

Taking the Social Justice Fight to the Cloud: Social Media and Body Positivity

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Fat. The word has a negative, vitriolic meaning, but there are body positivity activists trying to reclaim the word as a descriptor rather than derogatory term. People in larger bodies are often ostracized, not allowed to fully participate in society, making this a social justice issue. Social media are becoming primary tools people use to shape and change discourse that frames fat bodies as lesser members of society or a problem to be controlled (think the “obesity epidemic”). This conceptual article details *how* social media platforms can be used to change the dominant narrative, pushing the scholarship beyond realizing that social media are being used for this change-related purpose. Using Sementelli’s map of the individual, I highlight some Instagram accounts promoting either the dominant weight loss narrative or a body positive one, showing how people can use their power (or reclaim it) to shape discourse related to social justice and body positivity.

Keywords: body positivity, critical theory, fat activism

Lizzo is an American rapper and classically trained flautist who soared to popularity in 2019 with her anthems about self-acceptance and body positivity. She regularly shares her mental health struggles on her social media feeds, along with photos and videos appreciating her larger body and self-confidence (Carlin, 2019). In an interview with *Essence* magazine, Lizzo explains that she posts seemingly risqué photos of herself not to gain shares or likes but because she is comfortable in her skin and wants to normalize bigger bodies of all kinds, but especially Black women (Obell, 2019). As Obell writes (2019, para. 3, emphasis added):

The opportunities that are finally meeting Lizzo’s preparation are a result of divine timing by way of the *social media age* and our love for celebrities who somehow manage to find the balance between being uncensored and socially conscious online without coming off as annoying oversharing know-it-alls. Lizzo has mastered the art. “I think that people love authenticity and they love to see people truly enjoying themselves,” she says. “My social media is very self-serving. I do it for me. Even if I have 500 followers and no likes, I can still go on tour selling my show out and be fine. And I always wanna kind of keep it that way—like *my social media is something that needs me more than I need it.*”

She is one example of someone using social media as a sort of emancipatory platform, a mechanism to share a story without a third party retelling the narrative. People applaud the unfiltered nature of social media, while at the same time using digital filters to share ostensibly perfect photos or swoon-worthy adventures. Research is mixed about the ways social media affect mental health (Aalbers, McNally, Heeren, de Wit, & Fried, 2019; Jelenchick, Eickhoff, & Moreno, 2013), but the digital tools are mechanisms for people to tell their stories and build communities.

The purpose of this conceptual article is to examine the social justice ties between social media and fat bodies in society. Using Sementelli's (2012) map of the individual, I show the tension between the physical and digital worlds when it comes to social justice issues, specifically looking at Instagram accounts related to body positivity (or not). Sementelli's (2012) map was meant for the physical world, so I extend its application into the digital space by choosing some exemplar Instagram accounts to highlight how people who might not find power in the physical world can use digital spaces to create their own sense of self-worth. In other words, when the physical world is cruel to fat bodies, people can reclaim their power in a digital realm by controlling the content and narrative.

Controlling fat bodies becomes an interesting, and often expensive, public-private-nonprofit partnership—a struggle supposedly so vast it rises to the level of a wicked problem. But how is this a public administration concern? Because government, nonprofits and various PPPs spend billions of dollars tackling the “problem.” One example is passing legislation punishing consumption of certain types of foods. Cities throughout the U.S. are adopting soda taxes to curb drinks labeled “bad” for one’s health. Bird (2019) notes that taxes might range from 1–2 cents per ounce, but that adds up quickly when buying a 12-pack of soda. The tax is usually imposed on the distribution companies that then pass it along to retailers, then on to consumers (Bird, 2019). Bloomberg Philanthropies launched a \$130 million effort to curb worldwide obesity by supporting a soda tax, promoting healthy lunches, and developing obesity prevention materials (Bloomberg Philanthropies, 2019). Despite the spending, the Congressional Budget Office concluded many U.S. federal obesity-related programs do not produce viable results, as sometimes the major beneficiaries are pharmaceutical corporations pushing weight loss drugs (Duchovny, 2015).

