'I think she's truly beautiful': Celebrity, gender and body positivity in plus-size fashion blogs

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Abstract:
This article examines the intersections of celebrity, gender and body positivity in fashion blogs written by plus-size women. Through a qualitative, thematic analysis of fifty-four blog entries and 189 comments, I explore how the bloggers construct celebrities as their body positive role models, as well as the ways in which mainstream media discourse on (celebrity) women's bodies is critiqued by the bloggers. The results of the study highlight the boundary work that takes place within the plus-size fashion blogging community, as the bloggers view some celebrities as 'authentic' representatives of their community, while rejecting others. A boundary is also drawn between the blogosphere and the mainstream media, since mainstream media's portrayal of women is highly criticized by the bloggers. The goals of the body positivity movement – such as bringing more diversity and acceptance of different bodies into media imagery – are present throughout the data. However, the study also draws attention to the problematic aspects of body positivity, such as the commercialization of an originally activism-driven social movement.

Keywords: blogs, body image, body positivity, celebrity culture, fashion blogging, fat acceptance, gender, marginalization.

Introduction

In recent years, the term *body positivity* has become ubiquitous on social media. Following on the heels of the more established *fat acceptance movement* (e.g. LeBesco and Braziel, 2001; LeBesco, 2004; Cooper, 2016), body positivity seeks to challenge the mainstream media's beauty ideals, promoting the acceptance and celebration of different body types – 'all shapes and sizes' (Sastre, 2014, pp. 929-930). Societal marginalization that is based on appearance and body mass is undeniably connected to gender, as women's bodies are

objectified and sexualized in public discussions more than men's, and previous research has shown a more pronounced connection between body size and social acceptability for women (e.g. Hartley, 2001; Harjunen, 2009). As a result, the body positivity movement is a gendered movement, and the majority of the body positive spaces and resources on social media are geared towards women.

In this article, I investigate the ways in which women discuss body positivity and its connections to celebrity culture and gender in one such online 'space': a network of fashion blogs authored by plus-size women. Plus-size fashion bloggers, also known as 'fatshionista bloggers' (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013; Harju and Huovinen, 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013), can be considered central figures in the online body positivity movement. Through blogging, these women form communities based on shared experiences (Limatius, 2016) and construct identities that are not seen as possible in the mainstream fashion media, which remains largely anti-fat (Harju and Huovinen, 2015; Limatius, 2017).

As van Zoonen (2006, p. 291) points out, due to the historical exclusion of women from public spaces, 'fame' and 'celebrity' have traditionally been difficult for women to obtain. Moreover, when women *are* able to obtain celebrity, specific portrayals of femininity are demanded of them. According to van Zoonen (2006, p. 291), 'female celebrity is articulated primarily with the codes and conventions of media representations of women; of Hollywood conventions initially and an amalgam of television, pop music and advertising images later'. Because the standard of 'ideal beauty' for women in current, Western mainstream media is thin, white, young and able-bodied, popular culture is saturated with imagery of women who fit in these categories. As a result, it is more difficult for women with marginalized bodies, such as plus-size women, to discover celebrity role models who they can relate to and take inspiration from. When such role models *are* identified, their existence can help marginalized women to defy normative beauty standards (Gurrieri and Cherrier 2014, p. 284). Thus, the role that celebrity women have in diversifying ideas of the 'acceptable' female body is worth examining.

In my qualitative analysis of blog texts and comments, I investigate who the bloggers' body positive and feminist role models are, and to what extent the body positive ideology overlaps or intercepts with celebrity and gender discourses in the blog data. In addition, I demonstrate the ways in which the bloggers connect body positivity to the broader discussion on gendered, normative beauty standards in the mainstream media. My study illustrates that while being able to identify with body positive celebrity figures in the media can encourage and empower plus-size women, the concept of body positivity itself and its connections to celebrity culture can – and should – also be problematized.

As body positivity becomes more and more of a 'catchphrase' (Lome, 2016) on social media, it also becomes increasingly commodified (Sastre, 2014; Limatius, 2019b). For example, the hashtag *#bodypositive* now appears frequently in online influencer marketing to advertise a wide range of products – everything from makeup to weight-loss aids (Limatius, 2020a, p. 35). According to Sastre (2014, p. 935), 'consumption-oriented bodily practices' familiar from, for example, television's makeover shows, are still present in the

body positivity movement, which prevents it from becoming truly 'radical'. The focus of the movement remains on *beauty*, even if the idea of *what* or *who* can be considered beautiful is broadened.

For many plus-size fashion bloggers, the commercial turn in the body positive movement has invoked negative feelings of the movement being 'taken away' from its original contributors – namely, fat acceptance activists (Limatius, 2019b). This is not a novel phenomenon, considering that plus-size clothing brands have adopted strategies from fat activism to market their products before (Cooper, 2016, p. 76), but such appropriation has arguably become more pronounced since the advent of social media, internet celebrity and so-called *influencer culture* (Abidin, 2018). Thus, the body positivity movement and its claims of inclusivity and equality need to be viewed through a critical lens. Plus-size fashion blogs offer a rich source of data for such critical examination.

Plus-size fashion blogging, fat acceptance activism, and body positivity

In the present study, I use the term *plus-size fashion blogger* to describe women who author fashion-focused blogs and identify as 'plus-size'. The majority of the bloggers in the data also refer to themselves as 'fat' with no negative intention, often as a conscious effort to normalize the use of the word and to remove it from its derogatory connotations (see e.g. Harju & Huovinen, 2015).[1]

Plus-size fashion blogs feature many elements familiar from 'straight-size' fashion blogs.[2] These include, for example, 'outfit of the day' photographs, reviews of clothing items and accessories, and discussion on current trends and new releases by fashion brands. However, it is not uncommon for the bloggers to also address more personal issues, such as self-confidence and mental health, or topics they find current and interesting, including popular culture and celebrities.

