

Columbia College Chicago

Digital Commons @ Columbia College Chicago

---

Cultural Studies Capstone Papers

Thesis & Capstone Collection


---

4-29-2019

## The "Fat Acceptance and Fat Pride Movements" and Consumer Culture: A Critical Intervention on Popular Obesity Discourses

Gabriella Josephine Papas

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cultural\\_studies](https://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cultural_studies)

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

Columbia College Chicago

**The 'Fat Acceptance and Fat Pride Movements' and Consumer Culture:  
A Critical Intervention on Popular Obesity Discourses**

Gabriella Josephine Papas

Senior Capstone: Section 01

Dr. Jaafar Aksikas

April 22, 2019

## Abstract

This project is presented as a critical intervention into the larger debates surrounding the US fat acceptance and fat pride political ‘movements,’ at a historical moment when the country is suffering from a deep obesity epidemic and crisis. At a time of deep concern about increasing healthcare costs and overall societal health, the fact that the dominant discourse among fat activists tends to contradict prevalent positions and findings of contemporary medical research calls for a critical ideological critique of the movements and an interrogation of their rhetoric. In this project, Gabriella Papas’ critique combines concepts from both cultural studies and medical research in order to conduct a critical textual and contextual analysis of these emergent formations. She interrogates the common claims and discourses circulating amongst fat activists and supporters in various popular and social media outlets. In particular, she focuses on the ideas of self-proclaimed fat activists, such as Virgie Tovar, Tess Holliday, and Whitney Way Thore. Papas claims that these activists’ arguments far from advancing the larger feminist goal of undoing the objectification of the female body have instead resulted and assisted in enabling the commodification of a serious health issue for monetary gain.

**Keywords:** Obesity epidemic; obesity; health crisis; fat acceptance; fat pride; healthcare; body; medical; ideology; commodification

## Introduction

As someone who wants to pursue a degree in bariatric medicine after graduating from Columbia College Chicago, I am particularly interested in obesity, the obesity epidemic, and the cultural and political movements surrounding these issues in contemporary American culture surrounding weight. I would like to start by saying that this project will not be about appearances and aesthetics but rather to look at the health and well being of a society that is currently in a rising obesity epidemic. I am in no way implying that someone needs to look a certain way to be loved or to love themselves, rather I want to look at the discourse between what the medical field states about obesity and compare it to what is being said in the fat acceptance and fat pride “movements” furthermore I am going to look at the actual “work” that is being done in those movements.

Have we as a society naturalized unhealthiness? Although the fat acceptance movement calls themselves a movement they are actually considered a micro-political campaign. So what's the difference? A social movement is a structured and organized group that typically tries to empower a group of oppressed people. Social movements look to create specific changes and to resist powerful or advantaged elites around a specific cause. Although the fat pride “movement” may be on its way to being a movement as of now it is still considered a micropolitical campaign which can be defined as a smaller and more targeted political campaign that is not structured or organized but looks to create change. The fat acceptance and fat pride movements in particular look to create change in Western cultures. But is the change that the fat pride and fat acceptance movements actually benefiting our culture? Or is the current wave of these movements ultimately working to commodify the ‘fat body’ through rhetoric that opposes the medical field?

With such opposing views from both sides of the argument it can be hard for someone to know what the truth is or even what the actual motives are for both sides of the argument. With public figures such as the former first lady of the United States Michelle Obama speaking out against obesity with her initiative to solve the childhood obesity issue in the country through her Let's Move! program on one end of the spectrum and plus size supermodels such as Tess Holliday on the other end, it can be hard for the public to know what to believe, especially when most of the information being shared through social media.

### Discourses Around Overweight, Obesity, and Fatness

It is not uncommon for people to equate the words fat, overweight, and obesity to mean the same thing when in reality these words have different connotations and meanings. Overweight and obesity are medical terms that are typically categorized by someone's *Body Mass Index* (BMI). According to a BMI chart, anyone with a BMI of 25.0-29.9 is overweight, 30.34.9 or above is obese, and 35 or over is extremely obese. Fat, on the other hand, is a cultural term that encompasses both overweightness and obesity and typically is describing how a person looks and is therefore more elastic and relative. Although there is no one cultural definition of the word fat for the purposes of this project it will be used to describe someone whose body looks bigger than the prevalent "cultural norm". However, I would argue that in American culture a fat body is a normal/average body considering how many people are overweight and obese. Another important thing to understand about the word fat is that the fat acceptance and fit pride movements are now trying to "take back" the word fat to try and make it an empowering word rather than a "bad" or "dirty" word. In a Huffington Post article titled *8 Women On Why They Are Reclaiming The Word 'Fat'* an intersectional fat activist woman named Rachele

Cateyes stated “I am fat and I love the word fat. With a million reminders a day that fat is the worst thing that can happen to you, it is pretty badass to celebrate the word fat as a term of empowerment. Fat is an insult if you believe being fat is bad. It isn’t some terrible thing that happened to me. It describes my body, community, and activism...”. This instance is one of many examples of how the word fat is used within the fat pride and fat acceptance communities. However this is not at all linked to obesity or being obese which are not just words that are used to describe someone. Obesity is a global medically recognized disease that kills over 500,000 Americans yearly and is the leading cause of death in the U.S. and worldwide according to the CDC.

