'The super-fats, the middlies and the barely-fats': Naming and describing the body in plus-size fashion blogs

Hanna Limatius

Abstract: This article investigates the practices of naming and describing bodies in plus-size women's fashion blogs. Building on Jeffries' (2007) work on the construction of bodies and bodily processes in women's magazines, I explore how bloggers use language to construct their identities through references to bodily characteristics. I investigate terms the bloggers use to describe the plus-size body, as well as the connotative features of these terms. In addition, I analyse the use of three terms that were used to describe bodies that are not plus-size: *thin*, *slim*, and *skinny*. The results demonstrate that, while the bloggers build counter-discourse to the mainstream media discourses that construct fatness as a negative characteristic, they also maintain particular hegemonic discourses on beauty, sexuality and gender.

Keywords: body positivity, fashion blogs, fat acceptance, gender, identity, othering, weight stigma

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1. Introduction

The way we describe ourselves contributes to the construction of our identity. Particularly in social media and other online settings, the words that we choose for presenting ourselves are significant, as we lack some of the cues that contribute to self-presentation in face-to-face interactions. By using specific terminology to describe ourselves, we can discursively highlight particular aspects of our identity and downplay others (Goffman 1990). Similarly, we can use words to identify ourselves with other members of a social group or community – that is, the choices we make in describing ourselves online also affect our social identity (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz 1982; Tajfel 1982).

In this article, I explore the ways in which identity is constructed online through practices of naming and describing the body (and parts of the body, see Jeffries 2007). Specifically, I study the ways in which the body is referenced in fashion blog texts written by plus-size women. I am particularly interested in the specific words that blog authors use to describe their bodies and the connotative features of these words. In the context of this article, I consider this type of language use related to bodies and body parts as naming, since it reflects the bloggers' preferred way of addressing their bodies, as well as their identification with similar others, i.e. the in-group. There is a broad variety of terms that can be used to describe a plus-size woman's body, yet the bloggers tend to favour certain words (Limatius 2020). The fact that plus-size people are an often-marginalized group, particularly in the context of fashion, is relevant here, as the process of naming their bodies online gives these women agency over their bodies. As Chibuwe, Mpofu and Bhowa (2021:3) put it, 'self-naming becomes an act of exercising power over the self'. However, as defining one's own identity typically also includes processes of defining the other, I am also interested in how plus-size fashion bloggers name bodies that are not plus-size. Therefore, I also investigate what type of words the bloggers use to describe bodies and body parts that are different to theirs and thus represent the out-group.

I will use a qualitative study informed by methods of corpus-assisted discourse analysis (Baker 2006) to address the following research questions:

1. How are plus-size bodies named and described in the blog data?
2. How do the bloggers name and describe bodies that are different to theirs?
3. What kind of connotative features does the naming and describing of bodies have in the context of plus-size fashion blogging?

In order to answer these questions, I will first position my work in the broader context of research into language, gender and fatness. As I will demonstrate, the intersections of these topics are relevant for the practice of constructing identity through naming and describing the body. Similarly, as Pilcher (2016:766) states, the concepts of naming, identity and embodiment are also 'inextricably intertwined'. After addressing the role of language in constructing identity specifically in the contexts of gender and fatness, I will move on to the concepts of naming and describing, explaining how I approach them based on Jeffries' (2007) framework for studying women's magazines. After providing theoretical background to the topic, I will introduce the data and the analytical method. Finally, the empirical section of the article will present the findings of the qualitative analysis along with my conclusions.

The main results of the analysis can be divided into three categories. First, the bloggers in the data name the self as an empowered agent, highlighting the fact that by choosing the language to describe themselves with, they are in control of their representation. Under this category, I discuss two more specific ways of using descriptive terminology as an empowering resource: reclaiming existing terms and innovating new terms. Second, the bloggers also construct a collective, social identity by naming the self as a member of a group. Here, I will address the use of inclusive pronouns, the use of the word *fat* as a noun, and the practice of naming the blogosphere as a shared 'space'

or community. Finally, through an investigation of three terms that were used to describe the bodies of thinner women – the others – I will demonstrate how practices of naming and describing bodies are also used to construct difference. The results of the analysis provide new insights into the significance of naming bodies and body parts, particularly in the context of fashion blogs. My work shows that while many of the naming practices in blogs are comparable to those in women's magazines (Jeffries 2007), they are used to construct different ideas of 'normal' bodies that reflect the norms and values of the plus-size fashion blogging community.

2. Language, gender and fatness

When studying the language use of plus-size fashion bloggers, it is necessary to consider the societal context of weight stigma, particularly in relation to fashion. People with plus-size bodies are marginalized in contemporary Western societies, and their representation in the media is dominated by medicalized, moralizing discourses that construct fatness as a burden to society, a failure in self-control and a risk to both individual and national health (Dickins et al. 2011; Brookes & Baker 2021). In the fashion industry, thin bodies have long been particularly idolized and fat bodies particularly vilified, although there have been attempts to reconstruct these norms in recent years as a result of the popularization of the body positivity movement (Sastre 2014; Zavattaro 2021; Brathwaite & DeAndrea 2022). Social media has been in a pivotal role in the shift towards more body diversity in fashion imagery – according to Czerniawski (2021:3), 'The rise of [body positive] hashtag campaigns coincides with the decline in influence of mainstream magazines and traditional advertising campaigns'.