Some – but not all – plus-size fashion bloggers also raise issues related to the discrimination of fat people in society on their blogs alongside the 'lighter' fashion commentary (Limatius, 2019a; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). This type of activism-driven blogging can be traced back to the *fat acceptance movement* – a social movement that first emerged in the 1960s but has become more widespread since the advent of digital media (Dickins et al., 2011, p. 1681; Harjunen, 2004, p. 317). Fat acceptance challenges the mainstream discourse on fatness that is typically centered around medical issues and dominated by the idea of the dangerously spreading 'obesity epidemic' (Cooper, 2016; Dickins et al., 2011). Achieving equal rights between fat people and those who are not fat in a variety of societal settings ranging from healthcare to the workplace is at the core of the fat acceptance movement.

The *body positivity movement*, while more recent and more obviously tied to digital media, can be viewed as a kind of continuation of the fat acceptance movement. Body positivity aims to challenge the beauty standards presented in mainstream media by demanding representation for and acceptance of marginalized bodies, including fat bodies, disabled bodies, as well as the bodies of LGBTQ+ people and people of colour. According to

the body positive ideology, there are no 'ugly' bodies, just like there are no 'perfect' bodies (van Es, 2019). As such, body positivity can be interpreted to be a more 'inclusive' movement than the fat acceptance movement (see also Limatius, 2020b).

However, as Sastre (2014) points out, in its current form body positivity is not truly 'radical'. Despite the inclusive idea of celebrating 'all bodies', thus far the movement appears lacking in intersectionality – for example, the majority of the participants on the body positive websites studied by Sastre (2014, p. 935) were white women with middle-class status. Body positive online activists typically make claims of being 'authentic' on social media, instead of only displaying perfectly polished versions of themselves (van Es, 2019). However, as van Es (2019) points out, while their social media accounts may feature photographs where their 'flaws', like cellulite or rolls, are visible, the content they post still features '[makeup], good lighting, nice clothes, and good quality pictures'.

In online interaction, authenticity can be constructed through a range of linguistic and semiotic practices which the users either are or are not entitled to use (Leppänen et al., 2015, p. 1). According to van Es (2019), authenticity is 'best understood as a social construct in a niche'. Within the online community of body positive activists – as well as within the overlapping community of plus-size fashion bloggers – there are certain norms and practices that make up the concept of 'being body positive'. If one does not fulfill these requirements, they may be deemed 'not body positive enough' by other community members (Limatius, 2017).

In their study on hipster culture, Maly and Varis (2015) discuss the authenticity discourse among hipsters, which has features that are comparable with the authenticity practices among body positive activists and bloggers. Both the hipster identity and the body positive identity require the individual to possess the ''right' identity indexicals [...] accompanied by an identity discourse in which these indexicals are presented as part of one's 'real self''(Maly & Varis, 2015, p. 646). The 'real' hipsters do not dress in a certain way, listen to specific music or use particular products because these practices are fashionable, but because they are a part of their 'real' identities that are distinct from the mainstream – moreover, real hipsters see those who are taking part in these practices simply because it is trendy as a 'threat' to their 'authentic' hipster identity (Maly & Varis, 2015, p. 645). Similar discourse is currently forming in the body positive community – those who believe they are 'truly' body positive feel as if body positivity is being taken away from them by brands, businesses – and, as I will demonstrate in the present study, 'inauthentic' celebrities – as the movement becomes more commercialized (Limatius, 2019b).

Cooper (2016), a renowned scholar in the field of fat studies, also stresses that the body positivity ideology of all bodies being beautiful and deserving of celebration should not be considered to represent the full spectrum of fat activism – rather, it is a *proxy* of fat activism; 'a partial view, shorthand, a grain of something small that ends up becoming absolute' (Cooper, 2016, p. 11). In Cooper's (2016, pp. 40-41; 85) view, 'doing' fat activism includes a wide range of activities tied to culture-making, community-building, micro activism and political process work, such as publicly challenging/criticizing businesses

profiting from the diet industry, engaging in critical discussions about fat with different people and groups, organizing fat-activism-focused workshops, zines, seminars and gatherings, as well as sharing resources on fat activism and making them publicly available. Instead of presenting fat activism as 'a happy endeavour of self-acceptance and healthy living', Cooper (2016, p. 37) approaches it using Ahmed's (2010) notion of the 'killjoy,' who is pushed to the margins of society and disrupts social norms *from that marginalized position*, going against the mainstream. Body positivity, with its demands for more representation in media and fashion, appears to rather aim for marginalized bodies to become *part* of the mainstream.

Data and method

The starting point for the present study was a blog corpus I had compiled as a part of an earlier research project (Limatius, 2020a). As I was particularly interested in the role of celebrities as body positive role models for the bloggers, as well as the gendered nature of the body positivity movement, I searched for occurrences of the following terms in the corpus: 'feminist/feminism', 'celebrity/celebrities', and 'role model.' As a result, a dataset consisting of fifty-four blog entries written by sixteen women was formed. This dataset also contained 189 comments that had been posted to the blog entries. The texts that were included in the analysis were published during the years 2010-2014 and collected and archived in 2015. At the time of data collection all blog authors were based in the United Kingdom. All authors also identified as women. Prior to data collection, I contacted the authors and asked for permission for using their blogs as research material. Only blogs whose authors gave me their informed consent were included in the corpus. In the analysis, I use pseudonyms for the bloggers, and the wording of the textual examples has been changed slightly in order to make it more difficult to discover the bloggers' identities.[3]

The methodological approach of the study is qualitative, as well as inductive, since the research questions were formulated and developed alongside the analytical process. In order to examine the intersections between gender, body positivity and celebrity in the blog texts and comments, I carried out a *thematic analysis* (Attard & Coulson, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the data. I formed themes based on my repeated observation of the textual material and then proceeded to investigate how these themes intersected and overlapped in the blog posts and commenting section discussions.

