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## The role of fashion and fatshion blogging in college women's negotiation of identity

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THE ROLE OF FASHION AND FATSHION BLOGGING IN COLLEGE  
WOMEN'S NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITY

by

Katy Leigh Stang

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of  
Arts degree in Journalism  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

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Thesis Supervisor: Professor Meenakshi Gigi Durham

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Graduate College  
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Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee for the  
thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree in  
Journalism at the May 2015 graduation.

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, the salience of obesity and body image in society has given rise to a "fat activist" movement dedicated to defending non-normative body types. The term "fat" has been reclaimed by the movement as a term of emancipation and defiance. This activism has extended to the online environment, in which groups who are ostracized for their bodies have taken to blogging as a form of resistance and expression. The so-called "fatshion" blogs have a growing audience, and there is a burgeoning scholarly literature on this phenomenon. The aim of this research was to investigate college-aged females who identify as "fat," who may or may not have been exposed to the online fatshion (fat fashion) market or blogs. Are these blogs being used as resources for these women? Do they even know these websites exist? Thus, the aim of this study was to discover how ideologies of fat activism play out among women who are consumers of plus-size fashions and may or may not engage with "fatshion" blogs.

The main objective of this study was to find how plus-size women's fashion choices are shaped by the mediated and cultural discourses of the body and how these, in turn, influence their shopping experiences. By conducting semi-structured interviews, this thesis explored the personal thoughts and feelings of fat women in relation to fashion and fatshion blogging. Fatshion was studied through four theoretical lenses: as a counter-discourse, as a place for identity construction, as a mode of gender performativity, and how fatshion is informed by intersectionality of race, class, and gender. Based on the interview data, the study found that the messages found on fatshion blogs have the potential to spark opposition in ways that mobilize a more positive self-image as well as nonconformist self-presentations through a heightened awareness of the possibilities for

opposing dominant ideologies.

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

In recent years, the rise of obesity and body image issues in society has given rise to a "fat activist" movement dedicated to defending alternative bodies. This activism has extended online, where groups who are ostracized for their bodies have taken to blogging as a form of resistance and expression. These "fatshion" (fat fashion) blogs have a growing audience, and there has been increasing literature on this topic. The aim of this research was to investigate college-aged females who identify as "fat," who may or may not have been exposed to the online fatshion market or blogs. Are these blogs being used as resources for these women? The purpose of this study was to discover what fashion is like for those who may not participate as heavily within these communities, specifically looking at how plus-size women's fashion choices are shaped by the cultural and mediated discourses of the body and whether this influences their shopping experiences. By conducting interviews along with a questionnaire, the thoughts and feelings of fat women outside of this movement were explored. Fatshion was studied through four theoretical lenses: as a counter-discourse, a place for identity construction, a mode of gender performativity, and a phenomenon informed by intersectionality of race, class, and gender. Based on the interview data, the study found that, when they were used, fatshion blogs were a site of resistance that women navigated in relation to their own body image and their ideas on fashion.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Fashion as a Communicative Tool.....	3
Fatshion as a Concept .....	4
What is Weightism? .....	5
Fat Activism .....	6
What is fat activism?.....	6
Online fatshion blogging.....	8
Theoretical Framework.....	10
Counter-discourse .....	11
Fashion-ing Identities.....	12
Gender Performativity .....	13
Intersectionality.....	15
Research Questions .....	17
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	19
Introduction .....	19
Fashion and Identity .....	19
Non-Internet Studies .....	19
The Internet and Fashion .....	24
Fashion Blogging.....	26
Fatshion Blogging .....	29
Filling in the Gaps .....	32
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....	34
Introduction .....	34
Participant Selection .....	36
The Two Populations .....	39
Interviewing Methods.....	40
Problems and Solutions .....	42
Methods of Analysis .....	44
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS.....	47
Introduction .....	47
Fatshion Communication.....	48

Blogging.....	48
Media Sources.....	51
Personal Communication .....	53
Identity.....	55
Body Image and Fat Activism.....	58
Blogging & Media .....	58
Shopping .....	60
Fat Activism.....	62
Consumerism and the Plus-Size Fashion Industry .....	63
 CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION.....	 66
General Conclusions.....	66
Body Discourses .....	66
Rules of the game: Family, friends, fashion magazines .....	67
The Influence of Blogs.....	70
The Power of Identity and Style .....	74
Contribution to Literature.....	77
Future Research .....	78
 REFERENCES.....	 81

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### **Introduction**

In recent years, concerns with increased obesity and a recognition of body image issues have given rise to a fat activist movement that challenges the politics of contemporary body norms. One aspect that has gained popularity throughout the fat activism movement is “fatshion,” or fat fashion. Fatshion refers to the exploration of how fat individuals clothe themselves in the fashion world that normally rejects this body type. This is often done through fatshion blogs, which have emerged as a resource for these women to shop and find tips, and these spaces can be used as “a tool that has the power to alter societal perceptions of the fat body as well as to promote body positivity” (Peters, 2013, p.8). The word “fat” has been reclaimed by the fat activist community with, “the political project of reclaiming the word fat, both as the preferred neutral adjective and also as a preferred term of political identity” (Wann, 2009, p. xii). While the word fat will be used within this paper, both “plus-size” and “overweight” will be utilized interchangeably as well.

In this thesis, I will be exploring how fat female college-aged students use these blogs in their consumerism and in their constructions of identity. Since fashion is a presentational tool that can communicate everything from economic status to personal style, it is imperative to understand how those who may have a limited wardrobe available negotiate their fashion choices, and how that, in turn, impacts their identity formation. Thus, the “visual communicative ability of garments” becomes even more important if an individual does not fit into the standard body type for which most clothing is made (Farren & Hutchinson, 2004, p.473). The role of social media is an increasingly salient element in this process.

In recent years, a plethora of scholarship has focused on how fatshion bloggers view the fat

activist web environment and their role within it. While this research is both useful and fascinating, these case studies represent only a small number of fat women who take leadership roles in these online communities. Thus, the aim of this research is to investigate college-aged fat females who comprise target audiences for fatshion, and who may or may not have been exposed to the online fatshion blogosphere, also known as the fatosphere. Are these blogs being used as resources for these women? Do they even know these websites exist? Thus, the aim of this study is to discover what this fashion media sector may mean to the broad community of fat fashion consumers-- those who are not engaged in these online communities and those who only lurk within this community, rather than acting as “prosumers.” Thus, this study focuses on the presumed audience niche for these blogs. Fatshion’s meaning among these audiences will be dissected through four theoretical lenses: as a counter-discourse, as a place for identity construction, as a mode of gender performativity, and how fatshion is informed by intersectionality. By conducting semi-structured interviews, an in-depth look at the personal thoughts and feelings of fat women outside and on the outskirts of the fatshion blogging movement will be explored.

To investigate these phenomena, I will first discuss the significance of researching fatshion in light of the literature on fashion as a communicative tool. I will then explain fatshion as a conceptual category and how weightism can be advanced via limited fatshion choices. Next, the movement of fat activism and its goals will be explained and connected to the new wave of fat activism occurring through online fatshion blogging. A preview of theoretical underpinnings of this study will be outlined, focusing on counter-discourse, identity formation, gender performativity, and intersectionality. Finally, the overarching research questions that will be addressed are outlined and explicated.

### *Fashion as a Communicative Tool*

Fashion is a part of everyday life and culture. No matter if a person wears a military uniform, a sundress, or a leather jacket, the clothing a person wears represents more than just a frivolous impulse and instead can signify anything from social status to career choice. Clothing can be a marker of personal identity and style while also communicating, “social states and gender and therefore [is] useful in maintaining or subverting symbolic boundaries” (Crane, 2000, p.1). Thus, the study of clothing cannot be discounted as a trivial pursuit as clothing items can be “subtle indicators of how different types of societies and different positions within societies are actually experienced” (Crane, 2000, p.1). Throughout history, clothing has taken on different types of meaning and importance. Specifically, fashion has traditionally been a distinguisher of social class, with certain styles and fabrics available to those with more wealth. As prices of clothing have leveled, fashion has now transformed into a more cultural good, which helps create the persona of personal identity (Crane, 2000, p.11). Not only does this clothing communicate identity but, “at the collective level this results typically in locating [people] symbolically in some structured universe of state claims and life-style attachments” (Davis, 1992, p.4). Thus, clothing allows individuals to place themselves within certain groupings based on outer representation. Fashion has also been a place to resistant the dominant culture. Punk has been one of the most documented cases of a subculture using fashion as a way to rebel against societal standards (Hebdige, 1979).

While fashion is able to communicate multiple meanings through garments, there is not always an equal opportunity to participate in these messages. Although plus-size clothing companies exist, the number of retailers is comparatively small against the number of traditional-sized retailers. Of the female fashion market, only 18 percent of total revenue is generated by plus size fashion (Bellefante, 2010). This may not be indicative of a small population of fat

women, however; as we shall see later in this research, women with nonconforming bodies sometimes are forced to buy men's clothing or make their own clothes. Thus, communicative fashion is not available for all. Since fashion is able to communicate, resist, and designate social class, if there is a limited amount of clothing available this would limit the amount of representation and expression an out-sized person can have. Because of these limitations, bloggers and online retailers have become popular on the fatshion scene, offering clothing and style options that were previously unavailable. The goal of fatshion is to create the same opportunities and styles for representation that are traditionally missing from fashion retailers.

### *Fatshion as a Concept*

Fat women represent one group which has traditionally been absent from mainstream fashion. In the fashion industry, fat women and men are labeled as plus- or out- size, differentiating them from the "average" person. The fashion choices that fat women have are limited, allowing for some to feel that "it is hopeless to dress a large chubby—and therefore less than modern – body in contemporary feminine styles" (Klepp & Storm-Mathisen, 2005, p.337). While clothing choices tend to be minimal within stores, online retailers have capitalized on this market, so that "fashionable plus-size garments are made available at a high cost mostly through independent online purveyors or relegated to separate virtual categories by mainstream online retailers" (Peters, 2014, p.81). Fat women, along with other fashion outsiders, have used blogging as a space of play that is also "a significant cultural site in which the struggle over the meanings of race, gender, sexuality, and political action happen every day" (Pham, 2011, p.28). This space of play has created the concept of fatshion, which is fashion specifically designed, created, and modelled for fat individuals.

Fatshion is a subgenre of the fat activism movement: it aims to fill the gap between the wants of fat individuals and what the traditional fashion industry offers. While both men and

women are active in this community, women represent a larger population, in both the fat activism and fatshion spheres. Those who assume the identity of a fashionable fat person are often referred to as fatshionistas, “a fat female who disrupts normalized understandings of beauty and its social categories via active participation in cultural fields of beauty” (Guirrieri & Cherrier, 2013, p.278). Often times hypersexual, these women often engage in blogging and community building, helping to promote body positivity through the lens of fashion inclusion. This online community is known as fatosphere, and it includes anyone from popular bloggers to non-participative observers, aiming at “creating a safe space where individuals can counter fat prejudice, resist misconceptions of fat, engage in communal experiences and promote positive understandings of fat” (Guirrieri & Cherrier, 2013, p.279). Thus, fatshion allows for both personal struggles to be articulated while also tackling the traditional notions of what it means to be a female. This safe haven is in solidarity with fat activism against discriminatory practices, such as weightism, that occur around the world.