### The Scientific/Medical Perspective

With the rise of micro-political campaigns such as the fat pride movement, more and more people are entertaining the idea that being obese is not necessarily unhealthy. However, claims like this are refuted by most medical professionals and contemporary medical research. To better understand how obesity affects people medically, here is a short list of ailments that are a symptom of obesity such as hypertension (high blood pressure), high LDL cholesterol, low HDL cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, strokes, osteoarthritis, sleep apnea, certain cancers, mobility loss, body pain, cellulitis, and certain mental disorders. These are just a few of the major issues that can be caused by obesity according to the Center for Disease Control website. This is a limited list but many of the issues that can be caused by obesity can be extremely harmful or even deadly. In the last twenty years, weight has steadily been going up. According to the CDC in 1997, about 19.4% of all adult Americans were obese and as of 2017 39.6% of all adult Americans are obese. This means that in the last twenty years obesity has

more than doubled which contradicts the idea that being obese is normal considering that as a society we have not always had the massive weight problem that we do today.

Obesity is a very real issue that impacts our society in a multitude of ways both physically and financially. Of course, there is a huge number of physical issues that come with obesity that I discussed earlier, but there are also huge financial costs that come with obesity as well. According to the CDC, the United States spent an average of \$147 billion 2008 on obesity alone, with nearly half of that being paid for by Medicare and Medicaid which are both insurance programs paid for by taxpayers. This means that \$73.5 billion of taxpayer money went into paying for obesity alone in-2008. Of course, with the rise in obesity, there is a rise in tax money going towards paying for obesity. In 2018 this number jumped to \$210 billion with around \$105 billion being paid for with tax money. This growing yearly number only accounts for the healthcare costs of obese people and not the other costs that are associated with obesity. Disability is another way in which taxpayers money goes towards obesity. Obese people cannot typically collect disability just from being obese unless they are immobile due to their size, however, obese people can collect disability from the ailments discussed prior such as uncontrolled diabetes or heart disease. Because most people who are on disability due to their obesity are technically getting it for other ailments it is hard to calculate the average costs for how much is being spent on disability for obese people according to the disability benefits website. The disability benefits website also states that “obese people miss an average of 13 times more days of the year than their co-workers of normal body weight” and are more likely to be injured on the job. This can cost a company a lot of money due to the productivity be lower with the absences of their employees.

When talking about whether or not obesity is healthy many fat pride activists bring up the *Metabolically Healthy Obesity* (2009) study which was a short term study that stated that some obese people were technically healthy despite their obesity (as in no diabetes, heart disease, etc). However, what many people fail to realize is that this study has been updated and it concluded that long term there is no such thing as a metabolically healthy obese person. The fat acceptance movement still uses the original study to promote the idea of ‘health at every size’ despite the fact that it has now been debunked. *Obesity and prognosis: Time to forget about metabolically healthy obesity* by Xavier Garcia-Moll (2017) is the follow-up article that has the new updated information about MHO. This article attempts to explain why the metabolically healthy obese person is not what most people think it is. This article showcases how although someone who is obese may be metabolically healthy at the time they are checked by their healthcare provider, it does not mean that they will stay metabolically healthy forever if they continue to be obese or if they continue to gain and fall into morbid obesity. What this article conveys is that the MHO person study only shows that someone is healthy short term and that the studies that suggested that obese people can be metabolically healthy was short term and as they continued to do long term research that most obese people do end up metabolically unhealthy as time goes on. Garcia-Moll states “where this type of obesity is only regarded as a transient phase between a normal metabolically healthy state and an obese metabolically unhealthy one according to the long-term results of the Whitehall study. This new study also looks into the fact that many obese people are not going to the doctor as often and therefore diagnostics are sometimes missed.



## Fat Pride and Fat Acceptance

The history of fat pride goes back as far as 1967 but according to sociologist Charlotte Copper, the development of fat pride can be looked at in waves similar to those in feminism, highlighting the close ties between the two movements. First wave fat pride started during the early part of the 20th century, when obesity was seen as detrimental to the community by means of decreasing human efficiency, and that obese people interfere with labor productivity in the coastal areas of the United States. The second wave the fat pride movement started in the late 1980's and continued until the turn of the century. This wave became more widespread in the USA and started to spread to other countries. The third wave of fat pride became more diverse as well as the fat pride movement increasing in the 2000s, with the creation of the "fatosphere" and the "Fat Liberation Feed" which provided online communities of blogs and social media dedicated to the fat pride movement. The fat pride and fat acceptance movements also coined the term "Fatphobia" which is defined as the fear and dislike of obese people and/or obesity. Generally people who disagree with the fat acceptance movement are often called fatphobic.

The fat pride and fat acceptance movements also seeks to create a sense of self that derives from an individual person's fatness and equate it to things like race, gender, and sexuality. This often comes with the idea that a person being fat is something they were born with or something that can never be changed. In fact fatness has become such a part of some people's self worth within the fat acceptance and fat pride communities that people within those communities who lose weight can even be called fatphobic for doing so, even if it is in the person's health interest to do so. Fat activists such as Tess Holliday, have been known to block fans of hers on social media for posting before and after photos of weight loss because of this.

Jenny Lee Molina posted before and after pictures after losing 80 lbs due to being diagnosed with prediabetes on Instagram, and that same day Holliday unfollowed her. When Molina reached out and asked why, Holliday responded stating that the photos were “triggering” and “not body positive”. Holliday moreover told Molina that the pictures insinuated that Molina was implying that there was something wrong with her being overweight instead of just being happy with herself. This is one of the examples that showcases how the fat acceptance discourses uses fatness (overweightness or obesity) as an identity trait rather than an illness. This example also showcases how if someone changes their physical trait of fatness, it somehow necessarily means that person hates fat people rather than a pursuit of a healthy lifestyle.