In the following sections, I will present the findings of this analytical process. First, I will briefly discuss the themes related to gender, celebrity and body positivity in the blog data on a more general level. After that, I will move on to an in-depth analysis of how the bloggers determine which celebrities are 'authentic' in their presentation of body positivity, and thus have the 'permission' from the community to represent plus-size women in the media and in the fashion industry. Finally, I will demonstrate how the bloggers position themselves as body positive 'activists' by challenging the ways in which women's bodies are talked about in the British media – in particular, the *Daily Mail*. In the textual examples from

the data, bold text is used to emphasize words or passages that I consider to be of particular relevance.

Body positivity, gender and celebrity in the blog data

The bloggers talked about celebrities in a variety of contexts. In many cases, the celebrities who were mentioned in the blog posts were merely discussed as sources for style and makeup inspiration, without any commentary that would position them specifically as 'body positive' role models. However, some bloggers did feel particularly inspired by plus-size celebrities, such as actor Rebel Wilson and singer Mary Lambert. These examples are unsurprising in the context of the plus-size fashion blogosphere, as previous research has identified similar practices. For example, the 'fatshionistas' studied by Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013, p. 284) used the 'identification of 'fat icons'', either celebrities or prominent figures within the blogosphere, as a means of 'disrupting the beauty difference binary'.

However, in my data, taking style or fashion inspiration from a celebrity was also justified with factors other than being able relate to the celebrity's body size:

(1) This month's challenge is dressing in the style of your favourite celebrity. Now, I can't really say that I have a favourite celebrity. I don't immerse myself in celebrity culture […] so I am winging this a little. In the end, I decided to go with Jennifer Lawrence, as I like her style**, she seems to fall over a lot (like me) and she seems like the kind of girl that you would have a great time with**. (Blogger A)

In (1), Blogger A has participated in a *blogging challenge*, where a group of bloggers agree on a particular theme or topic for each month, write a blog post based on that prompt, and then share links to the other participants' blogs in their post. Instead of choosing a plus-size celebrity who might be similar to Blogger A in body shape and size, she chooses actor Jennifer Lawrence. Blogger A considers Lawrence to have a likeable personality, as well as relating to her 'clumsiness.' Being clumsy is a feature that makes Lawrence's public persona less polished and perfect, and more relatable. In fact, Lawrence is often portrayed as someone who is 'just like ordinary girls' in the media. Thus, while she does not directly represent plus-size women, she does represent 'differing from the norm' of a glamorous Hollywood actor.

Blogger F, who participated in a similar challenge as Blogger A did, also chose someone who could be considered surprising: super model Kate Moss.

(2) Kate Moss regularly wears the harem/peg trouser look, and I was thinking how far off we are in our stats: Kate at 34-23-35 and me at **off the scale-off the scale-off the scale**. LOL! So**, it would be interesting to see different shapes and sizes in a similar look**. (Blogger F)

Instead of attempting to find something she has in common with a celebrity, Blogger F takes the opposite route in (2), drawing attention to the difference between a super model's measurements and her own 'off-the-scale' body. For her, it is this difference between the two bodies that makes the challenge interesting. Her approach, despite its humorous tone, can be interpreted as following the 'guidelines' set by the body positivity movement: celebrating and representing bodies of 'all shapes and sizes.'

However, by repeating 'off the scale' three times as a comparison to Moss' measurements, Blogger F also highlights the fact that her own proportions are beyond any socially acceptable 'stats' – she could have included her own exact measurements, but she does not. This can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, not measuring oneself reflects the body positive idea that size 'does not matter'. On the other hand, providing specifics of a thin woman's body while describing a fat, female body as simply 'off the scale' echoes the stereotype that for a fat woman, being fat is always the most prominent, defining characteristic, and no further detail about her appearance is needed for the comparison. After all, the fat identity, according to the 'pathologizing narrative' that portrays fatness as a result of 'poor behaviour' and dominates contemporary Western culture, is 'an identity for which all other narratives are impossible' (Kent, 2001, p. 132).

In addition to replicating celebrities' fashion styles, the bloggers commented on current events and news that featured celebrities, especially when the focus was on the celebrities' bodies. The mainstream media was heavily criticized for its portrayal of women who were in the public eye, and the lack of visibly plus-size and fat women in the media was also commented on:

(3) I enjoy seeing fat bodies portrayed positively in the media, but I don't see much of it. If I gravitated towards fat positive entertainment, I wouldn't have anything to watch or listen to! **My list of celebrity inspiration is slowly dwindling away**, with a lack of 'new fatties' on the scene and **an increasing number of 'old timers' falling into the diet trap**… it's a **sad** state of affairs. (Blogger K)

For Blogger K, the main issue with media representation is the overall lack of plus-size and/or body positive role models. In (3), she describes the process of formerly plus-size celebrities losing weight as 'falling into the diet trap' – an attitude that is echoed by Blogger C, who states that she feels 'despair' over celebrities who she has looked up to, such as actor Dawn French and celebrity chef Nigella Lawson, losing weight. It is worth paying attention to the language used about the 'old timers' here: formerly plus-size celebrities losing weight is 'sad', and something to feel 'despair' over. Blogger K most likely does not have any concrete evidence that the women she's referencing 'fell into the diet trap' – yet it is assumed that these women succumbed to society and media's pressure for women to be thin to be considered worthy. Framing weight loss as 'falling into a trap' takes away the

agency that the individual has over her body, and instead connects the individual's experience to a broader, shared experience of a social group.