### *What is Weightism?*

With over 1/3 of US adults being obese, it would be logical to assume that clothing options would reflect this number; however, this has not occurred (“Overweight & Obesity” 2013). The restricted apparel market is just one form of weightism, which is “prejudice or discrimination against people based on body weight” (Fox-Kales, 2011, p.158). Weightism has particularly been evident within the workforce with obese men and women making significantly less than their thin counterparts (Baum & Ford 2004) and obese women more likely to be stigmatized by HR professionals (Giel, et al. 2012). Weight discrimination has been found to bring “social stigmatism and stereotyping and that can lead to depression, discrimination and binge eating” (Dye, 2008, p.2). Thus, not only does the act of weightism occur within businesses, but this can actually cause those suffering to gain more weight by bingeing.

Weightism, while affecting adults, has also been found among children. These behaviors and ideas about weight are “firmly established in most elementary schools as both boys and girls joke about, tease, and bully classmates whose body sizes do not fit the cultural norm” (Steiner-Adair & Vorenberg, 1999, p.117). These beliefs have then translated into actions with children reporting “significantly higher rates of mistreatment reported by overweight and obese adolescents than those of normal weight” (Buccianeri, et.al, 2013, p. 49).

Weight discrimination is detrimental when it comes to the lack of fashion options available. For children, it could lead to a lack of style choices that marginalize them among their peers. Among adults, if obese individuals have limited choices and may need to go online to purchase clothing, this presents even more serious problems. To be hired at a well-paying job, common wisdom holds that a person needs to present himself or herself in the best light through dress and grooming. However, to afford professional style clothing, one needs money, which a fat person may not be able to obtain without the well-paying job. Thus, the linkage between overweight women and their fashion choices has economic implications as well.

### **Fat Activism**

*What is fat activism?*

Fat activism is a social movement aimed at fighting against the traditional “weight-related belief system” which dominates American culture (Wann, 2009, p. ix). In the United States, this activism emerged with the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), which began in 1969 (Wann, 2009, p. x). It began when an “average-sized” man “observed the suffering of his large wife but had experienced at first hand the embarrassment and difficulties of being a man who is attracted to fat women” (Millman, 1980, p.4). This prompted him to create a safe environment for fat individuals to both express themselves and find acceptance about their size. Through conferences, newsletters, social gatherings, and other public activities, the



NAAFA has established its goal to “eliminate discrimination based on body size and provide fat people with the tools for self-empowerment through advocacy, public education, and support” (NAAFA, 2014, “NAAFA: About Us”, para. 1). Marilyn Wann, one of the most prominent fat-rights activists, has emphasized the struggle that fat individuals go through as they, “are discriminated against in employment, housing, in access to theatres, and restaurants, and they are subject to cruelty- the crushing burden of fat hatred” (Cooke, 2006, para. 15). Thus, the goal of the fat activist community is to try to combat those presuppositions both politically and socially.

Another advance that occurred within this movement was the introduction of the Health at Every Size (HAES) campaign. While not specifically introduced by members or influenced by the fat activism movement, the NAAFA has embraced this stance as it is more inclusive and less judgmental than other, more traditional health plans. The goal of the HAES approach is “self-acceptance and healthy day-to-day practices, regardless of whether a person’s weight changes” (Burgard, 2009, p.42). Unlike other medical issues, being overweight is often approached as an issue that has solely been caused by the fat individual and relies heavily on BMI calculations. This discounts other considerations such as other health situations or the hereditary nature of obesity. Instead, HAES focuses on: enhancing overall health without setting specific weight goals, physical body acceptance, eating without a specific food plan or diet, participating in physical movements for the joy and health benefits, and ending weight bias (Burgard, 2009). By participating in these five tenets, participants will arrive at their “natural” weight, rather than trying to conform to societal ideas (Burgard, 2009). This takes the emphasis off looking a certain way and onto projecting healthy weight for each individual.

While this movement has allowed for some theories and help for fat individuals, it is not a highly visible organization, “we don’t have places of pride to gather together on a daily

basis...there's no fat-pride bar [...] our first reaction is not to fight back, our reaction is to give money to fat-hate industries (Weight Watchers, stomach amputation, etc.). Instead of demanding self-respect, we seek approval from our oppressors" (Cooke, 2006, para. 16). Under this umbrella of activism many different subsidiaries have emerged, from the discussed Health at Every Size campaign to the online body positivity communities to fat fashion. Fat activism aims to bridge the gap between these different campaigns in order to enhance the living conditions of fat individuals who may be suffering from different inequalities based on their size.

### *Online fatshion blogging*

As individuals have taken up different social issues via the Internet, a new wave of fat activism has emerged within the blogosphere. As Lauren Downing Peters (2013) suggests, this new wave of fat activism "disrupts constructions of normative feminine beauty [...] erodes the restrictive dress conventions established by plus-size style guides [...] and] make[s] the fat body more visible in society" (p.1). Primarily through fatshion blogs, younger users are participating and blogging about their struggles and body image journey. While this helps develop the individual self, it also promotes a group identity which can allow a deeper conversation to transpire about the role of fashion as a way to "alter societal perceptions of the fat body as well as to promote body positivity within a market that otherwise marginalizes fat bodies" (Peters, 2013, p.8). Both the group and the individual identity that are fostered in these blogs allow for expression and participation from their viewers.

Through popular blogging websites such as Tumblr and LiveJournal, fatshion and fat activism communities have grown. Most of these blogs are run by women and can deal with either general clothing for fat people or the bloggers' personal fatshion issues. These blogs often feature photos that can be either uploaded via the blog-owner or readers can submit their own fashion photographs. These posts usually feature information about where others can purchase

the outfit and sometimes come with paragraphs written by the uploader. These can feature anything from measurements and weight to their personal journey or how the blog has helped them. With millions of fashion blogs in existence (Rocamora 2012), these websites have the power to reach others and act as spaces that can subvert traditional notions. While this is often the goal of these blogs, there are currently no studies, which examine how this translates to those who are not creating these websites, but rather engaged with them as audiences, or who fatshion consumerism is not directly impacted by the blogs.

The goal of this research then, is to define how this new wave fat activism through these blogs has affected those who may be outside the leadership circle of this innovative and transformative community. As mentioned above, these blogs have acted as a space to advocate for fat rights while also combating the traditional notions of fat exclusion from fashion. This study hopes to understand how fat women are using these blogs in reality. While the goals of these blogs may be admirable, it is imperative that data be collected to see if this is translating into actual use. Another component that will be examined is whether those who view the blogs are part of the larger fat activism community or if they simply have stumbled upon these blogs on their own--- or if they are operating in isolation from both.

While the fatshion blogosphere has now become a developing area of research, certain trends have emerged within this subfield with regard to methodology and subject selection. Specifically these leaders in the community who are fashion bloggers or run high traffic fat activist webpages, are often utilized in these studies. While this provides a necessary insight into this community, there are those who are simply aware of the existence of various fashion blogs, but may or may not use them as a shopping guide or individuals who have no knowledge that these resources exist. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine presumptive fatshion blog

audiences rather than the bloggers. This population has yet to be studied within the fatshion community. By also interviewing those who lurk within these communities, but do not actively participate, a comparison can be made of those who are aware of this sector and those who are not and how, and if, this reflects not only their shopping experience but their relationship to fat activism. The reach and impact of these fatshion blogs is a neglected aspect of existing scholarship, and this research hopes to gain the perspective of those who have not dedicated their life or time to the fatshion community.

The goal of interviewing college students in particular, is twofold. First, college-aged women are often conscious of what they are wearing and may put more effort or importance on a wardrobe, which may not be seen in another population (La Ferla, 2011). In addition, shopping may now be an activity done solely by the young adult without the parent both monetarily and physically, which may allow for new and distinctive explorations into shopping and fashion. Since shopping is a process that is taught, it mostly begins with mother and daughter then finally, “as children reach adolescence, they are more likely to shop with friends at the mall and use shopping as a recreational activity” (Huddleston & Minahan, 2011, p.39). Thus, as college students experience freedom, this will be reflected in their clothing decision-making. By retrieving this insight, the current fatshion scholarship will advance by understanding how fatshion blogs may vary environment for plus-size shoppers outside of their readership. Previous research has identified activist themes and agendas central to fatshion bloggers’ narratives. In this study, I seek to find out whether fat fashion consumers subscribe to similar themes and agendas. In other words, are the ideologies and motives of fatshion blogs also at work in the larger real-world environment of fatshion consumption?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Four of the most discussed and dissected topics within fashion and fatshion will be explored

throughout this study. The first is how fatshion works as a counter-discourse that subverts the typical body standard that is positioned as “correct” throughout Western culture. This proves particularly interesting with regard to whether individuals outside, or not actively participating in, the fatshion community view their clothing as a statement or if there are other reasons for their choices. Next, identity formation will be looked at in terms of how fashion pieces represent and shape one’s identity and its representation to others. This perspective will be applied to determine whether fat women feel they have a personal style and how closely this relates to the fashion they wear and are able to afford. In addition, a concept, which is often explored in fatshion research, is gender performativity. The goal of using this theory is to understand whether plus-size women shoppers feel they are performing certain gender functions or identities by their clothing choices. Often those running fatshion blogs can have a hypergendered persona, such as in Downing Peters “You are what you wear,” which may or may not translate to the general public. A continuation of this subject is the final theory intersectionality, where race, class and gender are interlocking systems that construct social hierarchies. Intersectionality will be explored in terms of how it may help or hinder fashion decisions. Both race and class determine not only the rules of what and how to wear, but also what is available for different individuals to wear. These four theories will be explained in further detail below.

### *Counter-discourse*

The first theory informing this study is the idea of counter-discourse. Michel Foucault (1989) argues that power and knowledge are connected and communicated by and through discourses, which help guide the way individuals think and behave. These discourses work as tacit mandates, which are performed and communicated by people; since “the events of discourse find the principle of their regularity” (Foucault, 1971, p. 22). This concept can be tied to Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. Although Gramsci (2009) views ideologies as a negotiation

between the dominant and subordinate classes while Foucault conceives this as a more hierarchical process, both discuss how this powerful hegemonic rule determines how society functions. While these discourses do shape the way mainstream society behaves, the idea of counter-discourse expands this and proposes a resistance to the pervasive ideologies. Thus, counter-discourses are able to allow the “formerly voiceless to begin to articulate their desires – to counter the domination of prevailing authoritative discourses” (Moussa & Scapp, 1996, p 88). While counter-discourses have always existed, the rise of the Internet has opened up new spaces for resistant voices to emerge, such as in the fatshion blogosphere.

Counter-discourses can specifically be examined with regard to fashion and how it can be a space for various conversations and resistance to occur. This has been dissected within the traditional fashion realm, with research finding that “fashion discourses provide consumers with a plurality of interpretive positions that, because of their diverse associations, can enable them to juxtapose opposing values and beliefs” (Thompson & Haytko, 1997, p.15). Researchers specifically looking at fatshion have been able to expound upon this idea, stating that these spaces may “offer users a respite and a place of belonging in the context of the exclusive, elitist, and oppressive confines of mainstream fashion” (Connell, 2013, p. 221). Thus, the practice and consumption of fatshion may serve to provide community for individuals while also refuting fashion roles that dictate what fat women should and are permitted to wear. This study will look specifically at whether fatshion consumers see their fashion purchases as explicit acts of countering these hegemonic ideals and whether fatshion blogging plays any role in their perspectives.

### *Fashion-ing Identities*

Another topic that is related to this research is the idea that fashion can be a sphere where identity is both molded and constructed. One of the most influential theorists of identity is Erving

Goffman (1959), who proposed that identity is a mixture of both intentional choices as well as those that are unintentionally conveyed by people. Intentional choice could include the purchasing of goods as a symbolic consumption. This concept postulates, “products that we buy, activities that we do and philosophies or beliefs that we pursue tell stories about who we are and with whom we identify” (Wattanasuwan, 2005, p.179). While many theorists are critical about how beneficial it is for consumption to be closely equated to self, it stands that the “pursuit of meaningfulness is vital to the creation, continuation and communication of the self,” which these products are able to provide (Wattanasuwan, 2005, p. 180). Fashion, in particular, is “one of the most visible forms of consumption [which] performs a major role in the social construction of identity” (Crane, 2000, p.1).

