all experiences as being diminished. One participant stated that she simply wasn't "people-ing" enough, explaining that she felt if she had been in public more often, she would have had greater experiences of weight stigma to share (Beth, 27, Student). Some of my participants' responses demonstrated an increase in engagement with body acceptance content on social media during COVID-19. One such example can be seen in Katie's push to educate themselves and their sister on "anti-oppressive values." They said, "we found an Instagram account called @yourfatfriend. There's also like @bodyposipanda. And they talked about their experiences living in a fat body and how they're marginalized in society, but like, they're not really letting that stop them" (Katie, 25, Student). Further, as mentioned above there has been a stark increase in body acceptance/neutrality content produced by these creators on TikTok since 2020: 5x the content in 2021, and 4x the content in 2022 compared to availability in 2020 after the

onset of the pandemic. As noted in my methods, TikTok saw a massive increase in user engagement during the pandemic (Ceci, 2022), and many participants reported it became their main form of social media during that time. Because of this engagement, TikTok became the 'pandemic social media' for certain age groups and is a very representative media source of how the pandemic was addressed, progressed, and weathered. Beth's observation of decreased "people-ing" demonstrates that pandemic restrictions may also have created a sugar-coated image of change, which will likely change for fat women and AFAB individuals as COVID-related social restrictions are lifted. As mentioned in discussion of algorithms, TikTok shows users what they wish to see (Schellewald, 2022). This means that, likely for the first time in my participants' lives, they were able to 'edit' the world around them to support and uplift themselves. Users willing to listen to and learn from body neutrality and positivity creators were exposed to a breadth of content catered to learning and expanding existing social dialogues around size. However, due to the individuality of the TikTok algorithm, doctors who are medically biased against fat individuals may not have engaged with this content, may not have learned as my participants report doing, and could very likely still hold the same biases on weight and health as they had prior to the pandemic. If this is the case, then Beth is correct that the difference in instances of weight stigma lies not in tangible change but in a lack of interaction in public places, something that is already beginning to shift back to pre-covid times. Further, prior to the pandemic and periods of self-isolation, there was less

engagement with algorithm based content speaking to body acceptance.[22] In the same way that COVID-19 led to less in-person engagement, leading to fewer instances of weight stigma for participants, it also created an influx of body acceptance/neutrality, content made possible by more time indoors, that reduces as in-person engagement becomes more readily available and necessary. If this theory is correct, these same participants will have weight stigma experiences post-covid, representing March 2020-April 2022 as a *break* from weight stigma but not a move away from it. Further, some participants did experience weight stigma during COVID-19, such as questions on medical testing for blood sugars and cholesterol for a fat participant prior to vaccination, while their thin friend who accompanied them was not subject to the same questions (Blue, 31, Retail Manager). My results reveal that while in-person experiences of weight stigma were reduced, they were replaced by other kinds of weight stigma, such as those seen on social media. The pandemic allowed space for the algorithmic foundation of TikTok to increase education around reduction of weight stigma moving forward, allowing participants to negotiate tensions between stigmatizing content, and the body acceptance tools they chose to engage with.

These findings provide an understanding of how COVID-19 created the possibility of distance from dominant social ideologies around health and bodies and may have allowed some to question these preconceived notions. By comprehending that this

[22] See table above

resulted from consistent encounters with this material made possible by TikTok, we can understand why this change is significant but not representative of a complete cultural shift. As social media exists in conjunction with, and yet still separate from, interpersonal experiences, fat women and AFAB individuals are likely to continue to experience media-based weight stigma, and fight through issues such as choosing whether or not to access medical care based solely on weight. However, encounters with content that resists a hegemonic narrative can aid fat individuals in advocating for proper medical care from an understanding that health and weight are not intrinsically connected and that their worth exists separate from size.

DIET CULTURE'S GRASP: QUARANTINE 15, BODY IMAGE, AND WELL-BEING

By understanding how participants were indoctrinated into diet culture and developed body image issues, readers can understand the fear involved in navigating health care surrounding and during COVID-19 for fat people. Women and those AFAB individuals who have always heard the 'fat = bad' narrative may be more likely to believe that their size alone would put them at risk for COVID-19, or to internalize weight stigma during the pandemic. Surprisingly, however, women and AFAB individuals in my sample who were heavily indoctrinated into diet culture and who struggled with body image are

also among those who found and avidly adopted the counter hegemonic discourse circulating on TikTok during the pandemic.

It is critical to establish the definition of 'dieting' as it relates to this project. I coded these instances of dieting as anything that related to intentional weight 'watching' or loss. Participants spoke about only eating "good" or "whole" foods, not eating carbs when they were worried about their weight, frequent body weight monitoring, using smaller sized dinner plates, and more. Some of the instances I coded as 'dieting,' to some, may read as requirements of a healthy life. This project employs an anti-diet/HAES approach that rejects any restrictive or highly monitored eating, leading to intentional weight loss. In total, ten of my participants reported subtle forms of dieting or restriction at some point throughout their lives. On the whole, the assumption within HAES is that those who still wish to change their appearance or body size are not in a state of full body acceptance.

As many of my participants were socialized into diet culture, body shame, and weight loss, as context to the findings below, I was interested in learning about how precived attitudes towards weight in childhood homes may have impacted experiences as fat individuals during COVID-19. I was interested to learn if dieting was a large part of their experience, and if their body size was accepted or if they were expected to diet and change. Six of my participants reported being put on diets at a young age (under 18 years old). Further, a total of 8 participants spoke about dieting or diet culture as influential to

their lives from a young age. I came to view these many instances of dieting as a socialization into diet culture, a process which made dieting a key to femininity (Harrison, 2019). This can be seen through Victoria's experience of dating as a smaller individual for the first time. She explained, "And so I think I was just so amazed that someone that good looking would like me…I'm like, Yeah, I'm pulling this amazing guy, that wouldn't have liked me before" (Victoria, 25, Project Manager). Women are taught that we are most valuable when we are attractive (read: to men) and that attractiveness is linked to being thin(ner) (Harrison, 2019). Relating to COVID-19, those who were socialized into diet culture at a young age were almost all in the process of exiting or countering diet culture. Seven of my participants reported going on a formal or structured diet at some point throughout their lives, and eight had at some point felt societal pressure to diet. Some of my participants also reported pressure to diet in order to achieve a 'better' life, available to them if they could be in a smaller body. Josie captured this succinctly, stating:

> If there was a magic pill that healthily made everybody skinny in three weeks, 10 years ago, everybody would have taken it. And everybody in the world will be skinny. Because it would work. And then everyone would have done it because of all the shaming in culture and society that we've put this pressure on everyone. (Josie, 25, Event Planner).

Body Image

Body image relates to the key concerns of this project as it affects how participants reported constructing their worth, in turn affecting how they access services

and move through the world during, and prior to, COVID-19. Body image issues appeared frequently in my interviews, represented for my participants as struggles with body dysmorphia, body comparison, and attempted or successful body modification. This included linking appearance to worth, self-doubt due to body size, worrying about taking up space in a larger body and much more. One participant (Jess) explained that she often thinks about the amount of space she takes up as a fat person. She said "I'm thinking like, I'll stand up and kind of half sit on the stool to try and make myself appear smaller. I don't know. Like, it's just, it's just silly" (Jess, 36, Artist/ Musician). All thirteen participants reported feeling self-conscious or bad about their bodies due to weight at some point in their lives. Whether this was an ongoing battle, as it was for many, or something left behind as they claimed a body acceptance stance, every single one of my participants had felt shame or self-consciousness around body size. This was regardless of individual body size, whether they would have been deemed fat (by a social definition) or still have experienced some degree of thin privilege, and for most was a present struggle. Blue explained, sadly, "I do think that, you know like you, you almost have *exhales* if the world is a scale, and your body is taking up more on the scale, do you have to add more value, ah, on the other end to like, balance that out?" (Blue, 31, Retail Manager). There is a large degree of consciousness around space for truly plus size women, and even led one of my participants to change their manner of dress so they could more easily hide from the world (Jess, 36, Artist/ Musician). Jess explained, "Um, reopening I felt, I felt and

feel, very self conscious going out. Um, I wear a lot of, like, leggings and baggy shirts" (Jess, 36, Artist/ Musician). As Peter's (2014) states, how we dress largely dictates how we present and express ourselves. As society re-opens into in-person interactions, those who generally dress to minimize their bodies may feel more exposed than ever, as suggested by Jess, having become more accustomed to social distancing that required less public interaction.

In the context of COVID-19, this uneasiness around fatness and taking up space also came into my interviews in how these individuals were able to social distance. Blue even described this experience for themself as learning to "own [their] six feet" and making space for their body by verbally asking for it (Blue, 31, Retail Manager). Blue continued, "the way that they [thinner individuals] create space if they can't create it by moving the other person back, they create it by shrinking themselves…That's just not something I'm capable of" (Blue, 31, Retail Manager). It became harder for truly plus size participants like Blue to maintain six feet when they felt as if their bodies were already occupying a larger portion of the available space. Blue explained viewing their size not as a descriptor of their physical form but as an inconvenience to those around them, something that is very likely connected back to the cult of thinness and linking body size to worth.