The fact that some of the bloggers take this type of stance to weight loss is interesting considering that body positivity is meant to focus on the acceptance and celebration of *all* types of bodies, presumably also those that have been through changes, or are in the process of changing (Sastre, 2014). However, as opposing *diet culture* can be viewed as one of the main practices that brings online body positive activists together, celebrities who have previously appeared content in their size/weight drastically changing their appearance may be perceived as 'betraying' other plus-size women – I will return to this theme in more detail later on in the article.[4]

Despite the obviously gendered nature of size-based marginalization and the fact that most of the bloggers in the data self-identified as feminists, there was less overlap between the concepts of fatness and feminism than I had initially expected – that is, the terms 'feminism' or 'feminist' rarely occurred in blog posts that focused on discussing fatness. This is interesting considering how several researchers in the field of *fat studies* have also criticized the most prominent feminist literature on the topic of the body as lacking fat representation. Hartley (2001, pp. 60-61), for example, has pointed out that despite the feminist movement's resistance of the 'tyranny of slenderness', feminist research has addressed this issue more frequently by theorizing anorexic and other eating-disordered bodies than by theorizing the fat woman's body. LeBesco (2004, p. 15) also notes that academic literature on 'women, food, and embodiment' largely focuses on anorexia and bulimia. Cooper (2016, pp. 21-22) even goes as far as saying that the fat activism movement has been 'completely overlooked' by the feminist scholars whose work has greatly influenced scholarly discussion on gender and the body, such as Orbach (1978; 2009), Chernin (1981) and Bordo (1993).

Based on the data of the present study, there is a similar sense of detachment between feminism and fatness in the plus-size fashion blogosphere – although the relevance of combining the two is apparent, there was little actual discussion that addressed the role of feminism in the bloggers fat acceptance or body positivity 'journeys'. However, this may be affected by the data, as the blogs I studied were *fashion-focused* in particular. Not all fat fashion bloggers are fat activists, and the more activism-driven fat bloggers who may address feminist concerns more explicitly do not necessarily consider fashion to be a valid form of activism (Cooper, 2016; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013).

Although the overlap between the two themes was not prominent in the data, the connection between fat acceptance and feminism was not completely absent, either. Blogger D, for example, stated that 'anger and a dash of feminism' made her realize that her body's 'primary function' was not pleasing men aesthetically or sexually. It is notable, however, that even in this example the role of feminism appears somewhat dismissive in the language the blogger uses: feminism only contributes 'a dash' to her fat acceptance journey.

However, if we conceptualize the body positivity movement as concerning *all* bodily diversity, not just body size or shape, the connection between feminism and body positivity in the blog data becomes more visible. In (4) and (5), Blogger B discusses two of her self-described feminist role models: artist Frida Kahlo, as well as model, actor and musician, Grace Jones:

(4)   Clothes were an important form of expression in Frida's life. **She can be seen […] wearing a man's suit in a family portrait. In a time where […] only men wore trousers this is a token of Frida's free spirit.** Frida challenged gender roles, was unapologetic, and rebellious in nature. […] Her appearance has been seen as controversial, as **she embraced her facial hair, wasn't afraid of getting naked, or displaying her disabilities**. (Blogger B)

(5)   Often **ridiculed for her masculine features**, Grace Jones just owns it and shows the world that **beauty comes in all forms**. (Blogger B)

Although Blogger B emphasizes internal features, such as creativity and confidence ('owning it'), when writing about her role models, the way she discusses Kahlo (4) and Jones (5) can also be linked to the body positive ideology. While not as commonly discussed in the media as weight and body size, facial hair and other traditionally 'masculine' features are used to ridicule and marginalize women – similar to being overweight, they are interpreted as signs of 'letting oneself go' (see Hartley, 2001). To admire women who have such features, even going as far as giving them the title of 'role model', can thus be viewed as a body positive act. Blogger B recognizes Kahlo's and Jones' tactics of rebelling against society's standards for female beauty by blurring the gender boundaries and flaunting features that are considered unfeminine. For a fat woman living in a society where thin is the feminine ideal, such examples of 'breaking the beauty rules' can be empowering and inspiring, despite the fact that they are not directly connected to fatness.

Who has the voice in the body positive community?

The discussion on what women – not only women with marginalized bodies, but all women – can and cannot do when it comes to fashion can be observed throughout history. As Tseëlon (1995, p. 16) puts it, women '[can] never get it right'; no matter what women wear, negative characteristics such as vanity, indulgence, excessiveness, frivolity, or impracticality are bound to be associated with them. However, I would argue that these negative connotations are highlighted even further in the case of plus-size or fat women. Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013), who examined 'fatshionistas' using queer theory, characterize plus-size women who engage with fashion as experiencing femininity and beauty from an ''outsider' or queer positionality' (p. 278). Fat women engaging in feminine fields such as fashion, 'disrupt' and 'complicate' these fields because they are, by default, 'abnormal' in the

feminine marketplace (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013, p. 278). Yet, as the discussions in the blogs I investigated illustrate, there are also norms *within* the plus-size fashion blogosphere concerning who can – or cannot – participate in creating new spaces for plus-size beauty and fashion. Even within this group that is 'abnormal' and 'disruptive' in the field of fashion, rules and limitations exist.

