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Crossing The Troll Bridge - The Framing Of Fat Bodies On Social Media

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**CROSSING THE TROLL BRIDGE – THE FRAMING OF FAT BODIES ON SOCIAL
MEDIA**

by

AMANDA LEVITT

THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

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Advisor

Date

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to all of the people who found community online and continue to believe we can build a better world, even when the harassment and violence becomes too much.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Heather Dillaway, for her continued guidance and support throughout all of my scholarly pursuits. She is by far the best brain wrangler I've had in my academic career and has continued to push me to do my best work regardless of where I started. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Krista Brumley and Dr. Zachary Brewster, for taking part in this thesis and constantly supporting my research interests throughout my time as a graduate student. Furthermore, I would like to thank the Department of Sociology for their support of my research interests and my activism work outside of the graduate program.

It goes without saying that I could not have done this thesis without the work of my fellow moderators at *This is Thin Privilege*. When I began the data collection process they were more than supportive of the project and have continued to support me while I took a back seat as a moderator, only helping when I had free time. They both are fearless and continue to remind me why this work is so important.

I cannot say enough about how much this work has been guided, crafted and built by the community I've found through my activism work within fat liberation. Fat community has been the place I've grown from a fat teenager into a fat adult. I could not have completed this work without the labor of all of those people who came before me or the people who continue to give so much of themselves on a daily basis to dream of a world where all bodies and people are allowed to thrive equally. I continue to be in awe of all of you.

Lastly, thank you to my mom for being my constant support and reminding me why we often have to choose the hard path even when the easy one held the illusion of being less painful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
LIST OF TABLES	vi
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW	1
CYBER BULLYING	2
MOVING OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL YARD	3
TROLLING	4
DOMINANT FRAMINGS OF FATNESS	8
A FAT STUDIES APPROACH	11
CONTRIBUTIONS	15
CHAPTER 2 RESEARCH METHODS	18
DATA SOURCE	18
DATA COLLECTION	19
DATA ANALYSIS	20
RESEARCHER ROLE	23
CHAPTER 3 RESULTS	25
CONSTRUCTING FATNESS	25
<i>Fat people as the cause of fatness</i>	30
<i>Fatness as disease</i>	36
COMMON TACTICS WITHIN MESSAGES	40
<i>Destabilizing online rhetoric around fatness</i>	46
DETECTING THE TROLLS	50

CHAPTER 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	57
WHY DOES THIS MATTER?	59
LIMITATIONS	61
FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS	61
APPENDIX	63
LIST OF CODES	63
REFERENCES	68
ABSTRACT	76
AUTOBOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT	77

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 – Themes Found: Messages making claims about fatness	26
Table 2 – Theme Found with Individual Blame	28
Table 3 – Themes Found with Sickness and Disease	29
Table 4 – Themes Found: Tactics	41
Table 5 – Statement Tactic and Number of other tactics embedded	43
Table 6 – Themes Found: Trolls	51

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past two decades the Internet has become a central force within our social world. Our lives have moved from the physical world to a digital landscape where we communicate and interact with other people using social media platforms that have created a new dimension to the way our society functions. In this new world, every day, 890 million people log onto Facebook and 500 million tweets are published (Facebook 2015; Twitter 2015). While this new dimension of our social reality gives us an enhanced ability to communicate in a way we never have before, the very social issues we see in our physical world are reflected and reproduced online. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the dominant understanding of fatness online and how people use social media to reinforce these messages. Using content analysis of data drawn from a fat positive Tumblr blog, I will look at how dominant narratives about fat people are continually reinforced by online commenters who challenge the mission of online websites that seek to humanize fat people and fight against fat stigma.

Within the last decade, bullying has gained more public awareness and focus from researchers, policy makers and concerned parents to put an end to the violence many young people face in school. Due to the significant amount of children and youth who experience bullying, a sense of normalization of this behavior dominates, leaving it largely overlooked by many:

Up to three-quarters of young adolescents experience bullying (such as rumors, name calling, or public ridicule), and up to one-third report more extreme experiences of coercion or inappropriate touching. (Aalsma and Brown 2008: 101)

While many believe bullying is simply part of growing up, research shows the long-term impact that is caused through social isolation and repeated victimization.

Although research demonstrates that bullying is related to social power, much of the research looks at the influence it has on the victims. Tactics that are used include physical intimidation, verbal harassment, spreading rumors, and lying (Donoghue et al. 2015). Aalsma and Brown (2008) found students who were bullied are more likely to be depressed, suicidal, and have low self-esteem. Students are also more likely to skip school and have lower grades than their peers, since they do not feel they are able to get help from adults to stop the treatment (Donoghue et al. 2015; Aalsma and Brown 2008). With the added reach of social media, these behaviors are also happening outside of physical boundaries of school environments. Social media has enabled bullies to victimize their targets far more frequently and in more intensive and seemingly anonymous ways.

CYBER BULLYING

Social media has a profound influence on children, youth, and adults who put much of their lives online. While it has allowed for people to be more connected to each other than ever before, it has also increased the likelihood that they would become the target of cyber bullying. Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder and Lattanner (2014) find three main similarities between on and offline bullying: “it is an act of aggression; it occurs among individuals among whom there is a power imbalance; and the behavior is often repeated.” The perpetrators of cyber bullying use anonymity and the ability to target individuals outside of the constraints of school hours to their advantage. Furthermore, they are not limited to where they post information about individuals

online and the amount of people it reaches. It gives them a heightened ability to cause harm with cyber bullying that isn't found offline.

Cyberbullying tactics are similar to bullying offline with bullies using harassment, rumor spreading, and lying. Students in grades 6 through 9 report that specific characteristics made certain individuals more likely to be targeted through cyberbullying,

In the open-ended question, approximately 95 percent of both male and female respondents from all age ranges and across all represented ethnic backgrounds claimed that students are more likely to be cyber bullied because of specific attributes such as special needs, academic abilities, un-popularity, physical appearance, physical and mental disabilities, unfashionable clothing and ethnicity.

(Cassidy, Jackson and Brown 2009: 7)

Students also respond that sites where bullying occurs most frequently include text messages and through email. Other research shows the most frequent site of bullying occurs in online chat rooms, text messages from computers, through email and on online bulletin boards (Patchin and Hinduja 2006). All these online sites allow for a far larger audience and ability to target an individual than they would have offline.

MOVING OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL YARD

Both on and offline, bullying reflects a larger system of conflict between individuals that goes far beyond schools. Adults also engage in bullying behavior in similar ways that children do within other social spaces. The difference is that scholars frame these interactions through a lens of social or structural inequality, noting how systems of oppression influence the daily interactions of people. Scholars focusing on workplace bullying argue that it should be

understood as structural and interpersonal forms of violence that also occur outside work (Berlingieri 2015; Soylu and Sheehy-Skeffington 2015).

Within the workplace, bullying is more likely to occur between coworkers and supervisors when an employee possesses a marginalized identity (Roscigno, Lopez and Hodson 2009). These power imbalances are more likely to happen in workplace cultures that are dysfunctional and allow for greater conflict. Soylu and Sheehy-Skeffington (2015: 1121) found workers used bullying tactics to achieve greater social power,

Respondents portrayed bullying used either as a calculated means of getting rid of unwanted employees, or as a subtle, but no less pernicious, means of achieving the dominance of one sociocultural worldview over another. Thus emerges a picture of bullying as a manifestation of processes of sociopolitical conflict and inequality, and, in turn, a mechanism through which such inequality is maintained and reproduced.

While these interactions are offline, we see similar behaviors in research on bullying among adolescents that reflect systems of power within their society. Similarly, cyber bullying occurs online and reflects how adolescents experience it in social situations like the workplace (Privitera and Campbell 2009). One main difference between the workplace or school settings is that the anonymity the Internet provides further advantages people who engage in cyber bullying by allowing them to target people they don't know offline.

TROLLING

The growth of social media has allowed for individuals and communities to become the targets of online harassment. Many believe online harassment is simply another form of cyber

bullying, but there are distinct online behaviors that certain individuals online engage in that is often defined as trolling. Since the mid-1990s, when trolling is thought to have begun, people have used the Internet to harass or bait other people into endless debate online (Phillips 2015). Over the last 10 years with the growth of social media the actions of trolls has become more visible due to the ability of people who have been targeted being able to speak out about their harassment and the heightened awareness of trolls.

Trolling, by definition, comes from a fishing tactic where fishermen lure fish to their bait by pulling the line behind their boat (Herring et al. 2002). Online this originally meant a troll would purposely bait other people into an endless debate or create a spectacle as a fun or playful attempt to get attention (Phillips 2015). In her book, *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, Whitney Phillips notes the origins of a subculture of trolling has not just resulted in targeting individuals but creating major media coverage over things they do online. Most recently this has resulted in media coverage over fake hashtags, which are used to denote a specific topic with a link on twitter, started by trolls like #EndFathersDay and #FatShamingWeek. Both were met with major online websites writing articles in response to the mass outrage they caused and fueled by the fake online accounts trolls made on twitter to make it appear like the tags were real (Broderick 2014; Okun 2013).

Today, most trolling does not result in major media coverage; instead, it occurs most frequently within online community forums like Reddit or 4chan where trolls find specific individuals to target and harass. The behavior has been shown to still reflect some of the original intent of people who self-identifying trolls, with them finding pleasure in the anonymity and ability to target others online (Buckels, Trapnell and Paulhus 2014). Regardless of how they frame their actions, they still have a propensity to most frequently target marginalized

communities in ways that are similar to literature on cyber bullying and reflect dominant ideas about those communities (Phillips 2015).

Epistemological issues occur when we try to broaden the discourse around trolling and relate it to the online harassment that occurs online through cyber bullying. The term ‘troll’ has been redefined online to include any form of online harassment from individuals who may not identify it as trolling but are still targeting individuals due to their identities or due to a power imbalance. Buckels et al. (2014) finds that regardless of whether someone identified as a troll or as someone engaging in cyber bullying, they still were more likely to exhibit similar characteristics they called “Dark Triad Traits,” which included Machiavellianism, sadism and narcissism. Individuals who self-identify as people who had trolled or cyber bullied in the past were engaging in online behavior that included harassment, threats of violence and stalking online.

Individuals who are targeted by these patterns of behavior often have similar characteristics. Most of the people targeted online through cyber harassment are women.

Examples of cyber gender harassment show it routinely involves threats of rape and other forms of sexual violence. It often reduces targeted women to sexual objects and includes humiliating comments that reinforce gender-constructed stereotypes, such as “[w]ho would let this woman out of the kitchen?” and “why don’t you make yourself useful and go have a baby.” The online abuse can be “more vicious” if targeted women are “lesbian and/or ...not white.” (Citron 2008: 380)

Like sexuality and race, other identities become markers for being targeted by online harassment. Ability or disability, class, body size and gender identity all contribute to the level of online

harassment individuals experience online. While this may be considered fun for individuals doing the trolling, those targeted are not able to differentiate from someone purposely trying to bait them into endless debate and hostile hate speech that is often directed towards them.

Entire communities of people are often the target of regular trolling or cyber bullying. One of those communities is a fat¹ positive community that expands across multiple social media platforms, including Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook. Within these community spaces center discussions on the experiences of fat people, body image, and discrimination at structural or institutional level, while allowing for a sense of community that many members are unable to find offline in their daily lives. It has become commonplace to deal with harassment and trolling when participating in these spaces. They often seek to frame fat people's experiences as individual problems due to lifestyle choices as opposed to structural, institutional and cultural problems, while mimicking the way people treat fat individuals offline.

The purpose of this research is to analyze the behavior of trolls and cyber bullies who target fat positive spaces online. Specifically, I identify the themes and tactics deployed through online harassment within fat positive spaces through the collection and analysis of messages from people who oppose these communities. I ask three questions: First, what are the perceptions of fatness within these messages and do they reflect dominant discourse about fat people? Second, what tactics, threats of assault, intimidation, trying to debate, etc., are used within the messages? Third, can we identify the difference between individuals who are trolling and individuals who

¹ This paper will utilize the word "fat" as opposed to terms such as "overweight" or "obese" as a signifier of personal identity or description of the body and not a manifestation of disease (LeBesco, 2004).

are just commenting? The answers to these questions will help us to understand how the messages frame or think about fatness but also how those perceptions change depending on the level of hostility or abuse the messages include. This will also allow us to see if individuals who are truthfully “trolling” are behaving differently from other individuals.