My goal here is not to wade into the debates about obesity and health. Instead, I draw attention to the ways in which governments and people in general who disparage fat bodies are exacerbating a social justice issue—and how social media can emancipate those ostracized or othered from this oppression to live fuller lives. In a society that feeds on what they see in pop culture, social media are showing those who might be uncomfortable with fat bodies that people can live full, happy lives while not fitting in with a certain social stereotype.

Social media are vital sites where social justice fights are happening in response to the so-called¹ obesity epidemic, where people focus on body positivity and fat acceptance instead (Lupton, 2017). It is a rally against policies, practices, and ethical strategies trying to other people in this way. Public administration must respond to equity concerns of all kinds, stopping the prioritization of only efficiency and effectiveness and including justice, fairness and equity (Blessett, 2018; McCandless & Ronquillo, 2019), and this article is one step to highlight how people can take back power from an administrative state that constantly shames bodies not falling into some hegemonic norm.

THE SOCIAL JUSTICE CONCERNS FOR FAT BODIES

A natural question is this: how is fatness a social justice issue? Friedman, Rice, and Rinaldi (2019) explore this question in their new book, arguing fatness and keeping it at bay has roots in colonialism and structures of oppression. Hegemonic neoliberal narratives about thinness perpetuate injustices against fat people, making them less-than-full participants in society, seeking solace perhaps in digital spaces where they can be themselves. Adding an intersectional lens only exacerbates this problem (Friedman et al., 2019). Robinson (2019) notes in early American colonial periods, depictions of the new land often included images of a supple, naked woman just waiting to be conquered and tamed. This holds still today in different forms in popular media, whereby softer bodies need to be fixed and tamed.

One might wonder why I am using the word fat here. Indeed, in the age of body positivity and fat acceptance, advocates are trying to remove the stigma associated with the word. The fat acceptance movement in the U.S. and Canada traces to the 1950s and borrows strategies from other social justice movements such as civil rights, feminist thought, and gay rights (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance is the oldest organization of its kind in the U.S. (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015) and is a nonprofit dedicated to including fat bodies in the world in meaningful ways (NAAFA, 2019). Their Instagram feed includes the #EqualityatEverySize hashtag and features photos of people embracing their larger bodies. The acronym and name were meant to draw associations between the fat acceptance organization at the NAACP.

Trying to “fix” fat bodies is also source of entertainment in Western culture. Sender and Sullivan (2008) analyze television shows such as *The Biggest Loser* and *What Not to Wear*. Wildly popular, *The Biggest Loser*, which recently returned to television in 2019, highlights individuals medically classified as morbidly obese, taking them to doctors who show them through scans and other tests their likelihood of dying from their health problems. *What Not to Wear* depicted women and men in all kinds of bodies how to dress, but often would give larger-bodied women advice about cuts and patterns to hide their tummies or arms. Reality television in this sense is a spectator sport, where viewers watch and pick a favorite to win or take notes for themselves if they want clothes that flatter a problem area. This co-creative investment is seen as a manifestation of the surveillance state and Foucauldian governmentality (Andrejevic, 2004), encouraging people to monitor the contestants and participants on the shows that do work that government agencies presumably cannot (like control fat bodies).

In pop culture, especially television scripted series, fat bodies are rarely shown and if they are, they are usually men and/or the butt of a joke (White, Brown, & Ginsburg, 1999). Men often desire thin women, citing physical attractiveness as a top quality in picking a partner, essentially furthering the notion that fat bodies are not desirable so cannot be shown in pop culture (Smith, Waldorf, & Trembath, 1990). Indeed, reality TV programming such as *The Biggest Loser*, *Revenge Body* and others show that fat bodies are something to revile and change at the pleasure of others (Klos et al., 2015).

These shows failed to change how people perceive fat bodies, with respondents clinging to American ideals of self-control and individual responsibility for being fat, leaving out connections between fatness and poverty and access to things such as fresh fruits and vegetables, or safe recreation spaces (Sender & Sullivan, 2008). Deeply enmeshed, then, with rising

obesity rates are government and nonprofit actions (and inactions) that usually punish fat bodies rather than examining and removing underlying social, political, racist, and economic constraints. But government intervention into weight has its problems, such as the occurrence of externalities, insurance regulation, access to information about health and wellness, and ever-changing information (McCormick & Stone, 2007).