As Hartley (2001) has pointed out, women in the public eye – especially fat women – are under constant scrutiny for any changes in their bodies, and no amount of fame can help them escape this position:

> Women who get fat publicly (Elizabeth Taylor, Oprah Winfrey, Sarah Ferguson) are openly censured and scorned as if their bodies were public property. And when they lose weight, as all three of these women have, they are met with an approval that again marks their bodies as public property. (Hartley, 2001, p. 65)

In the plus-size fashion blogosphere, the topic of celebrities gaining and losing weight surfaces fairly frequently. However, instead of focusing on weight gain negatively – as the mainstream media does – plus-size fashion bloggers are more concerned about what type of attitudes towards weight loss (or gain) are promoted by those celebrities who are involved in the plus-size fashion market. The bloggers in my data were particularly worried about whether the celebrities who participated in creating plus-size fashion were suited for *representing their community*; in other words, whether they were *authentically* body positive. As discussed earlier, 'authenticity', as it is defined within the community of body positive bloggers/activists, is one of the body positivity movement's core values. In order to present themselves as 'authentically' body positive, the participants of the movement are required to, for example, show their 'real' selves on social media, instead of highlighting only the best aspects of their bodies (van Es, 2019). The bloggers also appear to value the idea of *loyalty* towards the community – and as illustrated earlier in example (3), weight loss can be viewed as a betrayal of this loyalty.

The practice of 'policing' the borders of an online community against those with inauthentic motives is not unique to the plus-size fashion blogosphere. As Bergs (2006) states, online interaction within specific groups of people can potentially lead to 'strong, close-knit networks.' Such closeness may, in turn, result in the development of community-specific rules and structures that define how one is expected to behave as a member of the community (Limatius, 2016). This, naturally, also leads to the exclusion of those who are not perceived as 'valid' members of the community (Luzón, 2011, p. 525). Yeshua-Katz (2015, p. 1350) argues that within a group that is socially stigmatized, the 'public vilification' of the community enhances the members' need to guard the boundaries of the community. She provides an example of this in her work on the online interaction of the Pro-Ana movement.

The members of the Pro-Ana community studied by by Yeshua-Katz (2015)[5] expressed a need to protect their online spaces from inauthentic 'wannarexics' – individuals who 'want to take part in the community but whose creditability as having an [eating

disorder] is considered questionable' (Yeshua-Katz, 2015, p. 1351). The 'authentic' group members considered the wannarexics problematic because their actions – such as consciously seeking out an eating disorder, as if having one was a voluntary action – decreased the credibility of those who truly lived with anorexia.

The boundary-managing struggles within communities of eating-disordered people are easily comparable to practices of policing the boundaries of the plus-size fashion blogging and body positive communities. Both groups consist mainly of women, are stigmatized because of their bodies, and presented as problematic in the mainstream media for 'glorifying' or 'glamorizing' unhealthy bodies. My previous work (Limatius, 2017; 2019b) has illustrated that the bloggers appear to distinguish between the 'right' and 'wrong' kind of portrayals of body positivity and fat acceptance. In addition to celebrities, other plus-size women, other bloggers, and in particular the plus-size fashion bloggers *themselves* are scrutinized (and sometimes criticized) for their body positive stance. Not being 'body positive enough' by community standards can thus be interpreted as a failure (Limatius, 2017).

In the data for the present study, two British celebrities were mentioned often because of their connections to and collaborations with the plus-size fashion industry: singer-songwriter Claire Richards and reality TV personality Gemma Collins. Both women were criticized by the bloggers, and their right to represent plus-size women in the public eye was questioned. However, different bloggers and commenters also had differing opinions about both Richards and Collins, which resulted in in-group debates.

A post by Blogger G that goes into detail about the role of celebrity collaborations in the plus-size fashion industry depicts Collins in a clearly negative light – not as an ally to plus-size women, but as someone who benefits from the fat acceptance and body positivity movements financially, and intentionally uses the movements to her personal advantage:

(6) **Gemma Collins and the likes of Gemma Collins** […] are courted, rightly or wrongly, by plus-size brands **to sell us, the plus size consumer, a product**. Gemma has been in the news again (I don't think there's a day she isn't) and surprise, surprise, **this week, she doesn't like being fat** (someone has been offered a fitness DVD deal) […] Collins, just like everyone on this planet, has the right to lose weight, **that is 100% her choice** […]. That is not what I have an issue with. **What I do have a problem with is the women who tout themselves as plus-size poster girls, the saviours of the fashion-challenged fatties, but who are constantly yo-yoing their opinions**. (Blogger G)

In her criticism of Collins in (6), Blogger G heavily underlines the fact that for her, the problem is not plus-size celebrities losing weight or changing their bodies, but rather the hypocrisy of working with a plus-size clothing brand and, shortly after, verbally abusing their previously plus-size bodies. As we saw earlier in example (3), for some of the bloggers,

celebrities simply losing weight *is* an issue – Blogger G is most likely aware of these attitudes and wants to ensure that her message is not misinterpreted as such an opinion. While Collins' self-criticism and 'yo-yoing' opinions could be viewed as her personal struggles, her position as a public figure and the fact that she earns money from verbalizing these struggles is seen as problematic by Blogger G. Gemma Collins – as well as other celebrities who are not named, but simply referred to as 'the likes of Gemma Collins' – thus appear as lacking in solidarity towards other plus-size women. In Blogger G's view, a celebrity who profits from the diet industry and seemingly only embraces being plus-size when it is financially beneficial for them to do so, is not a suitable 'representative' of the body positivity movement, nor plus-size women in general.