Fashion, then, can create a suitable platform of symbolic consumption that both articulates identity while also representing, “a visual metaphor for identity” (Davis, 1992, p.25). While fashion is one way this can be communicated, both the Internet (Turkle 1999) and fatshion blogging (Peters 2014) also provide arenas where identity and self can be negotiated. Through these webpages, individuals can evaluate and alter their own identities, while also constructing a collective group identity (Scaraboto & Fisher 2013). While this is a space for identity formation, “Fatshionistas do not want to change themselves to accommodate the market. Rather they want the market to accommodate their size, tastes, and needs” (Scaraboto & Fisher, 2013, p.1242). Thus, this identity play also serves as a symbolic consumption of resistance against the prevalent hegemonic ideal of the thin body. Fashion, therefore, is not simply employed for one reason, but is a multifaceted process dependent on the person and the environment.

### *Gender Performativity*

The concept of gender performativity is relevant when exploring how the fashion sphere can be manipulated and employed by its participants. This theory focuses on the idea that gender is

not decided when one is born but is instead crafted according to how one performs gender roles (Butler 1990a). This performance of gender is communicated through repetition and is, “instituted through the stylization of the body [...through] bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 1990b, p. 270). A performativity based on actions and gestures becomes problematic when conceiving how the Internet can serve as a space for this presentation. Without the visual cues that are found in face-to-face communication, gender performance online becomes a debatable issue. It could be argued that due to the anonymity of computer-mediated communication, gender is not a relevant component to conversation unless participants elect it to be. However, this perspective does not account for the cultural obligation one has to reveal gender and how avoidance of this topic will cause, “others online [to] inquire of one another about what the person's gender ‘really’ is and why he or she is reluctant to reveal it. The failure to ‘reveal’ gender is viewed with suspicion” (O’Brien, 1996, p.56).

When gender is performed online, there is also room to test, construct and receive feedback on gender norms. While these do not always change personal identity offline (Kendall 1998), both “male and female bloggers express their identity in multiple and diffuse ways, performing different forms of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’” (Van Doorn, et. al., 2007, p.155). Femininity has been performed through blogs with the exaggerated portrayals of make-up, dress and accessory. Whereas, masculinity has been represented through the portrayal of men on the blogs and with women shopping and wearing clothing from the men’s department. Thus, even within the online sphere, certain gender performativity norms exist and are constructed through differing interactions.

Gender performativity can also be experienced and contested via fashion. This has been



conceived within the fatshion community as well, as a new sphere where members of this marginalized group can communicate with one another. Unlike the traditional gender binary that permeates society, these fatshion blogs often blur traditional gender definitions or have “adopted queer discourse to render their outsider identities intelligible” (Peters, 2013, p.4). While this does not always transpire, it does represent the vast diversity of gender performance and identity that may occur within fatshion blogs. Although this topic has been touched on briefly in regards to the fatosphere and fatshion (Peters 2013 & Connell 2013), this is one of the areas of fat activism that requires further examination. Through this research, gender will be explored by determining how gender is perceived and performed by those outside the producers of this blogging community. Due to the lack of clothing that fits, fat women may have to shop in other sections such as maternity or men’s wear to find clothing that fits. In Downing-Peters’ (2014) study on fatshionista bloggers, she discusses a plus-size woman who was much taller than the average plus-size clothing size and therefore would “often shop in the men’s department to find pants with longer inseams” (p. 53). Thus, gender can be performed in multiple ways within shopping for fat fashion especially in regards to those who may not be able to afford the more expensive online boutiques.

### *Intersectionality*

Finally, this research focuses on the idea of the intersectionality of race, gender, and class as a way to interpret not only the importance of studying fatshion, but also the complicated role that these factors play in consumer behavior. In its most simplistic definition, intersectionality refers to the examining, “how both formal and informal systems of power are deployed, maintained, and reinforced through axes of race, class, and gender” (Berger & Guidroz, 2009, p.1). Although obesity rates have not produced a significant change since the late 1990s (Flegal et al., 2012), both the treatment of fat women within the media along with the consistent othering which

occurs inside of the fashion industry represents how intersectionality integrates to oppress. Both race and class have been categories of discrimination through fashion in various ways. Race, in particular, has been excessively marginalized in terms of fashion models, advertisements, etc. and as one particular study noted, “it was difficult to find photographs that portrayed a Black model, and photographs of women from racial groups other than Black and White were almost non-existent” (Millard & Grant, 2006, p.670). It has been hypothesized that fashion works as class differentiation which “unites those of a social class and segregates them from others” (Simmel, 1957, p.541). This idea is reflected in fashion trends and how, “when the mass initiates [the trend] in an effort to obliterate the external distinctions of class, [the elite] abandons it for a newer mode” (Simmel, 1957, p.541); a process which can only be accomplished through wealth.

While some research has touched on how intersectionality works through hegemonic discourses concerning fashion, this study looks to gain insight based on how college-aged fat females deal with these problematic dialogues. Both race and class tie closely to both income as well as the rules of fashion that are implied for women. One study looked at whether there was a correlation between weight and income status, finding that in developed countries, such as the United States, “income inequality was significantly related to obesity among men and women” (Pickett, et. al., 2005, p.672). Other research has shown that certain races, particularly African American populations, have a higher rate of obesity versus others, due to the cost of food and financial circumstance (Ogden 2014). Thus, both race and income both have been proven to tie closely to the possibility of weight issues. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, how one dresses affects everything from how much money a person makes to how she feels about herself. These perceptions have a large impact based on both class and race, which can reflect in fashion selection. Since these are determinants of how women are perceived in the realm of

fashion, they will be explored through intersectionality along with gender.

### **Research Questions**

Based on these theoretical insights, three research questions will be addressed in this study. The first research question (RQ1) is: *To what extent are fat women's fashion choices shaped by hegemonic discourses of the body in fashion culture?* This question is aimed to find out how fat women engage with ideologies of the body in relation to dominant discourses and counter-discourses. While within fatshion studies, the theoretical underpinnings mentioned above have been used in fatshion activism and blogging, those outside of this space may not have the same conception of what fashion represents. In addition, this question is aimed at determining whether the average plus-size shopper recognizes these hegemonic discourses while shopping. Do they see their choices as equally matched to those of thin women? Do they resist these discourses? Depending on the answers given, participants will be probed to describe the specific issues they see and how they have felt the effects (if any) of these discourses. They will be asked whether fatshion blogging alerted them to these hegemonic discourses.

The second research question will be split into two parts. The first question (RQ2a): *Do the discursive ideologies in online fashion blogs and the online market for fatshion clothing, influence fat women's shopping process? If so, how?* The goal of this inquiry is to determine if and/or how the online sphere is influencing women's fashion consumerism. Current research tends to have a focused lens on the community of fatshion without examining how (and if) anyone who is not a content creator of this society is participating or benefitting from any of the work these bloggers have done. In addition, the aim of this question is also to understand the thought process behind shopping online versus in person and what factors contribute to this distinction for fat women. The other question is (RQ2b): *Do the discursive ideologies of fat activism influence fat women's shopping processes? If so, how?* Since the fatshion community is

a subset of fat activism, this second part of RQ2 will be aimed at understanding more about the relationship of the fashion community with fat activism. In addition, this question will help understand if the individuals using fatshion blogs are also members of the larger grouping of the fat activism community.

The final research question draws on personal experience and choice to understand the conception behind specific clothing selection. The third research question this study will consider is: *What role does (a) gender and/or (b) personal identity/style play in fat women's clothing selection?* By looking at both identity and gender, the respondents may be able to indicate how often and in what respects they use fashion as space for communicating identity and social meaning. These questions will be linked back to gender performativity and intersectionality and what role they may play when women are making purchasing decisions. All of these questions will be accompanied by any personal anecdotes and memories the participants wish to share. These questions will be studied via interviewing fat women. These interviews will focus on fat women who are mostly outside of this fatshion culture. This will allow for a more thorough understanding of how this movement may or may not have affected that outer sphere of fatshion consumers.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Introduction**

Three areas of research will be explored in this chapter: fashion as a social system, fashion blogging, and fatshion blogging, to explain how this thesis will fill the lingering gap in this literature. Fashion, which is the biggest sector of research, has been analyzed in various ways ranging from a manufacturing perspective to a communication framework. Fashion blogging has briefly been touched on as a subgenre of regular blogging, while fatshion blogging has been the subject of very few studies that tend to focus on those who run the blogs rather than consumers of this content. This thesis aims to compensate for the lack of research in fatshion blogging, while also understanding the perspective of fat women shoppers who may or may not use this material.

My study builds on the findings and conceptualizations that have been developed over the years in the three topical areas most closely related to my project. An overview of this literature is provided below.

### **Fashion and Identity**

#### *Non-Internet Studies*

Although little research has explored fatshion blogs, fashion itself has been investigated through a variety of perspectives, such as through the consumer's purchasing of clothing, the symbolic meaning behind the acts of purchasing, and the manufacturing and designing of clothing. Frequently fashion is viewed in studies as a type of representation. Whether this representation is through the communication of identity, distinguishing socioeconomic classes, or a way of rebelling against social standards, fashion has a "language" which allows for meaning to be constructed. Through this language, Alison Lurie (1991) explains that "long

before I am near enough to talk to you [...] you announce your sex, age, and class to me through what you are wearing” and “by the time we meet [...] we have already spoken to each other in an older and more universal language [of fashion]” (p. 32). This recognition of fashion as a communicative tool has been corroborated by many scholars (Blumer 1969, Davis 1992, Barnard 2002) and is a foundational concept that often underlies fashion research.

Another prominent theme within some of the existing literature is how fashion can be used to show differentiation, both voluntary and involuntary. Through intentional choice, fashion can be a platform for debate and rebellion in the form of wearing clothes that defy the social standards. Many research studies have focused on how oppositional dress has been used throughout history to rebel. In her book on fashion, Crane (2012) found that fashion could be a form of nonverbal resistance. In the late nineteenth century, this different style “incorporated items from men’s clothing, such as ties, men’s hats, suit jackets [...] but always associated with items of fashionable female clothing” (Crane, 2012, p. 101). Clothing took on a political tone when women were “referred to as a piece of skirt or petticoat and such terminology was regularly used in pro- and anti-suffrage material,” where trousers and other distinctly masculine clothing signaled a more direct rebellion that women were engaged in (Rolley, 1990, p.48). With reference to the mod, rocker, and punk styles of mid-1970s Great Britain, Hebdige discusses how successful these acts of resistance are in regards to how subcultural groups express themselves, until they become commoditized. Through “the process of recuperation” these acts of resistance can have a “conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity form)” (Hebdige, 1979, p.94), thus losing their rebellious significations.

Fashion has also been studied in relation to the consumption of clothes and how this affects women and their purchasing habits. The main theme that is found dealing with consumption is

how this act is tied to femininity. One foundational writing dealing with the consumption of clothing and fashion is Simmel's (1957) research, which claims that "the relation and the weakness of her social position, to which woman has been doomed [...] explains her strict regard for custom, for the generally accepted and approved forms of life" (p.550). In other words, women are most often the consumers of fashion due to their position within the social scheme. Another area that has focused on women and consumption is how political this interaction can be. McRobbie (1997) specifically discusses how certain restrictions can occur based on income and different class and ethnic backgrounds, which may work as disadvantages for certain types of consumers. She also states that shopping has been viewed as a leisure practice that is masked as "women's new public freedom" with shop assistants "play[ing] the same sort of role as servants" (McRobbie, 1997, p. 77). Thus while some studies generalized the process of consumption, McRobbie's work recognizes that shopping is sectorized to those who have this privilege rather than a shared freedom all can participate in.