Four of my thirteen participants mentioned a desire to be thinner in their interview, revealing they were still in a diet culture mindset. Even more significantly, *all*

participants expressed a societal pressure to be and stay thinner. Nine of my participants reported feeling the influence of diet culture through social media. A large number of these participants spoke to this experience regarding the "quarantine 15" or "pandemic 20." This was a turn-of-phrase circulating on TikTok in the spring of 2020 (May/June) that encouraged users, mostly women, to shed the weight they had gained in lockdowns to achieve a "reopening" body. For one participant, it sounded far too similar to the same social media pitch for a bikini or summer body, and to lose the "winter weight" before hitting the beach. Companies such as BeachBody thrive off of this brand of body shame to endorse their products like the *21 Day Fix.*[23] Others talked about the struggles of weight gain, during the pandemic (and generally), and the barrier that presented in accepting their bodies (Jess, 36, Artist/Musician). Jess explained, "I always kind of felt like ah- like a divide between my life because there's like a very, there was like before I was fat and an af- and what I'm like now as fat, right? And I'm like, Oh, if I can just get to where I was before I was fat" (Jess, 36, Artist/ Musician). @mariellegreguski addresses concerns of weight gain and body changes with her viewers in a video on February 2nd, 2022. It is of note that three of my participants mentioned @mariellegreguski by name, their experiences aligned with her content, and several reported that she was helpful with their body acceptance journeys. Marielle tells her followers:

> A bikini body correlates to the idea of having a summer body, and the idea of a summer body leads us to believe that our summer body is more worthy, more

[23] https://www.beachbodyondemand.com/

> attractive, and better than our rest of the year body…now that my bikini body is the same as my year-round body, I just consistently have a summer body. (Greguski, 2022).

She explains that this has allowed her to wear a bikini on her vacation (where this particular video was shot) without thinking that she needed to change or "put in the work" (Greguski, 2022). She gets to live in the freedom of her body, always being worthy and 'good enough' and she shares this with her followers to change their mindset towards total body acceptance. One participant explained that the renewed, but dated message of changing one's body was frustrating during the pandemic. The participant explained, "And then I also found when those restrictions first got lifted, um, everyone was like, oh my god, I have to lose like the pandemic 20. And I'm like, why? [...] not a huge fan of this" (Anonymous, 23, Student). This respondent felt the simultaneous pressure of past diet culture rhetoric mixed with pandemic pressure of re-entering the world as if nothing had changed and chose to remove herself from social media for a period of time to avoid adopting this rhetoric. However, not all my participants were able to reject this narrative. Maddison stated, "it was just like, did I waste my time? Like crap, that was my chance to like, do the life changing weight loss goal that you hear during the years" (Maddison, 24, Young Professional). For Maddison, it was more difficult to resist this messaging, making it unsurprising that almost nine of my participants felt this dieting pressure through social media such as TikTok and Instagram.

Eight participants rebuked the cult of thinness. Anna spoke to the pressures of thinness diet culture had embedded into the people around her, and how that messaging invariably seeped down to her. She explained, “you know, the idea of coming from people who love me…I have to be skinny and basically you have to be skinny to be happy. You have to be skinny to be confident in your body and show off your body” (Anna, 20, Student). She explained that it was frustrating to have to hide her body because of her size, stating that she was old enough to decide what was comfortable for her in her own body. Victoria, speaking on the muddy waters of midsize (between straight sizing and plus sizes), said “Couldn’t tell you [what midsize means]. But it’s like, defining yourself as mid-sized is kind of like a cop out for the, for the women who are thin, but aren’t twig thin?” (Victoria, 25, Project Manager). She made this comment this during a discussion on midsize representation on TikTok. Victoria explained that her FYP had shown her “midsize” content on a size six body. A size six is well within the world of straight or non-plus sizes and made Victoria feel worse about her body, rather than showing her the representation she felt it was intended to. She brings up an interesting point about the dangers of distinction in a discussion on marginalization that Josie explains very well. She asserted:

> You find you’re [midsize], you're experiencing some of the side, you know, the runoff, I guess, of what's happening and kind of like the aftershock, but like we're experiencing the earthquake, you know, and I think that that's sort of the difference in my mind is like, it's great, like, you maybe can relate to some of what we're saying. But you're not experiencing, you're still benefiting from the system, whereas we're not benefiting from the system

(Josie, 24, Event Planner).

The experience of marginalization exists on a sliding scale, where those who can claim any ounce of thin privilege still benefit from fatphobia. Josie later mentioned that when she had lost weight and was at her smallest, but the same size as a friend who had gained weight, she was praised for her size while her friend was shamed. This speaks to how diet culture values shrinking bodies in that they *could* become thin, but not bodies that are content as they are, regardless of size. The cult of thinness is far reaching and is substantially permeated into society, making it understandable that it affects so many.

While some participants, who would be socially identified as fat, struggle to own their space, there are other more midsize participants (read: those who experience at least some degree of thin privilege) who like Victoria, wonder where they fit in this fight for equality. These are women who certainly still experience marginalization as reported in their interview data, but who also receive medical care and fit in public seating. Caleigh pondered, **"**Am I a mid-size body? What does thick mean? I'm too big to be skinny. I'm too small to be fat" (Caleigh, 20, Student). She echoes the sentiment of several participants, even some who wondered if they were 'big enough' to participate in this research or be considered at risk for illnesses associated with fatness (such as COVID-19). Or further, individuals like Victoria (25, Project Manager) who worry that using terms like midsize to describe their bodies could be harmful, or be seen as a "cop-out." Their consciousness with their bodies falls into an interesting category

concerned both with experiences of marginalization and not further marginalizing those 'fatter' than themselves. One participant explained that seeing people "who have gained all this weight, like quote, unquote, oh, I need to lose so much weight and like they're still half my size. What are you talking about like, and then and then it kind of goes back is like, oh, well, how, how are they viewing me then?" (Anonymous, 23, Student). She spoke to the effect of this mindset appearing in those around her as well as heavily on social media, referencing the "Pandemic 20" and subsequent push for weight loss. For this participant, this dialogue on fatness and the need to achieve thinness during a global pandemic illuminates the connection between morality and body size. As shown above, she worries what this fear of fatness says about her right to exist within a body that is larger than the 'fat' bodies others fear. Social media, in this case, can attribute harm to fat individuals who also relied on social media as proxy socialization during the pandemic.

Beyond this is the concern that when we in any way praise shrinking or thinness, we do so by making the 'other' inferior, in this case, fatness becomes that which is of lower status. When we as members of a social system that critiques fatness as slovenly try to appear flattering by hiding fat on our bodies, or wearing items designed to make us look thinner, we are delivering a subliminal message that fatness is bad, and we distance ourselves from that bad thing. In other words, we 'other' fatness and feed into fatphobia in doing so. This feeds back into the concerns of this project as body image, and how outside individuals view fat individuals (read: view their worth) impacts how fat

individuals are able to operate in the world, specifically one gripped by a global pandemic. This pushes fat individuals to the fringes and can often make these individuals devalue their own worth and right to access medical care, leading to poorer outcomes of physical and mental health overall.

Social Media and Body Image

Social media, and the body comparison extended SNS use inspires, lead participants to share media-based body image concerns. Three of my participants, Beth, Jess, and Katie said they refrained from posting to social media or engaging in content creation due to insecurities around their size. One participant stated that they felt there was no space, or a need, for their content on TikTok, or that they felt their content wouldn't be as good as the content other creators are already producing (Katie, 25, Student). The other participants spoke about fear around others seeing their bodies in digital content and having to confront their body insecurity simply to create content. Beth explained:

> But I hate posting pictures of myself on social media. And while I would love to be one of these TikTok inspirational people, I don't have the mental capacity to do it. Not because I can't think of the content I would create, but because the work that it takes to look at myself on camera is far, far, far more difficult than it should be.
> (Beth, 27, Student).

For Beth, Jess and Katie, the desire to hide their bodies or protect their mental energy outweighs the desire to produce content, whether that be crafts (Katie), music

(Jess), or activism (Beth). Jess explained it was hard to record her music because of her body image issues. She said:

> Which is hard too, because as a musician, I want to be able to record, ah, and post things about me playing guitar but I feel really uncomfortable showing anything. So I hate the way that I look when I play guitar. I hate the way that my arms look when I play guitar, and my chest especially because I'm so chesty.
> (Jess, 36, Artist/ Musician).

While the content they would make is important to these individuals, the journey into self-acceptance has not yet made this a possibility long term. Kite & Kite (2020) discuss this phenomenon in their book which they label as *self-objectification*. They examine this as a "mental picturing [that] leads to constant evaluation and monitoring of your body, in which you prioritize an outside perspective of yourself rather than your own first person perspective from the inside" (Kite & Kite, 2020, p. 103)[24]. As discussed above, trolling is rampant on *FatTok* and TikTok more generally, for different reasons. These women would likely all be confronted with trolling on their videos which would only further exacerbate their fears and prompt more self-objectification. This once again leads to weight stigma avoidance. A total of nine participants found social media to be a source of body image issues, either now or in the past, which supports findings on the impacts of social media (Fardouly & Holland, 2018; Gioia, Griffiths & Boursier, 2020; Gilbert, Keery & Thompson, 2005; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

[24] Their work speaks to the sociological theory surrounding self-concept that positions self-concept as both a "social product and a social force" (Rosenberg, 1989). Here their concept of *self-objectification* speaks to self-concept as both a social force (in that it is regulatory) and a social product (in that it is socially constructed).