However, there were also bloggers in the data who found Collins to be a relatable, positive role model. Blogger J openly admired both Collins' fashion taste and her personality, even going as far as referring to her as an 'icon' for plus-size women:

(7)   The one character I grew to love throughout [The Only Way Is Essex] was **the lovely Gemma**. Not only was she a plus-size lady – I loved her attitude, her feisty side and generally thought that me and her would get on like a house on fire […] It was music to my ears to hear that Gemma […] created a plus size fashion range. […] I love how Gemma herself wears and models the clothing. **For me she is an amazing icon for plus-size ladies**. I love her fashion line, her attitude, and **I think she's truly beautiful**. (Blogger J)

Blogger J's description of Collins in (7) has similarities to the way Blogger A talked about Jennifer Lawrence in (1). Collins is 'not only' a plus-size woman; she is someone who other women can relate to, and – like Lawrence – a person that one could imagine having a good time with. While Collins embodies a beautiful, fashionable plus-size celebrity for Blogger J, features independent of size also contribute to making her 'an icon'.

Blogger G, meanwhile, contrasted Collins' behaviour with another celebrity, Claire Richards, whose clothing collection she had previously discussed:

(8)   Claire Richards **has obviously lost weight** since she started her range for Fashion World **which is fair enough, her body, her choice, but what she hasn't done** […] **is publicly declare her old fat body as disgusting or gross**. […] What Gemma Collins needs to realise is that **every time she says her size 22 body is disgusting, she calls every other woman of that size or larger, disgusting.** For those who aren't confident, this could be a massive blow to their self-esteem. (Blogger G)

From Blogger G's perspective, Richards has more of a right to promote plus-size fashion than Collins, as she has not (to the blogger's knowledge) talked negatively about her

formerly larger body. Again, she underlines the fact that weight loss is an individual's personal choice and – in accordance with the body positivity movement – Richards is free to do as she wants regarding her weight. The important difference between Collins and Richards here is the way they *talk* about their fluctuating size, and, considering their public platforms, the possible effects that this talk has on their plus-size followers' well-being.

There were several posts about Claire Richards and her plus-size fashion collaboration with Fashion World in the data, and none of them were overly critical of Richards. She, unlike Collins, had seemingly succeeded in maintaining solidarity to the community, despite the changes to her own body. The difference in the bloggers responses might stem from the two celebrities backgrounds – while Richards has also participated in reality TV programs such as Celebrity Big Brother, her original career as a pop singer qualifies her as a 'traditional' celebrity in Abidin's (2018, p. 3) terms. Because of her status as a popstar, Richards is expected to have a more distant relationship with her audience, which leads to lower expectations in terms of authenticity. Collins, on the other hand, belongs firmly to the reality TV celebrity category, which creates an expectation for her, as an 'ordinary' plus-size woman, to be more relatable and authentic.

However, it should be noted that even though the actual blog entries about Richards had an overall positive tone, there were comments on Blogger G's post on Collins that criticized Richards as well:

(9)   I also think Claire Richards is a **hypocrite** (I am no fan of Gemma Collins). […] One minute, [the celebrities] are 'learning to live with the fact that they will never be thin', then the next time you hear from them (usually when they have been on Big Brother, Big Reunion, etc. and **therefore getting a big cheque**), they […] '**don't want to be unhealthy**' and want to lose the weight AND SURPRISE, SURPRISE, they get paid for being the spokesperson for a weight-loss company. (Commenter in Blogger G's post)

In example (9) the commenter challenges Blogger G's views by stating that Richards, just like Collins, has profited monetarily first from gaining weight (and subsequently designing a plus-size clothing line) and then again from losing weight. Similar to Blogger G, however, the commenter's issue here does not seem to be the celebrities changing their bodies, but rather the fact that they have used these changes to their financial advantage. The commenter also brings up the use of medicalized discourse in weight loss talk; while not necessarily a direct equivalent of labelling one's formerly fat body as 'disgusting', due to the innate fatphobia of the 'obesity epidemic' discourse (Cooper, 2016), celebrities stating they lost weight in order to be healthy can also be viewed as problematic.

Who, then, has the voice in this community, besides the bloggers themselves? While celebrity culture is constantly changing and new voices are added to the discussion, in my data the requirements of *authenticity* and *activism* appeared to be most important. Plus-

size celebrities who 'use their fame for good', such as publicly working towards the acceptance of both fat people and other marginalized groups, were less likely to be subjected to controversy and criticism. For example, Blogger H described singer Mary Lambert as a 'pioneer' for diversity, referring to her support of LGBTQ+ minorities. Blogger K, on the other hand, praised plus-size model Tess Holliday (formerly known as Tess Munster), who she named as her 'inspiration':

(10) She is a beautiful, confident woman, who also **has a great personality and is down to earth.** I love […] participating in the **#effyourbeautystandards movement that she created**. Tess may be a bit of a celeb, […] but she has time to be a wonderful mother, partner and friend, as well as spending time **supporting other people on their size acceptance journey**. (Blogger K)

Blogger K's reasoning for liking Tess Holliday in (10) has similarities to both what Blogger J says about Gemma Collins in (7) and what Blogger A says about Jennifer Lawrence in (1). All three women are described as in some way relatable, and their personalities are considered attractive. However, based on Blogger K's account, Holliday seems to exude solidarity towards other fat or plus-size women, whereas Collins – and, to an extent, Richards – are considered lacking in this department (and Lawrence is exempt from the responsibility, as she is not a part of the plus-size community, nor an active figure in the plus-size fashion market). Holliday is given the credentials of participating in activism due to the existence of her self-created social media movement that resists traditional beauty standards, and she is depicted as supportive of other women.[6] While Holliday quite certainly also benefits from her activities financially, her community-driven approach is more palatable than Collins' narrative, which – based on the bloggers' descriptions – seems more focused on her personal struggles as a plus-size woman, and the monetization of these struggles.