DOMINANT FRAMINGS OF FATNESS

The contemporary construction of fatness in the United States dates back to the early 1900s, but it was not until the late 1990s that our perception of fatness drastically changed. In 1998 the National Institute of Health redefined the categories of the Body Mass Index chart making 29 million Americans defined as “overweight” overnight when they lowered the cut off of the “normal” weight category from 27.8 to 25 (Squires 1998; Saguy 2013). The redefinition of BMI charts has been controversial and debated by scientists showing it does not reflect a significant change in mortality between “normal” and “overweight” categories (Flegal et al. 2005). This artificially raised the number of Americans who were part of the “Obesity Epidemic” and changed the discourse around fatness into a major health crisis.

Public officials inflamed the fear of the “obesity” crisis by shaping how fatness has been constructed in our society. During his tenure as Surgeon General, Richard Cormona continually referred to fatness as the “terror within” exacerbating public fears around the “obesity epidemic” (Page 2006). In the beginning of the Let’s Move! Campaign, Michelle Obama cited the epidemic as a risk to our national security, citing a report published by retired military generals titled “Too Fat to Fight” that the epidemic limited the capable candidates for military service and could significantly impact the ability to protect the nation against terrorism (Jaslow 2012; Allen 2010). These statements are in conflict research that shows there has not been a significant change in

children who are “obese” or “overweight” since the late 90s (Ogden et al. 2002; Ogden et al. 2014). Their statements continued to bring fatness into the public consciousness by claiming fatness is a social problem that is no longer an individual problem but one that harms the country as a whole.

The public consciousness around fatness has been pushed through the perception of fatness in medicine, where researchers and medical professionals try to find ways to treat fat bodies. In 2013, “obesity” was defined as a disease by the *American Medical Association*, thus, solidify the way the medical community treats fat bodies and brings new avenues for treatment through more access to health insurance (Stoner and Cornwall 2014). Doctors and researchers met this decision with significant skepticism, noting that the very definition of disease is hard to establish, as there are biological and social factors that contribute to individual health (Boyd 2000; Scully 2004; Rossi 2013). By defining fatness as a disease, the AMA highlights the precariousness of the definition and underlines how this decision was directed related to treating fatness, not about whether fat bodies are the biological source of health problems.

The dominant framing of fat people in the media is as a public health crisis, where their bodies are defined as inherently pathological or diseased. Organizations like the Center for Disease Control have pushed this frame by promoting measures and funding research that further documents the health risks that are correlated with increased body mass (Kwan 2009). Research shows scientific journalism sensationalizes studies on weight by oversimplify the relationship between weight and health and implying the facts presented are indisputable (Saguy and Almeling 2008; Campos et al. 2006). Even when research shows that fat people are able to be metabolically healthy and fit, Saguy and Almeling found scientific journalism minimized these findings by focusing on the diseases commonly correlated with fatness. Discourse around fatness

is further compounded by how scientific research is presented by the media as common knowledge, which makes research that contrasts earlier findings harder to change public perception about fat people (Boero 2006).

Normative beliefs about fat people have a direct impact on their everyday lives and the weight based discrimination that they experience. The discrimination that fat people face can often be traced back to the overwhelming public health frame, which emphasizes individual behaviors as the root cause of body size (Saguy and Almeling 2008). Research by Saguy and Gruys (2010) shows a contrast between how individuals with eating disorders are portrayed as young white thin women who have been harmed by the societal standards placed on their bodies, while fat people are blamed for over eating and a lack of control. Eriksen and Manke (2011) found both adults and children connected weight to health status, with the children specifically believing fatness was deeply related to overconsumption and lack of activity.

The emphasis on individual behavior is often gendered as a feminine practice in the media, with fat women considered failures as caregivers for their children, families and communities due to the framing of eating as a form of nurturing (De Brún et al. 2013; Woolhouse et al. 2011). Furthermore, the media is far more likely to target communities of color by tying the failure to keep children thin to a community's responsibility to properly nurture their children (Saguy and Almeling 2008). This builds on a narrative that focuses on fatness as proof of a lack of parental responsibility through poor food choices. The emphasis on personal responsibility within the media diverts attention away from structural or institutional factors that contribute to the health all people in our society, while also ignoring how stigma and discrimination impact the lives of fat people.

A FAT STUDIES APPROACH

There have been significant strides over the last few decades in research about the experiences of fat people and how they are framed within the media due to rhetoric surrounding the obesity epidemic. Public perception of fat bodies due to media portrayals of fat people has significantly contributed to dominant narratives on fatness. The way fat bodies are used as the embodiment of an epidemic by major news media has been coined as the “headless fatty” with media reports showing fat people without their heads,

As Headless Fatties, the body becomes symbolic: we are there but we have no voice, not even a mouth in a head, no brain, no thoughts or opinions. Instead we are reduced and dehumanised as symbols of cultural fear: the body, the belly, the arse, food. There’s a symbolism, too, in the way that the people in these photographs have been beheaded. It’s as though we have been punished for existing, our right to speak has been removed by a prurient gaze, our headless images accompany articles that assume a world without people like us would be a better world altogether (Cooper 2007: <http://charlottecooper.net/publishing/digital/headless-fatties-01-07>).

This imagery is further compounded by the media emphasis on disease and sickness that is associated with fatness. Cooper’s (2007) creation of the term “headless fatty” is based on media reports that show fat people without their heads when reporting on the epidemic, which she believes contributes to the dehumanization of fat people. While social justice organizations, such as the National Organization to Advance Fat Acceptance, have pushed for the identification of weight diversity as a normative form of embodiment most media portrayals of fat people, when they are not headless bodies, show their bodies as a project that needs to be worked on through

weight loss (Backstrom 2012). Shows like the *Biggest Loser*, a weight loss competition show, and TLC's *My 600-lb Life*, chronicling the lives of super fat people, only show fat bodies in a negative light and only show people in a positively once they lose weight. Fat bodies are shown the sole source of all of the participants' problems and the one thing keeping them from fully participating in society.

The body framed as a project, something to be worked on to no longer be fat, is consistently attached to the need to manage or overcome the shame that fatness is shown as intrinsically tied to in the media (Martin 2000). The importance placed on fat people to lose weight is further compounded by the framing of weight as a public health concern and the dramatization of research studies about obesity when written about in the media (Saguy and Almeling 2008; Boero 2006). On the shows mentioned above, the fear of death and health problems are things fat people are forced to navigate consistently. They shows reflect the way scientific journalism emphasizes the health problems that are associated with fatness, while ignoring or minimizing research that shows fat people can be healthy when engaging in healthy behaviors (Saguy and Almeling 2008).

These body projects and the overall discrimination fat people face are often gendered pressuring fat women's bodies to conform to societal demands. Fat women are more often framed as failures because they take up space, outside of being fleshy and "wiggly," because they do not exemplify daintiness (Gullage 2010; Bordo 1993). Media representations of fat people, through reality television shows like *The Biggest Loser* and *My 600-lb Life* exacerbate the individualized problem of taking up space by showing fat bodies as a failure of self control and self esteem (Sender and Sullivan 2008). This framing of fatness as a failure of wills combines with negative beliefs about fat people as lazy and uneducated (DeJong 1980).

Outside of the representations of fatness through health, fat women move between hyper visibility and invisibility. Fat women face consistent messaging about their bodies as something to be feared and in a transitional state to become the thin person they are inside, because fatness is framed as an affliction to the body not part of it (Kyrola 2004). Dominant narratives about fatness consider fatness as a deviant embodiment. Scholars have shown that the media and individuals believe fatness is the end result of mismanaged care and a lack of control due to the lack of responsibility people take over their bodies (Saguy and Almeling 2008). Fat people are more likely to be characterized unfavorably by others when they believe they are not eating or exercising properly (DeJong, 1980). This emphasis on the lack of control, disease and failure is has a significant influence on how fat people are treated within society.

Over the last three decades researchers have looked at the daily experiences of stigma and discrimination fat people experience. Studies show systemic and institutional forms of weight based discrimination within education, medicine, and the workforce (Puhl and Heuer, 2009; Carr and Friedman 2005). These social institutions vastly limit the access fat individuals have to social and economic power that is similar to the treatment of people on the basis of race, gender and class. Within the workforce income inequality for fat people targets fat women disproportionately more than fat men throughout their entire lifetime, whereas fat men only face a wage gap when they first enter the workforce catching up with thin men over time (Mason 2012).

The medical system has its own barriers for fat people who want to get access to medical care and has a significant impact on the lives of fat people. With fat individuals more likely to live in poverty, they are more likely to face barriers to basic medical care due to a lack of insurance; the implementation of Affordable Care Act in 2014 has helped to mitigate access

(Truong and Sturm 2005). Even with access to medical care fat people avoid doctors' visits due to fear of undressing, being weighed and having conversations about their weight with their doctors (Drury and Lewis 2002). These fears are a reflection of how fat people are taught to think about their bodies but also due to the kind of care they receive. Medical professionals have both implicit and explicit anti-fat attitudes, even among doctors who specialize in "obesity" treatment, along with a lack of respect for their fat patients when compared to thin patients (Huizinga et al. 2009; Sabin, Marini and Nosek 2012; Schwartz et al. 2003)

These anti-fat attitudes translate into not receiving the same treatment as thin patients and having their own care mismanaged through guidelines created to treat patients that ignore weight as a key factor in treating illness. It was not until 2012 when the *Journal of Clinical Oncology* published guidelines for fat cancer patients they were able to have the correct dosage of chemotherapy drugs after studies continued to show fat patients were less likely to survive due to the incorrect dosage they were being given (Griggs et al. 2012). In 2013, when the American Medical Association declared "obesity" a disease, they opened avenues for insurance companies to pay for the treatment of weight but not to create a more stigma free environment for fat individuals to receive quality care (Pollack 2013).

Outside of medicine, research demonstrates that even within organizations or businesses whose customer base are fat or plus sized women, the organizational structure supports a model that privileges thin men in management over the floor workers who are fat women and rarely have the opportunity for advancement (Gruys 2012). This example not only shows the intersecting nature of fat and gender identity but contrasts the privileges that one group has while another faces discrimination. Similarly, thin women have unearned advantage in the workforce when they are not likely to face wage discrimination due to their weight (Mason 2012).

Increasing levels of weight-based discrimination has a direct relationship to the amount of privilege thin people experience. The framework of privilege was first conceptualized in the early 1990s using race and gender as a way to explain privilege as unearned advantages that people with privilege have in contrast to groups who face systemic or institutionally-based discrimination (McIntosh, 1990). While race focused on differences between whiteness and individuals of color, thin privilege contrasts the unearned advantages thin people have compared to fat people.

Fat studies literature has reflected the online activities and rhetoric that are found within fat positive community spaces, challenging dominant framings of fatness. These spaces serve as a way to meet people with similar life experiences but also allow for people to change the way they have been taught to think about their own bodies (Harding and Kirby 2009). Involvement within these online spaces has positive outcomes like improving the health and wellbeing of community members by emphasizing empowerment and wellness without weight loss (Dickins et al. 2011). Many members also contribute to community actions and activism by either contributing to campaigns or starting their own (Pausé 2014). These spaces are often one of the few places where fat people are free to experience life without the fear of body shaming, weight loss talk or the continual messages that tell them they simply shouldn't exist.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This research focuses on the tactics and rhetoric used by commenters on social media when confronted with an alternative discourse that directly challenges the dominant framing of fatness. I aim to contribute empirically and theoretically to our knowledge on how social media users view fatness, how they use social media to disperse their message and the difference

between trolls with other commenters. First, empirically, I aim to add to literature on the dominant discourse surrounding the fat body by using data that reflects a new media space that has not been explored in prior research. By analyzing online media communication, I seek to add to research that has already addressed how the media, medical research and scientific journalism have shaped the dominant narratives about fatness (Boero 2006; Saguy and Almeling 2008).

Second, I aim to contribute to the growing body of literature on trolling and online communication by analyzing how online discourse is used to reinforce dominant narratives about fatness. While there have been contributions to literature about trolling and online abuse within the last few years, this area of researches it is still a relatively new. Furthermore, much of this research has been done in an attempt to understand how the general population uses social media and few studies have specifically looked at how cyber bullying or trolling affects the individuals they target. Empirically, I seek to add to the growing body of literature on online discourse by adding to research on trolling communities and how the internet – via both trolls and other commenters -- also reinforces dominant narratives about marginalized populations (Herring et al. 2002; Phillips 2015).

Theoretically, I hope this research will contextualize how online communication is used to reinforce dominant discourse about fatness and push other social science scholars to contemplate social media as a legitimate space for new data collection and analysis. Research has begun to focus on the presence of fat community spaces online but there are still large gaps within this literature because we have not yet examined how these spaces are maintained, how others enter and affect these spaces, and the burdens community members are faced with once others enter their space (including intense levels of abuse directed at them). I hope to begin to fill that gap by analyzing how online abuse occurs within one of those spaces while also evaluating

how the discourse in this space reflects the literature already available on the construction of fatness in other media and medical venues.