Another sector of research that has been studied in fashion is the decision-making process and the different considerations at work in what a person selects to purchase. One study examined what goes into teenager's selections, discovering that "the clothes choices made by young people are closely bound to their self-concept, and are used both as a means of self-expression and as a way of judging the people and situations they face" (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004, p.254). Thus, for teenagers clothing works as a way to assess others and express personal identity. Another article focused on what factors dictate how young professionals dress. Results from interviews portrayed that one important influence in these women's dress were "explicit and implicit rules, [...] where] these women construct versions of themselves to meet the 'rules of the game'" (Strashnaya, 2012, p.5). Women were able to understand the rules of fashion and

then conform to these understandings, which factored into their choice of dress.

Rules of fashion can also be extended to rules of the body and for fat individuals these are done through constraints. One researcher that commented on this listed some of the issues where fat people were constrained versus their thin counterparts. She wrote:

Shower stalls in which we have to stand sideways (baths are rarely an option); towels that won't fasten around our waists or chests; disproportionately expensive or ill-fitting jewelry, belts, shoes, and clothing; narrow doorways, hallways, aisles, and bathrooms; too-tiny and/or molded plastic seats in buses and on subway trains; narrow, flimsy, or armed office, lawn, theater, airplane, restaurant, and dining room seating; weight limits on exercise equipment; hospital gowns, blood pressure cuffs, MRIs, life jackets, seatbelts, and other health or safety devices that simply don't fit: all are constant reminders that fat persons don't fit, that our most basic needs, desires, and safety therefore matter less (Owen, 2012, p.294).

Thus, for plus-size individuals as their physical space is constrained by size and, as Owen words it, spatial discrimination, affects how individuals live and present themselves. This restraint within the everyday mirrors the same struggles many plus-size individuals face when trying to find clothing that fits and they feel comfortable in. Another study found that lack of options is a major concern for fat women and that this, "signifies a lack of legitimacy as a segment within the market" (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1243). Therefore, on top of the traditional rules of fashion which dictate how to dress, plus-size individuals have an added set of constraints that affect their self-presentational abilities.

It is important to note the lack of research that actually interacts with the audience. While research does exist dealing with the actual opinions of customers, many studies are focused specifically on market research or advertising (O'Cass 2000, Kastanakis & Balabaanis 2012) rather than having a strong theoretical background or delving into the nuances of fashion in users' lives.

Fashion has also been tied closely with identity and how, through the act of shopping and



styling, a person is using the language of clothes to comment about herself or himself. This is done not only by purchasing clothing but also by viewing and conforming to popular fashion rules. The identity that is constructed is not “a specific identity. Instead the heterogeneity of contemporary styles allows women to assume a variety of possibly contradictory identities” (Crane, 2012, p.207). Identity can be expressed in differing ways and one study demonstrated that especially when different ethnicities are involved, “Hispanic teenagers exhibit a higher need for uniqueness than their non-Hispanic peers in an attempt to navigate a hybrid cultural identity” (Chattalas & Harper, 2007, p.352). Fashion thus has transformative capacities, aiding in the negotiation of ethnic or racial hybridity. Another example of this is a study that looked at identity and the intersectionality of gender, race, and class in regards to shopping. Jubas (2011) found that “identity [w]as a matter of personal style, interest and cultural affinity” that can be recycled where “individuals continually reinvent themselves as their options and preferences change”; however, it was hard for interviewees to conceive of this (p. 332). Therefore, identity and shopping are interconnected and have been tied together through the history of fashion research.

The idea that fashion can be used as a communicative tool, that conveys information, can lead to resistance, and is tied to gendered and racialized subjectivity, will be dissected in two main ways. First, this study will look at how messages about fashion/fatshion are communicated through fatshion blogs. How do readers view that the clothes are being presented to them and how does this affect their personal views and practices of fatshion and shopping? Next, these concepts of fashion as a cultural product and tool will be examined in terms of how clothing items are used to express the identity of plus-sized women. This research aims to expand how clothing as a communicative tool, and thus identity, may be stifled due to the limited clothing options plus-size women often have.

### *The Internet and Fashion*

Fashion has also been explored from the digital perspective and how new media have altered attitudes about the shopping process. This literature has also examined how the same notions of fashion and shopping that were constructed offline have translated to the online sphere. The Internet continues to be a prime place to shop with a continuous rise in online holiday shopping (Clabaugh 2015) with e-commerce sales totaling \$227 billion in the US for 2012, a rise of 14.7% from 2011 (U.S. Census Bureau, Business & Industry 2014). Studies have emerged dealing specifically with shopping online and the risks people are willing to take by participating in e-commerce. This is one of the more important factors when determining whether a person will shop online rather than in stores. One study found that women feel they have more of a perceived risk than men when online shopping; however, if someone recommends a site, this can lower the anxiety about buying products online (Garbarino & Strahilevitz 2004). This can easily affect not only what people are willing to buy but also how much of their overall shopping they prefer to do online. A survey of what factors go into online shopping for clothing products found that some of the most important aspects are the transaction/cost and incentive programs (Kim & Kim 2004). Thus, clothing shopping has been altered via the online atmosphere and this will be further explored below.

The fashion shopping experience changes when going online versus in store, and scholars have begun measuring the different ways that people shop and consume fashion merchandise via the e-commerce sphere. One study dealt with the difference between men and women shoppers online and what factors motivate their purchases. The scholars found that “women are more ‘shopping for fun’ oriented compared to men, the latter being more ‘quick shoppers,’ which in turn may have an effect [...and create] barriers when purchasing clothing online” (Hansen &

Jensen, 2009, p.1167). This idea of shopping for leisure was also explored in another article detailing online purchasing experiences. Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2001) found that most online shopping was goal-oriented versus experiential. Customers valued “availability of information and ease of use; customer service is extremely important” along with how easy their website was to navigate and how readily available customer service representatives could be contacted (Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2001, p.25). These features, while simplistic, lead to the creation and cementing of brand loyalty, particularly if there are problems with orders. Only those who were looking for an “experience” while shopping felt that the activity should be fun online whereas the goal-oriented individuals felt this as less of a fun process (Wolfinbarger & Gilly 2001). Another study that connects well with this thesis discussed how college students feel about shopping online. Xu & Paulins (2005) found that college students were willing to purchase online but found that “fit of products, good price, convenience, secure credit card information, good quality and easy return policy” all are factors in purchasing online (p.430). Overall, both students and women are willing to shop online and are considerate of the issues that make the experience different from shopping for fashion in person.

Finally, fashion has been studied in terms of individuals browsing and shopping for clothes online. One article outlined what college students take into consideration when shopping on the Internet. The study separated males and females; however, both males and females found shopping confidence and price consciousness to be the most important overall (Seock & Bailey 2008). The researchers also discovered that women tend to shop for the “hedonic benefits, such as excitement” whereas males “shop for clothes where it saves time, and they usually buy their clothes at the most convenient place” whether online or off (Seock & Bailey, 2008, p. 119). Another study extended this research by determining whether university students impulse buy

online depending on their shopping. The researchers confirmed Seock & Bailey's finding that along with shopping, browsing is done both hedonically and in a utilitarian way, while also determining that those who browse in a utilitarian fashion tend not to impulse buy (Park, et. Al., 2012, p.1588). Some scholars have debated whether there is a difference between the shopping experience offline versus online.

This foundational work is woven closely into this study, which looks at fatshion as a subsector of fashion. Themes such as what makes a person shop online versus offline and what is available are extended within this thesis. Given that women's online fashion shopping is influenced by others' recommendations, the role of fashion blogging becomes salient as a factor in this process.

### **Fashion Blogging**

Fashion blogging, while a smaller section of scholarship, has been explored through a variety of lenses. One of the most prominent is the tying of identity, of both reader and blogger, to the process of blogging about fashion. Blogging, in general, has been researched as a place where social identity can flourish. One article examined this in terms of how teens can negotiate and understand their social identities through fashion blogging. By analyzing 10 teen fashion blogs, Chittenden (2010) concluded that "the choice of images and expression of personal thoughts allow individuals to signal meaningful cues about themselves" (p.518). Thus, fashion blogging allows for a space to represent personal identity while also interacting with others and gaining social interaction (Chittenden 2010). Fashion blogs have also been scrutinized in terms of how they can act as spaces to negotiate traditionally absent identity markers such as race, sex, and class. One article that inspected this focused on Asian American and British Asian blogs and found that while blogs can be "a significant cultural site in which the struggle over meanings of

race, gender, sexuality, and political action happen everyday” this may be a utopian view that is not always communicated (Pham, 2011, p.28).

Another subject that is examined in the literature is how much control bloggers have when determining what becomes fashionable. From style to fashion blogs, those who run these personal websites have the ability to affect a number of people who may continuously follow their site or stumble upon the material. In one article, the researchers placed fashion blogs in the same category with “online reviews and user-generated content” that influence the shopping process (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013, p. 136). After analyzing blogs they determined that there is still a hierarchy in place with bloggers which can translate into other forms of capital, “these select few [bloggers] can now leverage that gift [taste in fashion] into cultural capital, which can in turn be converted to social position and economic resources” (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013, p.154). This can occur when bloggers reach a certain follower count and market themselves to clothing companies, often being invited to events or receiving sponsorships. Another study on this subject aimed to determine the brand community that is created by Swedish fashion bloggers on their pages. One interesting result found was the linkage of one blog to the other, with bloggers being supported by each other and “exhibit[ing] forms of shared consciousness” (Pihl, 2014, p. 9). This study also determined how these bloggers can “help them [their readers] acquire knowledge and perspectives on trends and what is fashionable at a certain time” (Pihl, 2014, p.16). Thus, fashion bloggers have the ability to influence their readers and also leverage this into an economically profitable endeavor.

One of the most recent works that examines this is a dissertation, which aims to understand how both readers and bloggers define the blogging experience (Findlay, 2014). The dissertation makes note of the intimacy that is established between bloggers and their viewers, and find that

the level of the reader's investment will determine the relationship that is established (Findlay, 2014, p. 166). The researcher concluded that although some blogs feature high fashion that their readers can aspire to, this could also create an alienating effect because some readers felt the styles were impossible to replicate, whereas there was an "importance to readers of 'relatability' to style bloggers: that the blogger is relatable" (Findlay, 2014, p. 184). Even though interviewees commented on this distinction between attainable and impossible still, "29.5% used the word 'inspiration' or 'idea' (in regards to their own dressing) to describe why they read" the blogs (Findlay, 2014, p.185). Another research project that discusses this is a master's thesis, which specifically examines how individuals are impacted by the fashion blogs they consume. After inspecting blogs and conducting interviews, the researcher concluded that fashion bloggers do affect the shopping process specifically among those who are, "publicly self-conscious, are more into fashion and use fashion blogs as a source of influence" (Hauge, 2010, p. 84). Finally, the researcher found that these blogs were working as a substitute for traditional fashion magazines and that bloggers must be knowledgeable in order to gain popularity (Hauge, 2010, p.85). Thus, fashion bloggers wield a direct influence on the shopping and fashion decisions of their readers.