The Fat Studies discipline in academia as well as the Health At Every Size campaign were created by Marilyn Wann as a place for scholars to find more fat positive information. However, it should be noted that these types of studies are not scientifically based and are typically not peer reviewed if they claim to be scientifically based. Fat activists argue that the health issues of obesity and being overweight have been exaggerated or misrepresented and that the health issues are used as a cover for cultural and aesthetic prejudices against a fat individual and use the *Metabolically Healthy Obesity (2009)* a study that was written by Gianluca Iacobellis as their main argument (which has now been debunked). On top of that this study was a hypothesis piece that did a short term study. Another argument that has been used by the fat pride and fat acceptance movements relates to the yo-yo effects of dieting. The yo-yo effects of dieting can be explained by the fact that often diets that are created for losing weight quickly will only work for a short period of time before an individual on this diet will start to gain weight again. What the fat studies research fails to showcase is the idea that lifestyle changes and diets

are different things and how diets are set up to fail while changing your lifestyle typically does not have as high of a failure rate as dieting due. This is because often times people who change their lifestyle are losing the weight slower but in a more sustainable way.

The fat acceptance movement today seeks to go against the cultural standards of what a body should look like. Most of us would describe the standard as someone thin or fit, and one of the arguments of the fat acceptance movement is that the average women do not look like that. I would agree that the average women do not look like what the cultural standard is, considering how many people are overweight and obese; however, I also contend that it is not a good thing that the normal body size has been growing over the years because we are becoming an unhealthy society, which, in turn, normalizes unhealthiness. I think it is also important to look more in depth at the (large) subset of the fat pride and fat acceptance movements that promote “health at every size”. As discussed previously health at every size has been widely discredited by contemporary medical research. However, all over social media there are posts about how one can be healthy at every size. The original study on the metabolically healthy obese person became a huge phenomenon amongst the fat acceptance and fat pride movements despite being disproved by countless scientists. This idea then formed into what most people see as health at every size.

One of the main contributors to the health at every size movement is Linda Bacon. Although the idea had been talked about as early as the 1960s Bacon trademarked the term and wrote a book titled *Health at Every Size* about the topic. Bacon’s educational background is unclear but her book is written as fact even though what she is saying is actually a hypothesis of hers. Bacon has a Ph.D. and states on her website she has a background in Biology, Health

Education, Women's Studies and Psychology but does not state what her credentials in each field are. Bacon states on page 274 of her book "Assumption: "Overweight" and "obese" people die sooner than leaner people. False! Almost all epidemiologic studies indicate people in the overweight or moderately obese categories live at least as long—or longer—than people in the normal weight category". The idea that all epidemiologic studies say that obese people live longer is a blatant lie. A simple google search would prove this statement false; in fact, the results prove quite the opposite. Yet Bacon claims that her book is based on solid scientific research. This is an ideological falsehood that has been circulated through books like Bacon's and has now made its way into mainstream and social media. But false information about health is not the only issue within the politics of the fat acceptance and fat pride movements.

### Societal Contributors

It is unfair to critique obesity and the Fat Acceptance and Fat Pride movements in America without looking at the factors that have contributed to both the rise of obesity as well as factors that allow for the fat pride and fat acceptance movements to gain more traction in popular media. First, it is important to look at factors in our culture that have led to the obesity epidemic. In the United States, we have a problem with eating unhealthy foods and overeating those foods. The two biggest reasons that unhealthy foods are often overeaten or chosen over healthy foods are that they are more easily accessible and they are often cheaper. According to The Harvard Medical School Health Publishing website the top ten sources of calories for the American diet are Grain-based desserts (cakes, cookies, donuts, pies, crisps, cobblers, and granola bars), Yeast breads, Chicken and chicken-mixed dishes, Soda, energy drinks, and sports drinks, Pizza, Alcoholic beverages, Pasta and pasta dishes, Mexican mixed dishes, Beef and beef-mixed dishes,

and Dairy desserts. This is no surprise considering that the foods that the government subsidizes are corn, soybeans, wheat, rice, sorghum, milk and meat which make up every food that is on the prior list. These foods are often a contributor to obesity, yet they are the most easily accessible for people. Junk food and fast are also the quickest foods to eat for often the lowest amounts of money. These foods are also typically some of the only foods available in places where there are food deserts.

Food deserts are defined as “parts of the country void of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods, usually found in impoverished areas largely due to a lack of grocery stores, farmers’ markets, and healthy food providers” according to the United States Agricultural Department. This means that many people are without the basic needs to have foods that would help them avoid obesity. Of course this is a major role is obesity, and as close to unavoidable as it can get because of the scarcity of fresh foods in areas that are a food desert. Many of these people eat unhealthy foods because their main priority is just having enough food to get by and not necessarily if the foods are healthy. It is important when discussing the topic of obesity and the fat acceptance and fat pride movements to understand that it is a privilege to have access to healthy foods, but despite this it does not make obesity okay. In fact it makes obesity an even bigger issue because people of lower socioeconomic status are more susceptible to becoming obese due to the lack of tools to prevent it.