CHAPTER 2 RESEARCH METHODS

For the purpose of this research, I conducted a qualitative content analysis to find themes within the data collected from messages sent to an online fat positive blog. The use of qualitative methods allows for a more thorough and nuanced understanding of the messages or narratives about fat people. I used both open and closed coding techniques to allow themes to emerge from the messages. In this way, my use of content analysis gives voice to the data.

While I could have relied on quantitative methods for this study, I argue that it would not have given the level of analysis that is necessary to grasp the full depth of the content. I collected content from the Tumblr blog *This is Thin Privilege* using messages that were submissions to the blog through the “ask, submit and disqus” (comment section) features available for outside users. Messages were collected if they attempted to disrupt the main objective of the blog.

DATA SOURCE

This is Thin Privilege is a fat positive submission driven blog on the social media website, Tumblr, that covers the experience of fat people to counter the discrimination they face. It began in August 2012, as a fat centric space where users could submit their experiences of fat stigma and discrimination. From the beginning, the blog used McIntosh’s privilege framework to acknowledge the unearned benefits thin people experience due to systemic and institutional fat discrimination. As of August 2016, the blog has a total of 17,469 followers and posts 2-3 submissions a day.

Due to the framework that this blog utilizes, it became a target from well-known trolling websites like Reddit and 4chan, but was also targeted by online users with no affiliation with those websites (Phillips 2015). While I had personally experienced trolling through my own

blog, the amount and systematic nature of the messages *This is Thin Privilege* received was far more frequent than other blogs I've been part of. Unlike individuals who want to be anonymous, many of the people messaged with their identities intact. This data source was chosen due to its large readership, the amount of messages that it received on a daily basis and the ability to analyze a wide variety of beliefs due to the blog's online reach. I return to the relevance of this blog in my conclusions.

DATA COLLECTION

I collected data from May 1, 2013, to May 1, 2014, with a final dataset of 4,200 individual messages. I collected messages as screenshots from three different sources. Messages sent to the blog using the "ask" or question function and the "submission" form were the two main data sources. The third source was from "disqus" comments, a plug-in commenting platform where individuals can leave comments on specific blog posts.

Data were collected for a year to account for two methodological issues. First, this time period was used to counteract my position as an active member in fat community, as I outline below in "researcher role." Second, collecting data over a set time period accounts for outside forces changing the data due to people sending in messages in response to specific posts or something that happened in popular culture. During data collection there were periods where messages increased and decreased, it did not just occur during periods of organized trolling, where trolling websites planned to bombard the blog with messages, but also when a specific post was receiving a lot of pushback. The messages we received each day were never consistent, ranging anywhere from 100 to only a few. If messages were only collected for a short period of time it could drastically change the themes found within the data due to how the messages varied

depending on these outside factors. By collecting over a set period and analyzing a random sample of the dataset it allows for a better analysis of the themes and content within the messages instead of a mass response to a specific issue the blog had addressed.

DATA ANALYSIS

I used a random number generator to create a sample of 500 messages from the original 4,200 that comprised the dataset. I individually numbered each message in the full dataset before 500 messages were randomly selected and analyzed. Main themes within the data were found using open and closed coding. Each message was coded to answer the three main research questions before I went back to pull out main themes within each coding category. To find the main themes, I looked to see what messages had multiple themes applied to see if there was a pattern in the content of the messages with the same themes. Once major themes were found they were labeled and then analyzed to see how they relate to the original research questions as well as past literature.

The coding for this project focused on three questions as outlined below, along with the themes. Complete definitions and examples of each code within this project can be found in the Appendix.

Question 1 - What are the perceptions of fatness within the messages and how they reflect dominant beliefs about fat people? Codes for this question identified the way messages framed fatness.

Closed coding – All of these codes were created prior to data analysis relying on prior research that found fatness was most often framed through dominant discourse as individual problems, using health rhetoric and understanding fat people as lacking self control (Boero 2006; DeJong 1980; Kwan 2009; Saguy and Almeling 2008). I used the following schema: **Individual blame** – Message alludes to fatness being caused by individual behaviors, such as mentioning diet or exercise. **Self control** – Message mentions or references fat people lacking the ability to control their own behaviors. **Sickness or disease** – Message mentions health or mentions certain conditions and diseases they believe are linked with fatness.

Open Coding – All of these codes were created to build on the close codes and find the main themes within the data. I used the following schema: **Attraction** – Message makes claim about attraction and fatness. **Death** – Mentions death or dying. **Disgusting or Repulsive** – Message states fatness is disgusting or repulsive. **Food or Diet** – Message mentions food or the diet of fat people. **Lack of Mobility** - Message mentions the physical limitations or a lack of physical ability due to fatness. **Shame** – Message linked feelings of shame or having negative feelings about being fat. **Stigma or Discrimination** – Message mentions the discrimination or stigma fat people experience. **Unnatural** – Message mentions what they consider to be natural or normal about bodies in relation to weight.

Question 2 - What tactics like threats of assault, intimidation, and trying to debate are used within the messages? Codes for this question identified the way the messages were written.

Closed coding – All of these codes were created prior to data analysis relying on prior research that provided the framework to operationalize the common tactics used in online communication (Herring et al. 2002; Phillips 2015). I used the following schema: **Threats of physical violence** – Message discusses threats of physical violence – assault, murder etc. **Rape** – Mentions rape. **Death** – Mentions death. This is a separate tag from physical violence to note how fat people experience death threats online differently than thin people. Threats are often framed as “celebrations” or something that is expected to happen so physical violence is not necessary.

Open Coding – All of these codes were created to build on the close codes and find the main themes within the data. I used the following schema: **Concern** – Message expresses worry or interest in the health of fat people. **Counter arguments** – Message builds an argument that is meant to directly counter a post on the blog. **Disagreement** – Message states a difference of opinion with the blog content. **Laughter or Mocking** – Message includes content that is insulting the blog content or appears to want to cause harm. Also includes messages that simply include laughter. **Question** – Message includes questions to get information. **Shaming** – Message includes content that is degrading fat people. **Statement** - Message is a written expression that is different from messages that include questions or something that seeks to get information. The main goal is to express information. **Tone Argument** – Message comments on the emotional content of the blog.

Question 3 – How are the messages different between individuals who are trolling and individuals who are just commenting? Codes for this question identified different terms and behaviors that are linked to trolls.

Closed coding – These codes relied on prior research that provided the framework to operationalize the characteristics most commonly associated with trolls (Phillips 2015). Messages were coded as follows. **Declared Troll** - Message includes information from the username, email or body of the message that openly showed it was from a troll. **Playfulness** – Message appears to be written for the sender’s amusement and not to be taken seriously. **Repeated visits** – Message is sent from an individual who has sent numerous messages within the dataset.

Open Coding – All of these codes were created to build on the close codes and find the main themes within the data. Messages were coded as follows. **Internet speak** – Message includes language or the use of specific terms that are often found in trolling communities, such as landwhale, hamplanet, hambeast, shitlord, fatty etc. **Similarity in structure or message topic** – Message includes links or content that is similar to other messages within the dataset.

RESEARCHER ROLE

My role in this research brought together my work as a scholar with my activist work online. I began data collection when I became a moderator for the blog in May 2013. My connection to the blog and my work online occurred prior to taking this role, as my own blog, *Fat Body Politics*, was regularly shared and I have my own online platform. During data collection, my work as a moderator was primarily focused on spending time sorting through the messages we received daily, collecting messages for my research, sorting through messages the other moderators could answer publically and doing other work on the back end where the

general public cannot view. There were three other moderators who took a more public role while I collected my data.

During data collection, I did interact with readers and other users occasionally but tried to step back as much as possible to not influence the data I was collecting. While I did not want to influence the responses the blog received, I have to acknowledge that my own platform and work within fat positive community has made me unable to completely remove myself from the discourse that is found within these spaces. Throughout data collection and data analysis I made sure to not collect messages that were in response to my own writing or directly addressing me as a moderator. Since I was mostly working behind the scenes during data collection there were only a few occasions where this was necessary. I also attempted to counteract whatever influence I may have had by conducting data collection for a full year beginning when I became a moderator.

CHAPTER 3 RESULTS

Through the process of analyzing the data I was able to present three sections of results that reflect the three main research questions. First, I will present the results of the main themes found about fatness. Then, I will show the tactics commenters used in their messages and how they were used to disrupt the mission of the blog. Lastly, I show the main characteristics of messages sent by trolls and how they were presented differently than messages sent by other commenters. In each section that I will present the frequency of each theme found within the data and describe how I found the final results of each section. Presenting the frequency of how themes were found in the messages directly contributed to the main themes found. The final themes will be then presented after each frequency section.

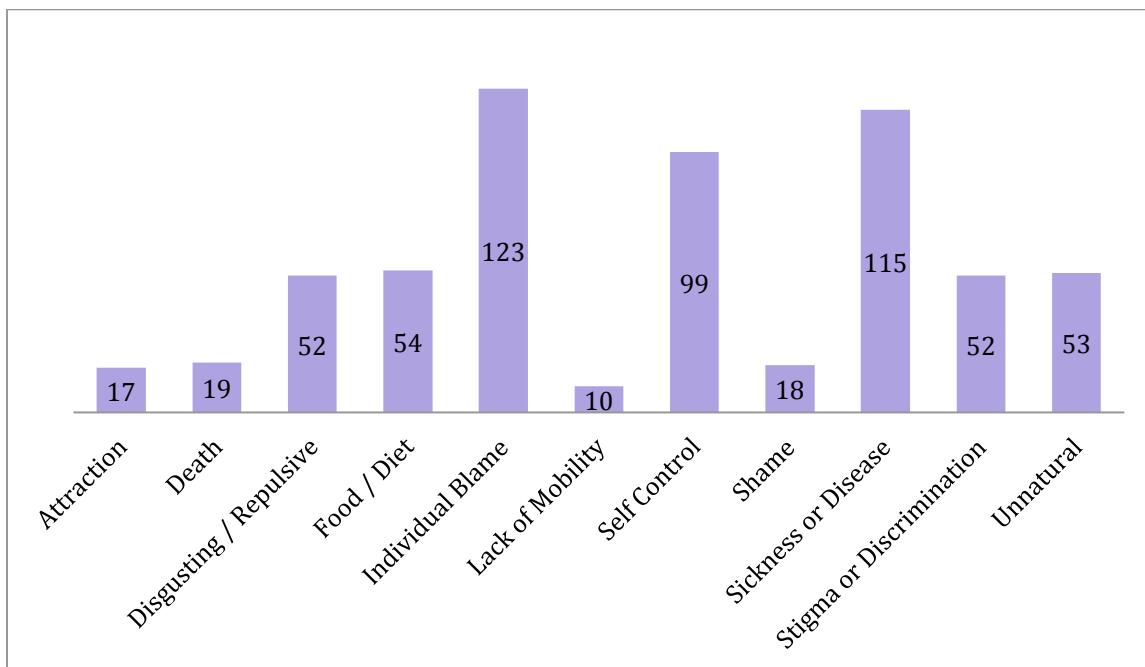
CONSTRUCTING FATNESS

To analyze how commenters constructed fatness, I found 11 distinct themes. However, I found two specific but interconnected themes of how messages perceived fatness, fat bodies, and fat people. In my analysis below, I present commenters' conflicted understandings of fatness as a core finding, and highlight the two thematic constructions of fatness: 1) fatness as the cause of individual behavior and 2) fatness seen as a sickness or disease. Messages frequently focused on a lack of healthy eating and exercise as the cause of fatness, but commenters also connected these behaviors with the belief that fatness was a disease that needed to be cured. Therefore, commenters illustrate a tension between two different themes or understandings of the cause of fatness – behavioral or biological causes – and this tension ultimately hints at a distinct lack of understanding for why fatness occurs. These two thematic framings of fatness represented the most common themes throughout the data and the two themes frequently occurred

simultaneously with other nine themes coded for in the data. Table 1 provides an overview of the frequency for all the themes found in the data (see Appendix for definition list).

Overall, my analysis led to 236 out of the 500 messages within this dataset being coded as making a specific claim about fatness. Messages that were not included in this analysis did not make specific claims about fatness, so they were discarded for this analysis. The themes most frequently found to the messages were fatness as equated with individual behavior or blame (123 times) and fatness as equated with sickness or disease (115 times). After discovering what themes were found most frequently, I then looked at what themes were found in the same messages and found a pattern between the two main themes – individual behavior and fatness as a sickness or disease – with other themes found in Table 1. I specifically found that certain themes were likely to occur together. Other themes, for instance, naturally grouped with the themes individual behavior or blame and fatness as sickness or disease.