Lastly, the most recent fashion market research has focused on questioning whether these blogs can be tools for the fashion industry to gain an understanding on what clothing is connecting with customers. One project looked at this topic in terms of how fashion blogging can affect the public relations field with regard to brands and consumers. Through interviews with industry professionals, the researcher concluded that "even simple gestures between bloggers and their readers can encourage two-way communication" between brand and customer (Durmaz, 2014, p.39). Another article which looks at this topic aims to understand the cultural landscape created by these fashion blogs and how this can be harnessed by the fashion industry into an

effective marketing strategy (Sedeke & Arora, 2013). The authors noted that while brands and marketing are mentioned, such as covering New York Fashion Week, bloggers were more focused on the everyday fashion and how it could translate to their readers (Sedeke & Arora, 2013). They concluded that “there is little presence of direct marketing or branding within these ranked blogs” and although there were some blogs that did mention brands it was in unusual cases, such as plus-size fashion blogs (Sedeke & Arora, 2013, para.37). Thus while there is potential for these blogs to become a marketing platform, the blogosphere is currently not focused on this pattern. While some bloggers receive incentives for posting certain ads or wearing clothes, research has not been conducted exploring how this affects readers or the marketing influence of these opinion leaders.

Particularly examining the relationship of bloggers and viewers is at the center of this thesis, but these issues are complicated when thinking of the plus-size experience versus the traditional bodied bloggers’/viewers’ conception of what is fashionable, affordable, and plausible, and how the blogger-viewer relationship works when fatness becomes part of the equation.

### **Fatshion Blogging**

While fashion blogs continue to be explored, fatshion blogging is just beginning to evolve as a subgenre of this research. Currently little literature focuses specifically on this community. Although some fat activism articles draw attention to this group; very few analyze what this does for the overall community. One of the leaders in fatshion research is Lauren Downing Peters who has written numerous pieces examining how plus-size individuals conceive of fashion. Peters often connects the concept of identity with this fat fashion community. In an early investigation, Peters (2013) examines the concept of fatshionistas and the place that they provide on their blogs to explore previously unattainable fashion. Specifically she looks at one community “The Queer

Fat Femmes” to conceive of fatshion and how the idea of fatshion blogging works with fat activism. Peters (2013) concluded that for fatshionistas, blogging about fashion “make[s] fluid the rigid fashion and beauty standards that are culturally imposed upon their bodies” (p.7). She also noted “that the collective fashion blog can also be an effective vehicle for mobilizing group identity,” thus allowing for identity to be explored both individually and as a group (Peters, 2013, p. 7). In a more recent work, Peters (2014) looks specifically at how identity is negotiated for plus-size consumers who face a stigma in the fashion arena and how fashion itself can be viewed as performativity, all under the context of how fatshion blogging fits into this schema. To investigate this, she interviewed three successful fatshion bloggers about their experiences. Peters (2014) found that self-fashioning was not simple, even for the bloggers, and that they were “activating, deactivating, and grappling with their fat identities” on a daily basis (p.62). She concluded that fat identity and fashion identity are two separate concepts that, while they can interact, do not necessarily co-exist for all (Peters 2014). By interviewing prominent fatshion bloggers she discovered that unlike other forms of social identity, fatness cannot be easily hidden and thus, fatshion is used to either accentuate or “downplay their fat identities at various moments” (Peters, 2014, p.65). These themes percolate onto the blogs which they run as well.

Another topic of fatshion research is that of fat fashion being a place to resist the normative understandings of dress. As mentioned above, “straight sizes” (regular sizes) are often viewed as the most desirable body and plus-size fatshionistas work to counter this assumption through reconstructing the notions of ideal beauty. One article addresses how fatshionistas define beauty and are reclaiming the blogosphere as a space to flaunt fat identity. The researchers found that these blogs served as a way to counter the previous notions of fashion and marginalization that fat women experience (Gurrieri & Cherrier. 2013). Fatshionistas view this as “a visible way of



rejecting normative beauty standards promoted in advertising, entertainment, and the media” and the idea of the “flattering outfit” (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013, p.287). Through the blogosphere, fatshionistas challenge these ideals through “three performative acts – coming out as fat, mobilizing fat citizenship and flaunting fat” (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013, p. 290). By interviewing popular fatshionistas and their blogs, researchers have been able to grasp how imperative clothing is to identity with regards to the fat body. In her article on the fatshion blogging, Connell (2013) aims to understand how this sphere is used to be a place of counter-discourse. By conducting a case study of a popular activity “Fa(t)shion February” on a non-fatshion blog she concluded, that this activity allowed for “a place of belonging” and “empowers users to critique hegemonic fashion discourse and to publicly imagine more egalitarian and radical alternatives” (Connell, 2013, p. 221). However, it was also noted that although some ideas were challenged, “the average poster was still a young white, middle-class, feminine presenting ciswomen who [... was] not far from the national average for young women” (Cornell, 2013, p. 221). More literature should focus on this topic in the future, as there is a surprising lack of articles that deal with the struggles of non-whites within the fatshion community.

While some research has been conducted, there are many areas of fatshion that have yet to be explored. Specifically, in regards to population and questioning whether these blogs are being used, this thesis builds upon this research and expands the knowledge on how plus-size women may or may not use these blogs to impact, not only their shopping experience, but their feelings on identity and the social location of the fat body. If they do not use these blogs, I am interested in what ways they may be communicating and being influenced by other media sources, whether it is magazines, television, or other online sources. Finally, this study will question whether these women recognize how fat activism is tied with fatshion blogs and whether they participate within

these communities. The goal of these questions is to understand how interaction about fatshion is occurring and how it is affecting this group of plus-size women. Ultimately, this thesis will explore how fat college women engage with the ideologies in fatshion blogs in their own fashion decision-making and shopping.

### **Filling in the Gaps**

This research aims to fill in the gap that is missing from each of the main sections of research. A great deal of recent fashion scholarship has been conducted as market research or is aimed at understanding the fashion process for advertising or selling purposes. By contrast, this study links well with past research that focuses on consumption, resistance, and identity. While this foundational information is found within my paper, this thesis targets an understanding of how these issues can be applied to the newer area of fatshion research.

One of the primary oversights in the existing fashion research is the issue of diversity within the methodology of the studies mentioned above. Most of the literature in the fashion section either focused on quantitative, marketing research or proposes future research while defending why fashion should be studied. These literature reviews and propositions, while valuable, lack a foundation in audience-centered scholarship which could make them more relevant to understanding how fashion is experienced by the individuals who shop. Blogging studies have compensated for this, by looking at real blog webpages and engaging with participants on those networks, but this work has not focused on fat readers or consumers. Other studies have conducted mass surveys trying to understand individual's fashion choices. This study will fill in the more personal narratives of the shopping experience, especially as it is affected by the ideological tenets of fatshion blogging, and provide deeper commentary on identity and consumption that cannot be found in larger surveys or proposition articles.

There are also gaps in fatshion literature, specifically with the participants that are recruited and the methodology used. In terms of participants, the majority of the fatshion research that has been conducted focuses on those who run the blogs or have their own clothing lines rather than those who observe or participate in this community. While speaking with this population is helpful, this research aims at understanding whether these blogs are being used and how they might affect the shopping experience for the average customer. If these women are not using the blogs, the study explores what media influences their fashion style and choices. This study uses in-depth interviews with a dozen participants, rather than smaller interviews with fewer, privileged contributors. This research alters the fatshion research methodology while trying to understand similar concepts within a new population. A more in-depth look at methodology will be explicated in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

In contrast to the populations studied in much of fatshion research, this thesis aims to examine the unique experiences of ordinary plus-sized young women whose fashion choices and consumerism may be influenced by fatshion blogs. In this study, semi-structured interviews took place in order to gain a nuanced personal insight into the shopping process of fat women. Qualitative methodologies, specifically interviews, will best help answer my research questions since “qualitative researchers seek to preserve and analyze the situated form, content, and experience of social action rather than subject it to mathematical or other formal transformations” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 18). While surveys could answer the question of who is actually looking at these blogs, both how women use these the sites as well as their personal experiences as shoppers, would be missed. Another reason qualitative research was chosen was because it allows the researcher to gain an understanding of the participants’ “experiences, feelings, attitudes, and the world they live in” and can conceptualize how this affects their views and opinions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. xvii). This approach will directly answer my research questions that are aimed at understanding the complexities of participants’ attitudes towards fatshion. This study specifically used in-depth qualitative interviewing to gauge how fashion blogging and the act of consuming fashion relates to identity.

Qualitative interviewing is not simply about gathering data but, “all interviews are reality-constructing, meaning-making occasions, whether recognized or not” which can therefore provide a deeper understanding of meaning and context provided by the participant (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p.4). The interviews for this study were conducted in a semi-structured format, which were “designed to have a number of interviewer questions prepared in advance but such

prepared questions are designed to be sufficiently open” to allow for the respondents and the interviewer to use a more conversational tone (Wengraf, 2001, p.5). While this is a riskier methodology to practice versus a structured interview protocol, it may also provide more ample and fulfilling results that probe deeper into understanding the meaning-making behind fat women’s practices (Wengraf 2001). By conducting interviews, the practices and behaviors of these fat women were revealed while also allowing the participants to contribute any other additional knowledge they wanted to provide. Although this may seem frivolous, these contributions opened up aspects of fatshion that had not been previously dissected within current literature.

Fat college-aged women were chosen in particular for two reasons. First, it has been proven that a student’s sense of belonging is an important factor in how they view their social acceptance (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen 2007). Thus, if a certain fashion is pervasive campus-wide, students may feel pressure to conform to these trends and ideals. Examples of this could be anything from “white parties” where all attendees are required to wear white clothing or rushing for a sorority or fraternity and being required to wear a particular style of dress. If these choices are limited, as they may be for plus-size students, this could have a variety of side effects, such as wearing clothing which is out of style or spending an inordinate amount of money to comply with fashion standards. Another reason fashion could matter to students is that those in the later stages of their college careers may be looking for employment or internship opportunities. Since “54.6% of students reported participating in an internship program” after entering college, fashion has become an imperative for more than simply social occasions (Frankie et al., 2010, p.5). Therefore, by interviewing college-aged fat females, there is a greater chance of gathering pertinent opinions while also surveying a population for whom these

clothing options are more crucial to their life trajectory than other groups.

Another reason to interview college students, is the relationship between feelings of belonging and body size that occurs within the university setting. Multiple studies have found that college campuses are areas rampant with body dissatisfaction that can have results ranging from depression to eating disorders. One study measured whether eating disorder attitudes changed through college, they found that “for most undergraduate women, eating disorder behaviors, attitudes, and risk factors remain stable over time” (Berg, Frazier, & Sherr, 2009, p. 141). Thus, eating disorders do not simply occur within the freshman population but can remain consistent throughout their college career. Another article concerning the relationship between college students and eating disorders found that characteristics such as “social comparison, physical appearance social comparison, and body surveillance” largely affected the women’s body image (Fitzsimmons-Craft, et.al., 2012, p. 801). Clearly, body size is a significant factor in college women’s socialization. This study aims to question how these pressures and the need for belonging may affect plus-size college women in terms of the counsel they seek for clothing choices and related issues of body size and gender.

### **Participant Selection**

To find participants for this study, three different recruiting techniques were proposed once IRB permission was obtained. First, flyers were hung up around campus, specifically in places where the anticipated population may be such as in the student union (the Iowa Memorial Union), the different cultural centers around campus, in the main library, and in the continuing education center. These flyers advertised the overall study, the qualifications for participation, and provided tear-away strips with the researcher’s information. The next recruiting strategy was to send a mass e-mail through the UIowa system advertising the study. Through the e-mail

system the study was advertised, highlighting the goals of the project and asking for participants to e-mail or call the interviewer if they were interested. The final technique was to visit the classrooms of journalism professors to conduct a short, five-minute presentation and answer any questions students in those classes may have. The flyers were employed and hung around campus; however, they produced no participants. Next, the mass e-mail system was used and rendered all of the participants within this study. While the initial goal was to interview between 10 and 15 plus-size women, over 30 responses were received based on the mass-email through the UIowa system. Thus, while the third technique was to visit classrooms of journalism professors, this was abandoned due to the success achieved from the mass e-mail.