It is valid that these participants fear the consequences of entering digital creation spaces as marginalized individuals, as the consequences of trolling and push-back are real.

These results show something impactful. Because Jess, Beth, and Katie feel restrained from posting their content (read: as fat individuals) online due to the consequences of potential weight stigma and body image issues. In turn, they get less access to public self expression in a digital age and less social interaction through those channels. Due to this fear of showing their bodies to virtual audiences, that could be much farther reaching than those they interact with in-person, fat individuals who feel they cannot create or post to social platforms then only experience social media as consumer, rather than consumer-creator. This means that in some ways, fat individuals become disadvantaged in virtual communities in terms of representation and access to adding to these digital discourses. However, those same communities offer freedom from stigmatization not available in in-person interactions. They allow these same individuals the opportunity to *choose* if they are viewed. That opportunity is deeply profound for those who fear being perceived negatively in daily life, but still long for community.

During certain periods of COVID-19, such as lockdowns, the use of social media for *all* socialization and interaction made for an entirely different experience for those who adopted a consumer-only stance for protection from push back and stigma. This phenomena of the consumer-only fat SNS user extends beyond the participants quoted above that spoke directly to their experience. Others in my sample spoke to heavy SNS

usage but not content creation; the difference becomes that what holds back these individuals from content creation is not stigma, but simply a lack of desire to do so. Further, none of my midsized participants (those who would still experience some runoff of thin privilege) shared this fear. In the context of COVID-19, weight stigma created a barrier that divided how those fat individuals got to be social, which becomes exceptionally impactful to mental health, isolation, social connection, and self-worth when these individuals must fear the impact of simply appearing as they are on screen.

Tik Tok creator, Sean Taylor, also addresses how "formerly fat people" can often be some of the worst trolls or sources of harassment for fat people, both online and in-person. The follower comment @heyseantaylor uses to address this reads: "can't respect someone who doesn't respectz [*sic*] themselves, p.s. super fat girl Here, its True I didn't respect myself but im starting to by loosing weight" (2021-7-11). This viewer's stance of weight loss is obviously counter to what Sean advocates herself. She tells viewers in the video that some of the most "hateful, meanest, and judgmental people towards fat people" are these individuals who claim to be weight loss 'success' stories.[25] Her caption says, "Have your diet. Just don't be this person" (2021). Sean opens up an incredibly important dialogue of thinness, or desired thinness, that attacks fatness to justify restriction and sacrifice of bodily needs.

[25] This is in no way intended as a value judgment on these individuals, rather that the impact their words have on fat individuals like Sean and her followers who attempt to live a HAES lifestyle in a diet culture world is profound. It is important to remember that these fat or formerly fat individuals boasting this rhetoric are also aggressively harmed by diet culture and that this is an internalization of those principles.

@theabbybible's sole experience of weight stigma and bullying on her page involves her fears around eating in public as a fat person (Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015). In a video posted in January of 2021, Abby tells her viewers that she is visiting LA and wanted to have *In-n-Out*[26] for lunch. She shows the empty bag, but explains that she is sitting in her hotel room to avoid the judgment and stares she expects as a fat woman eating fast food, or any food, in public (2021-1-9). She captions this post "can't wait to hear what the trolls have to say about this one" (2021). Based on the content of her video, the trolls would likely attack a) her fear of weight stigma as being exaggerated or unfounded, or b) say that she should be judged, criticized for her food choices, or leave even nastier comments surrounding their disapproval of her body. Fat creators on TikTok have reported receiving death threats or being told to take their own lives[27]. It would make an incredibly interesting, but disturbing project to investigate these kinds of comments to try and link what kind of content may be most likely to elicit these responses, in turn learning more about the users that chose to leave these vicious comments. Still this caption supports Hunger and his colleagues' work (2015); past experiences of weight stigma for Abby have led her to prepare for a trolling attack before it happens and escape a space of potential stigma before it could result in another detrimental experience.

[26] a popular American burger chain
[27] The TikTok colloquialism for this is "unalive", "sewer slide", or "slip and slide" to trick the algorithm and potentially be less triggering

@aliciamccarvell also shares stories of weight stigma on her page. I recorded twenty-eight instances of weight stigma related content. Alicia regularly shares with her followers details of her past with crash dieting, eating disorders, and her very short journey into bodybuilding where she dropped an extreme amount of weight in order to compete in 9 months. She explains in this video that she "ruined her relationship with exercise, binge ate" and spent that entire time hating herself. Her caption reads, "I'm so tired. Thin does not equal healthy. Stop spreading that garbage narrative" (2021-12-20). This represents not only one experience of weight stigma for Alicia but years of it that lead to this drastic change that taught her she would be worth more if she was thinner. She posts this in relation to a comment that reads "I'm just saying, don't you ever get inspired by your partner to get in shape and actually take care of your health? You can do it!!" (2021). Alicia is in tears as she struggles to tell the story of weight stigma fueled comments like these that lead to that dark time. Whether intentional or not, Alicia aligns with HAES doctrine for herself and her followers in the face of this kind of treatment. It is stigmatizing to assume that those who are fat are lacking motivation to be thin because it assumes worth rests in size.

Finally, Marielle has experienced silencing of her content and her body on TikTok during the course of the pandemic. However, where others have had their initial experiences in-person, Marielle's experience of weight stigma is entirely through the social media platform itself. A video of her in a bikini, celebrating her body in the sun,

namely her back rolls, was flagged for breaking 'community guidelines' for instances of nudity[28]. Of course, Marielle is not nude in the video, she is wearing a bikini, which becomes frustrating as thin creators wear as little, if not less on TikTok, without being flagged. This explains her caption "bout to be shadowbanned bc [*sic*] this app hates my bikini body" (Greguski, 2022), alluding to the fact that it would be fatphobic censorship that would ban her. Her ability to regain access to her platform was due to the help of her followers and her persistence to fight these accusations as a midsize woman. While this kind of censorship is not unique to COVID-19, the impact on the creator, and likely also on their followers, is magnified due to the social effects of the pandemic. Those looking for communities of fat individuals to create a sense of social interaction while in lock down, or to learn how to cope with marginalization, are likely to be heavily affected by this censorship during a period of social isolation. Therefore, it is significant that @mariellegreguski experienced fat censorship on TikTok during COVID-19 because it was both her outlet for, and connection to, social interactions. Further, it becomes significant that she regained her platform through the help of her followers as it demonstrates how both @mariellegreguski and her followers were able to cope with weight stigma and marginalization when presented with it on the app. Marielle is not the only TikToker who has been flagged for nudity for showing off body parts that are not

[28] What happened to @mariellegreguski: Shadow banning happens on TikTok when a creator is making content that goes against community guidelines of conduct, that displeases the moderators of the app. Essentially, their content gets hidden and shown infrequently through the algorithm. This means that if creators are making new content, they get little, if any, engagement because no one is being shown their videos.

‘socially acceptable’ by current beauty standards. @theabbybible discusses this unfair censorship of fat bodies in relation to a lack of brand deal opportunities for fat influencers on social media. She links these issues by stating that thin influencers are less likely to have their content removed for the same ‘offense’ which hinders plus size creators’ ability to profit from their content as effectively, leading to lack of deals and reduced income potential. The mis-flagging of content on TikTok, especially as it relates to body focused content, by plus size creators is evident to those consuming these creators’ content. This mis-flagging can become internalized and may affect whether plus size users are willing to make themselves vulnerable to this flagging by becoming creators of this content. Flagging nudity for the exposure of a clothed fat body communicates to users that fat individuals are not only unwelcome, but unsightly according to the moderators of the app, exposing deep rooted marginalization and stigma. It reinforces the truth to users that someone will always be watching (read: judging) their content.

Dieting, body image, a pressure to be thin, and social experiences of weight stigma are all common and at the core of lived experiences of fat women and AFAB individuals. Both participants and creators spoke to the joint understanding that diet culture and pressures of thinness hinder their ability to live freely in their own bodies. By understanding how young fat women and AFAB people come to view their bodies as ‘wrong,’ and how they are socialized into commonplace experiences of stigma and mistreatment, we can grasp their mindset prior to the pandemic. Further, it becomes

evident that these experiences, ones that limited them to their body size, speak into how they may approach care for their bodies (medical treatment), and why COVID-19 would prove a uniquely difficult experience to navigate, given the historical treatment of fat women (and other marginalized identities) by the medical field. The next section of this project will speak to how my participants and creators were able to counter that fear and hegemonic narrative to reclaim a relationship with their bodies during COVID-19, largely through the power of TikTok.