The socioeconomic status of an individual also has a lot to do with their weight as discussed prior. But what exactly is socioeconomic status? Socioeconomic status is the social standing or class of an individual or group. It is often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation and showcases the disparities between high, middle, and low class. There

are many inequities that come with having a lower socioeconomic status which often includes health. According to the CDC individuals with lower education and lower household income are more likely to be overweight or obese. This CDC also states that black and white people as a whole are more likely be overweight or obese due to socioeconomic status while hispanic women are more likely to be obese due to their socioeconomic status. It is no surprise that people of lower socioeconomic status are more likely to be obese considering that as discussed above there is a lack of healthy foods available.

In recent history the extremely skinny body has been praised. Models are often photoshopped to be extremely thin as well as expected their actual bodies to be extremely thin to the point of unhealthiness. This issues has taken a turn in the other direction with more demand for plus size models and bodies. In the 1980's there started to be a high demand for super thin models, often meaning that some models would starve themselves or be overly photoshopped to look the like desired body type that was desired by designers to model their clothing. This lead to problems in society such as the glorification of the super thin body. This very unattainable body type that was in almost every advertisement was becoming a standard of beauty in many western cultures and many young girls were developing eating disorders to try and be as thin as the models because of societal pressure. Fortunately, within the last ten years, there has been a lot of push back from people to stop having extremely thin models because it was doing more harm than good, and ultimately glorifying an unhealthy body. As of 2017, the country of France has banned extremely thin models because of how harmful they were to their society's physical and mental health. At the same time that people started condemning extremely thin models, plus

sized models starting becoming more popular on social media through the body positivity movement.

Although most people in 2019 can agree that super thin models promote unhealthiness, there is much debate surrounding the complete polar opposite, extremely overweight models. Soraiya Fuda wrote an opinion article titled *Sports Illustrated: Here's why fat size 20-somethings don't belong on the runway* for The Daily Telegraph. Although the article is quite harsh, it makes very good points. Fuda states "My argument here cuts both ways. If the fashion industry decides to stop using models who appear to have starved themselves to skin and bones, as they should, they shouldn't then choose to promote an equally unhealthy body shape." This article got a lot of heat from fat pride and fat acceptance activist claiming the article was fatphobic with statements from fat activists such as Christine Morgan stating "There's no such thing as glorifying obesity because of the bias people who are bigger experience they go whether it's the doctor, shopping or an aeroplane".

Annabel Hennessy and Kris Crane wrote a follow up article for *The Daily Telegraph* defending the first article titled *Health officials worried 'extremely overweight' models taking to the runway glorifies obesity* where a medical doctor named Dr. Brad Frankum stated "It's a difficult message but just like we don't use cigarettes to promote products I don't think we should have unhealthy weights promoting products". The follow up article cites a source titled *The (Ironic) Dove Effect: Use of Acceptance Cues for Larger Body Types Increases Unhealthy Behaviors* which was a short term scientific study conducted by Brent McFerran and Ross MacDonald-Allan. The researchers conducted five experiments to see how subjects would react to cues suggesting that obesity was acceptable. "In each instance the subjects displayed a greater

intended or actual consumption of unhealthy food and a reduced motivation to engage in a healthier lifestyle, driven by an increased belief that obesity was more socially acceptable” (McFerran & MacDonald-Allan 1). This peer reviewed study shows that the message that the fat acceptance and fat pride movements are sending allows obesity to be normalized. This naturalization of obesity can potentially have health effects for people because of the dissociation from the serious health issues that can come with being overweight. This also shows that the fat acceptance and fat pride movements can promote people to want to purchase more products because they feel like their choices to buy more are now validated.

The fat acceptance and fat pride movements often undermine the healthcare system stating that fat patients do not receive proper health care due to fatphobia. Although I do agree that some fat patients do not get as much care as others I think there is more to the story than the fat acceptance, fat pride movements, and the medical field let on. There is validity in what both parties are saying. In an article published by SELF a media news platform titled titled *The Shocking Ways Large Women Are Mistreated by Health-Care Providers* by Kelly Coffey insinuates that fat women in particular are not getting the same healthcare as other groups of people. Coffey states “A review of studies published in the journal *Obesity Reviews* in 2015 surveying empirical evidence across multiple disciplines showed that health care professionals’ negative feelings about fat bodies can lead to misdiagnosis and late or “missed” diagnoses, negatively impacting patient outcomes”. This of course is horrible for patients who are experiencing this kind of treatment, after all doctors are supposed to be there to help treat their patients. However the issue is a double edged sword. If we take Coffey’s article as an example we can see that this issue exists, but if we look at the journal that Coffey states is “empirical



evidence” we can see that much of the evidence used is circumstantial evidence. This study that Coffey cites used some medical records, but cites a lot sociological studies as her main point of research. Adding to the fact that many medical professionals feel frustrated with their obese patients. This is due to those patients ignoring the fact that they have been told to lose weight in order to alleviate symptoms or to prevent diseases according to a Harvard School of Medicine survey. It is no wonder there are issues between medical professionals and fat activists. This issue can often lead to both overweight and obese patients as well as healthcare providers to play the blame game with each other. Until both parties can work with each other, patients will continue to be harmed in the process.