While over 30 applied, many dropped out of the overall study. Attrition was due to two primary reasons: first, the lack of monetary compensation provided by the study and second, many applicants did not meet the requirements of being a consumer of plus-size fashion. From those that remained in the pool, 20 interviews were scheduled over four weeks. Of the 20, four never arrived to the location where the study was to be conducted and two cancelled their interviews. I interviewed a total of 14 women, nine of whom self-identified as Caucasian, two as African American, one as Asian American, one as Hispanic/Latino, and one as two or more ethnicities. This population reflects the overarching student ratio represented at the University of Iowa, with 2.8% of students being African American, 3.5% being Asian American, 5.6% being Hispanic/Latino, and 64.3% of students being White (University of Iowa, 2015, p.22). While this excludes international students on a temporary visa, it lines up with the sample of population collected within this study, specifically in the distance between the large population of white students versus other ethnicities. The incomes of participants were self-identified as 13 making less than \$20,000 and one making between \$20k-\$35k, which was an expected income range

since the population targeted was college students. Of those who were interviewed, three were freshmen, one sophomore, one junior, three seniors, and six graduate students. The ages of these women ranged from 18 to 28 years old, with the median age being 21.5 years old and the average age of participant being 22.3 years old. In future research, a more even spread amongst ethnicities should be explored, as well as how other demographic information plays into plus-size fashion purchasing and online behavior.

The recruitment mass e-mail asked specifically for three qualities. First, the participants must self-identify as “fat,” “plus size,” or “overweight,” which all interviewees did. Next, the participants needed to be between the ages of 18 to 25 and college students at the University of Iowa (the reason this was stretched was due to the conviction of the 28 year old graduate student, who asked explicitly for me to allow her to be interviewed). Since I was concerned about individuals dropping out of the study, I interviewed her and ended up using some of her thoughts on fatshion blogs within the paper. While this is not fully representative of college age students, her opinion did contribute to the understanding of how fatshion blogs have an impact on women who use them. Finally, participants must be female and needed to have shopped for clothing within the last 12 months. This was required to ensure that the shopping experience was fresh in their minds and they would have recently needed to look at fatshion blogging, if they so chose. As mentioned above, a total of 14 women were interviewed; however, this population was split even further after interviewing the women. Instead of interviewing women who were fully within the plus-size realm and solely shopped in that department, part of the population interviewed fluctuated between sizes. These two populations, which will also be discussed later in this chapter, created unexpected results that informed not only fatshion and body image blogging, but the shopping experience that occurs when buying in multiple departments.



### *The Two Populations*

The first population comprised women who shopped exclusively within the plus-size departments. Eight of the 14 interviewees belonged to this population. These women exclusively buy and shop in these specialized departments and, surprisingly, tend to go to stores that address both plus and traditional sizes. While three of these women used blogs, five out of the eight had never heard of both fatshion blogs or of fat activism. However, those who were unfamiliar with these concepts asked for explanations as to what the activism and blogs were. Another interesting intricacy about this population was the ethnicity of group members. Of the eight women who shopped exclusively in plus-sizes, seven of them identified as Caucasian with the other woman being African American. This is noteworthy since of the nine women who identified as Caucasian in the entire study, eight of them fit within this population. In terms of salary, this whole group was also part of the below \$20k mark. While this study does not aim to examine how both ethnicity and salary effect fatshion shopping, obesity, and body image issues, these could be areas to examine in the future specifically comparing how these affect each other.

The other population was a group of women who self-identity as fat, plus-size, or overweight and will sometimes shop in this department; however, they are not fully restricted to this sector when shopping for clothing. As one participant put it, “my butt is bigger than my waist and my breasts, so I buy big sizes”; this woman, like some of the others, bought only part of her wardrobe in this department. However, most women in this group confirmed that they overall identified as a fat, plus-size, or an overweight woman. Within this group of six women total, two of the women self-identified as Caucasian, one being Asian, another Hispanic/Latino, one being two or more ethnicities, and another woman identifying as African American. A total of five women had an income of under \$20k, with one participant making between 20-35k. Only

a couple of the women had heard or used fatshion blogging, and only one was familiar with fat activism. These two populations shared a surprising number of characteristics in terms of their thoughts and feelings related to communicating about fashion and fatshion blogging.

### **Interviewing Methods**

Before the interviews began, IRB approval was gained for both the recruiting and the interviewing process, which included approval of suggested questions and consent form. While, on the IRB application, preliminary conversations were to take place via phone call, participants preferred to conduct these scheduling discussions via e-mail. After the mass e-mail was sent and participants expressed interest in the study, an initial e-mail was sent thanking them for their interest and providing a list of dates that they could choose from. This correspondence also included a request for them to pick a time that would be convenient for them. In addition, I provided directions to the building, and invited them to ask any questions they had about the interviewing process or the study. After scheduling each interview and answering questions, communication ceased between the interviewer and participant. A final e-mail was sent the day before the interview, as a reminder that the next day they would be interviewed and a reminder of the time they had selected. There was also a mention of the possibility of rescheduling if necessary and another reminder of directions.

During the beginning phase of contact, multiple discussions occurred between the subjects and I regarding where the interviews would take place. These discussions focused on which locations would be the most quiet and discreet while also being convenient for both the participants and myself. While multiple locations were discussed with each, most agreed that working within a conference room in the Adler Journalism Building would be sufficient. Subjects agreed to meet at my office in the Adler Journalism Building and then walk over to a

small conference room in the Resource Center. The conference room was reserved once the initial date, time and location were agreed upon. Out of 14 interviews, 13 were conducted in this location with the other being administered in my work office.

As we were walking from my office to the location of the interview, most participants had general questions about the study. After arriving at the Resource Center conference room, I provided them with a printed copy of the exempt consent form. Certain parts of the form were highlighted to note that participants are able to leave at any time and to skip any questions that they feel uncomfortable with. In addition, each participant was encouraged to add anything she felt the questions did not cover or if she disagreed with anything. Next, we walked through the anonymity that would be provided and how all information related to the thesis would eventually be deleted, including audio files, notes, etc. Each woman then filled out a questionnaire detailing basic demographic information along with her shopping habits and how much money they spent on purchasing clothing per year. Finally, a discussion about audio recording occurred, where I explained that I would be the only person to have access to these files and how they had the option of abstaining, but still participating in the interview. All interviewees agreed to their answers being audio recorded. While each woman was answering her questions, I took extensive notes focusing on their movements and important details they included about fatshion blogging and clothing communication.

Each interview took between 40 to 70 minutes, and none of the participants opted to take a break at any time. Due to the nature of the semi-structured interview, the amount of time given to each question and subject was in the control of the interviewee. Each interview was recorded on a personal Sony recorder that was purchased specifically for this project. The recording device was placed in the middle of the table where interviewees had access to pause the device if they

deemed it necessary. This never occurred. Only during one interview did any incident occur worth noting. During one interview, a class of students had overtaken the conference room that had been reserved. To avoid possible embarrassment or an awkward situation that could have altered the results of the interview, I suggested other possible locations where we could begin our discussions. The interviewee agreed to conduct the meeting within my office. A note was placed on my office door, asking for privacy and we continued with the interview as planned.

After conclusion of each interview, the audio recorder, completed questionnaire, and all notes from the interview were stored within a locked cabinet in my office. This is where all interview materials were stored until the transcription process began. When transferring materials to computer format, all documents and audio files were secured in a separate flash drive, with all files being password protected. Transcribing took place in a Microsoft Word document on my personal computer and was conducted by listening to each file and manually typing the responses received by the subjects. All transcription files were password protected and held on the same flash drive, with all other documents. In addition, my personal computer is password protected and kept within a locked desk in the home. Both the answers given and the questions asked were typed. After transcribing each interview, I reviewed the notes taken and compiled any excess information that would add to the overall understanding of each answer provided. Overall, the interviews ran smoothly and valuable data was collected; however, some complications arose in terms of what was expected with population and their communication with and without fatshion blogs.

### **Problems and Solutions**

A few problems cropped up in this study; however, solutions presented themselves throughout the interviewing process. The first issue occurred when recruiting participants. As

mentioned above, a mass e-mail was sent to the entire female population at the University of Iowa looking for women who self-identified as “fat”, “plus-size”, or “overweight.” This was clear in both the original e-mail and the subsequent e-mails that were communicated between the researcher and participant. However, when multiple participants were interviewed, instead of being solely within the plus-size category, many said that they fluctuated in which department they shopped. For example, one woman stated that although she shops for blouses within “traditional” sizes, she can only buy pants and boots in plus-sizes. Another woman stated how her weight fluctuates due to medication consumption and through this she buys in both “thin” and plus-sizes. As almost half of the women interviewed were in this category, it became obvious that this was a common occurrence within the plus-size industry.

Instead of viewing this as a problem, this allows for a clearer distinction between what occurs in the fashion industry with regard to the categories of “plus size” and “regular” clothing. With participants acting in both spheres, these women were able to shed light on the artificial stability of the plus-sized fashion industry, which in fact has shifting parameters in its “lived” reality, and how this constant shift in department affects identity. These women mentioned other differences between plus-size and regular sizes such as the shopping process, their nervousness shopping with others, and how their expectations during pre-shopping tended to be more negative. Overall, this issue required the study to split the interviewees into two distinct populations, one being those who consistently shop in the plus-sizes and the other those who continue to move between the two departments.

Another issue encountered in this study was the lack of participants using the blogs in their fashion choices. While this in itself is a result, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, only a few of the overall interviewees actually used and participated within these spheres. This becomes a

challenge for both this research and other fatshion studies in terms of how influential these blogs are. To address this, with the non-blog users, how they communicate about fashion was explored. Emphasis was placed on how they receive fashion advice and what influences their overall fashion sense. With the participants who did use blogs, focus was placed on why they read them, whether they contributed within the community or only observed, and what influence this was having on their fashion choices and their identities. Future fatshion studies should be conducted in order to determine how much participation actually occurs within this sphere and how this compares to traditional fashion blogs. While this is a smaller community and research has been conducted focusing on this sector of blogs, a survey addressing whom, how they work, and how large this group of blogs is would be useful in confirming the validity of this and other studies.

### **Methods of Analysis**

Examination of data began after all the interviews were conducted, fully transcribed, and all notes had been organized and compiled. To analyze the transcriptions, I conducted an inductive process of categorization, which is where an, “analyst examines the data [...] and finds that certain textual units (typically words, phrases or sentences) relate to each other in ways that suggest a new category” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 247). The first step in this process is categorizing the data by topic. Researchers Lindlof & Taylor (2011) describe this process as “the analytic process of sorting units of data with respect to properties that they have in common,”; basically this entails grouping responses together based on similarity (p. 246). By using this method, results can easily be compared to one another and grouping allows comparison to be drawn between the differing responses that each participant gave. In addition, working with categories allowed for results to be organized to answer the research questions outlined in the previous chapters.

Each category will be explained in detail within the next chapter; however, there were four specific categories of responses. First, “fatshion communication” was extremely important, for both inspiring what to choose and learning the rules of what is acceptable to wear as a plus-size woman. This was primarily accomplished by using the blogs, magazines, or person-to-person interaction. Next, “identity” and its relationship with fashion was discussed at length with all of the subjects. Specifically, women focused on how they had a personal fashion sense and whether this reflected their identity. “Body image and fat activism” is the next category that was found. While only two of the participants had ever heard of fat activism, the majority of subjects discussed body image issues that are prevalent in the conversations of fat activism and fatshion blogs. Finally, “consumerism and the plus-size fashion industry” emerged as a theme that focuses on the observations and opinions participants had about their clothing choices. While this does not necessarily fit into the research questions, this category revealed how these women interact with the clothing and how this influences their shopping and communication experiences.