Over the past two decades, plus-size women's fashion blogs have become central spaces for producing counter-discourse to the one-sided representation of fat people in the mainstream media (Connell 2013; Scaraboto & Fischer 2013; Harju & Huovinen 2015; Limatius 2020). According to Cooper (2016:76), practicing 'fatshion' blogging

'encourages fat people's creative participation in spaces where they are usually excluded'. In addition to the aforementioned body positivity movement, other social justice movements such as the fat acceptance movement (Zavattaro 2021:283) and the health at every size movement (HAES, The Association for Size Diversity and Health 2020) have provided fat people with resources to oppose the 'obesity epidemic' focused discourse of the mainstream media. Language has an important role in the construction of these counter-discourses. According to LeBesco (2001:76), fat people can create and regulate 'a new social reality through the use of words', resulting in a 'more inhabitable subject position' than the discourses that characterize fatness in current Western media. The reappropriation of the word *fat* is one of the most concrete ways in which activists have harnessed language into creating counter-discourse. Previous research (Connell 2013; Scaraboto & Fischer 2013; Harju & Huovinen 2015; Limatius 2020; Zavattaro 2021) illustrates how bloggers and influencers have embraced the word purposely in order to lessen its stigma and to normalize it as a neutral descriptor.[1]

While fat people of all genders experience discrimination, women and homosexual men are more likely than heterosexual men to face strict beauty and body standards (Hartley 2001:67).[2] Moreover, weight stigma intersects with other types of marginalization, resulting in increased stigmatization of fat people of colour (Zavattaro 2021:284). Women's bodies in general, particularly in the context of sexuality, have traditionally been subject to societal and discursive control (Ho & Tsang 2005:524), which is also reflected in the portrayal of women's bodies in the media. For example, Brookes and Baker (2021:200) report that in the British press, women's obesity is discussed more

[1] It should be noted that outside of the body positivity and fat activist communities, this kind of neutral use has not yet been normalized, and *fat* continues to be a contested term. However, as LeBesco (2001:76) names academics as one group of people who can participate in transforming the subject position of fat people through language, I also use the term *fat* as a neutral word with no derogatory intent throughout this paper.
[2] However, as noted by Brookes and Baker (2021:178) unobtainable body ideals for men have also increased in recent years.

than men's, and the articles on women, obesity and weight loss also have a more aesthetic focus, where being 'beautiful' and fitting into specific items of clothing is highlighted. Discourses on womanhood and sexuality are inescapably tied to hegemonic views of bodies as 'beautiful', 'acceptable' or 'normal' – and, by default, also as 'ugly', 'unacceptable' or 'abnormal'. Media such as women's magazines (Jeffries 2007) and fashion blogs contribute to these discourses either by maintaining hegemonic ideals or (less commonly) by challenging them. As Jeffries (2007:21) puts it, references to the body construct the body. Since the body has a central role in the discursive construction of gender and sexuality, such references also contribute to our understanding of those concepts.

3. Naming and describing the body

In this article, I apply Jeffries' (2007:66) framework for studying the construction of women and their relationship to their bodies and bodily processes to fashion blog data. Jeffries (2007:65) investigated the 'naming and describing of women and their bodies' in women's magazines. I consider the framework suitable for blog data, as many parallels can be drawn between fashion blogs and women's magazines. Both media are aimed at an audience consisting predominantly of women, both offer examples and advice on how to fashion the body in different ways to their readers, and both typically have commercial motivations, although in the case of blogs these are not always as obvious. This means that in addition to expressing the author's opinions, the texts are also selling us specific ideas on how we should view and treat our bodies.

Jeffries (2007:63) considers the noun phrase as 'the basic unit of naming'. This means that when studying the ways in which the body is named, it is relevant to consider both the choice of head nouns as well as how that head noun is modified (Jeffries 2007:63). Thus, modifiers such as adjectives are also investigated as a 'part of the naming process' – which is why Jeffries (ibid.) talks about naming and describing the body. The processes of naming and describing are con-

nected, and they both contribute to the textual construction of meaning and the incorporation of ideologies into texts (Jeffries 2007:63).

Jeffries' (2007:78) analysis of naming conventions revealed tendencies toward particular ways of constructing the reader of women's magazines. That is, the reader was either textually constructed as a specific kind of woman, or 'identified with her body parts' (Jeffries 2007:78). In the latter type of construction, sexual or sexualized body parts were of particular significance (ibid.). Similarly, Pilcher (2016:771–772) has also discussed nicknames that emphasize particular body parts and aspects of the body (e.g. *fatso* or *ginger*). According to her, such nicknames can be used either for highlighting belonging to a group or for othering individuals and marking them as outsiders. As I will go on to demonstrate in the analytical section, naming and describing the body is used for both purposes in the blog data.