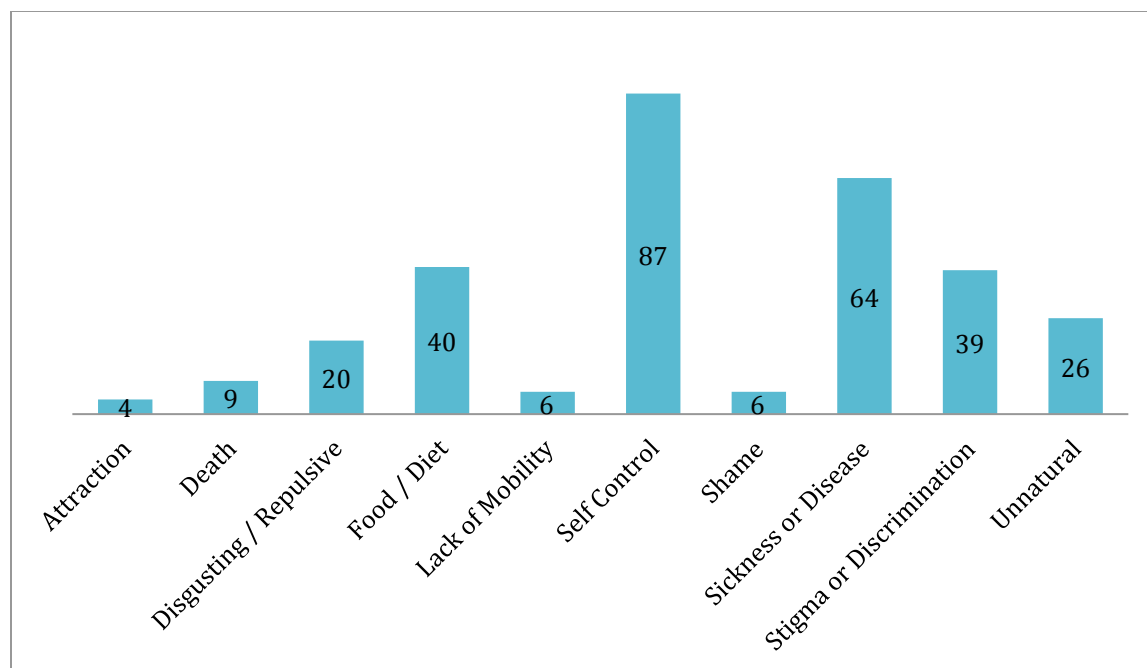
Table 1 – Themes Found: Messages making claims about fatness (n=236)



I found messages that portray fatness as the cause of individual behavior most frequently within the data. As table 2 shows, all of the themes found in the data occurred with the theme individual blame. The theme individual behavior or blame was found most frequently, however, alongside themes for fatness as a sickness or disease (64 times), fat people lacking self control (87 times), references to the diet or eating habits of fat people (40 times), references to the discrimination or stigma fat people experienced (39 times) and the perception of fatness as disgusting or repulsive (20 times). After finding the themes that were most likely to occur together, I analyzed the ways that messages with multiple themes found in it constructed fatness as an issue of individual behavior or blame.

By analyzing data that represented more than one theme, I was able to see how the messages built a specific understanding of fatness through this main theme within the data. The main conclusion that I am able to draw from these analyses is that commenter's belief that fatness is caused by individual eating habits, a lack of exercise and a lack of self-control. Commenters on the blog view fatness as the cause of these behaviors and believe fat individuals are to blame for their weight. Furthermore, they believed that correcting the behaviors would make fat people lose weight. Drawing on the language of the messages, I discuss this theme more fully in later sections.

Table 2 - Theme Found with Individual Blame

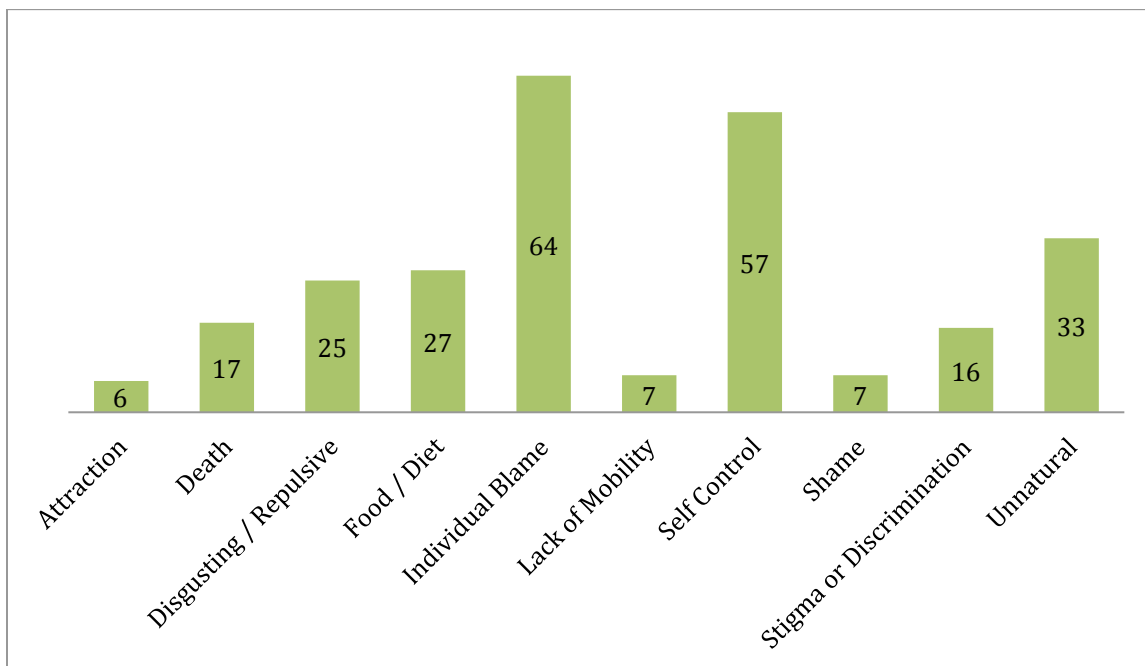


The second most common theme found within the data was commenters' perception that fatness is linked to sickness and disease. This major theme embodied the other themes that addressed framing of fatness. But, as shown below in table 3, fatness as a disease was most often found with messages that portrayed fatness as disgusting or repulsive (25 times), link to death or dying (17 times), highlight the diet or eating habits of fat people (27 times), suggest that fat people lack self-control (57 times), mention discrimination or stigma (16 times), cite fatness as unnatural (33 times) and equate fatness with individual behavior or blame (64 times). As with the other main theme, I analyzed how messages with multiple themes illustrated commenters' understandings of fatness, and how they constructed the connection between fatness and disease as they responded to blog content.

Through the process of analyzing the themes within this grouping, I found a clearly defined perception of fatness as a sickness or disease within the data. Specifically, there was a significant tension between understandings of disease/sickness and understandings of individual

behavior/blame, due to what I found to be commenters' confusion over what constituted a disease. Overall, I found that commenters frequently believed that the existence of fatness was proof that fat people were not healthy and that they would face more serious health complications unless they fixed their weight. Again, using the language of the narratives, I discuss this confusion in later paragraphs.

Table 3 - Themes Found with Sickness and Disease



In summary, by analyzing the data in multiple ways, I was able to find and make sense of two main thematic constructions of fatness within comments on the blog. The analysis of messages that were representative of multiple themes allowed me to understand commenters' conflicted understandings of fatness, fat bodies and fat people. The commenters showed a conflicted understanding of fatness by constructing it as both the cause of individual behavior and viewed fatness as a sickness or disease. These two constructions of fatness were not easily

separated within the data. Commenters made two distinct arguments for why they believed fatness exists but simultaneously had conflicted perception of fatness due to the use of both arguments interchangeably or within the same messages. This made the findings complicated and multilayered, with many messages having inconsistent interpretations about the behaviors fat people engage in and how this relates to the health of fat people. Below I will show how each construction of fatness was built within the data and the tension between these constructions. I will deconstruct the data by analyzing the text of the commenters' messages.

Fat people as the cause of fatness

The emphasis on the individual behavior of fat people as the cause of fatness was the primary theme within the data on framings of fatness. Commenters frequently focused on the perceived eating habits, lack of exercise and lack of self-control of fat people for why they were unable to control their weight. The focus on these behaviors was used as proof for why fat people were fat. Commenters branched outside of simply discussing individual behavior to discussing the choices individuals make about their own lifestyles, the personal responsibility people have over how they care for their bodies, and arguments against the discourse of thin privilege.

For instance, in many of the messages that I marked as "individual blame," commenters focused on the belief that fat people's eating and exercise habits deviated from what were "normal." For instance, in message 3718, the commenter highlights this understanding by arguing that fatness does not have a biological cause but, instead, is due to fat individuals' inability to control their diet and exercise habits:

Go for a walk you cow. Being fat is not a disease or a "glandular" problem. It's that you shove too much food in your fat face. "My metabolism is so slow" is not a valid excuse for being a fatass when you

shove 9meals a day and 3 snacks in between your fatfuck chipmunk cheeks. Thin is not a privilege. It's something NORMAL people try to maintain. Why? Because they like remaining healthy. They still like being useful and respected among and to society.

I'll end with this again. Being fat is a disease. Why? Because the cure is taking a walk fatshit.

This message implicates very specific behaviors that the commenter perceives fat people engage in as the reason why their body exists in its current form. While they waffle between presenting fatness as a result of individual behavior and fatness as a disease -- even changing their position at the end of the message -- this commenter focuses on fatness as the result of behavior. The commenter begins by rejecting fatness as a disease or a biological issue and instead states, "It's that you shove too much food in your fat face." The commenter implicates the amount of eating fat people engage in as "9meals a day and 3 snacks." Similar statements were made by other commenters, intimating a general cultural understanding of fatness as caused by "abnormal" eating practices. The suggestion, "Go for a walk," also infers that fatness is due to a lack of individual exercise. In this message the commenter also creates a contrast between what is considered "normal" and "abnormal" behavior. The commenter specifically links thinness to normative behavior in saying that thinness is something "normal people try to maintain."

References to "normal" eating patterns were frequent in the data and used to contrast with the perceived behaviors that fat people engaged. In other words, commenters made reference to previously normative behaviors they believed thin people engaged in that fat people did not. A social-historical shift in behavior patterns was frequently mentioned in comments on the blog as

well. As in this case, a commenter highlighted her/his understanding of fatness as being a new phenomenon, as if fatness did not exist during earlier time periods:

That's because fat people are cunts and need to excersize [sic] a more. No fat people back when we were hunter-gatherers? Wonder why. (Message 3668)

Within the quote the commenter not only disparages fat people but also suggests that diet and exercise are the key problems and attempts to refer to a previous time period when food was scarce and more physical activity was the norm. While this reference to lack of fatness in certain time periods may be historically inaccurate, the commenter suggests that changes in amount of exercise are the key reason for the seeming prevalence of fatness in contemporary times. This commenter places blame for the existence of fatness on individuals.

Positioning the behaviors of fat people as “abnormal” through the use of an historical lens, commenters often implied or stated that fat people could be thin if they conformed to what they considered “normal” eating and exercise habits throughout time. The continued emphasis on individual behavior (and conforming to normative behaviors) was not only linked to a belief about faulty lifestyles but also a lack of self-control among fat people:

In the world and every decent human beings case it's all the sooner to see die when left to your own devices, you sack of piss. The privilage [sic] would be yours if you weren't [sic] such a disgusting slop of ineptitude brought on by a life spent in ignorance and hedonism. (Message 1177)

This message uses the framing of fatness as caused by individual behavior -- specifically, a lack of knowledge about proper behaviors and overindulgence caused by lack of self-control -- as the reason why fat people do not have the same access to the privilege that thin people experience in

society. The commenter also uses this framing of fatness to suggest that individual behavior will end in fat people causing their own death.

Commenters construct individual self-control as the path to weight loss, normativity, and thin privilege. As messages 3718 and 1177 show, it is not just that commenters are framing fatness as a result of individual behavior but also abnormality. Commenters throughout the data I coded continually created the distinction between the behaviors fat people engage in and normality. This dichotomy solidified the idea that fatness is solely caused by fat people. Placing the cause of fatness on fat people reinforces the idea of personal responsibility; thus, blame for fatness falls squarely on individuals within the data.