Criticizing mainstream media through blogging

Overall, the bloggers included in the data for the present study were critical of the mainstream media. While some bloggers claimed they were not particularly interested in celebrity culture, these claims were often hedges followed by some type of commentary on said topic – thus, even those bloggers who 'did not care' often ended up discussing news related to celebrity culture, especially when it concerned celebrity women and their bodies. Others were more straightforward in their criticism:

(11) There are magazine articles where **women are praised for losing 10 pounds as if they've given birth to the next Jesus,** and they also bring the hammer down on any celebrity who is not doing whatever it takes […] **to fit in with this bullshit, sexist, male-dominated perspective**. […] The message is there, even though unspoken: Look at this woman who **dares**

to be larger than a size 6. See how **worthless** she is? Then, she'll diet, and they'll print a photo of her looking slimmer, and **suddenly they're full of praise for her**. (Blogger D)

In (11), Blogger D calls out print media for the exact reason discussed by Hartley (2001, p. 65) more than a decade earlier: treating women as public property and measuring women's worth by their (presumed) desirability in men's eyes. Hartley (2001, pp. 62-67) emphasizes the role of the *male gaze* in fatphobia – according to her, 'internalized fat-oppressive attitudes are more often present in persons of either sex who want to be found attractive by men' (p. 67). Blogger D also connects fat-shaming in the media to sexism, describing the problem as a 'male-dominated perspective.' In the extract in (11), the use of the pronoun 'they' – those who praise celebrity women who loses weight – likely refers to the media in general, but considering the blogger's earlier emphasis on sexism, we can also interpret that 'they' are viewing these women through the male gaze.

Although the mainstream media was criticized by the bloggers on a general level, one media outlet was perceived as particularly offending towards women, especially plus-size women. The *Daily Mail* was mentioned in the data multiple times due to its problematic presentation of female celebrities. Blogger D, for example, compared the publication to 'the twatty bloke outside the pub who says 'look at the size of THAT!' as I walk by.' Meanwhile, Blogger A provided an interesting commentary to the topic in a blog post where she presents a 'profile' of 'the *Daily Mail* reader', written satirically in the style of a bird-watching guide, with sub-headings such as 'Body' and 'Facial features.'

(12) ... I want to look like a *Daily Mail* reader. Specifically, the reader who writes comments. Now, **the elusive *Daily Mail* reader has never been seen out in the open. From the comments made, however, we can begin to deduce what they must look like**. (Blogger A)

In (12), Blogger A describes the *Daily Mail* reader as an 'elusive' creature that has 'never been seen out in the open.' This can be interpreted as a reference to the relative anonymity of online communication; from behind a keyboard, a pseudonym and a nondescript profile photo, it is possible for us to say almost anything without bearing the responsibility of our words. Due to their invisibility, the *Daily Mail* reader is safe from scrutiny, yet free to scrutinize others. In (13), Blogger A goes on to list the features that characterize both the *Daily Mail* reader's face and body, using discursive strategies reminiscent of nature documentaries:

(13) **Facial Features**: Considering the various comments made regarding features such as '**huge nose**', '**needs plastic surgery**', '**would need a bag over their head to be attractive**' '**ugly**', '**disgusting to look at**', and so on, it can only be deduced that the *Daily Mail* reader has **perfect features**.

However, their features are **also not *too* perfect**, so that they can't be described by the following: '**too bloody good-looking for their own good**', '**vain**' or '**must be a slut**'. <u>Body</u>: Based on their comments, it is impossible to accurately guess the size or weight of a *Daily Mail* reader, other than the fact that it is '**just right**'. Therefore, one cannot say the following things about a *Daily Mail* reader's body: '**you need to eat more pies, love**', '**fetch a harpoon**' ,'**must have had a boob job**' […] or '**a bad role model**.' However, as with the facial features, we must note that the *Daily Mail* reader's body **cannot be so perfect as for them to be described as 'a whore', 'vain' […] or someone who 'must have had plastic surgery**'. (Blogger A)

Blogger A's description of the *Daily Mail* reader cleverly demonstrates the 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' position that (celebrity) women often find themselves in when it comes to the media. While a plus-size celebrity is targeted for her weight ('fetch a harpoon'), a slim celebrity is condescendingly told to 'eat more pies.' However, in contrast to Blogger D's comparison to the 'bloke outside the pub', Blogger A's *Daily Mail* reader is not gendered: she consistently refers to the 'person' she is describing in a non-gendered way, either by using the pronoun 'they' or by repeating the subject's name ('the *Daily Mail* reader'). However, one might even assume the *Daily Mail* reader's gender to be female in this case, as their behaviour is contrasted with negatively presented behaviours that are clearly gendered and linked to women in particular. The celebrity women described by the Daily Mail reader can be 'sluts' or 'whores' and they 'must have had a boob job' – by contrast, the *Daily Mail* reader is someone whose appearance is 'just right' and who could never be accused of such behaviours.

Interestingly, Blogger A also brings up the issue of celebrities being judged for being 'too beautiful', and thus labelled as 'vain' or attention-seeking. In the eyes of the *Daily Mail* reader, it seems that women truly cannot 'get it right' (Tseëlon, 1995, p. 16). In concluding her blog post, Blogger A ends with a deduction that, in fact, the *Daily Mail* reader looks like 'everyone else'; again, the critic's position as someone nondescript and invisible is highlighted. This is an interesting conclusion since in the past decade, the line between 'traditional' media and social media has become considerably blurred. Even though online interaction has resulted in the spread of both the body positivity and the fat acceptance movements, it has also resulted in the fact that on digital platforms, now more than ever, (celebrity) women's bodies are 'public property' (Hartley, 2001, p. 65), and anyone with a smartphone and an internet connection is granted the permission to evaluate them.