Establishing categories of similar and different bodies through naming and describing results in ideas of what kind of body is seen as the norm. The notion of the 'real' or 'normal' body is created through (repeated) social performance, just like the notion of 'real' or 'normal' gender (Butler 1999). Indeed, a common theme in women's magazines is the evaluation of the normality of the body, which Jeffries (2007:85) mentions as particularly noticeable in magazine articles aimed at teenagers. Throughout her data, Jeffries (2007:85) also notes the prevalence of adjectives that evaluated the body in a positive or negative way, particularly in a 'before and after' context.

The idea of the body as 'natural' or 'unnatural' – in other words, right or wrong – was also reflected in the presence of the ideology of 'the unchanging body' (Jeffries 2007:89) in women's magazines. By this, Jeffries refers, for instance, to the expectation that the body should return to its 'natural' (i.e. attractive, socially acceptable) state after childbirth. According to Jeffries (2007:89), the body in women's magazines is thus 'portrayed as serving the individual, as able to let us down, and to some extent able to be "fixed"'. This results in the reader of the texts being left with the pressure to 'create the perfect, natural and normal body by any means possible' (Jeffries 2007:101). The idea of the body as something to be 'fixed' is particularly rel-

evant in the case of fat bodies and their media representation – in addition to women's magazines, for example numerous reality television shows focus on 'fixing' fat bodies either through weight-loss or particular ways of dressing up (Zavattaro 2021:283). Since plus-size fashion blogs are authored by fat women themselves, they have more agency in creating their representation, which results in different discourses concerning the body. However, although these blogs may resist the hegemonic ideas of 'right' kind of bodies, they cannot escape such definitions completely. Similarly, while they rely on a different conceptualization of the 'real' body compared to Jeffries' (2007) data from women's magazines, many body positive marketing campaigns continue to exclude a variety of bodies and thus create their own norms and boundaries based on features of the body (Czerniawski 2021).

4. Data and method

In connection with a previous study (Limatius 2020), I compiled a corpus consisting of 20 UK-based blogs that focused on fashion from the perspective of a plus-size woman. The blog corpus, which was compiled in 2015, contains 7,776 blog posts (3,177,959 words) and 32,737 comments (1,000,049 words). All blogs featured in the corpus were publicly available at the time of data collection, and the authors of the blogs were informed about the inclusion of their blogs in the corpus.

As the goal of the present study is identifying discursive patterns in the use of specific terms, the analysis is based on methods of corpus-assisted discourse analysis (Baker 2006). A list of all descriptors that were used to describe plus-size women's bodies (or parts of their bodies) in the corpus was compiled using the Word List function in AntConc. The resulting list consisted of altogether 45 terms (Limatius 2020). In order to expand the investigation to include identification through difference, in 2021, I compiled another dataset that featured all occurrences of *thin*, *slim* and *skinny* in the blogs. After identifying relevant terms, I conducted a concordance analysis in order to exam-

ine the wider context in which the terms were used (Brookes & Baker 2021:32). Occurrences where the words were used to describe things other than bodies or body parts (e.g. 'big surprise') were excluded from the analysis. As the use of the terms needed to be critically considered in the specific context of the plus-size fashion blogging community, the main focus of the analysis is on a qualitative, dis-course-analytical approach.

In her study on the naming and describing of women and women's body parts, Jeffries' (2007:66) presents a 'checklist of textual features' that were examined. In my analysis of fashion blog data, the follow-ing categories, adapted from Jeffries (2007:66), are of particular rele-vance: use and reference of pronouns, connotative features of chosen terms, and structural properties of noun phrases (e.g. the use of mod-ifying adjectives). However, since descriptive words – mainly adjec-tives – were the starting point for my analysis, the analytical process also differs slightly from that of Jeffries' (2007). In order to study the structural properties of noun phrases, I examined the nouns that the adjectives which had been established as descriptors for bodies in my previous work (Limatius 2020) modified (e.g. the nouns referred to as *fat*, *plus-size*, *big*, etc.). I also investigated the pronouns that were used to refer to the noun phrases that featured such modification (e.g. *I*, *we*, *they*). Finally, in order to study the connotative features of the descriptors chosen by the bloggers for specific bodies and body parts, I examined the broader context around the use of these descriptors through the lens of earlier literature in fat studies (e.g. LeBesco 2001; 2004; Cooper 2016; Czerniawski 2021) as well as previous research focusing on the community-specific linguistic and discursive prac-tices of plus-size fashion bloggers (Connell 2013; Scaraboto & Fischer 2013; Harju & Huovinen 2013; Limatius 2020).