RESISTING HEGEMONIC CULTURAL IDEOLOGIES: BODY ACCEPTANCE, TRUE WELL-BEING AND TIKTOK

A key function of this project is to grapple with the flaws within the current understanding of 'health' and social expectations of thinness. *Health Care*, addressed the struggles my participants, as fat women and AFAB individuals, face in accessing adequate medical care both prior to and during the pandemic. *Diet Culture* examined how narratives of diet culture influence medical treatment, how fat women/AFAB individuals access that care, how they view and treat their own bodies, and how society lacks accommodation for those of higher weight. The dominant social view of weight as a moral status is a hegemonic understanding of health relating to body size. However, as illustrated through weight stigma and HAES theorists (Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015; Hunger, Smith & Tomiyama, 2020; Harrison, 2019; Kite & Kite, 2020; Schvey, Puhl & Brownell, 2014; Tomiyama et al., 2018), it is deeply flawed and highly

correlational. Over the course of this project, I saw an emerging counter cultural narrative of fat individuals rejecting social expectations of thinness in favour of standards that valued their bodies, their autonomy, and tangible health criteria, such as clean blood work, cardiovascular health, and mobility (by their own desire and definition). This section will address how I saw this dialogue develop, both in interview and TikTok analysis, and discuss the function of this push-back from women/AFAB people who do not fit the thin, white, able-bodied expectations of womanhood and femininity (Thompson, 2018; Tovar, 2018; Gay, 2018; Taylor, 2018; Harrison, 2019). TikTok plays a large role in the dissemination of this information, as mentioned, the platform has seen a major increase in body acceptance content over the course of the pandemic.[29] Finally, this section addresses the barrier created for fat individuals who feared weight stigma as a result of social media engagement, and the negative effects that are associated with consumer-only media when media was the predominant form of social interaction.

Redefining Health and Well-Being

Well-being for the purposes of this project refers to health and wellness pursuits not motivated by diet culture in order to separate discussions of thinness from those of deliberate health decisions and from cultural messaging . Diet culture messaging has warped so many true components of healthy living to market their products (Harrison,

[29] See Table 1 above

2019) that it was necessary to highlight the separate conversation of personal and individually defined wellness. My participants, who were still partly invested in diet culture, are not largely represented in this section. However, participants who had begun making a journey into body acceptance and HAES shared some very enlightening words about the development of their relationships with well-being and their bodies.

It is easier said than done to break away from diet culture and to exist within a new understanding of health to exist within. Five of my participants felt that current social definitions of 'health' were limited or did not match their understanding of well-being. These individuals found that it was even difficult to understand what different resources *meant* by health because of how implicated these terms had become with weight loss and dieting. For one participant, this was an impediment to her recovery from diet culture and disordered eating. She explained, "because that's not what wellness is, like wellness and healthy and diets are all like very different things. So, when you start interchanging them, I feel like it can be very detrimental for people like me, who are like in the middle of their journey" (Anonymous, 23, Student). It was essential she learn to tell the difference between what was 'diet culture lite' with capitalistic ties, and true healthy behaviours that would promote happiness and comfort in her body. Josie also explained this struggle in her own words as, "the reality versus, you know, I keep calling it brainwashing, but like societal brainwash" (Josie, 25, Event Planner). There is a stark difference between individualized health and capitalistic ventures pushing supplements or

wellness retreats, the latter which can be more harmful than helpful to those seeking personal introspective wellness.

Supporting findings that weight is not a reliable indicator of health (Harrison, 2019; Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015; Hunger, Smith & Tomiyama, 2020; Bacon & Aphramor, 2011), 11 of my thirteen participants shared with me a belief that their weight was not intrinsically connected to their health. Katie explained to me that part of realizing their size didn't make them unhealthy was that they had prioritized others and had not prioritized their own self care. They recounted, "like realizing how much I neglect my own needs and my own wants to make other people more comfortable and I'm sure a lot of it has to do, too, with not wanting to be the inconvenient other, the inconvenient fat person, the inconvenient whatever other title you want to use" (Katie, 25, Student). Katie also shared that they were learning to take up that space and make themselves a priority for care and well-being, which they had gained through TikTok based education, as mentioned above in reference to the accounts they found particularly helpful.

Two other participants expressed frustration at the current dialogue around health. Bridget shared with me that her body had seen major fluctuations and left her feeling very unwell. She lamented, "your body can't handle being small, but yet we stigmatize being large" (Bridget, 21, Student). She went on to share with me some of the articles and research she had read on thinness and anorexia and could not believe fatness was the

target of our society's health crises and fears when thinness was much more of a morbidity risk for those who pursued it as hard as diet culture intends. Anna also felt puzzled at how 'health' is presently framed. She said, "I find that very ironic, because you always lose weight for health, but meanwhile, you literally won't eat a vegetable because there's too much sugar in it" (Anna, 20, Student). Anna speaks to a core assumption of diet culture's narrative: that the pursuits and efforts of thinness *are* about health.

@heyseantaylor displayed an instance of recreating wellness in a video on December 8th, 2021. She shares modified Pilates exercises with the hashtags, #fatbabesdoingthings #fatbabesoftiktok. She tells viewers in the captions, "if you needed a sign that fat people can do Pilates too…this is it" (Taylor, 2021). I found this video to be significant as it directly counters the traditional narratives on exercise. As seen through Garland-Thompson's (2005) work, diet culture and the health/wellness industry are very exclusionary of bodies that don't meet the default criteria (young, able-bodied, thin, and 'healthy'). By showing how other fat individuals who follow her can move their bodies for Pilates at any skill level, @heyseantaylor is expanding the definition of what 'fitness' and/or movement can look like. This is especially significant given the breadth of fitness influencer produced weightloss content on SNSs like TikTok and Instagram during the pandemic. She provides an example of what Kite & Kite (2020) discuss in their book: there is no look for "healthy." .

Well-being for my participants took on multiple forms, from social media cleanses of wellness and diet culture accounts, to spending more time with nature, to eating three meals and two snacks daily (or trying to meet this goal). For example, one participant (Blue) said: "Like, I think maybe I can just like, stretch when I wake up in the morning when I'm still in bed…And like, I don't have to call it yoga and get everything else ready around it" (Blue, 31, Retail Manager). For Blue, the act of intentional movement has become the focus over the definition of what that movement is or what that practice should look like. During COVID-19, there was an emphasis on the time society 're-gained' and subsequent expectations of how that time should be spent. Some participants (Annonymous, 23, Student; Blue, 31, Retail Manager; Cass, 24, Barista) spoke to the pressure these expectations put on social media users in regards to fitness and weightloss/gain. For Blue, the act of stretching instead of engaging in a formal yoga practice was a form of resisting these expectations. For every individual health and well-being was different, but this analysis allowed me to capture what *didn't* work for participants. A narrow view of health and wellness that shamed them into calorie deficits and joyless movements was not a helpful tool. And although this is not conclusive, I noticed a greater appearance of happiness in those who had created their own version of well-being than those still working to extricate diet culture from their lives.

Body Acceptance

Body acceptance became an overwhelming theme in my interviews through narrative explanations of how participants made/were making peace with their bodies (read: as fat people in a thin obsessed world), as discussed by Harrison (2019). Ten of my participants' personal accounts of body acceptance involved sharing TikTok trends or accounts that had helped them feel validated in this decision. A few of the creators named in this discussion became cornerstones of the TikTok portion of my analysis, such as @mariellegreguski and then @aliciamccarvell. What I want to clarify is that none of the TikTok content reviewed and collected for this analysis was particularly ground-breaking, nor was entirely different from what my participants had shared. What drove me to include this amount of data on body acceptance is that my results from interviewing made it obvious that it mattered greatly to the individuals speaking with me. One participant (Caleigh) said "So @lord.chord was definitely one of them. Especially because, like, in St. John's, you can like, pop up and see her around in real life. And just like oh my god, you're such a huge influence on my life" (Caleigh, 20, Student). This is to say, the engagement with this kind of content seemed to *mitigate* or soften some of the impacts of weight stigma and marginalization for young women and AFAB people during COVID-19. This is made most obvious by the amount of engagement with this content on TikTok (likes, comments, shares, and followers) as shown, in part, in the table above.

Twelve of my participants who expressed acceptance of their bodies reported experiencing positive personal growth, not only based on weight but also race, disability, hair, gender presentation, etc during COVID-19. Katie expressed during our interview, "I don't want to make people uncomfortable, but I mean, to exist as a queer nonbinary person is to make people uncomfortable" (Katie, 25, Student). They speak from experience of making others uncomfortable due to their own appearance and presentation, something they feel is a natural part of their transition in a heavily gendered society. Katie also spoke about accepting their body as is, often meaning not wearing a bra and always meaning not wearing shapewear, which they recounted does not please the older women in their life. Katie appears to have gained enough of their own acceptance to push through this discomfort to be who they are; a process which has been happening for some time, but they explained that COVID-19 produced the time to journey further. They stated, "we kind of just started this journey of becoming I guess, more educated more, I'm gonna say the word woke, but like…really more like anti oppressive values" (Katie, 25, Student).

@aliciamccarvell posts a quiet video of self love[30] where she is dressed in lingerie, and the camera zooms in on her stretch marks, belly, and chin (Mccarvell, 2021-4-9). This video is a show of her love for her body, and her understanding that she falls outside of the social norm but that her body remains deserving of love. Alicia

[30] Self-love is a common term used on social media to speak about (predominantly women) individuals posting body content online to honour and uplift their bodies. This video displays self love in how @aliciamccarvell is leaning into her socially perceived flaws and celebrating those parts of her body.

counters the cultural narrative by continuing to post her body for her followers and her own journey. In fact, this video is a repost as it was taken down by TikTok, likely for a breach of community guidelines due to concerns of nudity, as was the case for @mariellegreguski. Alicia captioned this repost “not me having to upload this again because people are afraid of fat bodies” (2021). @mariellegreguski (discussed above) and @aliciamccarvell’s battle with TikTok censorship shows that fat women are more often flagged for nudity than thin women producing similar content, likely because it is not the bodies that mainstream viewers wish to see (or such is the ideology of those moderating the platform). It is the expectation that fat individuals will hide their bodies and feel shame for their size. One participant (Beth) explained why it frustrated her that people would avoid calling her fat, assuming she would be ashamed of her body size, rather than viewing it as a physical descriptor. She said:

> But the reality is I'm fat, ha ha, and you telling me that I’m not fat is not going to make me feel less fat. And you telling me I'm not fat is not actually going to do what you intended to do. It's going to increase the stigma as it increases and shape it instead of helping diminish it.
> (Beth, 27, Student).