### The Media and Fat Acceptance

There are different ways that the fat acceptance and fat pride movements are able to function via various media outlets. To better understand how fat acceptance movements work and move through media today it is important to understand how it has worked in the past. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s there was no social media so the fat acceptance movements worked through more traditional or sometimes less accessible smaller media outlets. During the 80s and 90s the fat acceptance movements would circulate through small magazine or newspaper publications these were often opinion pieces made by individuals wanting to share the message of fat acceptance and showcase the ideas. During this time the fat acceptance movements would be seen on reality television including talk shows and small news stations. When on television in the past often the person talking for the fat acceptance movements would be debating someone else on the validity of their “movement” as well as debating whether or not being obese or overweight it detrimental for someone's health. Rarely was the idea of fat acceptance seen on tv

as acceptable. One of the last ways that fat acceptance worked was through academic texts. There was a small portion of fat acceptance texts that existed during the 80s and 90s, but often these texts would not be seen by people outside of the fat acceptance movements. One thing that is important to note is that when fat acceptance ideas were being circulated during this time it was not widely accepted by people outside of the fat acceptance movements. Most of the public would mock ideas of fat acceptance and fat pride, typically the only places that these ideas were accepted was within fat acceptance circles themselves.

It wasn't until the early 2000s that fat acceptance and fat pride started to gain traction, once social media started to take off. With social media it is easier than ever for people to share ideas or issues with more people than ever. This is one of the ways that the fat acceptance and fat pride movements have been able to make their way into more popular culture. Often fat acceptance and fat pride are working under the idea of body positivity when in the media, but it seems as if the ideas of the body positivity movement which was created so that people with all bodies, especially those with disabilities, chronic illnesses, scars, and other unchangeable aspects of their bodies could feel good about themselves and love themselves despite these aspects. It seems though that body positivity was hijacked by the fat acceptance and fat pride movements. This can be seen a lot through the discourse that is spread through social media. Social media websites such as YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook are the main sites that fat acceptance and fat pride discourses are circulated. Facebook is the main website where fat pride and fat acceptance is seen under the light of body positivity. Of course there are articles that are widely shared such as [19 Controversial Facts About Being Fat That You Need To Know](#)

Surprising facts you might not have heard about America's favorite crisis: Obesity! Via Buzzfeed or Everything You Know About Obesity Is Wrong via Huffington post that have thousands of comments from both supporters of the ideas as well as people in opposition of the shared articles ideas arguing in the comment section. Although there is an overwhelming number of opponents to these types of Facebook posts, often times the supporters of fat pride and fat acceptance shut them down by either deleting comments, calling the opponents fatphobic, or attack them verbally. Of course it is social media so it is no shock that the conversation is not productive, but the alarming part is that supporters of fat pride and fat acceptance try to completely shut down opposing ideas.

This lack of willingness from the fat pride and fat acceptance communities to allow for the opposing side of their argument to share their thoughts is seen throughout most of these social media sites. On facebook many fat acceptance and fat pride pages are close groups that someone needs to be accepted into by moderators. An example of the is the Health At Every Size (HAES) Facebook page that required me to answer and initial off on questions and compliances stating that I would not talk about diets, that I would not post articles stating obesity is harmful, that I would not discuss obesity being harmful or the obesity epidemic, and much more. After answering some questions and agreeing to their community standards I was accepted after around two days. After accepted into the group I noticed that the rhetoric being used was similar to what has been discussed throughout this project, but it was more extreme because this page is an echochamber of thousands of people who all believe in the same thing. There are comments such as "Dieting is self harm" and "This is a group that doesn't promote diet culture, that doesn't centre weight loss with health, and many of us feel very uncomfortable with the discussion of

IWL (intentional weight loss)”. This group claims to share science backed information with their group members, but from what I have observed after joining this group is that every post has been based purely off of emotion and speculation. Another example that had been discussed prior in this project is Tess Holliday’s Instagram and her Twitter. Tess Holliday openly states that she blocks and deletes comments from people who post about their own weight loss, or people who make speculations about her own health. These examples showcase how often times the fat acceptance and fat pride movements use social media to their advantage because it is easy silence anyone who disagrees with them, creating an echochamber that allows for the movement to grow because it seems unopposed to any outsider that stumbles upon share posts and articles.

### Fat Pride Activists

Vergi Tovar is a radical fat activist and feminist as well as an author and lecturer. Tovar holds a Master's degree in Sexuality Studies with a focus on the intersections of body size, race, and gender. Tovar believes that the fat pride movement is a sector of feminism. Tovar’s blog posts and articles are often used as sources in other articles written by people within these campaigns. Tovar is also the founder of “BabeCamp” which is described on her website as “Lose Hate Not Weight Babecamp is a 4-week online course designed by acclaimed body image expert, Virgie Tovar, to hold your hand through finally breaking up with diet culture and taking your rightful place in the babe pantheon”. Babecamp costs \$297 for the course. Tovar also has a summer camp called “Camp Thunder Thighs” located in California. For a weekend as her summer camp which is described on her website as “Camp Thunder Thighs is about living the 5 principles I believe lead to deep, meaningful change in our relationship to our bodies - 1. Community, 2. A critical and intersectional political education, 3. Practical tools for healing and

resiliency, 4. A non-judgmental space to recuperate our relationship to food, and 5. Movement whose only purpose is pleasure - for a weekend in a beautiful place so you can use these tools to heal yourself and change the trajectory of history. Basically”. A weekend at Camp Thunder Thighs will cost someone \$689 for three days and two nights (not including transportation costs).