5. Findings

The results of the qualitative analysis of blog data can be divided into three categories: naming the self as an empowered agent, naming the self as a member of a group, and naming the self as different from

others. In the following sub-sections, I will discuss this categorization and provide examples from the blog texts to illustrate different practices for naming and describing the body under each category.

5.1. Naming the self as an empowered agent

The bloggers in the data constructed the self as an empowered agent through naming and describing their body in specific ways. In this section, I will discuss two distinct practices that could be observed in the blog texts: assigning new meanings to existing terminology (i.e. reclaiming the terms), and creating innovative new terms.

5.1.1 Reclaiming existing terms

The most popular terms used for describing the plus-size body in the corpus were *fat* (1,869 occurrences), *plus-size* (901) and *big* (413) (Limatius 2020). These terms could be found in all 20 blogs, although there were differences in the frequency of their use between individual bloggers (for a more in-depth investigation of the frequencies, see Limatius 2019). The prevalence of *fat* is particularly notable due to its traditionally negative connotative features and the potential that plus-size fashion blogs have for challenging these connotations through different representations of fatness. Such resistance of dominant discourses can also be observed in previous literature on naming and the body. For example, Pilcher (2016:772) mentions the fact that derogatory nicknames can be re-appropriated 'as a source of resistance and empowerment', while Ho and Tsang (2005:524) discuss how women can (re)present themselves through personal narratives of their bodily relationships.

In the context of women's magazines, Jeffries' (2007) discussed the connotative features of adjectives that were used to modify nouns referring to the body. According to Jeffries (2007:84), the majority of these adjectives 'could easily be interpreted in the context as hyponyms of either *good* or *bad*' – thus, they were used to construct specific bodily features as positive or negative.

1) And it may just have another little article by **your favourite fat girl**.... Buy your copy now!

In Example 1 from the blog data, *fat* is used by the author in a self-reference to 'your favourite fat girl'. This noun phrase describes the author's body as *fat*, but the other modifiers of the noun *girl* make it clear that the term is not used in a derogative sense. The use of *your* implies closeness between the blogger and the reader, while *favourite* has obvious positive connotations. Thus, *fat* is not a bad word for the blogger – the blog text has different 'good or bad' distinctions compared to those typically seen in the mainstream media (Jeffries 2007), where describing someone as a 'fat girl' would likely be interpreted negatively. This phenomenon is also demonstrated by the bloggers' use of some words that are traditionally connotated more positively than *fat*:

2) I do however, **class myself curvy**, I also know I'm **fat too**, but with **a large bust a small(ish) waist** and **some rather large hips** I have what you might class as **a curvy figure**.

The blogger in Example 2 discusses the use of the word *curvy*. In most contexts, *curvy* could be interpreted as a more flattering term than *fat* – for example, plus-size fashion brands are more likely to market their clothing to 'curvy women' than to 'fat women'. However, in the plus-size fashion blogging community, the term is often debated, as some bloggers and fat activists see it as linguistic sugar-coating that impacts the representation of 'actually fat' women negatively (Limatius 2017). *Curvy* (159 occurrences) was also notably less popular than *fat* (1,869 occurrences) in the corpus, with some bloggers not using it at all (Limatius 2019). The somewhat problematic nature of the term within the community is reflected in Example 2 – while the blogger names herself as *curvy*, she makes sure to mention that identifying with the term does not take away her fatness. Similarly, she describes her waist as *small(ish)* instead of merely *small*, and provides justification for why she *might* be classed as having a curvy figure. Describing

the body as *curvy* is performed carefully, while being *fat* is stated as a fact. Thus, common descriptors of bodies that might also be found in women's magazines, for example, are used by the bloggers, but they use them in a way that is in line with the community's norms. *Fat* is not vilified, and the smallness of specific body parts is not idealized.

5.1.2 Innovating new terms

In addition to describing their bodies and body parts with relatively common words such as *fat* or *curvy*, the plus-size fashion bloggers named their bodies using more creative formations, such as wordplay and abbreviations. These more innovative terms included *fatshionista* (2 occurrences), *fatfashionista* (1), *inbetweenie* (2), *bootiful* (1), *boobilicious* (1), *bootylicious* (1), *booby* (3), *chubs* (2), *chubster* (8), *bigfatfatty* (1) and *BBW*, which is an acronym for 'big, beautiful woman'(21). While these terms were notably less common than constructions such as '*fat* + head noun', they are nevertheless worth discussing in the context of constructing identity through naming the body.

Jeffries (2007:70–71) noted a tendency in women's magazines 'for people to be identified by the body part under consideration' – for example, women were equated to their vagina or breasts ('Whether you're big, small, pointy, saggy or pert, chances are you wish your boobs were different (*Bliss*)'). According to Jeffries (2007:71), this practice was unique to discussions of either sexual or reproductive body parts, or weight, which she states is 'usually considered to be a factor in (sexual) attractiveness'. Thus, in women's magazines, women were only equated to body parts with sexual connotations, and not other parts of their body.