While Beth’s frustration stems from those close to her not accepting that she is fat and separating it from morality, it does resemble the backwards efforts of the trolls who attack @aliciamccarvell. By not calling Beth fat, her family/strangers stigmatize her body. By angrily engaging with @aliciamccarvell’s content to state their displeasure, trolls effectively support the creators they dislike by generating more discussion on the

videos and telling TikTok that there is something of interest to a different kind of audience. Both approaches, based in weight stigma, do not produce the intended results. Josie told me, in regards to her fatness, “their perceived discomfort or their perceived embarrassment for me… I don't care. Like, I'm like, you're embarrassed for me? Like, that's a whole lot of you. You need to do therapy” (Josie, 25, Event Planner). Josie, Beth, and @aliciamccarvell have adopted an attitude that claims their bodies for their own, their fatness as part of that reclamation, leaving little room for others' unsolicited opinions and hegemonic narratives.

@mariellegreguski is a very popular content creator for her body acceptance messages. In fact, she has a series of videos that she debuts with “welcome back to: getting dressed with me while I say nice things to you” (Greguski, 2020-2022). Each of these videos feature her unique midsized style and a message about self-love, body acceptance, or social justice education. Due in large part to this series, as well as her other body acceptance content, Marielle’s page has forty-nine occurrences of body acceptance videos. On March 21st, 2020, she released a video replying to a comment on an original ‘get ready with me’ video from the series. The comment asks Marielle how she deals with weight gain and clothes that no longer fit. She explains to the viewers that she wanted to address this comment in this series so she could talk about bodies while viewers could see her body move and fit in clothes. She says “listen to me very carefully: there is nothing shameful about gaining weight” (Greguski, 2022), followed by the

hashtags #bodypositive #bodyneutral #midsizetiktok #size12 #size14to16.[31] By using hashtags like #bodyneutral, someone who is struggling with this topic and wants more body neutral content on their feed or simply to consume, may come across her message in an initial search. I wanted to highlight this kind of content because it directly speaks into the struggles my participants mentioned during their interviews. Knowing that all my participants use TikTok to some degree (as required in participation criteria) I knew that they, in part, make up the market of those influenced by this brand of content. One participant touched nicely on this, explaining that in her understanding, body acceptance on TikTok referred to unconditional acceptance. She stated:

> You can't ask it to be thinner, you can't ask it to be bigger. You can't ask your boobs to be bigger or smaller. You don't want to change the way your butt looks. You just appreciate your body for getting you through a day. And especially when a lot of us are struggling mentally. That was a really interesting take that I have not considered but I needed to hear.
> (Bridget, 21, Student).

Bridget was one of my participants who credited body neutrality on TikTok for sparking and helping her through her journey. Similar to eating disorder recovery, theorists like Harrison (2019) and Kite & Kite (2020) explain that this state of contentedness is an ongoing goal that will not happen every day.

The other video I will highlight surrounds a trend that took place on TikTok during the fall of 2021. Users created videos using a song by musician Lukas Grant,

[31] Hashtags aren't always impactful on TikTok because they are often used out of context to ramp up views. However, those identified I have explained the audience @mariellegreguski wanted to reach with this video, and what sides of TikTok she wanted her message to land on. TikTok consists of 'sides' or communities that represent a certain kind of content.

called “Mama Said” (2015). The lines referenced in these TikToks are *“my mama said that it was okay, my mama said that it was quite al-right”* which people used on body acceptance and feminist TikTok to display their choices to live outside of societal expectations and traditional views (read: separate from hegemony). Both @heyseantaylor and @aliciamccarvell posted videos reacting[32] to fan videos of this trend. Both creators have become role models that create an environment that encourages followers to accept themselves as fat individuals. @heyseantaylor reacts to @rosiegab’s video with the on-screen caption posted by a troll “You’re so confident for a chubby girl” (Taylor, 2021-9-11), which then switches to pictures and videos of @heyseantaylor, and they explain it was Sean’s influence that allowed them to gain that confidence. @aliciamccarvell shared a similar reaction video to @melcoomerrr whose on-screen caption read “you think you deserve to be in a loving relationship even though you’re plus size?” (Taylor, 2021). Alicia’s caption over the whole video reads, “the comments on this video have me in shambles. You are worthy of love no matter what” (Mccarvell, 2021). Alicia is well known for speaking about her marriage to her husband Scott, a traditionally attractive and muscular man. She is often trolled (bullied) for this content and this trend allowed her to see how other women in the same situation (a couple that viewers feel are unacceptable by social standards of beauty) are impacted by her body acceptance content, and how this translates to an unwillingness to change for others.

[32] a side-by-side video of the original content in which they can write captions on the screen and viewers can see their reaction.

Representation

Representation on social media proved impactful for my participants not only for representations of fatness, but also for sexuality, ability, and race. In fact, simple representation of women, and creators generally, who had similar bodies to the participant was enough to encourage participants' own body acceptance. Nine of my participants expressed the importance of representation in life and in the media. This included celebrities, such as Lizzo and Ashley Graham (a Pennington's model) who represent successful fat women in thin dominated fields, as well as fat content creators, showcasing fat bodies as everyday and present average bodies. As someone who is living with illness and disability in a fat body, Anna spoke to why representation of *all* kinds of fat bodies matters. Often as fat representation is brought into traditionally thin arenas, it remains limited to those who are closest to the existing standards of beauty. Anna explained that it frustrates her when people say "Oh, I don't want to be fat, it's unhealthy" which she recognizes as a tired discourse that was ever present during the pandemic. Her response to these comments is "even so, people who are fat and unhealthy are also people" (Anna, 20, Student). Anna brings humanity and people back to the centre of this discussion around fat representation. The importance of social media rests primarily in how it impacts, affects, or helps *people*. My participants reported appreciating average fat women trying to live joyfully in their bodies and sharing that journey with their viewers,

both prior to, and during COVID-19. In relation to @yourfatfriend and @bodiposipanda mentioned by Katie above, they said, “they talked about their experiences living in a fat body and how they're marginalized in society, but like, they're not really letting that stop them” (Katie, 25, Student). Further, Victoria shared, in relation to social support via social media, “to go to social media and to be able to see, you know, midsize bodies or workout routines and to be able to, like, have it as an outlet…can be really positive” (Victoria, 25, Project Manager). Representation of traditionally marginalized body types on social media allowed my participants to feel seen and move towards loving their own bodies.

The TikTok content creators chosen for this project produced many videos that spoke to the importance of accurate and diverse representation for bodies on social media. @aliciamccarvell speaks to representation and “hot-takes” in her activism. Her TikTok page revealed thirty-two instances of activism. In 2022, Lizzo produced a TV show called *Watch Out for the Big Girls*, in which plus size dancers compete to join a performance of her song *Good as Hell*. On March 30th, 2022, @aliciamccarvell released an emotional video explaining the impact that the show had on her as a fat woman. She says “I don’t think y’all understand how empowering *Watch Out for the Big Girls* is” (2022). She pleads with viewers to “please watch it, whether you live in a big body, or you don’t, this is so important for you to watch and see and hear and understand” (2022). Alicia holds back tears while she tries to convey what it means to her to see people that

look like her on the screen. She captions the video "@lizzo you nailed this" to show her appreciation for Lizzo's dedication to representation. The emergence of this show lines up with the growing discourse on TikTok, resisting narratives that demonize fatness. Due to Lizzo's TikTok presence, she is also privy to this conversation. The significance of Alicia's excitement at the show is that this content becomes possible, and coveted through the TikTok conversations that grew during COVID-19, and gave women and AFAB individuals the tools to *want* this kind of representation, one that does not promote body modification. As Lizzo has grown in popularity she has obviously amassed wealth and it is encouraging to see uplifting women like herself, who are often overlooked due to weight, despite their talent.

The root of the discussion of fat fashion, as it concerns this project, is in visibility, both on screen and in daily life. Women are socialized to value thinness and hide or shrink the parts of their bodies that do not meet that standard; plus size clothing is often diminishing rather than accentuating. This leads to exclusion from fashion that is expressive in style or colour, and it becomes permanently exclusionary when those sizes are limited before production. The experiences that follow from participants largely speak to exclusion and fear of presenting their bodies, specifically in hyper feminine ways. As Peter's work on fat fashion explains, fashion is important for fat women to develop their social identity (2014). Caleigh tells a story of trying to buy a dress in Turkey, and being refused tailoring services due to her size. When she questioned the tailor he said, "I don't

work with bodies like you" and Caleigh continued to emphasize, "no, not people. Not body shape, bodies. I don't work with bodies like you" (Caleigh, 20, Student). For Caleigh this has had such a long-lasting impact that three years later she still defines herself by this experience. She concluded the story by telling me, "every time I look at a dress, I'm like, not for a body like yours" (Caleigh, 20, Student). Some TikTok discourse discusses fatness as 'fat bodies' while others use person first language to talk about 'fat people.' While I initially planned to use the more clinical terminology and focus specifically on the body, I was guided to use person-first language to respect humanity, and simultaneously the dehumanizing experiences of my participants. Caleigh's experience reveals why talking about bodies only is hurtful, as this statement reduced her to her body (Mairs, 1990) and has stayed with her since.