The emphasis on personal responsibility also places the blame on fat people for the stigma they experienced:

The disadvantages that come from being obese are self-imposed. It's not a privilege to find clothes that fit easily, but a consequence of gorging your face that you can't. ... It's not a privilege to go to the doctor and not have your weight mentioned... that's what happens when your size isn't a medical issue. Your doctor bringing up your weight is indicative of how horrifically unhealthy what you're doing to yourself is. These are simply the effects of ignoring the well-being of your own body. No shit you can't fit into your shirt now, tubby. But nobody is going to cater to your mistakes. Especially when it's so expensive, wasteful and draining on those around you to try. If you fuck yourself up, it's your responsibility to deal with it, not the rest of the world. /rant (Message 2814)

Within this message the commenter pushes the concept of personal responsibility further, by shifting blame for the socio-cultural experience of fatness onto fat people themselves as well. In other words, according to this commenter, not only are fat people to blame for the existence of fatness, but they are also to blame for societal reactions to fatness itself. The commenter specifically mentions the lack of access to well-sized clothing and the stigma fat people experience in medicine as examples, in order to reify individual blame.

By blaming fat people for being fat and for the way that society treats them, commenters create a circular logic that always ends with individual fat people and their behaviors as the problem. In message 2814, the commenter uses this very circular logic. The commenter's message starts by suggesting that the experiences of fatness and the health of fat people are "self-imposed." The commenter then discusses how the behaviors of fat people affect fat people. The commenter finishes their message by referring to fatness as a problem, claiming that taking personal responsibility over their behaviors is the only option that fat people have, since their experiences are created solely by their own actions.

The final way that an individual blame argument was used to frame fatness was through commenters' suggestion that fatness is a choice. Commenters defined fatness as something fat people choose to engage in, which also allows commenters to argue that fat people are consciously living the lifestyle within which they are assumed to participate. In message 3249, the commenter builds their opinion about fatness as a choice by contrasting fatness to being gay or transgender:

Are you honestly comparing being fat (an obvious choice) to being gay or transgender (something clearly genetic?) Really? Come the fuck on guys.

Be honest with yourself. You have a choice in what you eat and what you do. You have a choice in how you want your body to look.

The "just lose weight" argument is rude, but it's also the fucking truth. And a lot of the time the truth hurts. Think about it. If you ACTUALLY hate being fat and ACTUALLY hate being bullied or teased over it, why wouldn't you try to change?

Aside from the fact that being obese is rediculously [sic] unhealthy, if you're unhappy with yourself and your image should strive to better yourself, not sit around and mope because people think you're gross.

The construct of fatness as choice pulls on an understanding of fatness as caused by individual behavior once again, and the subsequent belief that fat people need to take personal responsibility over their bodies. Through the framing of sexuality and gender as static and related to biology instead of choice, this commenter frames fatness as something different from biology – i.e., something that fat people can have control over. As with the previous example, this message places the blame for the experiences of fat people solely on individual fat people.

In this section I have outlined findings on the most common perception and framing of fatness – that is, fatness as the result of individual behavior. In sum, commenters most frequently place blame for fatness on fat individuals. In these cases commenters showed a core understanding of fatness as being caused by over eating, lack of exercise and lack of self-control. Emphasizing their perception of core behavioral traits helped commenters frame fatness as a problem, for which *only* fat people need to take personal responsibility. This framing also leads to the construction of fatness as a choice. All commenters quoted in this section highlight the

common and very negative references to the fat body and the behaviors of fat people, and the frequent framing of fatness as a problem of fat people only, and not society.

Fatness as disease

The second most common theme was the construction of fatness as disease. This frame highlighted commenters' uncertainties about what constitutes a disease and whether fatness is a disease, as much as it highlighted their equation of fatness as disease. In some messages, commenters not only construct fatness as the physical embodiment of disease but also a sign of individuals' lack of self-control. Therefore some commenters slide between two framings: one of fatness as disease and one of fatness as the result of individual behavior. These two competing arguments about fatness were used interchangeably within the same messages at times. The waffling of commenters showed a distinct lack of understanding about what a disease is, what health really is, and an understanding of why fatness exists.

The most frequent way to frame fatness as a disease or sickness was through declarations of fatness as unhealthy. Commenters repeatedly repeated linked fatness and bad health by responding to blog post that had a more nuanced discussion of health (This is Thin Privilege 2012 *I*). In message 264 the commenter states:

Hey, fat DOES equal unhealthy. This whole thing with fatties saying they're perfectly healthy is just like bible thumping freaks saying that science is wrong.

This commenter constructs the existence of fatness as proof of a lack of health. The commenter also viewed discourse on the blog about health to mean that fat people are perfectly healthy; attempting to remove bloggers' abilities to have a nuanced discussion about the way "health" is constructed. With fatness being defined as unhealthy, other commenters can also go one step

further and construct fatness as a disease. Some commenters also wrote about fatness as disease to specifically counter bloggers' arguments about fatness as an identity or embodied state. In fact, in equating fatness with disease and unhealthy status, these commenters did not understand the purpose of the blog, as the commenter from message 1706 states:

I don't fully understand this blog, obesity is a disease. Why are you trying to defend a disease?

Once they framed fatness as a disease, commenters often could not understand why fat people would want to (or even could) remove stigma from their bodies. Since the blog's main objective is to humanize fat people, commenters questioned the existence of the blog by viewing fatness (or, in this case, "obesity") as an entity that exists outside of fat people's control. Thus, the fatness as disease frame often ran counter to the frame of individual blame, because of the arguments about self-control within each frame.

In most messages within the data, however, there were conflicting understandings of fatness as both disease and the result of individual behavior. Fatness was consistently described as a disease and unhealthy but it was also linked with individual behaviors, all within the same messages. The behavior of fat people was sometimes used as proof for why fat people were diseased. In other messages, however, commenters specifically separated fatness from biology and disease in order to make an argument about personal responsibility. In this way, some commenters demonstrated more clarity than others as they framed fatness. As in message 3718 from the previous section, engaging in better eating and exercise habits could cure the disease of fatness. This commenter's construction builds confusion about the cases of fatness and the commenter's understanding of disease (as fixable and as caused by behavior that can be changed) does not connect to dominant understandings of disease (Boyd 2002; Scully 2004).

In some messages, however, commenters used conflicting perspectives about fatness by denying that weight was connected to genetics, while still linking it to diseases that are known to have a significant genetic predisposition. These conflicting perspectives on disease are shown in message 1619:

Its not genetics, you're just a sorry fat fuck and you want to blame it on others when in reality, it is your fault. If you want to be healthy, lose weight, dont bitch about thin privilege when in reality no one else is to blame but your own actions. It makes me sick reading all this bullshit nonsense that you spew out of your pie holes. Have a good day my diabetic or future diabetic people. You can all go fuck yourselves.

While rejecting the connection between fatness and biology or genetics and linking fatness to individual behavior, the commenter first places all of the blame on fat people. However, the commenter then ends their message by stating, "Have a good day my diabetic or future diabetic people," which creates a connection between fatness and diabetes, a disease with well-documented genetic components (American Diabetes Association 2013; Dean and McEntyre 2004). This type of message adds to the overall contradictions found within commenters' understandings of fatness and understandings of disease. Perhaps in this case the commenter does not understand the genetic underpinnings of diabetes and perceives this condition to be caused primarily by behavior. Yet this possibility reaffirms the uncertainties surrounding the definition of disease (Scully 2004).

The perception of fatness as unhealthy, as well as the uncertainty surrounding a link between fatness and disease, was strengthened within messages that make a link to other diseases

associated with fatness. For example, in message 3397, the commenter makes sense of the behaviors that fat people engage in by framing fatness as akin to its associated diseases:

So you're proud of being completely unhealthy, having a higher chances of hospital visit from personal injury or diabetes [sic]? Heart failure or lymph node problems? Sure you can be 'beautiful' but theres [sic] no way society has taught me being skinny is the norm. Being healthy is for you to take care of the body you were given, not making up your shit excuses and allowing overeating to be a life style. Gluttony is not beautiful.

While commenters ultimately view fatness as the result of individual behavior (and this shines through any category of findings), they frame it first sometimes as “unhealthy” and only subsequently link it to other diseases or disorders that others might associate with fatness. This kind of framing brings into question whether it is fatness itself (and the “diseases” associated with it), or the behaviors fat people are perceived to engage in that are unhealthy. In this particular message the commenter begins by labeling associated health conditions or diseases and then focuses on individual behavior, critiquing fat people for feeling “beautiful” by making reference to “gluttony.” This commenter implicates fat people and the behaviors they associate with fat people as the problem by the end of their message, even though she/he began by focusing on sickness and disease.

Other commenters present similar understandings of fatness and disease by stating what they believe to be a causal relationship between the two. Another commenter states:

But someone has to recognize that obesity (noted by the adipose tissue cells over North America) IS ACTUALLY a health issue. I mean, I hate bigotry as much as the next guy, but ignoring the ridiculous rates of

cardiovascular problems and other issues caused by high rates of obesity (Yes, being obese is not healthy. But remember obesity is more than your BMI.) is, well...a little delusional. (Message 3895)

This commenter expands on the understanding of fatness and disease by stating there is a causal relationship between the two. The commenter begins by asserting that people must recognize that “obesity” has a direct connection to health and claims that, by not framing fatness as disease, the bloggers are “delusional.” At the core of the message is a contrast between the importance of the relationship between fatness and disease and the “bigotry” fat people experience (the latter less important, according to this commenter). The commenter frames fatness as something that needs to be placed within a context of disease first and stigma/discrimination second.

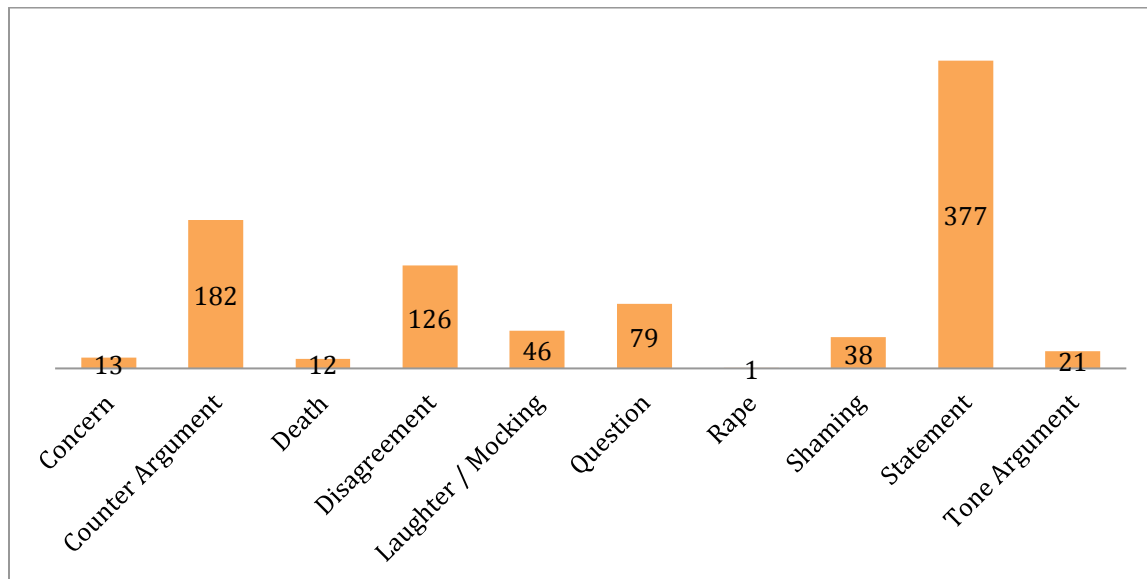
Messages that play with the construction of fatness as a sickness or disease show commenters’ confusion over what constitutes a disease, medical research surrounding fatness and how it connects to the overarching construct of fatness as caused by individual behavior. Commenters frequently focus on behaviors that they believe are the cause of fatness but also simultaneously reference fatness as diseased. Therefore, a reader of blog comments may find themselves confused, waffling between understanding that fat people are to blame for the state of their bodies, due to perceived behaviors of fat individuals, and fatness as the cause of illness or disease.

COMMON TACTICS WITHIN MESSAGES

My second research question focuses on tactics. Analyzing the tactics used within the messages brought forward another main theme within the data: commenters’ consistent pushback against the content of the blog. Regardless of the exact tactics used by commenters, the messages

most frequently sought to reinforce dominant understandings about fatness and contradict discourse about thin privilege. As discussed in the last findings section, commenters often used their understandings of fatness as caused by individual behavior and as a disease in their attempts to shut down discussion about thin privilege on the blog. By putting the emphasis on individual behavior and long-term health/disease, they sought to suppress claims about fat experience and reinforce the narrative that experiences shared on the blog were anecdotes and not related to larger forces of structural or institutional discrimination. Analyzing more specifically, I also found evidence that commenters used a variety of tactics to garner these results. A summary of 10 or 11 tactics used by commenters appears in Table 4.