Some of the innovative terms in the blog corpus display a similar pattern – they are related to traditionally sexualized body parts, such as breasts (*boobilicious*) and buttocks (*bootiful*). The term *BBW* also has sexual connotations. While not explicitly linked to any particular sexual body part, *BBW* is a term widely used in the porn industry and to convey sexual attraction to women with larger bodies.

3) You should all be aware by now that I am on a mission to prove that **short, fat, old birds** can be **bootiful** too.

In Example 3, the blogger names herself as a *short, old, fat bird*, who despite these presumably negative characteristics, can still be *bootiful*. Here, we see that the discourse on bodies and beauty that is constructed in the blogs is still affected by hegemonic ideas of what constitutes an attractive – and thus socially acceptable – woman. The blogger's statement implies, for example, that older women are usually not considered beautiful (or sexual). Moreover, while the term *bootiful* may be merely intended as humorous word play, it nevertheless connects the notion of beauty to a traditionally sexualized part of a woman's body. The blogger's language use highlights her agency, since she states her 'mission' to defy hegemonic beauty standards, but at the same time it contributes to the discourse where all women, regardless of age and size, should strive to be as 'beautiful' as possible.

In addition to naming the body after sexualized body parts, there were also creative word formations in the data that stemmed from the most popular descriptor in the corpus, *fat*. Some of them were amalgamations of *fat* and *fashion*, like *fatshionista*, which has an established role in the language of the community (Gurrieri & Cherrier 2013; Scaraboto & Fischer 2013), while others appeared to intensify the notion of fatness (*bigfatfatty*). Some, namely *chubs* and *chubster*, are plays on another descriptor related to fatness, *chubby*:

4) For **us chubs** it really is hit and miss in there, although they go up to a size '20' and yes I mean a '20' some garments are more generous than others.

In an earlier study, I noted an element of casualness and humour in the ways in which the bloggers referred to the bodies of other plus-size women, perhaps in order to highlight the fact that using words traditionally considered as derogatory was not intended as an insult (Limatius 2017). While the use of *fat* and other terms that highlight fatness instead of 'curves' in a positive, reclaimed sense was com-

mon within the community, some bloggers preferred more 'neutral' language (e.g. the term *plus-size*) (Limatius 2020). Some women may interpret specific words that refer to body parts as derogatory while others experience them as empowering (Ho & Tsang 2005:527). In Example 4, the blogger describes a particular group through identifying a shared bodily feature – namely, 'chubbiness'. Such language use appears playful and comparable to the use of nicknames, which, according to Pilcher (2016:771–772) can signal affection and belonging. However, one needs to be aware of the possible different interpretations of naming practices within the group in order to successfully create feelings of community and belonging instead of hierarchies and divisions.

5.2 Naming the self as a member of a group

While many of the practices of naming and describing the body in the corpus were focused on the body of the individual blogger herself, the data also contained references to plus-size women as a group with shared bodily characteristics. In such examples, the blogger was named as one member of the group, and the bodies and body parts of other bloggers or blog readers were also referenced. In this section, I discuss three features of the bloggers' language that were of particular relevance for constructing the in-group: the use of inclusive pronouns, the use of the word *fat* as a noun, and naming the blogging community as a shared space.

5.2.1 Pronoun use

As demonstrated in Examples 3 and 4 in the previous section, the bloggers often identified themselves as a part of a larger collective of people that was named after shared characteristics, like *short, fat, old birds* in Example 3 or *us chubs* in Example 4. This type of language use can be seen to construct social identity (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz 1982; Tajfel 1982), as it identifies the individual bloggers as members of a specific social group and implies closeness or attachment to

this group (Benwell & Stokoe 2006:25). One typical way of establishing and naming this in-group is via pronoun use:

5) I am really trying to wear more skirts and I find that pencil skirts and midi skirts can be dressed up and down and [they are] very flattering for **us plus sized girls**.

Jeffries (2007:70) refers to the readers and writers of women's magazines' articles 'splitting up the world' based on particular bodily characteristics. In Example 5, identifying as plus-size creates such a division – there is an implication that women who are not plus-size (i.e. not part of 'us') need not worry about their skirts being 'flattering'. By naming *us plus sized girls* as a group, the blogger simultaneously identifies her own body in relation to particular fashions, and offers advice to her readers on how to dress in a 'flattering' way. A similar practice was also present in Jeffries' (2007:69) data from women's magazines, where answers to readers' letters typically featured the use of the first-person plural pronouns *we* and *us*. The advisors included themselves in the same category as the letter-writers in order to construct generalizations that presented the writers and their bodies as 'normal', and thus acceptable.

5.2.2 *Fat* as a noun

Another way of naming oneself as a member of a group in the corpus was reflected in the use of the word *fat* as a noun instead of an adjective. This practice, interestingly, occurred particularly when the word was used in its plural form *fats* (21 occurrences) in reference to a group:

6) Even better would be a girly get together with **all my fabulous fats** and I may have found the perfect place.