Further, Eight of my participants reported feelings of insecurity or body dissatisfaction due to shopping which was exacerbated during COVID-19. When fashion is not accessible to fat women and AFAB people it can lead to feelings of inadequacy, body shame, and can be an experience of marginalization (Peters, 2014). Cass, during her interview, shared with me how closed fitting rooms during COVID-19 complicated purchasing clothing for her as a fat woman. She told me "I hate ordering clothes and like because of--because of, stuff doesn't fit sometimes. And like you can't tell until you look at it or feel the fabric or whatever" (Cass, 24, Barista). For Cass, clothing shopping is already stressful and difficult without the added struggle of not being able to try on

clothes, or, as @aliciamccarvell points out, not having them offered in-store. COVID-19 presented a unique challenge to individuals like Cass who could not access the kinds of clothes necessary for their bodies. Cass is not the only participant who spoke to me about the perils of ordering online as a fat woman. Anna explained to me that she buys a lot of her clothing from an online company called *Shein*, a company out of China that offers a wide range of sizes, and up to date styles, all at affordable prices. However, *Shein* is fast fashion, calling consumer ethics into question. Anna explained:

> If it's, like one thing that does kind of get me, is when people shame people for buying fast fashion. Like, I get it, like I get that fast fashions' bad. If I could avoid it, I would. It's not a good practice. I don't want to be contributing to that. But at the same time for some people, that's all they have.
> (Anna, 21, Student).

Anna is correct that *Shien* and other fast fashion companies offer some of the best in-style fashion for fat women, something that the *FatTok* community agrees on. While none of the creators chosen speak directly to *Shein* in their videos, many do own pieces from them, and other small creators often offer shopping 'hauls' of their clothing. When fast fashion is all fat women are offered it seems trivial and privileged to further stigmatize them for buying it. This again speaks to a larger sociological issue of accessibility and a society that doesn't accommodate fat individuals, as well as the relationship between weight stigma, the patriarchy, and capitalist ventures. These social inequalities are easily seen through the inaccessibility of fashion for fat individuals (Peters, 2014).

Representation becomes significant to an analysis of fat fashion because my participants felt validated and seen through creators who broke the social norms of fatness. As discussed above, when truly plus size individuals feel they cannot be seen on social media they become consumers only, rather than participants, in these discussions, kept from that participation by size alone, held back by past stigmatization. @theabbybible is fashion-focused and encourages viewers to be daring in how they express their style as fat individuals. She shows off four new looks from the brand @FashiontoFigure in her video published on April 30th, 2022. The first outfit features a bright pink button-up cropped shirt and bright yellow paper bag shorts. The following outfit is a body-hugging denim jumpsuit. The third is a mono-chromatic bubble-gum pink suit, with a jacket, tube top, and paperbag pants. The final look is a bright yellow crop top with large puffy sleeves, and a frilled orange wrap skirt (Bible, 2022). By listing each outfit in detail I hope to show how these fun outfits fall outside of what is 'expected' and typically available for fat women to wear, referring back to Gay's struggle of *how* she is allowed to take up space (2018). In fashion, when sizing in exciting and fun clothing is exclusionary (either by size, cost, or both), it excludes most fat women by ensuring they are limited in their expression, which is detrimental to their body image and sense of self, as stated in Peters' work (2014). Abby takes up space in a colourful way and represents an era of fashion for fat women that doesn't have to be thinning, or quiet. @heyseantaylor says, "I had some suspicions about the definition of flattering…represent

favourably, gratify by falsification" (2021-12-16). Her discomfort with the term *flattering* is that it is based in deceit, the implication that some kind of flaw or 'defect' needs to be hidden. This innately positions fatness as a problem, making *flattering* exclusionary— a term that often surrounds fashion and shopping for fat women and AFAB individuals.

An intersectional analysis also reveals the significance of representation. As mentioned above, I aimed to choose popular creators that also represented intersecting identities in conjunction with fatness. What drew me to use @kendramorous as one of the five content creators is that she outwardly speaks about her nuanced experience as a fat Black woman. Not only was this hard to find,[33] but many of the fat Black creators I found either spoke more on Black rights issues or were not body acceptance focused and were largely sharing fashion videos separate from body acceptance activism. Her video, published on June 3rd, 2021, celebrates her joy for fat Black women and her presence in that body in a eurocentric society. Joy is a repetitive theme in her content. One instance shows her filming on a hot day, wearing a two-piece (sports bra and leggings) fitness set. She recounts a story to her viewers about another fat Black woman who stopped her on her walk to say, "yes we're wearing two pieces all summer baby!" Kendra replies, "yes and we ain't ever gonna stop mama" (Austin, 2021). The message of her video is a) that she will not hide her body and b) to praise and uplift Black women. The caption of the

[33] There are persistent allegations from creators that TikTok's algorithm favours privileged white bodies and boosts their content in favour of diverse (Black, gay, disabled, poor) creators, leading to limited representation of mainstream creators on the app. My research showed that this could be true, but there is no evidence available to prove this notion at this time.

video, in all caps, reads: FAT BLACK WOMEN, followed by four shouting emojis "🗣️". @kendramorous' love of her whole identity is profound in that it is so counter cultural for many women. Further, by sharing this experience with her viewers, she is representing the power of a fat, Black woman supporting other women of colour in a society that wants them to shrink, hide, be silent, and be divided (Gay, 2018; Thompson, 2018; Taylor, 2018; Tovar, 2018).

The final video I want to showcase concerning representation's importance on TikTok is the fan mail that @aliciamccarvell received from a 16-year-old fan. The fan's assignment for a class was to write about her hero, and after completing the assignment she sent it to @aliciamccarvell. She writes:

> "My hero is Alicia Mccarvell, and heres [*sic*] why. All my life I have struggled with my body and how other people perceive me, and so did Alicia. About 2 years ago I started watching her videos of her being herself and not caring what other people thought about it and I strive every day to be like her. I don't want to be like that. I don't want to be her, I just want to be vulnerable, kind, confident, and respected like she is. I hope someday to have a stronger hold on these traits" [sic] (Mccarvell, 2021-9-2).

While Alicia feels moved that she is finally seeing her own body represented in media, it is incredibly impactful that she is also creating that representation for her younger fans. This video captures @aliciamccarvell understanding, in real time, her own impact on her viewership, and how her vulnerability in sharing her struggles and the joy she has found in her life and relationship has helped others find the same freedom. Katie shared during our interview that during the pandemic, "seeing fat content creators, um, I guess,

clapping back at haters was super helpful. And just like seeing fat people doing yoga or just like, fat people doing everyday things, and I'm like, Shit, yeah, I never see that" (Katie, 25, Student). For Katie, representation was a pleasant surprise; they reported benefiting from the presence of *FatTok* as a community in a similar way that they benefited from the content itself. Beyond social media, four of my participants expressed gratitude and surprise at representation and inclusion of their lived experiences in this project.

TikTok is impactful in that it has been able to be representative of a larger lived experience. Anna explained to me why she loves *FatTok* so much in her interview: because it defies societal norms and allows space for body love. She exclaimed, "like just seeing a community of people who are like, Yeah, fuck you, I am fat, is something I think I really needed, especially with how everyone else and the pressure and how to look a certain way and it's just something I love, I love fat TikTok. You know?" (Anna, 20, Student). Anna also identifies as a reconnecting Indigenous person[34] and is learning to accept all aspects of herself. Like Thompson (2018), Anna refuses to be told that her body needs to be changed. A key aspect seen across both sets of data is that body acceptance is more than an ideology but an all encompassing state of being for the women/AFAB who claim it as their own. This largely speaks to the work involved in

[34] An individual of Indigenous heritage in the process of learning more about, and becoming more involved with, their Indigeneity.

resisting hegemony; it is hard to counter a cultural narrative, but as Anna explains, it is beneficial to do so.

TikTok Advocacy

TikTok advocacy has had a large impact on my participants during COVID-19. While body acceptance explores the process through which participants reported finding and grappling with body acceptance and neutrality discourse, TikTok advocacy is the process through which that information is disseminated. As previously discussed, advocacy on TikTok allowed participants to develop tools for body acceptance/neutrality, to combat stigma, and be involved in a community that respects, accepts, and represents them. At the time of data collection, @mariellegreguski had twenty-six videos relating to advocacy. On January 24th, 2021, Marielle explained to her followers the difference between body positivity and body neutrality. Her caption reads "Body positivity vs. Body Neutrality. Healthy dose of both is what worked for me!" (2021). She tells viewers, "body positivity is learning to love, worship and celebrate our bodies out loud" and that body neutrality is "just existing and being worthy of respect, all the time" (2021). Her soft spoken, plain language description of both body positivity and neutrality places no judgement on either and does not ask viewers to adopt one over the other. She simply explains the definitions so that viewers may further understand her content and outlook on life, and allows them to take what serves them and leave what does not.