The next step in the analysis is coding, which “are the linkages between data and the categories the researcher creates” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 248). As Lindlof & Taylor explain, codes consist of the smaller details that are found within the four types of categorization discussed above. One way to code the data is a model developed by H. Lloyd Goodall Jr., which involves looking at each interview as a narrative and trying to piece together the personal meaning that each participant was feeling. This is done by questioning not only the content of each response but the context. The goal of this is to understand the experiences that each population has had with their fatshion communication and “isolating the key moments in the exchange and attributing special meaning to them” (Goodall, 2000, p.108). This was done with

specific emphasis placed on rich points which are the verbal speech patterns that “contain cultural knowledge [...that] are sources of critical deconstruction of how cultures are understood from the inside” (Goodall, 2000, p.108). An example of this in the study was the continued use of the term “regular sizing” when referring to non-plus-size clothing for thinner consumers. Turning points, which are explanations of meaning traditionally “within personal and organizational narratives”, were also examined in the interviews (p. 108). These were obvious especially when discussing how fatshion has impacted their lives and how they receive opinions about fashion from blogs and other sources.

While fatshion blogging and fashion communication emerged as themes, identity and societal pressures were a consistent topic of the interviews. By transcribing the interviews myself along with conducting multiple in-depth readings of the data, I uncovered relevant codes and categories, which were able to shed light onto my research questions. The next chapter will detail the analytical findings based on the methodology, research questions, and literature review laid out in the first half of the thesis.



## CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

### Introduction

Based on the theoretical underpinnings of counter-discourse, identity, and intersectionality, the results of these interviews are explained in this chapter using the methods of analysis mentioned above. Four different categories have emerged from the data that specifically tie in with the notions of identity and how discourses of the body are perpetuated through their everyday interactions with what these women choose to wear. Within the fatshion communication category, participants discussed how they communicate about what they wear, what they think about the “rules” of fashion, and how they gain influence about their fashion. These are broken down by three sources: those who use blogs, those who use different media sources such as magazines, and finally those who use personal communication, such as family or friend influence. The next category is identity, which centered on participants’ perspectives on how their identities are or are not communicated through clothing. In addition to thinking about their own identity, many participants discussed how identity affected personal style and the constraints some of the women felt based on what they wanted to convey through their fatshion.

Next, body image and fat activism came up in how body image was affected (or not) by the blogging and blog usage that occurs along with actually participating in the shopping experience for fatshion. Fat activism ties closely with this in terms of what was being communicated on and off blogging sites. Finally, consumerism and the plus-size fashion industry theme, deals with the participant’s general feelings in terms of fatshion. Most of the material that came from this section were thoughts and opinions interjected by the women who discussed the struggles shopping within this realm. Overall, these themes confirmed previous literature that suggested the communicative importance that is placed upon fashion, and in turn plus-size fashion, and

how this influences both identity and body image.

### **Fatshion Communication**

#### *Blogging*

Of the 14 participants in this study, five of the women used different types of fatshion blogging in their life. First, the conversation began with whether the subject had seen or used plus-size fashion blogs before. When these women said yes, we began to explore what sort of resources they used and what they liked/disliked about these communities. The women were blog readers and users, though not themselves fatshion bloggers. While four of these women used traditional blogging platforms, such as Tumblr, LiveJournal, and Blogger, to access these materials, one woman chose Instagram to see the different fashion choices that other plus-size women were wearing. A plus-size only participant was particularly vocal about the type of blogs she frequents:

There are some people who put their fashion journeys [online]. There are people who are like proud of their bodies and keep updated posts about how to like love yourself and where to shop, you know? But, I hate preppy ones [blogs]...or just expensive ones. There are some where these women spend like \$300 on one dress...I can't afford that. I don't want to see that. I don't want to be a part of that. Like duh you can have great fashion if you're spending all that.

This separation between high fashion and “normal fashion” reflects closely with what past researchers have found (Findlay 2014) within traditional fashion blogs and the importance of connection between the lifestyle reader's live and their blogger's posts. Especially, in terms of money, multiple women brought up the difference between blogger's choices and their own. Another woman commented, “Most of the time they will pay like \$50 for a shirt and I'm just like ‘Yeah that's not my budget.’” She continued, “There are some people who have good fashion sense [on blogs] but they pay for it.” Thus, the closer the blogger reflected the same monetary or class status as the women, the more the participants connected with the bloggers and posters.

Most subjects frequented more than one blog, and their blog usage revealed a mix between frequenting sites that focused on one specific personal blogger and others that featured an array of user-submitted fashion. The user-submitted fashion blogs were characterized by one woman as “different people...women really [laughs]... send in photos of themselves in different clothes,” which are then collected as a series of inspirational shots that women can browse. These posts often contain snippets about the submitter’s life and their “problems with fashion and being plus size,” which encourages others to post while presenting positive words of affirmation. These user-submitted forums included activities such as OOTD (outfit of the day) and Fatshion February, which encourage viewers to submit their own photos and stories. Overall, all subjects who used blogs stated that while they viewed these multi-authored blogs more frequently, they felt more personal connection with the individual journeys provided by the single plus-size blogger versus the shorter narratives uploaded by submitters.

When asked about why they used these blogs, many of the subjects mentioned the differing styles that were absent in their lives. One woman stated, “I know like three [fat women] and we all wear like jeans and flats and stuff [...] they [the blogs] show me new fashions, that I don’t see, especially in my size.” Thus, the blogs were able to expose this woman to differing fashions that she did not often encounter within her daily life. Another participant discussed the inspirational aspect of the blogs, such as one contributor mentioning that she uses “the blogs when I’m feeling down about my fashion and then I realize I actually can achieve good fashion.” She went on to comment how this was absent in other forms of media such as magazines and advertisements. The blogs, for these women, worked as a way to view how other plus-size individuals were expressing identity, especially when they were paired with poetic posts about their struggles with body image and living outside of the dominant discourses.

Another reason the study's participants viewed these blogs was the messages communicated through posts by both individuals and the blog administrators. Interviewees explained how within blog posts, bloggers argued against traditional fashion rules inscribed by society. When questioned whether the participants themselves followed any fashion rules, one woman stated "I don't think so...I wear what I want [...] on them [the blogs] girls wear what they want and they're proud, out and about." Specifically within blogs that followed personal narratives of the bloggers posting, there were personal instances of rebellion, which one participant highlighted as being a challenge against her views on fatshion:

My favorite one is [name of blogger]. She wears very...new age-y things, like with crop tops, beads....hippy shit....like I don't know, shorts...Bikinis. That's not very new age [laughs], but [...]. [She] was the first fat woman I ever saw wear one, even if it's online...I just....It was new, you know? I never saw that. I just, was shocked. Offended at first. I read the comments. That was a mistake. But then I just kept asking like, why am I mad? Why am I against that? I don't know if I'm still 100% with fat chicks in bikinis, but I had never ever seen it.

Multiple blog-using subjects mentioned this with various different clothing styles, whether it was bloggers' wearing small shorts or showing off their wide arms in dresses and shirts. What this and the other subjects highlighted was how first seeing these bloggers break traditional fashion rules was not always comfortable, but was an alternative perspective that was not often seen in their everyday circles. While most stated they were not comfortable trying these daring looks themselves, there was a general understanding of appreciation that radiated from the women questioned.

This connects closely with both Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony and Foucault's ideas on counter-discourse and the power that resistance can have to subvert dominant ideologies. In this case, the interviewees recognized the dominant ideology of how plus-size women are supposed to dress and behave or, as one subject stated, "We've got to accentuate the

good parts and diminish the bad parts. Push up the boobs. Spanx the tummy. [...] I know what I've gotta look like. I know my weak spots, what bulges...I've gotta have my arms covered. I've gotta have tummy control." These blogs work as a way to recognize this narrative of how plus-size women should act and dress; however, they highlight alternatives that encourage the disruption of this overarching ideology that these women should remain covered. Posts that subvert these mainstream thoughts, such as a woman with a large stomach in a bikini, tend to get more responses. As one interviewee commented, "I heart the ones where real women rock it. None of that 'kinda big' bullshit. Like full on...fat ladies living in color. They blow up on [blog name]. All the likes and reblogs explode." However, neither this participant or any other, could accurately explicate how much of this feedback was positive or negative. In addition, since only one of the five women who used blogs, ever participated by uploading a photo, it is unclear as to the extent to which this counter-discourse is having an actual effect on the dressing habits and opinions of those who view the blogs.

For those women who had not heard of fatshion blogs or fat activism, I inquired why they did not use blogging as a resource and what they used in place of these for fashion inspiration. Some indicated that they were simply not aware that this community existed while others stated they received fashion advice, from other media sources, such as magazines, or from personal influences, such as friends or family. Of the 14 participants in the study, 7 said they used magazines while all but one woman stated she looked to friends or family for advice on what to wear and/or purchase in terms of clothing.

### *Media Sources*

The alternative media sources that some women employed for finding out about fatshion included magazines as well as Pinterest. These alternate sources were utilized as ways to hear about styles and see what others were wearing. One girl, in particular, used Pinterest as a forum

to see and pin outfits that she would want to try in the future. She had two particular boards, one which featured everyday clothing outfits that she wanted to buy in the future, which she stated worked as “a dream shopping list.” She continued, stating that the other type of board focused on fancy clothing that she felt is unattainable, both because of the cost of the items and because some of the photographs featured non-plus-size models. These outfits tended to be more expensive and she described them as her “dream outfits” that she was not considering purchasing. While this could be considered one form of blogging, unlike the fatshion blogs which were produced by either an individual or a group of contributors, the Pinterest images tended to be professional, or magazine-like photos of models. The woman who used Pinterest more often even mentioned the lack of writing that went along with each post, viewing it more as a collection of snapshots with no background information.

The other type of media messages that were heavily consumed were magazines. Multiple participants mentioned how they relied on magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, or *Elle*, to see the up-to-date fashions and understand what was in fashion that current season. Of the 7 women who used magazines, the act of browsing through them was seen as a pleasurable activity that only happened occasionally. None of the women had subscriptions to magazines and it was split on how often they actually buy them, with three of the women purchasing magazines every one to three months and the other four buying every six months to a year. These interviewees were not exclusively non-blog users, in fact, many of the women who used the fatshion blogs were also in this category as well. While there were fans of magazines and how “it’s fun flipping through and seeing all the outfits and prices,” there was also some resistance to this. One participant in particular felt strongly about the lack of representation that plus-size women receive in mainstream fashion magazines. When asked whether she consumed this material she

stated, “No magazines. We’re not in magazines. Not any of the popular ones. There are ‘plus-sizes’ [air quotes] in the magazines, but not really. It’s all just a model with hips. No real plus-size women are there.” Another woman added that this, looking at magazines, made her sad since she “don’t even look like the models” that were meant to represent her body type.

Many studies have examined the influence of fashion magazines with results lining up closely with the idea that “exposure to fashion magazines was related to women's greater preoccupation with being thin, dissatisfaction with their bodies, frustration about weight, and fear about deviating from the thin standard” (Turner et. Al, 1997, p. 614). However, some of the women did not accept all images they were seeing within these magazines. This level of rejection and critique that some of the women leveled against these magazines can act as a form of resistance to the dominant hegemonic discourses about the body that have been created. This is reminiscent of Stuart Hall’s ideas on encoding and decoding, specifically the multiple different readings for the messages found in magazines. In this case, many of the women took a negotiated reading of the text which “contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated)” (Hall, 2006, p.172). The women in this study were able to recognize the hegemonic messages found within this text and actively oppose some of the messages shown.