In Example 6, the blogger labels a particular group with the noun phrase *all my fabulous fats*. The expression is affectionate, referring to a group of friends, all of whom happen to be fat. Yet, fatness is seen as such a defining shared characteristic that the group is named

after it. According to Jeffries (2007:72), 'the use of a nominal form indicates a characteristic which is represented as more permanent and intrinsic to the person than the adjective'. Jeffries (ibid.) theorizes that as nouns can be considered labels, they have a starker effect than adjectives – nouns are 'likely to sound like a categorization', while an adjective 'simply notes a particular characteristic'. In light of this view, we can consider labelling oneself as *a fat* to be a stronger and more permanent marker of identity as describing the self or others with the adjective *fat*:

> 7) I don't want to drive a wedge between **the super-fats**, **the middlies** and **the barely-fats**.

In Example 7, we are clearly dealing with a categorization, since the blogger is referring to specific groups of *fats* who can be placed at different points on a spectrum of fatness. Thus, the social identity of being one of *the fats* appears divided into smaller groups of people based on their 'level' of fatness. People who are slightly overweight might be considered as what the blogger refers to as *barely-fats* – they do not fit the ideal beauty standards maintained by the fashion industry and mainstream media and may participate in practices of fashion blogging and blog reading to find alternative representations. However, the challenges they face are different than the challenges of those who are at the higher end of the fat spectrum. These people are not just marginalized in terms of fashion, but likely face discrimination on several levels of their everyday lives. Moreover, for the *super-fats*, finding fashionable clothing may be virtually impossible (Gurrieri & Cherrier 2013:279). Acknowledging distinctions between different groups by naming them, the blogger displays her awareness about such issues, and identifies the plus-size blogosphere as a diverse community.

5.2.3 Blogs as an in-group space

Another way of highlighting groupness in the data was naming the space where the plus-size blogging community interacted. The blog-

ging community was typically named as an empowering space that the bloggers had 'discovered' or 'joined':

8) I am not sure how long I have been using the word fat for, but I've certainly been using it a lot more since I started blogging and joined **the 'fatosphere'** (or the **#psbloggers crew**, hehe).

Again, the terms used by the blogger in Example 8 are rooted in the common descriptors for women's bodies – the *fatosphere* contains the word *fat*, while *#psbloggers crew* is derived from *plus-size bloggers*. *Fatosphere*, like *fatshionista*, is a well-established part of the lingo of plus-size fashion bloggers. Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013:279) define the *fatosphere* as

> A loosely interconnected network of online resources aimed at creating a safe space where individuals can counter fat prejudice, resist misconceptions of fat, engage in communal experiences and promote positive understandings of fat.

They also refer to the bloggers creating an alternative space for resisting mainstream beauty ideals and constructing new ones (Gurrieri & Cherrier 2013:283). It is meaningful that this place is named, and that the term *fat* is incorporated into its name. Referring to the network of blogs and the communal ties formed between bloggers as the *fatosphere* marks it as a space specifically for those with fat bodies. Similarly, the use of *#psbloggers crew* limits the community to those who use the hashtag #psbloggers on social media in order to identify themselves with the group of bloggers who all share the characteristic of being plus-size. In terms of social identity, naming the group after bodily characteristics separates the in-group from the others. Through such language use, the bloggers demonstrate that the space occupied by the group is not for everyone.

5.3 Naming the self as different from others

Finally, as establishing difference between oneself and the other is also a relevant practice in identity construction (Grad & Martín Rojo 2008:12), I examined words that the bloggers used when referring to women who were not plus-size. The three words that were investigated were *thin* (108 occurrences), *slim* (129 occurrences, including verbs *to slim/slim down*), and *skinny* (93 occurrences).

5.3.1 The usage of *thin*

In the corpus, the word *thin* was typically contrasted with *fat* – women were divided into fat women and thin women, and people more generally into fat people and thin people. This was a very concrete example of the bloggers 'splitting up the world' (Jeffries 2007:70) based on features of the body. The words could also be used to describe opposite ends of a spectrum of bodies:

> 9) All bodies are good bodies – **thin and fat and everything in between**.

In Example 9, the blogger contributes to a typical body positivity discourse, evaluating *all bodies* as 'good'. Here, *fat* and *thin* are named as the extremes, while all other types of bodies are generalized into *everything in between*. Although *thin* is positioned as the opposite of *fat*, neither of these terms are connotated negatively.

However, there were also instances of negative evaluation of thin bodies in the corpus. In Jeffries' (2007:97) data from women's magazines, the discussion on body parts was often 'concerned with what is wrong with them', which resulted in frequent use of intensifying adjectives that evaluated these body parts negatively. A similar evaluation was present in the blog data in the context of *thin*, as intensifying adjectives were often used to modify the term. I found instances of *very thin*, *rail thin*, *extremely thin*, *unhealthily thin*, *exceptionally thin*, and *really thin* in the data. By modifying the word in such a way, the bloggers constructed *thin* as problematic and not something to aspire to:

10) I don't think that **being unhealthily thin** is a goal to aspire to and I'm certainly not wishing to be **really thin**.