Other forms of TikTok advocacy take a 'tough love' approach to their education. On her page @kendramorous calls-out white women who co-opt the body positivity movement from its origins with Black women and who do not self-educate but use Black creators as resources. She speaks to a larger problem of those who do not have lived experience with marginalization lacking tact when they ask community members for easily searchable, and generalized information. She exclaims, "hey all my white #bopo queens, body positivity was built on the backs of fat Black women. Fat Black women do not owe you being a fully healed person, and do not owe you liberation" (2021-12-16) Below reads, "FAT BLACK WOMEN DO NOT OWE YOU LIBERATION!!! FAT BLACK WOMEN ARE HEALING TOO!! @lizzo (2021). She uses Lizzo in this example, as she is often a target of thinner white women's inquiries into the fat black experience. @kendramorous' TikTok takes the brunt of these inquiries, which forced her into a space of refusal to educate others to protect her mental peace, leading to push back that she wouldn't engage with their demands.

@heyseantaylor addresses performative thin activism in her post on September 12th, 2021. For nearly a year there has been a trend on TikTok for thin or midsize women to show off their rolls or share that a 'fit' body also has body fat at different angles. The issue with this, as @heyseantaylor and other *FatTok* creators have pointed out, is that it does not address, but actually exacerbates, the systemic marginalization of fat women. While it may help these women feel better about their small bodies not fully aligning

with the standard of thinness, it overlooks the experiences of women who in no way align with the ideal. The on-screen caption states, "when they hunch to pinch their lil [*sic*] 'roll' but refuse to learn from fat activists or listen to fat people" (2021). As Sean explains, to take part in the trend is a) to flood the body positivity/acceptance/neutrality content with thin women and consume the content of fat women, but b) to speak over fat creators already educating on the perils of fatness in a society that is not accessible to fat bodies in a significant way. As the project finds, fat individuals were already experiencing exclusion from social media engagement due to fears of stigma. Content like this further consolidates fears that their bodies are not acceptable or welcome in these onlines spaces. Body acceptance does include all kinds of bodies; however, it loses its gravity and purpose when those who are the most disadvantaged by the system are not at the center of the solution (Taylor, 2018, Thompson, 2018; Gay, 2018; Strings, 2018). As with any social inequality, allies must be willing to listen to further the fight.

While these videos may not appear to be directly connected to COVID-19 other than by the time in which they were created, they were not topics of conversation many mainstream creators and influencers were creating back in 2019. @aliciamccarvell's content, even closer to the start of the pandemic, reveals far less body acceptance content, and shows far less engagement than her comedy and relationship videos from that time. Thinking back to 2019, it is unimaginable for some of my participants to think of social media as a positive in their lives. Bridget explained, "you know, body positivity and

neutrality, I find that it's been more helpful. Ah, if you'd asked me that two years ago, you know, pre-pandemic, I would have said, Oh, it's more harmful. Absolutely" (Bridget, 21, Student). This tracks with an absence of body acceptance content and a plethora of diet culture content that was largely being left unchallenged. The presence of TikTok advocacy shown through the creators analyzed is a result of both a change in the kind of content being created over the course of COVID-19 and a gap that has been filled through the creation of this content.

Nine of my participants found their body acceptance grew over the course of the pandemic. When asked how their journey had progressed, eight cited *FatTok*, or body positivity TikTok as a source of that education. Some of my participants approached TikTok as a way to learn about issues they had not previously been exposed to, while others were drawn to social movements on TikTok due to their academic study in related fields. Among all of these reasons for engaging with TikTok to find body acceptance, one participant stood out to me in how she viewed the fight for acceptance of her own body. For her, it wasn't herself she needed to convince, but those in her life, and she spoke with a resolution about her body's capabilities that I did not see in my other discussions. She told me that after starting school her back began to hurt, due to the large textbooks she was carrying around. When her family suggested it was due to her weight, despite the problem having begun in her 20's, she tried to explain to them that her bone structure was more than enough to support her. She told me, "Bones are so strong, like bones have

literally like, kind of like the strength of steel. You think that it can't carry me?" (Anonymous, 23, Student). She has accepted her body, respects what her body can do for her, and refuses to listen to a dated narrative of health = size. For this participant, TikTok was the source of this narrative that was not available in her daily life, and allowed her to connect to body acceptance content at all times, without changing her geographical location. This participant's resolution to honour her body was something I felt had to be represented in this project as it shows a true understanding of body acceptance and neutrality that so few, both participants and creators, are able to attain.

A total of eleven of my participants found TikTok to be a positive source of support and community as fat individuals during the pandemic. This is represented in the creators they named in their interviews, the pages they said they engaged with on their *fyp* (FatTok, body acceptance, fat fashion, fat activism, etc.), and their continued following of fat creators. What's more is that eight of my participants stated that TikTok helped further their body acceptance journeys. Bridget recounted "I personally feel like it's been more helpful during the pandemic, because there has been a greater emphasis and nurturing of conversations towards fatness. Um, and, you know, body positivity and neutrality, I find that it's been more helpful" (Bridget, 21, Student). Bridget speaks specifically to content that was created and consumed during COVID-19. While it can be argued that this content could have been helpful to some prior to the pandemic, I argue that COVID-19 bred the breadth of this content and the ability to consume it so fervently.

As the creators profit off of their content, the content they produce is fueled by consumer demand. The increase in content on body acceptance and fat activism during the pandemic reflects both a desire for more of this content, and more time to interact with it. Six participants had seen body positive activism on their FYP prior to being part of my project, which can be seen through Bridget's comment as she acknowledged the impact of body acceptance content she had already consumed. It was significant to this research to understand when, how, and if participants had been exposed to fat activism prior to the project, or if their self-identification as fat might have been rooted in shame leading to alignment with weight loss content. Understanding my participants' previous engagement with this kind of content on TikTok allowed me to gauge how impactful these issues were on TikTok or if participants had sourced that information elsewhere. While just under half of my participants had seen this content on TikTok, the same was not said about other social media platforms (though Instagram's performative #bodypositivity was mentioned).

@theabbybible, using her platforms and her own desires to rise in the ranks of TikTok calls out the evident imbalance in the number of thin influencers to plus size influencers, countering the narratives that this representation is either desirable or just. In a video released on TikTok on January 12th, 2022, she writes:

> When are we going to talk about the major disparity in the amount of straight vs plus size influencers? It's not because plus people aren't out here trying. It's just easier to become a mainstream influencer if you're thin. There's more access to brands that carry your size. And even brands who have size-less products still

> choose not to work with plus size influencers. Plus, it's been proven that the algorithm censor's fat bodies. I can post a bikini video and be flagged for nudity, while a smaller influencer's same video will go viral.
> (Bible, 2022).

Her message is certainly a powerful statement on weight stigma on the platform, and a pattern of prominent fat creators being subtly silenced over time. This issue relates back to the larger project as it showcases differential treatment for fat women/AFAB individuals versus thin women/AFAB individuals, which becomes increasingly frustrating when fat centered, or inclusive brands miss the mark on clothing that is actually big enough for people like Abby. I would like to address the 'proof' mentioned above of the algorithm's censorship of fat bodies. In my search, I could not find proof (published research) that this is in fact what is taking place on the platform. The 'proof' I believe she is speaking of here is the experiences of more than a few women being flagged for nudity, including @mariellegreguski and herself, in videos that do not showcase more skin than one might show for a day at the beach (Greguski, 2021; Mccarvell, 2021; Bible, 2021). Creators who have spoken of this, not all of whom are able to be featured in this project, speak to an obvious preference towards thin bodies when those creators are not at risk for being removed from the platform or falsely accused of breaking TikTok's community guidelines.

Social Media On a Broad Scale

Feelings on social media outside of TikTok were far less positive for participants and did not positively impact their relationship with body size. Eight participants found social media to be generally harmful to their well-being as it relates to the pandemic, even if it allowed social connection and some form of information acquisition regarding social issues. Ten participants also mentioned that their social media use had increased during the pandemic. They credited the lockdown keeping them inside as a reason for spending more time on their phones. A few participants mentioned feeling judged for increased social media use instead of pursuing fitness or picking up new hobbies (Cass, 24, Barista) (Anonymous, 23, Student) (Victoria, 25, Project Manager). Cass explained:

> Oh, well, I went for a run today. What did you do on Monday? I watched TikToks for literally six hours straight. Like Oh, fun. Like, okay, sue me. You went for a run and worked out. Okay. I watched TikToks. We both had a good time. Actually, I probably had a better time. I wasn't hating myself the whole time.
> (Cass, 24, Barista).