A Catch-22 is that fatness is often seen as an individual responsibility or failing, as Sender and Sullivan (2008) confirmed, so government intervention might be seen as overreach (McCormick & Stone, 2007). Elliott (2007) explains in an American context, a healthy body traces to de Tocqueville's observation that strong, younger bodies can work to sustain the new democracy, and slothful bodies are an antithesis to this growth. In Canada, the same traces to World War II, when the government needed to recruit healthy men to fight (Elliott, 2007). The same occurred in the US when the so-called obesity epidemic continues to make it difficult to recruit soldiers (Myers, 2018). Weight discrimination often makes people feel less of a full participant in civil society, having to navigate spaces inaccessible to people in larger bodies (Elliott, 2007). Controlling these bodies falls under Foucault's biopolitics regime.

Weight-related medical programs and social policies represent a shift from seeing weight as an individual concern to one that rises to the level of national and international reform, even elevated to a "war on fat" in the late 1990s (Greenhalgh, 2012). Greenhalgh (2012) argues that this shift reflects biopolitical governance rather than weight management; biopolitical governance brings issues of control, stigma, othering, and power. People become so obsessed with fitting into the thin ideal, the norm that weight obsession is becoming "a trend with implications for larger issues of social suffering and social justice" (p. 473). Fat stigma often is closely associated with race, class, and a person's right to belong (Farrell, 2011).

In their study, Puhl, Andreyeva, and Brownell (2008) found weight discrimination is a social justice concern because people continue to be bullied, discriminated against, and left out from fully participating in civil society. "If this form of prejudice continues without sanction or interventions to shift societal attitudes, weight bias will likely remain socially acceptable and will harm future generations of overweight children and adults" (Puhl, Andreyeva, & Brownell, p. 2008). Their findings show that women are often subjected more to height and weight discrimination than men, and African American men and women were more stigmatized compared to white counterparts. Groups often internalized this weight stigma differently, with Hispanic women and black men turning toward more eating to find comfort (Himmelstein, Puhl, & Quinn, 2017), thus perpetuating the othering of those not within the social norm (Greenhalgh, 2012).

Specifically, research examines ties between fat bias and employment, wages, education, romantic relationships, and mental health (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012). Treatment providers tended to rate their overweight patients more negatively when compared to the so-called normal weight patients (Young & Powell, 1985). This means people with fat might not receive equitable treatment and often are told to lose weight to fix what ails them.

Given the social justice consequences of fatness, people have taken to reclaiming the term (Saguy & Ward, 2011). People "coming out" as fat is a response to fatphobia, which "evokes the fear and hatred that visible body fat on oneself or on others provokes for many in the contemporary United States" (p. 54). Fatness is viewed as something that needs correcting

and is seen as a drain on government resources, hence, people come out and embrace the term fat to reclaim their place as full members of society. Thus weight stigma and its consequences rises to the level of a social justice concern given the repeated, often acceptable bullying and othering of fat bodies and the consequences of such sustained, systemic attitudes, policies, and public spaces (Nutter et al., 2016).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE SPACES RELATED TO BODY POSITIVITY

Today, social media are ever present in our lives. We use the tools to stay connected, to generate viral content, and to promote preferred policies and political preferences—to name a few uses (Parker & Bozeman, 2018). Social media can also create spaces for meaningful micro-encounters with users from across the globe (Zavattaro & Brainard, 2019). Specifically, here I focus on how social media and online spaces were the primary platforms for the body positive movement. The body positive and fat acceptance movements are closely linked, so I use body positivity given it seems to be the chosen term in online spaces—though any line in the sand is artificial at best (Sastre, 2014). Body positivity refers to:

any message, visual or written, that challenges dominant ways of viewing the physical body in accordance with beauty ideals and encourages the reclaiming of embodiment and control over one's self-image. Body positivity encompasses any individual or movement actions which aim to denounce the societal influences and construction of body norms, and instead promotes self-love and acceptance of bodies of any shape, size, or appearance; including rolls, dimples, cellulite, acne, hairy bodies, bleeding bodies, fat bodies, thin bodies, and (dis) abled bodies (Cwynar-Horta, 2016, p. 38).