In Example 10, the blogger talks about thinness in connection with a discussion on weight loss. As I discovered in an earlier study, plus-size fashion bloggers who were in the process of losing weight often provided justifications for it, for example by stating health-related concerns (Limatius 2017). In this way, the bloggers strove to prove to their readers that they were still body positive and had not simply succumbed to the pressures of hegemonic beauty ideals. However, at the same time, this type of reasoning contributed to the dominating discourse of fat as unhealthy. Example 10 demonstrates another way of making weight-loss more acceptable within the community – a reassurance that the blogger does not 'wish to be *really thin*'. This type of language use also contributes to ideas of weight and health as inescapably connected by emphasizing that being *too* thin is not 'healthy'. Thus, the blogger problematizes thinness in the same way the mainstream media typically does with fatness.

5.3.2 The usage of *slim*

Out of the three terms investigated, *slim* appeared to have the most positive connotations in the data. It was used to describe *friends*, as well as more general groups, such as *people*, *women*, *girls*, *readers*, and *models*. Nevertheless, a difference between *slim* and *fat* was still emphasized:

11) Before I begin, I'd like to give examples to **the slim readers amongst us** to what seeking healthcare whilst fat is like.

In Example 11, the blogger simultaneously acknowledges *slim readers* as part of her blog's following, and draws a boundary between the slim and the fat. There is an assumption that those readers who are slim have not experienced prejudice from healthcare professionals, while those who are fat share this experience. Again, people – here, blog readers – are divided into two named groups, one consisting of

insiders (*us*) and the other of outsiders (those *amongst us*) who need more information in order to understand the in-group.

While all bloggers in the data identified as plus-size, some of them also used *slim* in self-description when referring to particular body parts in contrast with the rest of one's body:

> 12) I'm **apple shaped with slim legs**.

Jeffries (2007:94) noted a contrast between the use of 'big' adjectives that premodified personal nouns and 'small' adjectives that were 'more likely to function as the object of a possessive verb such as *have*' (emphasis added) in women's magazines. For instance, people were described as 'bigger-chested' (pre-modifier), but as '[having] small breasts' (object of a possessive verb). According to Jeffries (ibid.), the former use 'indicates a more intrinsic feature of the body than the mere 'possession' of small breasts'. Something similar can be noted in Example 12 – *apple shaped* is a more prominent feature of the blogger than her possession of *slim legs*. A body part could be named as *slim* in contrast to other parts of the body, but the slimness of these individual body parts did not shape the identity of the blogger in the same way as fatness did.

5.3.3 The usage of *skinny*

The connotations of otherness were the most obvious in the references to *skinny* in the corpus. A skinny body was portrayed as something foreign and unattainable by the bloggers:

> 13) I always felt that the spa was a place for **the skinny and beautiful** and **my extra large backside** was not a welcome presence amongst them.

Naming a group of people that the writer cannot identify with as *the skinny and beautiful* links these two features together and creates an implication they go hand in hand (i.e. those who are not skinny cannot be beautiful). At the same time, the blogger reduces herself to a specific body part (Jeffries 2007:70); namely, her *extra large backside*.

The otherness of *skinny* is also present in the next example, where a blogger talks about 'feeling skinny':

14) I went home, despite looking heavily pregnant, **feeling skinny in a size medium**, haha.

In Example 14, the blogger acknowledges *skinny* as something that is not a reality for her, but rather a feeling associated with wearing oversized clothing. A similar way of speaking about *fat* is a common phenomenon in everyday English – it is not unusual for a straight-size person to state they are 'feeling fat' as a euphemism for feeling unattractive, uncomfortable, or bloated. In the same way as most people who use such language do not actually identify as fat, the blogger in Example 14 makes it clear she does not consider herself to be *skinny* by describing herself as *looking heavily pregnant*. Rather, using the word is her way of naming the feeling of fitting into fashion smaller than her usual clothing size.

Finally, *skinny* was also found in the context of insults directed at smaller women in the corpus. While this type of use was very uncommon overall, there were a few instances where *skinny* had offensive connotations:

15) I agree with you about **these skinny birds** saying how disgusting it is to be fat, but they should remember real men like meat it is only dogs that like bones. xx (comment in a blog post)

We can consider *these skinny birds* in Example 15 in comparison to *all my fabulous fats* in Example 6. According to Jeffries (2007:81), the use of demonstratives is significant – there is a 'psychological distancing' involved especially in the use of distal deictic terms, whereas possessive adjectives were used about more positive features of bodies in Jeffries' data. In addition, it is notable that here the nickname *bird* appears to be connotated differently compared to 'short, fat, old birds' who 'can be bootiful too' in Example 3. The same nickname can be affectionate when used in reference to plus-size women, and

distancing when used in reference to thinner women, who appear as the 'outsiders'[3] (see Pilcher 2016:771–772). It is also notable that the commenter in Example 15 refers to male approval as a defining factor for 'good' bodies. Again, while fatness is constructed as a quality that is not inherently negative, the commentary nevertheless maintains hegemonic discourses on gender, sexuality and size.