Tess Holliday is a plus-size model and self-proclaimed leader of the fat acceptance movement. Holliday was recently a controversial cover model for Cosmopolitan magazine. Tess often tells her followers that despite being morbidly obese and recently having health complications from being pregnant while obese, as well as being someone who has started to lose mobility she does not plan on losing weight. Holliday often has the response that her health is nobody's business but her and her doctors yet shuts down comments and makes personal attacks people when they comment the risks of obesity or try to start a discussion about the health risks of obesity on her social media platforms. People from both the fat pride movement and people who felt that the cover promoted obesity found the cover to be controversial but for different reasons. Several fat pride supporters felt that Holliday's cover was working against the fat acceptance movement because it had been highly edited and felt that the fact they the photo had been photoshopped took away from the cause of the movement. Others who are not associated with the fat pride movement felt that the cover glorified obesity due to the fact that it was showcasing/praising a morbidly obese body.

Whitney Way Thore is a fat acceptance activist who focuses on “body discrimination”. Thore has her own reality television show on The Learning Channel (TLC) titled *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* where she showcases her attempt to find physical and mental health as well as for her viral video titled “Fat Girl Dancing”. In June of 2016, Throe had a syncopal episode due to

exertion during a dance marathon, which means she passed out. In her show, there is a clip of a Thore at the hospital after this episode where the Nurse Practitioner (NP-C) who was treating her tells her that she likely passed out due to her heart struggling to pump blood throughout her entire body due to her size and referred her to a cardiologist. The NP-C stated that at her age she should not be passing from the level of exertion Thore was participating in at her age and again told Thore it was due to her size. Despite this Thore still stated, “it’s not a question of fat versus thin it’s solely a question of health” as well as “I think it’s easy to look at a fat person who passes out and make a bigger deal out of it than you would make if a thin person passes out”. Thore believes she is unhealthy but does not believe that it is linked to her weight despite what healthcare professionals tell her. Thore is a core believer in health at every size despite the fact that throughout the show when she visits health care professionals they stress that a lot of her issues come from her weight.

### Fat Acceptance and Consumer-Commodity Culture

To understand the fat acceptance movement one needs to understand the history of feminism and how it transformed into intersectional feminism. As I mentioned above, like the fat acceptance movement, feminism came in waves. The first wave of feminism was between the 19th and 20th century. This wave of feminism is most notable for the women's suffrage movement and allowing women to be in the workforce. The second wave of feminism was from the 1960s to around the 1980s. This wave of feminism is known for female liberation and encouraging women to not take on the housewife role, rather making a space for women to explore themselves as individuals. This wave of feminism is also known for the sexual liberation of women as well as being the era where feminism was acknowledged in academia. Second

wave feminists had a rigid definition of what feminism should look like. Third wave feminism started in the 1990s and looked to dismantle the idea that feminism needs to be a certain way. Third wave feminism had a post-structuralist approach that looked to undo the essentialist representation of what femininity is. This was also the start of feminism looking at perspectives from views of people outside of the white middle-class women's lens. Third wave feminism also looked closer at having feminism be involved more closely with politics. Fourth wave feminism doesn't have a definitive start but is argued to have started in the early 2000s. Fourth wave feminism is argued to have started then because of the influence of social media on feminism. This wave of feminism also looks at everyday feminism and looks to fix small ways that sexism and other forms of oppression are working within society. Fourth wave feminism is also when intersectionality was fully incorporated into feminism.

Intersectionality is a term that was coined by a black feminist academic named Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Although the idea of intersectionality has been around since 1989 it wasn't until the 2000s that it was widely accepted in feminist circles. But what is intersectionality exactly? Intersectionality looks to explore how power frameworks are intertwined and affect various groups of marginalized people. Brittney Cooper describes intersectionality in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* - "Intersectionality considers that various forms of social stratification, such as class, race, sexual orientation, age, religion, creed, disability and gender, do not exist separately from each other but are woven together" (1). Intersectionality is the reason the fat acceptance and fat pride movements are intertwined with feminism. Although fat acceptance and fat pride was not included in the original definition of intersectionality, in recent years intersectionality has allowed many more social issues to be woven in with feminism. The

idea of intersectionality come from Marxist feminist theory that describes issues as class, race, gender, etc as being not primarily personal identities but rather as social hierarchies that need to be looked at more deeply and politically. As feminism and social justice in general has progressed it has become trendy and mainstream and therefore susceptible to commodification and adulteration of ideas. Since there are so many different definitions and ideas that are circling around feminism and social justice it seems that whatever an individual defines these movements as is correct.

Fat pride has become trendy and therefore stores are using it for marketing, in order to gain a new group of customers, and some companies are designed completely around making clothing for fat bodies. This may sound like a great stride for inclusion and progressiveness at first glance because more people or different body types are able to buy trendy clothing, however, there is a contradiction of progression when it is used to get people to buy more stuff. On top of this it does this cross the line into again promoting unhealthiness. An example I often think about is Justice: The Store for Girls. This is a children's clothing store that offers plus size clothing. On the one hand, I find it extremely important that these children have clothing that they can feel good in, especially because as children they do not have autonomy in their lifestyle choices. On the other hand, it is jarring to think about the fact that children need plus sizes that are too large on me, an overweight adult. Having this plus size market also creates a customer base that starts from a younger age now. Many adult stores, of course, have plus sizes as well which as stated early can be seen as a good thing considering almost every fast fashion store in America has a plus size section. But does this commodification of the fat body have to do with



the appropriation of the fat acceptance movement, or is it what is now intended of the movements in question?