There was no one person or website that launched the body-positive movement; instead, it was a series of individuals using new online engagement mechanisms to tell their own stories (Sastre, 2014). Social media culture dating back to the days of MySpace encouraged body performances within thin-privileged social norms, telling people to take “MySpace Angle” pictures that made you appear taller and especially skinnier (Sastre, 2014). Online spaces, then, became ripe for deception (Donath, 1999)—but deception that made a person feel part of the social norm of thinness. Put simply: people purposefully hid their bodies to appear more attractive, thin, and therefore socially acceptable when using early social media sites (Sessions, 2009). Social media allowed for push back against this normativity, and once the body positivity movement went mainstream, major corporations such as Dove and entertainers such as Lizzo and Lady Gaga emphasized “real” women (Murray, 2013).²

Social media are key tools fat acceptance and body positive advocates use to challenge the neoliberal, hegemonic discourse around health (thinness), and women tend to occupy these digital spaces more frequently than men because women are disproportionately affected by weight stigma (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012). Social media allow for people to showcase fat bodies, making themselves visible and part of the discourse (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). In this visible way, people can “come out” as fat, hearkening to LGBTQ people coming out (Saguy & Ward, 2011), and social media are places where people

can push back against dominant public values that might be exclusionary (Parker & Bozeman, 2018).

With the crossover of coming out narratives, it should be noted the body positive movement is often intersectional (Saguy & Ward, 2011). For example, White (2014) synthesizes fat activist literature and social media with that of transgender identity, using their own experiences on the gender spectrum. Jones (2015) similarly shares his story of body image in the queer community, arguing that queer theory can “provid[e] new ways to think about how sexuality intersects with other identities in relation to power and how those differences are experienced” (p. 773). Gay male culture often privileges socio-normalized bodies, so being thin is viewed as more desirable than someone who identifies, as Santoro (2012) shares in his story, as a bear—a gay male in a larger body.

With social media, users control the content they post. Traditional media often depicts thin bodies as the norm, and anything outside of that is less worthy of consideration for full inclusion in society (Lupton, 2017). This technology, though, works both ways. People can download apps to smart phones that link to digital scales, allowing for instantaneous readings of body weight and other weight-related metrics. Conversely, social media allow for people to control their personal narratives to showcase body positivity. “Contemporary digital media and devices provide many diverse spaces for people to actively represent themselves, share their body metrics and experiences and find likeminded others for support, advice, friendship, or political activism” (Lupton, 2017, p. 120).

The risk is we become wed to these technologies. For example, wearable fitness trackers are signs that we are dedicated to health and wellness, and we can even share our step goals or participate with friends in fitness challenges (Fotopoulou & O’Riordan, 2017). This is health as performance. Likewise, posting body positive images on social media can also feed into a neoliberal culture that encourages consuming of all bodies (Saguy & Ward, 2011). Influencers might feel compelled to constantly post content promoting body positivity that it becomes more about fulfilling what *others* might need rather than their own body positive goals. A person might want likes or clicks as a proxy toward their own self-worth if the platforms get away from them (Gerlitz & Lury, 2014).

Creating Community and Kinship in Digital Space

With social media, finding, creating, and building a supportive community becomes a bit easier when hashtags are searchable, and certain people become the faces of some movements. One activist noted using Instagram to build and maintain a fat activist community because she finds it less confrontational than other platforms (McGregor, 2017).

Because fat bodies are often excluded from full participation in public and private life, people turn to online spaces where they can assert their rights to exist (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). Through blogs and social media, fat activists try to showcase they do things like those in thinner bodies—eat, shop, exercise, have sex. Somehow, though, there is a taboo when fat people engage in these seemingly mundane activities (Hannä & Kyrölä, 2019), so online spaces seek to normalize these things for those identifying as community members and those wanting to learn more. Effective engagement usually involves emotional appeals that allow for dialogic exchange and shared experiences.