6. Conclusions

The UK-based fashion bloggers in the data constructed representations of the plus-size body both through reclaiming existing, traditionally negatively connotated terms and through innovating new terms. Both of these practices demonstrate that the plus-size fashion bloggers are aware of the agency they have in affecting their representation through language. The bloggers take advantage of the blogs as their own space, where they can challenge and dismantle discourses that traditionally construct the fat body as an inherently 'bad' body. They also utilize naming and describing the body for community-building purposes, by showing solidarity towards others who share their bodily characteristics, and including themselves in the same social group as their presumed readership based on the shared experience of living in a fat body. Thus, words that are used to describe the fat body have different connotative features in the blogs than they do in mainstream fashion media.

Although describing one's own body (or similar bodies) was more common in the data, highlighting the differences between particular groups of people through naming and describing was also significant in terms of identity construction. The analysis of how the bloggers named other people and bodies as *thin*, *slim*, or *skinny* revealed

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[3] It is worth noting that the derogative use of skinny in Example 15 occurs in a comment from a blog reader, and while the commenter claims to state their agreement with the blogger, they are not quoting the original blogger word for word. The majority of the instances of derogative language use towards smaller women – or indeed, offensive language in general – appeared in the commenting section instead of the actual blog texts.

a division between us and them – the fat and the thin. While thin bodies could have positive connotations – for example, they could be beautiful bodies, or the bodies of friends and allies – their position as outsiders (those who are not part of *us*, but exist *among* us) was nevertheless present. In addition, there were more negative connotative features, such as the connection between being *too* thin and being unhealthy or unattractive.

As LeBesco (2001:78) has stated, the process of reclaiming fatness through language use is not without its challenges, because new discourses are still bound to construct hierarchies and boundaries between groups of people based on their bodily characteristics:

> However, I am aware that the process of gaining the upper hand, or reconstituting fat identity to change its current status as spoiled, will in turn produce its own subset of unthinkable, unliveable, and abject bodies. Subjects are constituted by the processes of excluding and abjecting, so it is necessary to reflect on how these processes shape fat identity.

The analysis presented in this study hopefully sheds some light onto such processes of shaping the fat identity. The plus-size fashion blogosphere, as illustrated by the language use of its members, is a space with great variety. While the use of *fat* in general appears frequent – specifically in its non-derogatory, reclaimed sense – we can also observe the presence of different sub-categories of fat bodies: *curvy, plus-size(d)*, and *apple-shaped*, *super-fats* and *barely-fats*, to name a few. Bloggers can feel 'fabulous' because of their fat bodies, or despite them. The fat body, while unifying the group through shared experience, is approached in different ways by the group members. This type of variety also inevitably leads to the exclusion of some identities in particular contexts, as LeBesco (2001:78) warned.

Finally, it is important to note that despite the potential that blogging has for producing counter-discourse and agency, there are still features in the blog texts that contribute to maintaining hegemonic discourses on bodies and beauty. Although the bloggers construct different representations of 'right' kind of bodies compared to Jeffries'

(2007) data from women's magazines, these ideas are not completely absent. While thinness is not valued in the same way it was in women's magazines, the language used in blogs still reflects the idea that it is valuable for women to be beautiful and desirable. Discussing clothing that is 'flattering' on a plus-size body and mentioning 'feeling skinny' when fitting into smaller clothing than usual, for example, illustrate that the mainstream beauty standards are not completely absent from the blogs. In addition, the connotative features of some of the creative descriptors for the body such as 'bootiful' contain a problematic assumption that a 'good' or 'acceptable' (female) body is a body that is sexually attractive (to men). Due to the presence of such discursive features, plus-size fashion bloggers and their ways of constructing the body still need to be examined critically, much like the body positive advertising campaigns that make claims of inclusivity and diversity, but often end up featuring models that only represent a very narrow idea of the plus-size body (Czerniawski 2021).

One central limitation of the present study pertains to the data. The original blog corpus was compiled in 2015, and since then, both blogs as a genre and the plus-size fashion industry have gone through significant changes. As Czerniawski (2021:3) points out, social media has changed the ways in which people consume fashion, and this has also resulted in new types of fashion-related content creation. Short-video format content produced on TikTok and Instagram Reels, for example, has become popular among body positive activists and plus-size fashion influencers. As these platforms facilitate viral content, they also provide the content creators with a broader and more diverse audience. All of these changes in content creation potentially affect the representation of marginalized bodies, which is why it is important to study the naming and describing of bodies and body parts in these new social media environments in the future. The present study on fashion blogs, as well as Jeffries' (2007) work on women's magazines, can function as useful starting points for such investigations.

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