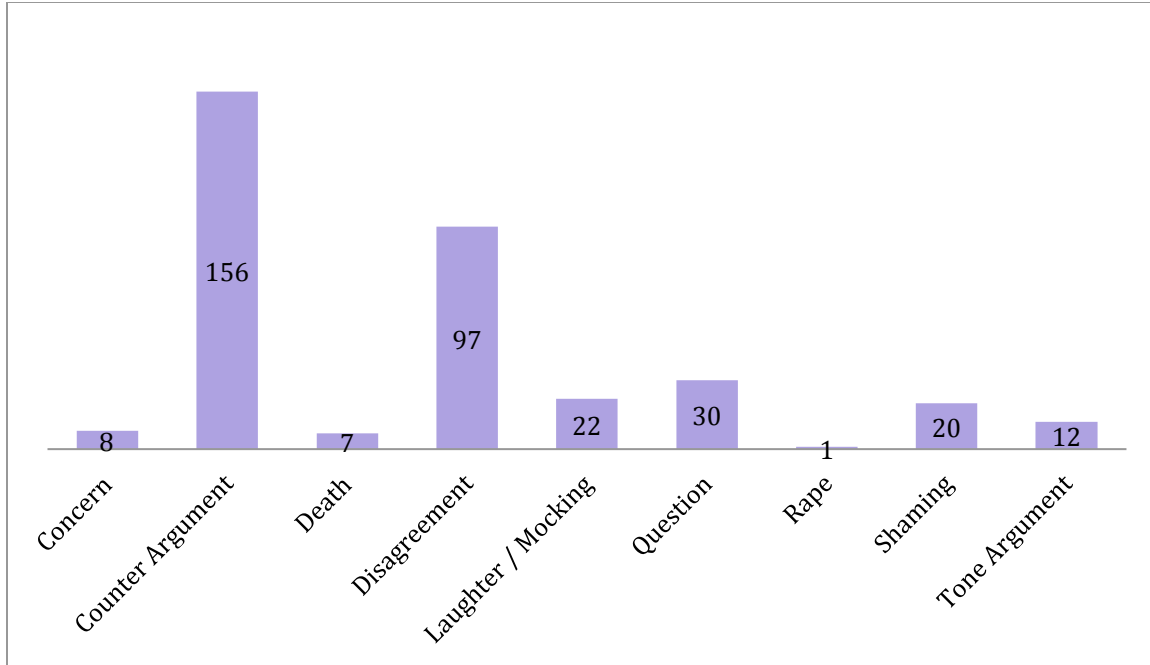
Table 4 – Themes Found: Tactics (n=500 messages)



Once I noticed the variety of tactics used by commenters through open coding, I coded my sample of 500 messages to reflect the different tactics used and expanded on the closed coding labels I created before doing data analysis. As in the case of other themes I found, many of the themes occurred together. Thus, one message could reflect multiple tactics. Table 4 shows

the frequency of each theme, with statements where commenters made claims or stated opinions was the most common theme found (377 times.) Messages that challenged the content of the blog by making counter arguments (182 times) and messages that stated they disagreed with the blog content (126 times) were the second most common. The sample included very few messages with discussions about death, rape, or physical violence. It is important to note that there were no messages in the sample that made direct threats of violence, and death and rape were mentioned infrequently compared to the other tactics that were used. Nonetheless, plenty of derogatory language was used towards bloggers and this negative language is reflected across a variety of themes. Other less common tactics were concern, laughter and mocking comments, shaming comments, and commenters directly critiquing the emotional or attitude of the blog content through tone arguments. I describe the three major types of tactics more fully below, and also show how the three major tactic themes overlapped. I specifically concentrate on how statements (the most common tactic) overlapped with the second and third most common tactics of disagreements and counterarguments, because these were the most frequently used tactics by commenters and showcase the argumentative nature on comments made on the blog.

Table 5 – Statement Tactic and Number of other tactics embedded (n=377)



The main theme within the data, statements, was found to occur more frequently with the use of counter arguments (156 times) and disagreements (97 times) within the messages. Comments that were coded as statements were messages that included opinions, made claims or intended to make a point. As the commenter in message 3966 states, “Give me your friend’s number she sounds hot.” This comment illustrates a specific response used within the message that intended to assert a claim or state an opinion. Similarly, commenter in message 3937 states, “At least make your fiction more believable,” showing a similar response that does not contribute more than to let the commenter’s beliefs known. Both commenters wrote their messages in response to a post to show their disapproval of the content on the blog. They did this by either supporting a thin friend who was engaging in fat stigma (Message 3966) or by commenting that the blog’s content was mostly made up (Message 3937).

Commenters who made statements were most likely to build on them by creating counter arguments to explain why experiences posted on the blog occurred. Counter arguments were coded to reflect a message including any statement that attempted to argue why a certain

situation occurred that could explain an alternative reality than the one presented. As the commenter from message 495 states:

Stairs are made to support large amounts of weight, either it's not properly built in which case not thin privilege just stupidity. Or your weight exceeds the structural integrity of the material at which point you should lose some weight.

I didn't fight for women's equality in the 60's so that a fatty could complain.

In this message, the commenter creates a counter argument for why stairs may not be built to support fat bodies (This is Thin Privilege 2014 2). The message itself was coded as a statement and counter argument, due to the commenter stating their opinion of fat people needing to lose weight and supporting it with their perspective of how stairs are only able to be built to certain weight limits.

Other commenters used the same tactic within their messages by building on their opinions or claims through the use of examples. Many commenters make specific claims to physics or other sources they believe to definitively support their perspective. As with the commenter from message 3186, who states:

even [sic] if the rides were made to accommodate larger people some people would still be left out. There will always be someone too big or too small to go on a ride, and that isn't prejudice or privilege, it's physics.

In this example, the commenter is responding to a post about maximum weight limits on amusement park rides claiming that physics limits the ability for certain bodies to fit (This is Thin Privilege 2015 3). Both examples show a specific form of argument being used to

undermine the content on the blog by giving an alternative understanding of why those experiences occurred.

Statements were also made as a way to disagree with the content of the blog. These messages were also more likely to occur with the theme counter arguments and continued to build on the main theme found within the data. Messages were coded with disagreement to reflect a commenter directly challenging the content on the blog. This was differentiated from the theme for counter arguments, as those commenters did not always state that the content was wrong and alternatively tried to create plausible reasons for why certain things occurred. Instead, this theme was used to highlight the outright disagreement found in Message 2624:

Fat people are NOT like other discriminated against groups. Gay people can't turn themselves straight. Black people can't turn themselves white.

However, fat people, if they choose, can lose weight. Message 1870

This example shows a specific statement in the beginning that outlines the commenter's disagreement with fat discrimination being considered similar to other marginalized identities. In the message, the commenter also engages in a counter argument by distinguishing between what they consider to be static identities like race and sexuality, whereas they view fatness as fluid and able to change. As I stated above, the theme for disagreements builds on the themes for statements and counter arguments showing a specific tactic being used by a majority of commenters.

Less frequently applied themes were not discarded but instead also often occurred alongside the three most common themes: statements, counter, and disagreements. All messages coded as questions were rhetorical making them also coded as statements, counter arguments or disagreements due to how they were written. As the commenter from message 2050 states,

“Think losing sixty pounds isn’t worth praise? Do it yourself.” While the commenter is clearly asking a question they are already assuming to know the answer of their question. Other commenters used similar tactics by making statements and arguments for why their perspective is correct as in Message 2067:

I don’t really understand ‘fatphobia [sic] in medicine.’ Doctors are trained professionals; if they say something is unhealthy, shouldn’t we listen to them?

Both of these examples show the commenters asking questions that leave little room for disagreement because they assume to already know the answer (This is Thin Privilege 2012 4). Other less frequently applied themes followed the same pattern, becoming additional or additive to the core tactic within the messages.

The tactics I most frequently found within the messages rejected the content of the blog and the arguments made about why fat people experienced discrimination. Overall, commenters rejected the notion that fat discrimination existed and placed the blame on fat bodies as the main reason bad things happened to fat people. Through this method of diverting the blame to fat people, the messages reinforced normative beliefs about fatness and placed the blame for fat experiences on fat people. The tactics being used by the commenters reflected the same circular logic that was shown in the previous section.

Destabilizing online rhetoric around fatness

Through the use of disagreement and counter argument tactics within the commenters’ understanding of fatness as an individual problem or as a disease, the messages tried to dispel the bloggers’ understanding of fatness and shut down conversations about the existence of thin

privilege. These tactics were found within the majority of comments in the sample and, together, built a solid resistance to the blog's core mission as well as individual posts. The strategies commenters deployed varied from outright disbelief in the ideas espoused by a blogger's post arguments about why the post was not an example of discrimination. Regardless of the rhetorical method, the underlying purpose was to destabilize the content of the blog.

Therefore, many of the commenters did not make a direct claim about fatness but, instead, disagreed with a post or with the core mission of the blog. As an example of outright disbelief in the content of a blogger's post, message 1314 states:

Today in "Things That Didn't Happen"....

In this example, the content of the blog's validity is questioned and references their perception that falsehoods are often shared on the blog. Beyond declaring the blog's content untrue, however, this commenter does not offer an alternative perspective on fatness or thin privilege. Their strategy is to register disbelief only.

The more frequent tactic used by commenters within the data was the use of statements that provided an alternative understanding for why fat people experience certain situations. These arguments were used to diminish the experiences being shared on the blog by consistently locating the problem in fatness and fat people. For instance, a commenter in message 3481 proclaims:

This is ridiculous

It's not the clothing's fault that you might look fat in it, it's your fault

In this second message, the commenter first disagrees (declaring the blog content "ridiculous") and then counters by suggesting that individuals are at fault for their own bodily problems (This

is Thin Privilege 2012 5). Specifically, the lack of available clothing for fat people becomes a problem located within fat people themselves, rather than an example of discrimination at large.

Other messages reflected a similar approach. For instance commenters argued that the treatment of fat people is a direct consequence of fatness itself. The topic of healthcare and medicine frequently came up in the data as commenters blamed fat people for their experiences, and health-related counter-arguments were therefore also common. Message 3367 is in response to a post about the higher insurance premiums that fat people are charged:

You're fat, therefor unhealthy, therefor more of a liability, therefor more likely to cost insurance companies money. That's how insurance works.

Through claims making about fatness as unhealthy, this commenter builds a counter-argument that locates the blame for higher insurance premiums on individual fat people, by framing high insurance premiums as a direct result of the larger healthcare burden that fatness causes in society (This is Thin Privilege 2013 6). This argument leaves no room for a more nuanced discussion of whether discrimination exists.

Other examples within the data used counter arguments to refute experiences shared on the blog. For instance, after a blogger discussed the treatment that a fat person received while at the doctor and related it to larger stigma that fat people face when seeking medical treatment, a commenter responded:

I completely disagree with everything you're saying. These well educated, well trained individuals are not "bullies" looking for another ego boost, but rather individuals who took (on average) seven years out of their lives to attend medical school and assist people like me and you. (Message 1107)

This response rejects the bloggers' discussion about the stigma that fat people experience in healthcare realms by emphasizing the amount of training that healthcare providers undertake (specifically to help patients). By emphasizing the level of training doctors receive, the commenter attempts to remove blame from providers. These are just some examples of the ways in which commenters make counter-arguments for the experiences of fat people and, in the process, negate the bloggers' stance (This is Thin Privilege 2012 4).

Commenters also refuted bloggers' discussions of how physical infrastructures inhibit the bodies of fat people. In response to a post about fat bodies not fitting in amusement park rides, a commenter stated:

That's not privilege, it's fucking mechanics.

You put too much mass in one place and it can mess with the operation of the ride.

No one gives a shit about you; they're worried about safety. (Message 1302)

While many of the messages in the sample reference physics or architecture specifically, this commenter builds his/her argument around the weight specifications of the architecture of rides and safety regulations about weight (This is Thin Privilege 4). This message, along with the message about the doctor's training, creates a larger counter-argument that treats these instances as innate to fatness experience and not evidence of institutional discrimination; commenters attempt to leave no room to ponder discrimination any further as they locate the cause for negative experiences firmly in fatness and fat people, and not society.