Take for instance Katie Sturino, a blogger and body positive activist known for starting the #MakeMySize movement. She goes to mainstream stores and tries on clothing, sharing if the store has sizes that fit her body. Fashion companies take note, and since her movement and others, mainstream brands, like Nike for instance, have started becoming more size inclusive. This happens when there is enough movement online through these communities that force change, though thinness is still the ideal when it comes to advertising and marketing (D’Alessandro & Chitty, 2011).

Though like most things, the formation of online communities is not without difficulty. As Maleo-Erwin (2011) notes, obesity-related discourse is rooted in Foucauldian thinking regarding controlling bodies, showing what is normal and what is not—and giving rise to fat activist discourses as counternarratives. The fatosphere, then, was a place for like-minded people to bond around their shared experiences, and when someone changes the narrative through weight loss, they risk being ostracized from the community.

MAPPING THE INDIVIDUAL: SOCIAL MEDIA FOR BODY EMANCIPATION FROM PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

That said, social media can be prime tools for how we can as individuals create our own narratives, to push against the stigma and dehumanization that comes with being in a fat body. I rely on Sementelli’s (2012) map of the individual to situate how people can use online spaces to go from a powerless, alienated state to one where they at least feel seen and accepted if not fully powerful, at least in the digital realm. Figure 1 is a redrawing of Sementelli’s

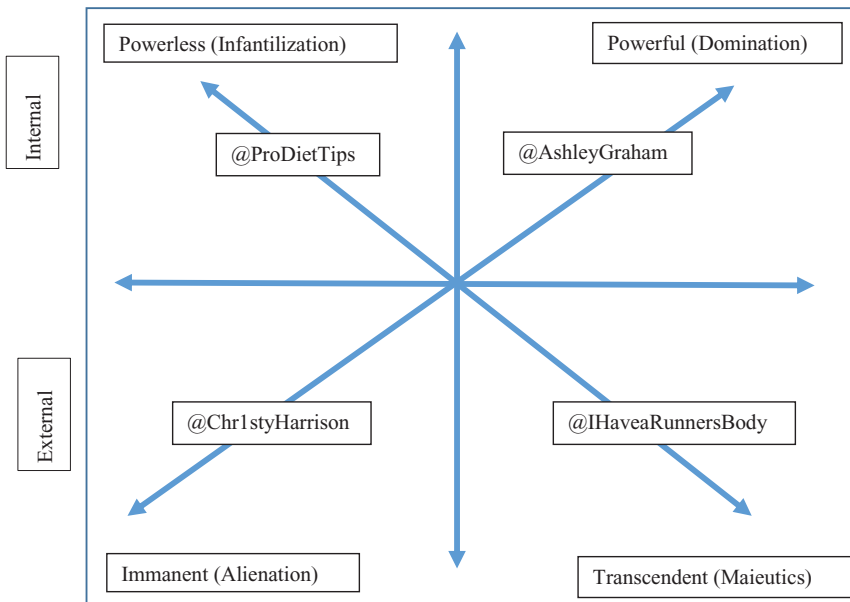


Figure 1. Map of the individual and social media.

(2012) map of the individual. Each section is explained, and I have added example social media accounts and posts in each to showcase how even the same person can move back and forth as Sementelli (2012) intended.

At the core of Sementelli's (2012) model is power, which can come from people themselves or from authority figures. Once people gain power, they can move into a more dominant state, but if they lose power they can move into an alienated state, for instance. According to Sementelli (2012), the middle @KatieSturino line separates those with power from those without, highlighting their inclusion or exclusion from society. @LauraThomasPhD Parker and @iWeigh Bozeman (2018) might call this line the space where people converge or diverge with public values in a social media realm. With this mapping, it becomes easier to see how those not within societal norms of beauty can be excluded from powerful spaces, thus, creating a social justice problem. Infantilized people can be within the dominant system but still lack the power to fully participate, while those who are alienated are both without power and access to the formal system.