This level of competition, while present in Cass' personal life, was fueled heavily by social media messaging urging followers not to "waste their time" while in quarantine, whether that be through fitness, side hustles (businesses) or art. This put unwanted pressure on those who, like Cass, just wanted to protect their mental peace during a global pandemic. Finally, four of my participants reported having taken a social media break or having cleansed their social media during the pandemic due to the harmful effects. Maddison explained, "I think you can kind of tailor it to like, if you see some

kind of content that is not something that you think is healthy for you, then you can change it. But I think a lot of people don't realize that certain content is hurting them" (Maddison, 24, Young Professional). Maddison and another participant spoke to their personal mission to use the "not interested" button on TikTok to remove content that didn't serve them from their algorithms. One participant stated, "I do I, um, I kind of like, make a conscious effort to make sure my social media is filled with it [body acceptance content] because I don't want them getting consumed by diet culture" (Anonymous, 23, Student). She referenced Instagram as another platform in which she practiced removing toxic diet culture messaging in order to improve her relationship with her body. This act of cleansing social media accounts of unhelpful or unwanted content is common practice for this age range for SNS users. In this way, many young women employ media literacy while simultaneously expressing agency over what they are willing to consume for their overall well-being. Katelyn (22, Student) also practiced this form of agency, stating:

> Um, years ago, but I'm at a point and I think I was even at the beginning of COVID, where, um, I'm, like, really, really taken a lot of time to like, look at who I'm following, unfollow people in my school that like would post their little bikini pictures, because they're modeling now. And like, whatever and unfollow, like unhelpful accounts.
> (Katelyn, 22, Student).

Another facet of this agency is deletion of social media applications entirely, however, none of my participants expressed taking it to this extent in their interviews. The intentional cleanses gave my participants the agency to choose the media they experience daily, and while some negative content may still seep through due to the reality of social

media and the imperfections within AI algorithms, these choices reportedly led to better body satisfaction for these individuals.

CONCLUSION

This project aimed to answer the questions: What does it mean to have a body deemed an epidemic, amidst a pandemic? How does social media use affect outside experiences of weight stigma on fat bodies and their ability to cope with the impact of such stigma? How does COVID-19 complicate an existing discussion around the effects of weight stigma on the social and physical well-being of young women and AFAB individuals? The results of this project show not a decrease in stigma, but a shift in how and through which mediums participants report experiencing weight stigma during COVID-19. TikTok operated as a vessel through which young Canadian women were able to receive education on body acceptance and begin their own journeys.

I embarked on this project to discern how young Canadian women and AFAB individuals were impacted by weight stigma during COVID-19. With a focus on TikTok, using our broader understanding of social media, I was interested in how TikTok specifically played into this experience. As mentioned above, due to the rapidly changing nature of both COVID-19 and social media, the methods I used for this project needed to be malleable to allow for a realistic, accurate, and current analysis. I recorded a vast increase in the amount of body acceptance content available on TikTok during

COVID-19, demonstrated through the five TikTok creators.[35] The creators examined for this project demonstrated an increase of greater than 5x the body acceptance/neutrality related content produced between 2020 to 2021. I did note a decrease in their content from 2021 to 2022, however, data was only collected up to April 2022[36]. Based on these patterns, there would still be some decrease in content in all of 2022, but still reveals a drastic increase since the onset of the pandemic.[37] I note that this decrease in 2022 could point to less social media engagement due to more in-person interaction.

My results from the interview portion of this project illustrated that, while many individuals utilize TikTok, much of our collective experience continues to be built and encountered off-screen. Despite the media heavy era of COVID-19 and a shared social experience of increased media usage, social media remains a representation of lived experiences and not an exhaustive source of data for this project. My findings demonstrated an experience of TikTok as a form of social media that does not wholly align with the traditional research as it does demonstrate a positive relationship between social media usage and body image for young women through algorithmic communities (Harrison, 2019; Kite & Kite, 2020; Fardouly & Holland, 2018; Gioia, Griffiths & Boursier, 2020; Gilbert, Keery & Thompson, 2005; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Wykes & Gunter, 2005), positioning TikTok, as some researchers have already reported, as

[35] As seen in Table 1
[36] At the end of data collection (April) there were 75 instances of body acceptance/neutrality content in 2022 for the creators
[37] While only an estimate, the 2022 content projection would still show a 4x increase of content on TikTok from 2020.

sociologically significant to younger generations imaginings and understanding of social issues (Masciantonio, Bouchat, Balty, & Rimé, 2021; Li, Guan, Hammond & Berrey, 2021; Schellewald, 2022). The significance of this project's findings lies in its ability to give insight into the experiences of young fat women/AFAB individuals during COVID-19 and the impact of TikTok on their experience. Each finding supports the ultimate argument of this thesis, that there was a decrease in in-person weight stigma experiences reported by participants during COVID-19, but that instances of weight stigma continued to occur in other forms. Further, TikTok aided in mitigating the impact of remaining weight stigma on young female and AFAB users as they gathered tools to negotiate tensions between stigma fueled experiences and body acceptance. Isolation also provided tools for both navigating, through influence of TikTok advocacy, and avoiding, through algorithm capabilities, weight stigma. This ability to avoid stigma through social media like TikTok demonstrates media agency; users get to choose what is allowed onto their pages through acceptance and rejection of suggested materials, something impossible to do in in-person settings pre and post lockdowns. Agency can further be seen in how or if users choose to *appear* on social media at all; for the first time individuals facing stigma were able to choose when, where, and how to be perceived, and on their own terms. However, this finding moves beyond the agentic to social justice issues of stigmatization that act as a barrier to fat individuals' participation on social media during periods of isolation.

My findings were in some ways counter to existing research as previous studies showed increased weight stigma resulting from marginalizing experiences, such as previous stigma (Chastain, *Food Psych Podcast*, 2017; Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015; Blodorn, Major, Hunger & Miller, 2016). This project showed that in fact, being deemed an epidemic amidst a pandemic (or the social consequences of this health criterion) allowed space for a movement away from rhetoric of body size related morality, and aided many participants in navigating situations of stigma or improving recovery from these experiences when they did occur. As stated above, this change is not thought to be *because* of COVID-19, but simply a product of that time period, due to a heavy reliance on technology and a decrease in social contact. Further, the heavy use of an algorithmic-based SNS also allowed individuals control over the content (read: conversations) they were a part of, something not often possible in the in-person social interactions that media largely replaced during the pandemic. This project allowed an in-depth exploration into the cultural conversation currently taking place around body acceptance and neutrality on TikTok. It further provides an understanding of how medical weight bias, as seen through broader push for narrowly defined 'health,' frustrates and negatively impacts young women and AFAB individuals trying to claim a positive relationship with their bodies.

I have stated throughout this project where further research could be done to clarify phenomena or other interesting patterns outlined in my research. However, I

would like to suggest projects that I believe would be beneficial, stemming from this research, to aid fat individuals experiencing marginalization, and increase our understanding on the impact of COVID-19. A follow up to this research could be completed in 5-7 years, well after COVID-19's visible impacts have settled, to understand how this project's findings on TikTok's relationship to mitigating effects of weight stigma during COVID-19 hold up in a truly post-COVID world. Many participants stated that they were pursuing a body acceptance journey inspired by TikTok. This project could analyze whether TikTok remains a hub for dissemination of this information, if it still exists at all, and if participants still identify with body acceptance and neutrality teachings. Further, it would be interesting to discover if participants found it possible to continue their body acceptance pursuits as life returned to in-person interaction and became less technologically based. Did overt instances of in-person weight stigma once again become more prominent in their lives? Was COVID-19, in their view, an opportunity to change an internal social narrative that pushed thinness over individual well-being?

Other studies of benefit to the field of sociology and fat activism could be on social media-based activism for Gen Z and how it educates young adults on social issues outside of the classroom. Specifically looking at body neutrality and representation, researchers could examine if language used on social media allows young adults to better advocate for their own needs and accurately represent social movements. Expanding on

this, research on early exposure to body activism and neutrality could investigate potential links between social media based education and eating disorders/disordered eating to discern if social media is more helpful or harmful in breaking these patterns, specifically with an emphasis on body acceptance.

Ultimately, there remains insufficient research in areas of TikTok, weight-based marginalization, and body acceptance methods. Any research that could feed into policy to create programs that address wellness instead of weight would be beneficial to pursue, to bolster greater body acceptance, and therefore improved health outcomes (Hunger, Major, Blodorn & Miller, 2015; Harrison, 2019; Kite & Kite, 2020; Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Hunger, Smith & Tomiyama, 2020), for young fat women/AFAB individuals as targets of medical and social weight stigma.

The individuals represented in this project are a small sample of women/AFAB people who experienced weight stigma prior to COVID-19 and have felt a shift in the discussion around bodies on social media through TikTok, during the pandemic. This project's findings are significant because they amplify the voices of these women/AFAB individuals, those who are often spoken over by thinner creators, and individuals trying to justify the natural state of their bodies. In doing so, as participants, creators, and researchers show, they invalidate the most marginalized bodies that should be at the centre of this conversation. The practical implications of this study can be found in an increased understanding of TikTok as an educational platform. Using my results that

understand TikTok as a tool for community generated learning and advocacy allows policy makers and educators to see opportunity for widespread education in short video format. Theoretical implications of this study are also in the TikTok related findings; algorithmic or short video social media as positive to body image and self-worth. Further as a researcher, while I experienced nineteen years in a fat body, my current privileged position as a midsized individual, and my time spent in a thin body, means that I am no longer the expert on this experience, especially not as it relates to COVID-19. Those reading this project, especially those who benefit from thin privilege, must remember that this project is not possible without participants willing to be vulnerable and share their lived experiences. Listen carefully to what they say throughout these pages and respect their voices.

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