When looking at the relationship with social justice groups such as the fat pride and fat acceptance movements have with commodification we can turn to Karl Marx's book *Capital* to consider his ideas about Commodity Fetishism. It is pertinent that there is background on what Marx means when he uses the word fetishism, and more importantly what Marx doesn't mean when he uses fetishism. What Marx does not mean when discussing commodity fetishism is that people have an unsettling sexual desire to commodities. Rather Marx is talking about an older meaning of the word fetishism, in the sense that an inanimate object worshiped for its supposed magical or higher powers or because it is considered to be inhabited by a spirit. However, Marx is using the word in a secular sense and not a in a religious sense. The root of what Marx's argument is that commodities exist in two ways. The first is in the physical state, meaning it is tangible. The second is the commodity's ability to dictate social relations in capitalistic societies. However as a consumer one is alienated from all the people who participated in creating, shipping, and even selling one the product, yet one buying a shirt still allows, and even demands social relations. In addition to this, commodities also create social relations through how they make a person appear to others because of the ownership of said commodity. We give these objects this power through advertisements which allude to these products giving us mystical social powers by using concepts of sexuality, youth, wealth, health, happiness, etc but completely forget the labor that went into the product because it is no longer an object made by humans, but rather a mystical social object. Marx explains that this ideology about commodities

is not some grand government conspiracy made to make people buy more stuff, but rather it is an unavoidable symptom of a capitalistic society.

Marx states in *Capital* “There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between thing” (48). What we see with the obesity epidemic is that many people now view food as a commodity rather than a source of fuel that is needed for energy and survival. As discussed previously there is an excess of food very conveniently and is not made or grown at home. There is complete alienation of where our food comes from and what’s in it, and people are becoming obese because of it. But what does this have to do with the fat acceptance and fat pride movements? One argument that is seen a lot in the fat acceptance and fat pride movements is that food tastes good and makes people happy. While I agree with that, the overconsumption of food plays into our capitalist society that profits greatly off of the selling of fast food and junk foods. The fat acceptance and fat pride movements as discussed earlier also profit greatly off the fat body and have even pushed for, and in some cases created new industries off of the fat body. There is a great push in the fat acceptance and fat pride movements that pushes for re-definitions of what health and normal should look like so that there are more ways to sell and profit from different people. Although this may seem like it is trivializing the discussion around fat bodies, I would say it's quite the opposite. I feel like it is infact a way to show the full circle of the issues surrounding weight and capitalism within our society and help explain why a medical condition that is preventable in more than 90% of instances is starting to be praised.

Although I did not intend for this project to be exclusively about women or feminism, when the discussion about my topic started in class many of my classmates thought it was about

women. I think that says something about the fat acceptance movement as well as its newly formed ties with the commodification of the body and feminism. Women are often over-marketed to especially for clothing and dieting and it makes sense as to why this topic would mostly revolve around women. It should also be noted that advertisements in the contemporary era use social justice as a selling point. Often brands will use the idea of empowerment to sell their products to the consumers. Angela McRobbie states on page 532 of *Young Women and Consumer Culture* that “This appropriation of the site of girlhood actively draws on a quasi-feminist vocabulary which celebrates female freedom and gender equality”. Like feminism the fat acceptance movement works within advertisements to push an idea of empowerment towards the fat body in advertisements so that they can sell more products to more people with the idea that their brand is now more inclusive for having plus size clothing or other commodities. As seen when analyzing only three fat pride and fat acceptance activists it is clear that their main source of income comes from using this political campaign as a selling point. For Whitney Way Thore, Tess Holliday, and Vergi Tovar their entire careers are based on the fact that they are obese women who use their obesity as a profit under the guise of fat acceptance and fat pride.

### Conclusions

The fat acceptance and fat pride movements in particular look to create change surrounding weight in Western cultures, but ultimately the changes that are trying to be made may be doing more harm than good to our societal health. The fat acceptance and fat pride movement’s rhetoric opposes contemporary medical research surrounding health. Through false ideas such as health at every size, and other non-scientifically backed articles and citing them as

empirical evidence, despite the evidence overwhelmingly being not peer reviewed or backed by anything other than personal experiences and emotions. With obesity killing over 500,000 Americans yearly and even more worldwide it is important to understand why the falsehoods to the fat acceptance and fat pride movements are important and potentially harmful, especially when these micro-political campaigns are becoming more mainstream. Although there are many societal issues that contribute to why people are becoming more obese than ever before such as the anorexia and photoshopping of models that create unreal and unhealthy standards, socioeconomic status, and the flawed the food system, it is not okay to for the fat acceptance and fat pride movements to trivialize the serious health effects of obesity.

With fat pride and fat acceptance activists such as Virgie Tovar, Tess Holliday, and Whitney Way Thore making all of their money through their obesity it begs the question of if the fat acceptance movements are commodifying their social issue as well as commodifying (and therefore normalizing) a serious health issue? Through the lense of Angela McRobbie and Karl Marx it seems that a main issue that the fat acceptance and fat pride movements focus on is that there needs to be more size inclusivity (bigger sizes) as well as selling products services with the label of fat acceptance. Women are often over-marketed to especially for things such as clothing or other products surrounding the body, and it appears the the fat acceptance and fat pride movements are using this to their financial advantage even if it is not intentional. If the fat acceptance and fat pride movements, which are now integrated into feminism, through the framework of intersectionality really wanted to do social justice work wouldn't they want to do what is healthiest for someones body so they can live a healthy life instead of using their movements as a marketing tactic. All in all the fat acceptance and fat pride movements are using

pseudoscience and preying on the insecurity of others to create a new market while simultaneously trying avoid the scientific literature that shows that being obese is not only unhealthy, but potentially deadly for profits.