Someone in the maieutic state is a facilitator, a change agent usually operating outside of systemic norms of power while at the same time acting to change them. A person in a dominant state might try to exercise power over others, thus creating further infantilization, but they also can use their power for social change. If someone loses that power, they can go back to different states of being (Sementelli, 2012).

Within the map, I have placed Instagram handles based on the content and images shared. To be clear, the goal of using these accounts was to bring Sementelli's (2012) map from the physical into the digital world and back again. Future research can deeply analyze all body positive social media accounts and hashtags looking for narrative traits. Instead, my purpose here is to use some accounts to detail how people can reclaim power and change the narrative in a digital world, perhaps even affecting change in the physical world.

Starting with the upper left corner, we see people showing a powerless state trying to conform to normalized body types. These typically would be accounts and people pushing skinny as the standard, though at some points these users can move throughout the map if they share information about body positivity. For instance, @ProDietTips is an Instagram account with more than 257,000 followers posting information about "good" and "bad" foods, meals for fat loss, intermittent fasting, and ways to control hunger. One post is a graphic showing three meals and a snack for the perfect diet, yet the text reminds people to eat what they want in moderation. The moderation narrative is dominant when telling people how to control their bodies, and the account is a good example of one using typical weight-loss narratives to help people shrink their bodies.

A person who is alienated feels powerless and rests outside of the system (Sementelli, 2012). In that instance, we can place almost anybody positive account there, but I highlight @ChrIstyHarrison and @LauraThomasPhD, given they both advocate a social justice message from outside the confines of the dominant diet culture discourse. Christy Harrison calls herself an anti-diet dietician and has more than 60,600 followers (less than the diet account shared above), and her posts are about diet culture's role in our lives. For example, she writes that "diet culture is literally a system of beliefs that promotes weight loss and denigrates higher weights (among other things)" (Harrison, 2019b). Laura

Thompson runs the London Center for Intuitive Eating and promotes intuitive eating. She has about 102,000 followers.

Harrison frames her anti-diet platform as a social justice push. “On planes and in everyday life, larger-bodied people of color, trans folks, disabled people, and those with other marginalized identities not only have to deal with weight stigma but also racism, transphobia, ableism, and other forms of discrimination that are at play in our society—not to mention lack of access to the spaces and services they need. And multibillion-dollar corporations benefit from excluding far too many people from those spaces and services. This inequity has to stop” (Harrison, 2019c, paras. 13–15).

Thomas advocates much the same message, working from outside the norms. Thomas argues for intuitive eating, where people eat the foods they want and listen to hunger cues without being wrapped in diet culture (Byrne, 2019). Intuitive eating, according to Thomas, gives agency back to the person rather than turning control over to governing bodies or external organizations (Kennedy, 2019). Given both Harrison and Thomas are using similar messaging outside the norms of diet culture, they are still working their way through inherent power structures.

From a position of power within the internal group we can find model Ashley Graham (2019) (@AshleyGraham), who one could argue began in a powerless position as someone outside the norm then worked her way to supermodel status and changing the fashion industry along the way. (The same argument can be made for Lizzo, who was working as a musician for more than a decade before shooting to fame. Now people follow her posts and write news stories about them, whereas before her voice was less powerful.) Others have tried (model Emme was popular in the 1990s and 2000s), but Graham broke through when she landed in the pages and later on the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, being the first plus-size model included as a model within the issue and not just in an advertisement (*Glamour Magazine*, 2016). Before that, Graham gave a widely viewed TED Talk on body positivity in 2016 and continues to use her social media platforms to promote body positivity. According to one profile of Graham (*Glamour Magazine*, 2016, para. 3):

She saw emerging digital platforms as a way to directly connect with women, no “permission” from casting directors or model agents required. She began posting selfies, behind-the-scenes snaps at fashion shoots, and more, many hashtagged the same way: #beautybeyondsize. Women responded (“They were tired of seeing one form of beauty for so long,” she says), and her fan base quickly grew—today she has more than 2.6 million followers on Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter.