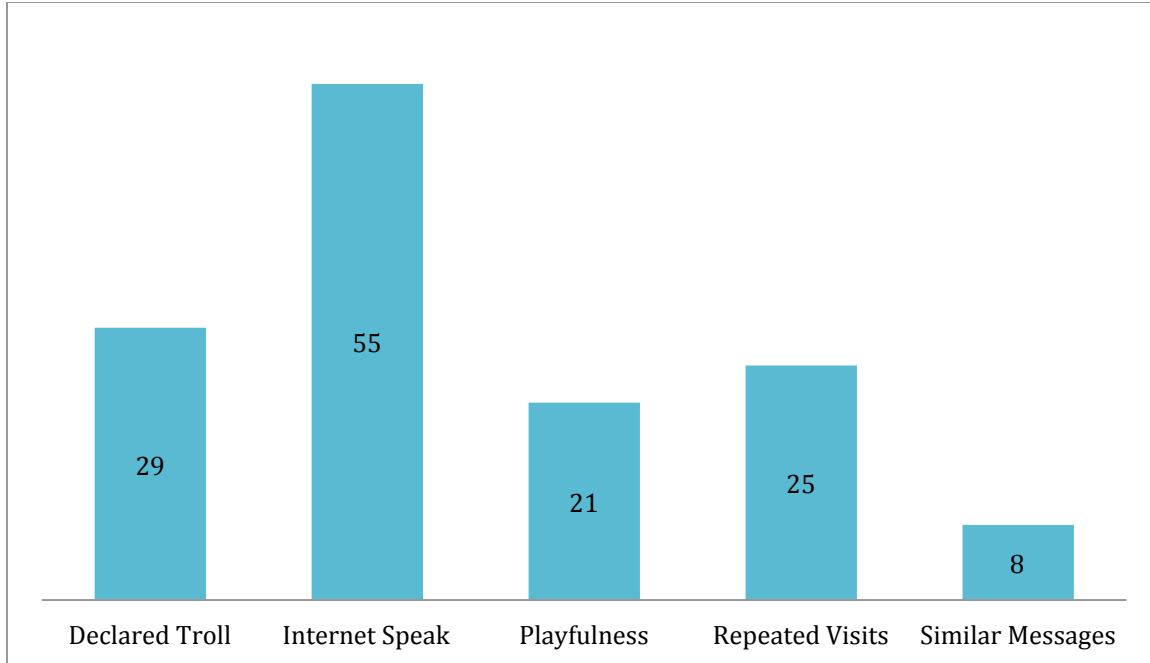
All of these examples reflect specific tactics used to diminish the content and mission of the blog. The most frequent tactics used included disagreeing and/or offering counter arguments

for the experiences of fat people. In some cases, commenters just offered disbelief about how real fat people's experiences were. In other cases, statements of disbelief were followed by counter-arguments or alternative views on bloggers' experiences. In the latter case, counter-arguments typically removed blame from society and its institutions and, instead, placed blame on fatness and individual fat people. In the next section I will address how troll characteristics were defined and how they were distinct when compared to the rest of the data.

DETECTING THE TROLLS

While coding for the tactics used by commenters, I found that commenters divided themselves into categories based on the style or characteristics within their messages. Commenters often relied on the use of slurs or other vulgar language, along with hyperbole and other grandiose writing styles, to get their point across. I also attempted to separate commenters from "trolls" and find characteristics that might define trolls distinctly. Overall, I defined trolls based on their style of messaging and I outline those styles below.

Table 6 – Themes Found: Trolls (n= 100)



Overall, I coded 100 messages in my sample as having characteristics that could be defined as “trolling.” Specifically, I coded messages that declared commenters’ troll identities or mentioned an online trolling community (29), messages with language frequently used within online trolling communities (55), messages that exhibited playfulness or hyperbole (21), commenters who repeatedly visited the blog and made comments (25), and messages that contained similar phrasing or content that made it appear to come from the same place (8 times). The language used by trolls became the most common way messages were coded as trolls, but there were no noticeable groupings or overlaps among themes found within the messages. I use this coding strategy to identify the types of messages that “trolls” versus other commenters send.

I specifically used the writing style and language used within each message to identify potential trolls versus other commenters in my sample. Although I was only able to find messages that easily matched detectable linguistic and rhetorical patterns, I was able to code a very specific subset of messages in my sample using this strategy and identified perhaps the most glaring or exaggerated forms of trolling behavior in the process. Many of the messages that I

identified as written by “trolls” contained similar language, which made it easier to distinguish them from other commenters, and some commenters also included phrases in their messages that are frequently used on websites like 4chan or Reddit, known trolling forums (Phillips 2015). For instance, in message 3345, a commenter used the word “fatty” in the body of the message but the username and email was attributed to “le nigger face,” a phrase that is commonly used on 4chans /b/ board, the “random” forum where online graphics and commentary often falls into racist tropes and stereotypes (Phillips 2015; Quickmeme.com). These phrases are purposely used by commenters who are seeking to draw out emotional responses from other internet visitors or to joke between community members (Herring et al. 2002). Within the data, this and other similar phrases became a way to identify “trolling” messages, because commenters were using these phrases to define themselves as insiders to troll language and communities (Phillips 2015; Broderick 2014).

Messages often identified commenters as insiders or community members in troll forums by drawing on outright acknowledgment of their affiliation. For instance, messages referenced forums with which trolls were affiliated, by simply using an email or other name-based identifier. One message written by a user noted the email “hater@fathate.org,” in reference to a Reddit forum that was banned in 2015 and is now a website (Reddit 2015). Other messages linked to troll forums where *This is Thin Privilege* was being discussed, in an attempt to get the moderators of the blog (and other commenters) to read what was being said about the website on trolling forums. The commenter who wrote message 2391 accomplished this by linking to a specific post on Reddit and stating:

Why is reddit so awful? I mean, how can they compare our condishuns
[sic] to smeared shit?!?!

Teehee. I know you'll delete this, because it makes sense. Bye, you fat lards. ;)

Aside from identifying their affiliation to trolling communities, commenters also used phrases and terms that further identified them as trolls. The beginning of this message was written to appear as a legitimate submission but then shows its real intent quickly, in simply bringing attention to the discussion of the blog on another troll forum.

This type of comment was found throughout the sample in messages that also included easily identifiable troll characteristics (such as names and emails), and the only real intent of these messages was, as said earlier, to bring attention to the discussions about fatness on other troll-affiliated websites. In message 2391, the commenter linked to a specific post, consciously uses exaggerated and slang language, identifies himself/herself as a troll. The playful nature of the post and the commenter's expectation that their post would be deleted was also found in other messages. Not all trolls identified themselves, however; some just used terms or language that is often found within known trolling forums.

Terms that were used by trolls to describe fat people were distinctly different from terms used in other messages (written by non-trolls) within my dataset. Trolling messages were more likely to reference fat people by referring to them as animals or mentioning animals associated with fatness. Trolling messages also frequently used exaggerated and slang language, as noted earlier:

Stfu you disgusting hambeasts. Get on the fucking treadmill once in your goddamn putrid life. (Message 889)

The term "hambeast" came up frequently within the data, along with other terms like "land whale" and "hamplanet." The commenter references individual behavior he/she believes fat

people do not engage in by demanding fat people “stfu” or “shut the fuck up” and use a treadmill. The structure of the message uses distinct language that is found within trolling communities. This combined with the demanding tone of the message reflects a linguistic pattern that is similar to other messages that I coded as trolling.

Many commenters did not make up new terminology when referring to fat people as animals, but instead just used language that could be easily overlooked and not regarded as troll messages without further analysis. The commenter from Message 1088 not only outs themselves as a troll with their email address (hater@fathate.org) but also states:

Losing weight is inspirational. Being a sow is disgusting.

In this message the commenter uses the term “sow” to reference how they view the bodies of fat people as disgusting and comparing them to pigs. The use of this language, along with outing themselves as a user from the troll forum “fat hate” they use an online style that was similar for many of the trolls in the dataset.

An individual with the username “Land Whalington” posted message 446 and this message exemplifies the playfulness and teasing found within many troll messages within my data:

Diabeetus

I CANT EXERCISE COZ OF MUH CUNDISHUNS SO I HAVE
BEETUS WHAT DO I DO?

This message used specific terms found within trolling communities and the exaggerated writing style made it easily identifiable as a trolling message. The purposeful misspelling of “conditions,” “diabetes,” and others along with the username connects to similar writing styles in

known trolling forums. As with other messages in the data, the commenter also reinforces the main themes about fatness (as caused by both individual blame and disease)

While many of the messages that were identified as trolls included exaggerated writing styles and terms, some only included small indications of their potential troll identity. Messages like Message 1884 (shown below) were not written in as exaggerated a style, but the use of terms or language found within trolling communities makes it more likely that this commenter is linked to those communities in some way.

This blog is fucking hilarious. And bot [sic] in a good way. You people just love to play the victim, don't you? (And before you start yelling "OMGZ OPPRESSIONZ!1!": by "you people" I mean the mods of this blog, not fat people in general.) What do you get out of hating so much?

The commenter begins by mocking the content of the blog and framing it as hilarious. He or she goes further by suggesting that the blog moderators are "playing the victim" when discussing issues of discrimination or stigma. The use of exaggerated language like "OMGZ OPPRESSIONZ!1!" triggered the coding of this message as "trolling," because it provides a link to language used in online trolling communities. This phrasing can be found outside of troll communities, but, at the very least, this language creates potential that this commenter is linked to trolling communities.

By coding the characteristics most often exhibited by trolls, I was able to identify and analyze messages potentially written by trolls. As the examples show, 100 out of the 500 messages (20%) had a very specific writing style and used terms, names, or slang commonly associated with online trolling communities (Phillips 2015). At times commenters even directly indicated their affiliation with trolling communities by referencing them in their message or

linking to the communities they frequented. While there is not a difference in the way they discuss fat people overall (in that they tend to make the same arguments about fatness and fat people), there is a considerable difference in the kind of rhetoric and language used in the messages I designated as trolling, when compared to the messages I coded as non-trolling.

CHAPTER 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to investigate online discourse around fatness, decipher the tactics used by online commenters and differentiate messages sent by (non-troll) commenters versus well-defined “trolls.” I was interested in the ways that online commenters on the blog framed fatness and if commenter perceptions were related to dominant rhetoric about fat people, and I also explored the methods commenters used to deliver the messages. Ultimately, blog comments brought forth commenters’ conclusions about why fatness exists, who is to blame for fatness, and general perceptions about fat people. Overall, I found that commenters constructed two competing understandings of fatness that were often used simultaneously. Commenters specifically relied on an understanding of fatness as caused by individual behaviors and, relatedly, believed that fat people were at fault for the stigma or discrimination they experienced.

Commenters also held to an equation of fatness and sickness/disease at times, but also waffled from this position as well, showing inconsistent and incomplete understandings of disease. Fatness was constructed as the embodiment of disease because commenters defined fat people’s perceived behaviors as a cause of the diseases that they associated with fat bodies. Because of the heavy emphasis placed on individual behaviors as the root cause of fatness, instead of genetics or other biological factors, commenters frequently waffled between these two behavioral or biological understandings of fatness. Commenters did believe fatness to be a sign of and cause of disease, but rejected any argument that fatness in and of itself was a biological predisposition.

Due to the stress placed on individual behavior and the denial of the equation of fatness and biology, they relied on behavioral causes of fatness and this lens created the ability to blame everything related to fatness on fat people. By viewing fatness as caused by fat people’s

behaviors, commenters argued that the stigma or discrimination fat people experienced was also due to fatness itself and removed blame from institutional or structural forces.

Aside from consistently shifting blame to fat people, the commenters' messages were meant to slowly chip away at the discourse on the blog. Through repeated use of disagreement and counter-arguments, commenters created a consistent message that fat people were to blame for their bodies and related socio-cultural experiences. Commenters made consistent and regular arguments about why the mission of the blog and its discourse were faulty.

Furthermore, I found that there were specific characteristics shared by commenters who participated in known trolling communities. The language and terminology found within those communities came through certain commenters' messages. Trolls held to the main constructions of fatness found within the data, and in that way the substance of their comments did not vary much from other commenters, but they used insider terminology and sometimes even identified themselves as trolls within their messages.

By analyzing the construction of fatness, commenters' tactics of dissent, and characteristics of trolls versus non-troll commenters, this study contributes to sociological scholarship about the body and online social media platforms in multiple ways. This study contributes to scholarship about the body by adding to socio-cultural understandings of fatness. The construction of fatness as the result of individual behavior and the secondary construction of fatness as a disease shows evidence of how dominant rhetoric has permeated online discourse around fat bodies.

By examining the tactics used within the messages and troll characteristics, this study also contributes to scholarship on online communities. Commenters and trolls did not differentiate in the way they framed fatness. Both the defined trolls as well as other commenters

used this social media venue as a forum to reinforce dominant discourse around fatness. Thus, the key differences found between trolls and other commenters centered around use of language. These findings add to the already growing research on trolling and online communities, but much more research needs to be done to understand trolls and their tactics and whether trolls are really any different than other commenters in their intents and/or discourse.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

I believe this research significantly contributes to different bodies of literature on fatness, online discourse and trolling communities. First and foremost, I believe the data used in this research from *This is Thin Privilege* provides a meaningful source to add to the growing body of literature on dominant narratives about fatness. While I only used one blog as a data source, it was chosen for its large readership, the significant media coverage it has received, and the consistent attention it garnered from trolling communities. The prominence of this blog allowed me to select from more data and see a broader range of data than I might have on a less popular or less visited blog.