Conclusion
The results of this study reveal that plus-size fashion bloggers identify celebrities as their 'role models', or otherwise voice their admiration for them, for a variety of reasons. For some of the bloggers, celebrities are mainly a source of fashion inspiration. In such cases,

being inspired by the celebrity does not necessarily have any connection to the celebrity's size or weight. However, several plus-size celebrity roles models were also mentioned in the data, and some bloggers also addressed the fact that they wanted more plus-size women in the public eye.

As for those plus-size celebrities who already *were* in the public eye, the concepts of authenticity, communality and activism appeared to be important factors in deciding whether the celebrity could be considered a suitable 'representative' of the plus-size and body positive communities. Celebrities who promoted the body positivity agenda or were involved in designing and marketing plus-size fashion were constructed as having 'right' and 'wrong' kinds of motivations for their actions. The case of Gemma Collins is of particular interest here – while Blogger J praised Collins and found her relatable, other bloggers and commenters criticized her because she benefited monetarily from both being plus-size and from her attempts of trying to be 'less' plus-size. The main criticism revolved around the issues of authenticity (as regards to the body positivity agenda), and the idea of not 'using one's fame for good.' Because of her 'yo-yoing' opinions on her size, Collins was not considered a good role model, nor a good 'representative' for the plus-size fashion industry. She was portrayed as someone who shamelessly used this industry for her own benefit, at the same time promoting the diet culture that is opposed by the body positivity movement.

The discussion around Collins is also interesting because the experience of 'yo-yoing' between feeling good in one's body and wanting to change that body is certainly not uncommon among plus-size women – or women in general, considering the fact in contemporary Western society, 'virtually every woman learns to hate her body, regardless of her size' (Hartley, 2001, p. 64). Gemma Collins promoting body positivity one week and a weight loss product the next could also be interpreted as a relatable struggle of a woman trying to come to terms with her size and, as we saw in other examples discussing Tess Holliday and Jennifer Lawrence, relatability is usually considered a positive trait for a celebrity to possess. However, most bloggers still viewed Collins' actions as a calculated scheme to make profit from the plus-size market. I suggest that this type of discourse on plus-size celebrities is one part of a broader issue within both plus-size fashion blogging and the body positivity movement: a conflict between *activism-based* body positivity or fat acceptance, and *commercially motivated* body positive ventures that have affiliations to brands and products (see Limatius, 2019b).

While there were fewer direct links between feminism and fatness in the discussions of celebrity role models than initially expected, the majority of the bloggers in the data appeared to admire celebrity women who challenged societal gender boundaries. Embracing traditionally 'masculine' features or fashions, as well as dressing or behaving in a way that was not considered socially 'acceptable' for women (especially women beyond a certain size or age) were praised and interpreted as feminist acts by the bloggers.

Issues of gender politics and sexism were most apparent in the bloggers' criticism of the mainstream media. The data contained several examples on the topic, including discussions on the campaign to ban the *Sun*'s 'page three girls'[7] as well as the heavy

criticism directed towards the *Daily Mail* and its approach to discussing celebrity women's appearance. As mentioned in the previous section, these discussions also tie in with a broader issue of anonymous commenting and hate speech online (O'Regan, 2018).

Although the body positivity movement appears as a step in the right direction when it comes to its calls for diversity in media representation, I am in agreement with Sastre's (2014) statement that currently, the movement is not truly 'radical.' While helpful and empowering for many people with marginalized bodies, the body positivity movement continues to be dominated by white cis-gendered women and focuses on the celebration of *appearance* – the idea that 'all bodies are beautiful' – rather than efforts to prevent societal marginalization based on bodily features. As the movement gains more and more visibility online, further studies are needed to further examine body positivity's true potential in changing the public discourse on appearance, size and gender.

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Notes:

[1] As the bloggers I studied use 'plus-size fashion blog/blogger' more frequently than 'fatshion/fatshionista blog/blogger', I have also decided to use the former. However, I use both 'plus-size' and 'fat' as descriptors for the participants in the article. Like the bloggers, I use 'fat' as a descriptor with no negative intent.

[2] 'Straight' sizes are women's clothing sizes that are not considered 'plus' (e.g. women's UK sizes smaller than 16/18).

[3] Changes to textual examples include the following: changing the word order within a clause, correcting misspellings, deleting parts of paragraphs that were not topically relevant (this is indicated with ellipsis in the examples), and using synonyms in cases where the word choice was not considered significant in terms of meaning. An example: "I don't usually post this kind of content" could be changed to "Usually, I don't post this type of content".

[4] It is worth noting that the apparent conflict between 'being body positive' and 'being on a diet' is not merely an issue that concerns the celebrity representation of plus-size women. When I analyzed plus-size fashion bloggers' weight loss discourse in a previous study (Limatius, 2017), several bloggers expressed fear and apprehension over 'coming out' as a person on a diet and/or attempting to lose weight, because they were afraid of the community's rejection.

[5] As Yeshua-Katz (2015, p. 1348) describes it, the Pro-Ana movement is typically defined as rejecting 'anorexia as a mental illness', instead promoting as a 'lifestyle' – however, in reality the movement is more complex and its members have multiple standpoints when it comes to defining anorexia.

[6] On January 23, 2020, the #effyourbeautystandards hashtag on Instagram had (so far) been tagged in over 4.2 million posts. Source:
https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/effyourbeautystandards/.

[7] The scope of this study, unfortunately, did not allow me to go into detail on all the issues regarding sexism and the media that were discussed in the data.