In the bottom right, we have an account like @IHaveaRunnersBody, which highlights women and men celebrating all body types while running. The group is trying to push for social change from outside a position of power (even though they have 41,600 followers). Their tagline on Instagram is “If YOU run, YOU have a runner’s body.” The line is meant to fight against the stereotype of long, lean runners. Their posts contain #ihavearunnersbody and feature people in all body sizes running everything from 5K races to marathons around the world. They mostly repost images people share using the above hashtag, so there is an almost therapeutic sense of bringing about change that people deliberately want to share and

see. The major way the people who run this account can find someone to highlight is if that original poster uses the hashtag, indicating a willingness to have their stories shared on this account. It is a collaborative process, then, of creating social change with individuals at the center of the narrative.

Also in the quadrant is account @iWeigh. Both accounts are in this quadrant because they turn over a lot of the content creation to individuals or sharing content someone posts on their personal feed on the @iWeigh feed. Looking through the @iWeigh feed, one will see content from people embracing their bodies in all shapes, sizes, and abilities. According to Sementelli (2012), people in maieutic stages are not part of the ruling elite yet use their power to affect change and solve problems. @iWeigh and @IHaveARunnersBody are digital spaces where people feel empowered to share their own stories while, hopefully, affecting change to popular thin and fitness narratives.

DISCUSSION

This conceptual article sheds light on *how* individuals can use social media platforms to push back against societal, hegemonic norms that often prevent their full inclusion within public (and even private) spaces. In this case, I examine the body positivity movement and associated fat shaming that takes place toward people living in larger bodies. People in bigger bodies are often given messages that they cannot fully participate in society, and public administration plays a role in this rhetoric and practice by imposing weight-related punishments on people including soda taxes or public health campaigns meant to shame people for living in larger bodies—they are part of an “obesity epidemic” that must be stopped.

The government, then, steps in to correct their bodies, not out of concern for their individual health but for society’s seeming embrace of these “bad” practices related to food and wellbeing—Foucault’s governmentality exemplified. Consumer society, whether we like it or not, caters to a certain sector, and oftentimes fat bodies are left out of full societal participation because they cannot participate in this normative transactional relationship because they do not fit an aesthetic ideal (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015).

Moreover, they might be punished with lower wages, and women are suffering weight-related wage loss more so than men, thus inhibiting full economic and social participation within consumer society (Baum & Ford, 2004). With all the pressures in public and private spaces, it is no wonder people might seek solace in a digital world—where a screen, to some extent, protects the person from direct evil gazes and judgment. (To some extent because the comments sections on body positive advocates’ accounts are often wildly disturbing.) For instance, fat activist Virgie Tovar noted: “It’s the embodiment element, it’s the witnessing element. When someone has a body that is like yours, or close enough to yours, and you see it doing things that you’ve been told you cannot do, that bodies like that *do not do*, it becomes part of a body of evidence” (McGregor, 2017, p. 149). People can more readily post body-positive photos online and explain them rather than dealing with hateful looks, say, while running or going to the gym or buying soda.

Using Sementelli’s (2012) map of the individual, along with some example Instagram accounts, highlights how people are reclaiming power and attempting to change the narrative

against larger bodies through fat acceptance and body positivity. People still are either working from within the system (accepted widely for their body) and without (still trying to promote body positivity but not as well known), and social media allows people to create their own networks for support and idea sharing, for examples. No filters are needed, and the message can be as the user intends. Changing narratives is not easy work (Miller, 2018), so the map above highlights how people can change positions at any time while using social media to push for social change.

The digital spaces might be where people in a larger body can fit in and feel like full members of society (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). They seek solace in an online space where they are free from stares and judgment in the physical world. This, though, has its limits in open comments sections and online anonymity that engenders trolling and bullying. Comments sections can be a blessing and curse—spaces of deep hurt that also allow people to correct misinformation related to bodies (Cain, Donaghue, & Ditchburn, 2017). When mainstream media and social media accounts perpetuate a thin ideal, there is often psychological harm done to those who think their bodies fit outside this image (Ravary, Baldwin, & Bartz, 2019).