Empirically, this research contributes and expands on literature within fat studies by analyzing a new space online that prior research has not explored. Previously, scholars have attempted to understand dominant narratives about fatness by looking at mainstream media forms and medical research venues (Boero 2006; Saguy and Almeling 2008). By looking at online communication and specifically a fat-positive community space, this research adds to the prior literature by showing how the dominant narratives about fatness are also reinforced online, and even in spaces that offer alternative perspectives. This adds to fat studies literature and gives scholars a new discursive space to explore how fatness is framed. Future literature should also

systematically compare the dominant versus alternative discourses within this space and how they intertwine and contest each other.

This research also contributes to bodies of literature that include research on cyberbullying and trolling by showing the significant messaging that occurs online against fat positive spaces. Prior research by Phillips (2015) only looked at how trolling communities reinforced dominant discourse around race and gender. I believe this research contributes to this literature by bringing in fatness as an identity that is targeted by trolls. Due to the nature of trolling being inherently gendered, as women are the main targets of online harassment and trolling, this research also contributes to the growing body of literature of the harassment women face online (Citron 2008). Due to the significant contributions of women to the *This is Thin Privilege* blog, the gendered nature of the messages could not be extracted during my analysis but contributes to an undercurrent of why blog receives such a significant level of trolling. Future research should examine gendered reasons for trolling and gendered undercurrents within the blog's discourse, more than I could in this thesis project.

Lastly, I believe this research contributes to an overall theoretical understand of how normative social constructions are created and reinforced, even within spaces where alternative discourse is supposed to be prioritized. The findings in this research provide an understanding of how fat bodies are viewed online and how those narratives are consistently reinforced through messaging that refutes any challenge to dominant discourses. Through the analysis of the data, I presented how commenters continually pushed back against messages that challenged dominant narratives and this contributes to an overall understanding of how these narratives are constructed.

LIMITATIONS

There were a few limitations within this research that must be addressed. My insider status as a moderator of the blog and blog community member meant I had to step back frequently throughout the research process, to make sure that I was fully articulating and analyzing the data. My status provided a significant hurdle at times and I worked diligently to bracket and break-through my own perceptions, in order to provide the best analysis of the data. The data source was also limited due to the anonymity of the commenters, and the inability to follow-up with commenters to understand their perspectives more fully. In addition, while coding for troll characteristics was completed, certain terms that originated in these sub communities have permeated the online landscape and are no longer contained only within troll communities. This is just one example of how online trolling behavior, while easy to differentiate from other online behaviors in some ways, cannot be treated as having characteristics that are exclusive to trolls. Finally, my sample provides just as small snippet of online discourse about fatness. Future studies should expand this analysis in many ways as a result.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study has contributed to the understanding of fatness online and the way that online commentary functions. It provides a distinct look at reactions to alternative framings of fatness and builds on scholarship within the field on this topic. Future research could expand on this study through a larger and more varied data collection of online comments about fatness and fat bodies. Specifically, future researchers should consider collecting and analyzing comments from

a wide variety of social media platforms, since this study is based on comments from only one alternative blog. Through the use of qualitative interviews, future researchers could also interview individuals who are the targets of online commentary and trolling, to see how this commentary influences their understandings of fatness, their own social media presence and activity, and the physical or mental impact of being the recipient of consistently negative messages about their bodies and ideas. Furthermore, interviews with self-declared trolls and/or other internet users who send these messages could allow for a deeper look into the beliefs of individuals who engage in online harassment or threatening behavior. While the sample in this study did not include threats of violence, this behavior is well documented in other research and future research could attempt to provide understand for why they engage in these behaviors.

APPENDIX

LIST OF CODES

Codes	Operational definitions with examples
1.1 Claims about Fatness	All messages in this code category make a specific claim about fatness that differentiates themselves from messages that do not mention fatness.
1.2 Attraction	<p>Message makes claim about attraction and fatness.</p> <p>Example – “Stop eating so goddamn much, and get your ass of [sic] the couch. Then men will want you, and you can stop with the victim mindset.” Message 547.</p>
1.3 Death	<p>Message mentions death in relation to fatness. This code differentiates from the code within the category “tactics” due to it requiring a specific claim about fatness, where as the other code can also include threats of death.</p> <p>Example – “Except it’s true. You can die from obesity. This is fact.” Message 493.</p>
1.4 Disgusting / Repulsive	<p>Message states fatness is disgusting or repulsive.</p> <p>Example – “Losing weight is inspirational. Being a sow is disgusting.” Message 1088.</p>
1.5 Food / Diet	<p>Message mentions food or the diet of fat people.</p> <p>Example – “If you are eating a mostly raw, micro-nutrient based diet you cannot become XXX amount of pounds overweight.” Message 1564.</p>
1.6 Individual Blame	<p>Message alludes to fatness being caused by individual behaviors, such as mentioning diet or exercise.</p> <p>Example – “thin privilege? yes, it exists. and that’s totally ok, because thin people actually do something for it (watch what they eat, exercise)</p> <p>you can’t complain about not having a privilege if you aren’t willing to do something about for it.” Message 227.</p>
1.7 Lack of Mobility	Message mentions the physical limitations or a lack of physical ability due to fatness.

	<p>Example – “If you’re a parent, and you happen to be obese, there is no way in hell you can raise and care for your child to the best of your ability. Being an obese parent goes beyond ‘it only affects MY body’. You wouldn’t be able to play with your child or do anything physical with him / her. And, as we all know, obesity kills.” Message 848.</p>
1.8 Self Control	<p>Message mentions or references fat people lacking the ability to control their own behaviors.</p> <p>Example – “Thin privilege is actually understanding the training people go through to become doctors, and not ignore it because it contradicts with their desires to om nom every cake in sight.” Message 1251.</p>
1.9 Shame	<p>Message linked feelings of shame or have negative feelings about being fat.</p> <p>Example – “Be shamed by your fat, because it’s not going to change if you accept it.” Message 15.</p>
1.10 Sickness / Disease	<p>Message mentions health or mentions certain conditions and diseases they believe are linked with fatness.</p> <p>Example – “Just wondering, if you feel that way why not lose weight? It would boost your self confidence as well as being healthy.” Message 82.</p>
1.11 Stigma / Discrimination	<p>Message mentions the discrimination or stigma fat people experience.</p> <p>Example – “Fat people are NOT like other discriminated against groups. Gay people can’t turn themselves straight. Black people can’t turn themselves white. However, fat people, if they choose, can lose weight.” Message 1870.</p>
1.12 Unnatural	<p>Message mentions what they consider to be natural or normal about bodies in relation to weight.</p> <p>Example – “NO-ONE’s ‘natural weight’ is in the morbidly obese zone....” Message 3092.</p>
2.1 Tactics Used	<p>All data in the sample set were coded to reflect how their message was sent.</p>
2.2 Concern	<p>Message expresses worry or interest in the health of fat</p>

	<p>people.</p> <p>Example – “Being overweight is unhealthy, having scurvy is unhealthy. If I had a friend with scurvy, id toss them an orange. Theres [sic] nothing wrong with caring about people’s health.” Message 2645.</p>
2.3 Counter Argument	<p>Message builds an argument that is meant to directly counter a post on the blog.</p> <p>Example – “ ‘Nobody should have to censor their body by wearing or avoiding certain types/styles of clothing just because it makes someone else uncomfortable.’</p> <p>Therefore, no one should object to my wearing of lingerie while running errands.” Message 1183.</p>
2.4 Death	<p>Message mentions death or expresses the desire for fat people do die.</p> <p>Example – “Have fun dying of a heart attack at 50.” Message 1950.</p>
2.5 Disagreement	<p>Message states a difference of opinion with the blog content.</p> <p>Example – “i have experiences this as a thin woman through varying ages of life. it has to do with being a woman, not with being fat. i am sorry though because it is very very frustrating to feel that all of your work has been undermined over your gender.” Message 2989.</p>
2.6 Laughter / Mocking	<p>Message includes content that is insulting the blog content or appears to want to cause harm.</p> <p>Example – “please please please dont take this blog down, t [sic] has changed my life.</p> <p>there is nothing else for my boyfriend and i to do post-coitus, eating and making fun of your oppression olympics.” Message 2230.</p>
2.7 Question	<p>Message includes questions to get information.</p> <p>Example – “I’ve read through a couple of your posts and I have some honest questions. First of all, why do you believe</p>

	that all thin people have a fast metabolism? Secondly, do you really have such a problem with people using your weight as an insult toward you? If all they can come up with to insult you is your outward appearance, shouldn't that make you stand upward as an individual?" Message 223.
2.8 Rape	Message mentions rape or sexual assault. Example – “I would rather rape a hot girl than a lardass, honestly.” Message 1922.
2.9 Shaming	Message includes content that is degrading fat people. Example – “You fat fucks are disgusting.” Message 1279.
2.10 Statement	Message is a written expression that is different from messages that include questions or something that seeks to get information. The main goal is to express information. Example – “An Olympic athlete murdered a super model. 2 celebrities. Had she not been a celebrity, yeah, there probably wouldn't be the same amount of coverage, the same way an average skinny white girl getting murdered probably wouldn't get as much coverage as Rebel Wilson being murdered.” Message 3006.
2.11 Tone Argument	Message comments on the emotional content of the blog. Example – “Calm down, dear.” Message 2604.
3.1 Troll Characteristics	All messages in this code category have specific characteristics that are found within troll communities and messages sent by declared trolls within the data.
3.2 Declared Troll	Message includes information from the username, email or body of the message that openly showed it was from a troll. Example – “You should give us a shout out, it's only fair.” Message sent from known troll blog. Message 95.
3.3 Internet Speak	Message includes language or the use of specific terms that are often found in trolling communities, such as landwhale, hamplanet, hambeast, shitlord, fatty etc. Example – “fat privilege is thinprivilege.tumblr.com.” User email includes “homofuck” and “landwhale.” Message 3508.

3.4 Playfulness	Message appears to be written for the sender's amusement and not to be taken seriously. Example – “Thin privilege is not having to make up new meals to quell one's insatiable hunger.” Message 690.
3.5 Repeated Visits	Message is sent from an individual who has sent numerous messages within the dataset.
3.6 Similar Messages	Message includes links or content that is similar to other messages within the dataset.

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Supposed to Eat like Pigs Are They?' Young Women Negotiating Gendered Discursive Constructions of Food and Eating." *Journal of Health Psychology* 17(1):46–56.

ABSTRACT**CROSSING THE TROLL BRIDGE – THE FRAMING OF FAT BODIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

by

AMANDA LEVITT**August 2016****Advisor:** Dr. Heather Dillaway**Major:** Sociology**Degree:** Master of Arts

As the use of social media grows, cyber bullying and trolling plague the way that people interact online. Even within spaces specifically dedicated to deconstructing dominant discourse around fatness, cyber bullying is an everyday occurrence. Data for this research came from a randomly selected sample of 500 messages sent to moderators of *This is Thin Privilege*, a Tumblr blog that explores and critiques the experiences of fat people in society. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on online communication by analyzing how commenters' messages construct fatness and reify dominant narratives, the common tactics commenter's use, and the characteristics and discourse of trolls versus other commenters.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

My time as a graduate student has been one of personal growth and it is during this time that I have merged my work as an activist with my newly formed scholarly career. Over the last decade I have defined myself as an activist and community organizer within fat positive community spaces, building a community that seeks to deconstruct harmful beliefs about fat bodies and challenge fat stigma. During this time my work has been featured on major news outlets, including *CNN*, *USA Today*, *Ravelry*, *Bitch Magazine* and the *New York Times*. In the summer of 2015 and 2016 I was a coordinator for the *Abundant Bodies* track at *Allied Media Conference* in Detroit, MI, where we organized sessions challenging dominant discourse around fatness and centered the voices of Indigenous, Black, People of Color, Dis/abled, Super-sized, Trans and Queer fat people. I have also facilitated body positive workshops around Metro Detroit, including a workshop at *Girls Rock Detroit*.

As a graduate student I have built upon these activist experiences by expanding my knowledge of sociological theories and using sociological perspectives to build critiques and seek solutions for the main social problems I've found through my activism. I have presented results from this Master's thesis and related projects on fatness at the *Society for the Study of Social Problems* in 2014 and 2015. I also presented research work on fatness with Dr. Zachary Brewster at the *Michigan Sociological Association* conference in 2014. I have been invited to present my work at *Oakland University* (in 2014) and the *Mid and South Michigan Planned Parenthood* with a workshop to help them create more body inclusive health care practices (in 2015). My work and my interests in fat studies continue to expand. I plan to continue researching this topic over the years to come, to look at the ways in which fat embodiment is shaped by social inequality and the intersections of gender, race, class, and geographic location.