In conclusion on the one hand people need to be respectful of obese people, but on the other hand we need to educate people on the dangers of being obese. We are creating acceptance for obesity instead of facing the very real health dangers. There is more money in it for the food drug companies, and the plus size market to keep people unhealthy and to accept their unhealthiness. On one hand there are issues that obese and overweight people face within society, but ignoring scientific evidence around the dangers of obesity is not a solution, and it ultimately unethical. It is costly and deadly for a society to not accept scientific data in the name of a micro-political campaign that may not even that an individual's best interest in mind. In the end it is unacceptable to promote a serious health issue. The fat acceptance and fat pride movements are far from advancing the larger feminist goal of the undoing the objectification of the female body through the contemporary work that is produced by the groups.

### Works Cited

- Vergie Tovar. "VIRGIE TOVAR." *VIRGIE TOVAR*, Vergie Tovar, [www.virgietovar.com/](http://www.virgietovar.com/).
- Soraiya Fuda. *Sports Illustrated: Here's Why Fat Size 20-Somethings Don't Belong on the Runway*. The Daily Telegraph, 1 Aug. 2017, [www.dailytelegraph.com.au/rendezview/fashion-needs-to-find-a-happy-medium-for-body-shap](http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/rendezview/fashion-needs-to-find-a-happy-medium-for-body-shap)
- "Overweight & Obesity | CDC." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 Apr. 2019, [www.cdc.gov/obesity/index.html.e/news-story/772df2a08d8aa4964c196b310531d447](http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/index.html.e/news-story/772df2a08d8aa4964c196b310531d447).
- Whitney Way Thore. "My Big Fat Fabulous Life." *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*, TLC.
- Mic, Hayley Wilbur. "8 Women On Why They Are Reclaiming The Word 'Fat'." *HuffPost*, HuffPost, 2 Oct. 2016, [www.huffpost.com/entry/8-women-on-why-they-are-reclaiming-the-word-fat\\_b\\_57eec8d0e4b0972364deb2e4](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/8-women-on-why-they-are-reclaiming-the-word-fat_b_57eec8d0e4b0972364deb2e4).
- McRobbie, Angela. "Young Women And Consumer Culture." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 22, no. 5, 2008, pp. 531–550., doi:10.1080/09502380802245803.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital*. Penguin Books, 1986.
- Lin, Lily, and Brent McFerran. "The (Ironic) Dove Effect: Use of Acceptance Cues for Larger Body Types Increases Unhealthy Behaviors." *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2016, pp. 76–90., doi:10.1509/jppm.14.020.
- Iacobellis, Gianluca. "Metabolically Healthy Obesity." *Obesity and Cardiovascular Disease*, 2009, pp. 17–20., doi:10.1093/med/9780199549320.003.0003.
- Iacobellis, Gianluca. "Metabolically Healthy Obesity." *Obesity and Cardiovascular Disease*, 2009, pp. 17–20., doi:10.1093/med/9780199549320.003.0003.

Annabel Hennessy, and Kris Crane. *Health Officials Worried ‘Extremely Overweight’ Models Taking to the Runway Glorifies Obesity*. The Daily Telegraph , 2 Aug. 2017, [www.dailytelegraph.com.au/lifestyle/health-officials-worried-extremely-overweight-models-taking-to-the-runway-glorifies-obesity/news-story/1bbe3edb159d32431606169ac93082f1](http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/lifestyle/health-officials-worried-extremely-overweight-models-taking-to-the-runway-glorifies-obesity/news-story/1bbe3edb159d32431606169ac93082f1).

“Health At Every Size (HAES) .”

Garcia-Moll, Xavier. “Obesity and Prognosis: Time to Forget about Metabolically Healthy Obesity.” *European Heart Journal*, vol. 39, no. 5, 2017, pp. 407–409., doi:10.1093/eurheartj/ehx535.

“Documentation.” *USDA ERS - Documentation*, 5 Dec. 2017, [www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/documentation/](http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/documentation/).

Disch, Lisa Jane, and M. E. Hawkesworth. *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

“Disability Benefits Help.” *How to Apply for Disability Benefits with Obesity*, 2019, [www.disability-benefits-help.org/disabling-conditions/obesity-and-social-security-disability](http://www.disability-benefits-help.org/disabling-conditions/obesity-and-social-security-disability).

“Did Tess Holliday Unfollow A Woman For Losing Weight??” *Perez Hilton*, 11 Jan. 2019, [perez Hilton.com/tess-holliday-before-and-after-not-body-positive/](http://perez Hilton.com/tess-holliday-before-and-after-not-body-positive/).  
Used as an archive

Coffey, Kelly. “The Shocking Ways Large Women Are Mistreated by Health Care Providers.” *SELF*, 18 July 2017, [www.self.com/story/weight-bias-and-health-care](http://www.self.com/story/weight-bias-and-health-care).

Bacon, Linda. *Health at Every Size: the Surprising Truth about Your Weight*. BenBella Books, 2010.