The utility of this article is that it expands existing literature by showing an application of Sementelli's (2012) map of the individual in a digital realm, as his intention was the physical realm. I also extend its theoretical application by showing the role social media can play in mapping the individual, in using and reclaiming power potentially lost to outside, external sources making people feel (and become) powerless. While I apply the map to look at body positivity, the same could be done using differently abled people, transgender activists, race and economic positionality, for example. Future research could also do the same with more traditional media to see how coverage of the so-called obesity epidemic has evolved over time (if at all). Sementelli's (2012) map was meant to provide an explanation, and I used it here to highlight the social justice trials larger-bodied people face when they are under constant scrutiny from the government and others.

Future research also could delve deeper into this physical-digital divide. We see this manifest already in research into "slacktivism," which posits online activism through clicks and shares somehow diminishes real-world activism, though the relationship is more complex than it appears (Smith, Krishna, & Al-Sinan, 2019). A question, then, arises about how people take their online activism into the real world. (One place to start would be Jameela Jamil, a founder of the @iWeigh Instagram account and body positive activist who uses her celebrity status to push—some might say radically—against diet culture and celebrities who endorse weight-loss products. How do the online and offline merge?) Borrowing from the slacktivism literature and research gives a place to start for this online-offline tension now present in Sementelli's (2012) map.

It might not seem like body positivity and fat acceptance are social justice issues, but when people are in larger bodies they are often physically and emotionally excluded from society, perceived as lazy and out of control (Allison, Basile, & Yuker, 1991). People at the lower end of the socio-economic scale often face structural challenges that could hinder the so-called healthy lifestyle choices and are stigmatized when wanting to take actions to improve overall wellbeing (Campos, Saguy, Ernsberger, Oliver, & Gaesser, 2006), thus, further alienating them from full participation in democratic society.

Kwan (2009) finds that social justice is a primary framing tool to understand the so-called obesity epidemic. A social justice lens promotes holistic health, including socio-structural health,

rather than focusing on larger bodies as medical problems waiting to be solved. Larger-bodied people often do not have access to adequate medical care (many ailments go mistreated because of a prescription to lose weight), and larger individuals might not want to participate in wellness activities where they could be mocked or feel inadequate (Kwan, 2009).

There is a risk that even this critical, fat acceptance discourse could be co-opted and monetized and pushed aside (Cooper, 2010). Cwynar-Horta (2016) argues that in an Instagram age, corporations have hinged on body positive hashtags and influencers to co-opt the movement, commercializing it and moving it further from its intended social justice goals. Though this could be a negative, it also could be positive in that “advocates are *experiencing power* in the sense that they have gained entry into a marketplace where they have control over whether or not they sponsor and endorse brands” (Cwynar-Horta, 2016, p. 53, emphasis added).

While there is a risk for commodification and usurpation, there also is a chance to create a new narrative that embraces body positivity for all individuals no matter the size, color, race, creed, gender identity, and more. Social media are tools where this discussion is taking place and could be pushed further when people, using Sementelli’s (2012) map, reclaim their own power, shove off societal norms, and live authentic lives out loud. Social media are ways people can show their diversity while pushing for inclusion and an expanded definition of representation (Elias, 2013).

NOTES

1. Some might take issue with the qualifier here. Obesity calculations are often based on a measure called Body Mass Index (James, Leach, Kalamara, & Shayeghi, 2001), but as a metric it does not take factors such as age, muscle, and bone density into account, so it often produces false positives (Rothman, 2008). Moreover, structural factors such as access to healthy physical environments such as greenspace (Taylor et al., 2008) and systemic racism (Tull, 1999) are not measured in obesity calculations, thus creating a social equity problem. Harrison (2019a) delves deeply into these problems for those interested in further reading.

2. Now, society is seeing another swing as more plus-sized people are prominent in Hollywood or fashion magazines. If “thick” bodies are in, people in thin bodies might be stigmatized for not fitting in. There is a movement, then, not for body positivity but instead body neutrality, which “aims to change the value placed on beauty in society by encouraging individuals to place less emphasis on their physical appearance altogether” (Cohen, 2020, pp. 4–5).

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