### *Personal Communication*

The final way that individuals connect about fatshion was through interpersonal communication, such as interactions from family and friends or observation on the street. All 14 participants of the study engaged in this type of communication. The most impactful of these exchanges was that between family and interviewee, who often said their fashion beliefs stemmed from these familial interactions, particularly with their mothers. As one of the women

mentioned, her main fashion sense stemmed from “where my mom liked to go shopping and [...] what I was allowed to wear outside of the house,” which was brought up by many of the subjects. For many of participants, not only did their mother’s actions build their ideas about fashion but also, they continue to shop with their mother. This was mostly due to the honest opinion that parents could provide during the shopping process. In addition, family contributed to understanding fashion, by purchasing clothes for their children for both holidays or when “she sees some shirt or dress that is totally me.” Within the plus-size only population, this was viewed as a less positive activity since mothers did not always buy the right sizes.

Another source of fashion communication occurred between friends of the participants. Just like with family, friends were able to give personal opinions that helped during the physical shopping exercise. However, friends also worked as inspiration by the outfits they wear on a daily basis. Many subjects mentioned how they would simply observe what their friends were wearing to see how this measured up to their own wardrobes; thus, this was used as a comparison point to their own styles. However, others mentioned how shopping with friends was not always a positive, since “It got difficult because I can see what my friends were buying and [...] I’d be shopping in different stores or in different departments and they just don’t have the same kind of clothes or the same kind of looks to blend in.” Thus, although this can be a bonding activity, shopping with friends, there can be a separation depending on sizes. Finally, the women commented on how observing other women in their daily lives could influence their fashion. Specifically, seeing other women on the street or in their classes gave them fashion inspiration and other options of clothing to wear. While this did influence some of them, interviewees commented that the majority of the women they observed and gained inspiration from were wearing thinner sizes. This aligns closely with Angela’s McRobbie’s (1997) discussion on how



the shopping experience is affected by different social positions. Due to the lack of available resources that college students may have, in this case both monetarily and as plus-size women, the social position and choices of these women are limited. These ideas were corroborated in a current study that looked at this same subject in terms of wearing pajamas in public and found that for working-class mothers “being dressed in your pyjamas, in the context of the everyday, the school run or the weekly shop, is not a concern” (Appleford, 2015, p.14). While other influences, such as familiarity level with community, were significant, one of the important aspects was that they put their children’s needs above their own. My results along with this recent study’s confirm McRobbie’s premise that the social sphere in which a person operates, will have an impact on fashion choices.

Overall, fashion is communicated to these women in a multitude of ways, but the majority come from both media and personal sources. In addition, blogs are used by some, but not all the women; however, more women consumed alternative media sources and all were influenced by connections in their lives. These messages that they were receiving influence not only how they feel about fatshion but also identity, body image, and the fashion industry. Each will be discussed in terms of not only what the participant’s opinions are, but also how the communication mentioned in this section influences this.

### **Identity**

Interviewees connected identity with fashion in a multitude of ways, one of the primary being through the selection and emphasis of personal style. When asked whether each participant had a unique personal style, there were mixed responses particularly in terms of the two populations in this study. According to those who bought in mixed sizes, the majority stated they had their own personal style which consisted of, as one woman stated, “a little bit of this and that. I like mixing different styles, like preppy punk. It changes all the time though.” She went

onto comment on the impact of having a personal style, remarking that, “It [style] plays a big part in my confidence level [...] Like I don’t know...It feels like shedding. Playing...that’s a terrific word for it.” For this and other interviewees, fashion allowed a way to communicate their identity through the matching of clothing to their own personal styles.

However, those who only shop within the plus-size market, tended to have more trouble not only pinning down a personal style but also stating that identity is tied with clothing shopping. A reason this might have occurred was the lack of clothing options that are available for plus-size women. One woman commented, saying:

I feel like my personal style is disabled a little bit because there are a lot of clothes that don’t...so like I think of regular size people who have the style that I want but I could never find clothes that fit me that are just like that or ...maybe they put their style together by going to Goodwill or something, like I couldn’t do that. The diversity of the clothing is less than [...] there are a lot less options.

Plus-size shoppers stated there were restrictions when it came to plus-size shopping and that this, in turn, affected their ability to put together their desired outfits. While some of the women were concerned about the limitations of color and cut, other discussed the lack of sizing that fit them as well as stores that cater specifically to their sizes. When asked about whether fatshion was important to this population many related this back to the lack of choices, saying “whatever I need to wear...fits it is [my style].” Although this seems like a simplistic issue, by limiting the diversity of clothing, there are fewer opportunities for plus-size women to creatively represent identity versus their thin counterparts.

Identity was also discussed in terms of how this was conceived via the fatshion blogging websites. Those who used the blogs talked about how identity worked in two ways; first, how it is portrayed by administrators and uploaders and how this affects their own opinions on fatshion and identity. When discussing others identity that is posted on fatshion blogs, one woman

discussed how seeing her peers posting photos, “inspires me...it makes me want to buy and makes me want to dress better. When I’m feeling bad, I can see her wearing sexy clothes and I want to wear those.” Many of the women explained that not only did this make them want to buy clothing, but it also opened their eyes in terms of reimagining their own identity. As mentioned above, in regards to bikinis and other dress, some of the participants had never experienced seeing this and the visual impact of the images altered their opinions on what they could wear. Another participant mentioned this, particularly in her shopping process, stating “I definitely think about it when I buy...like especially in-stores [...] I’ll think about that mini [skirt] and how she killed it and [laughs] I’ve totally impulse got it.” Thus, not only are those posting on the websites communicating identity, but also it is alters the traditional shopping process for some of these women.

This connects directly Alison Lurie’s (1981) ideas on dress as a communicative tool that can reveal everything from beliefs to social class — specifically the idea that fashion works as a non-verbal cue that informs not only how the individual feels, but also what others interpret. For example, when some women decided to purchase clothing that represents a counter-discourse where resistance is “the sender’s intention and it is this that is transmitted by the garment in the communication process” (Barnard, 2002, p.30). Thus, while clothing choices can unintentionally communicate ideas, they can also be used to subvert dominant notions, as was found in this study. As the plus-size women in this study discussed in both this and the previous section, what they were seeing in multiple sources about fashion resulted in them understanding the rules about fashion. The acknowledgement of these rules were reflected in their shopping experience and what they considered the correct and incorrect ways to dress. Although not all of the participants were willing to wear such risqué outfits, some of the women who viewed the fatshion blogs

expressed an interest in playing with these boundaries. Unlike previous literature suggests, the idea of the creation of group identity through the use of blogs was not found. When discussing both magazines and blogs influence, none of the women shared or discussed these activities with others, nor did they mention the information they saw to friends, spouses, or family. In this case, information obtained from these sites were private and personal between what they were reading and the person themselves. In thinking about blogs, only the woman who had submitted photos felt a sense of group identity formed by within the sites. However, all of those subjects who followed blogs did feel a personal connection between themselves and the individual bloggers who posted “selfies” of their fatshion life.

### **Body Image and Fat Activism**

#### *Blogging & Media*

In general, most of the women said they had fair to moderate body image, with only one participant stating she was extremely confident with her looks. However, my interview questions asked about how both media messages and fatshion blog posts affect these ideas of body image. In terms of magazines, twelve out of the fourteen interviewees in the study commented on the different size models that were categorized as plus-size. Even those who moved between plus and thin sizes remarked on this subject:

The fact that even in the plus-sizes, the models are thin and not realistic is just disturbing [...] the thin sizes too, like all the double zero models are advertising clothes in all those magazines ... most of us can't fit into that junk, but we might buy it because that's who we want to be. That we try to become that and I think that's when it becomes harmful because then you put it on when you want to wear it and it's not making you who you want to be.

This highlights the idea that not only are these women recognizing the fact that there are issues with the images presented in media, but they may be cognitively aware of how this is affecting their body image. In addition, many of the women mentioned the expense that comes with all of

the clothing found within these fashion magazines.

Once again, this aligns with Stuart Hall's (2006) conception of negotiated readings. Although there are significant sections of the magazines that do not pertain to these women or that they do not agree with, many participants stated that not only do they read these magazines but they also still use them as a fashion guide. This falls directly in line with the idea of negotiated readings since, "Negotiated codes operate through what we might call particular or situated logics: and these logics are sustained by their differential and unequal relation to the discourses and logics of power" (Hall, 2006, p. 172). In this case, there are very few popular sources that highlight fat fashion, especially to the extent that would rival *Vogue* or *Elle*. Therefore, the participants used a situated logic to be able to continually subscribe to the dictated fashion imperatives that are found within popular fashion magazines while also resisting and resenting the content they are consuming.

Blogging, on the other hand, offered respite from some of the body image issues that occur outside of this sphere. One girl mentioned that as she was on the way to shop, primarily riding the bus or getting a ride from friends, stating how it "pumps her up" for the trip and makes her feel positive. As one participant mentioned the blogs, "soothes my soul. I just get so overwhelmed....and [mumbles] to be honest, like sad about things...my legs and I like seeing the pretty things and people happy, looking cute." However, one woman who looked at the blogs had some criticisms of portraying women in only certain ways. Specifically, this participant noticed how the majority of the photographs felt similar in style. This subject had mentioned that her style was more tomboy-ish than what she usually saw, she stated, "I can't look at them [blogs] everyday. It's the same stuff. White women in dresses. Vintage dresses, and piles of makeup. Occasionally you'll see someone in something different, but it's all the time the same

stuff.” Thus, even within the blogs there is still a separation between groupings and this ties closely with hyper-femininity. All of the women who were blog-watchers stated how, although there may be problematic issues within the blogs, they overall felt improvement in their mood and body image after discovering the blogs.

While not mentioned extensively, race did play a factor in how these women viewed and interacted with the blogs. Specifically, one participant was concerned about consistently seeing the same racial identity of, “white women in dresses,” on the blogs she was consuming which caused her to distance herself from these sites. One study that reflects this result looked at popular magazines that were aimed at teenagers and how White readers interpreted the text versus African-American teens. After interviewing subjects, they found that, “Black girls generally viewed the magazines as biased and largely irrelevant to their ideas about beauty, though enjoyable for other reasons” (Duke, 2000, p.384). This mirrors the results in this study, which highlighted how, although the blogs did not cater to this audience and may detract from the use of them as fashion sources, women of races that were not being specifically catered to were still using them for lack of more inclusive alternatives. Therefore, the lack of representation of nonwhite women on fatshion blogs could play a significant role in the shopping process and may undercut the resistant messages found within these texts.

### *Shopping*

During the actual act of shopping, body image and insecurities can be affected by actual consumerism. One way that body image was affected was through the dejection of being unable to find clothing that fits. Particularly, the women commented on how if the shopping is a necessity, such as for a wedding or event, this can be a grueling process that may result in no success. One participant was in the process of planning her wedding and stated, although this was not the only factor, the lack of being able to find an affordable and comfortable wedding

dress did contribute to her choice to skip a ceremony and instead go to the courthouse. She continued, “I searched online, in-store. I even talked to a seamstress and it just... it just was too much [...] like both money-wise and the stress. I thought it was gonna be fun, ya know? Say Yes To The Dress and all those shows, but I was miserable.” When asked about what they were feeling while shopping, all of the women described it in negative terms such as, stress, anger, embarrassing, or shameful. This is in contrast with when the participants could find something that would work, which they defined as a “euphoria moment,” that initially is filled with skepticism but changes to happiness as they realize that something not only is affordable but also fits or is comfortable.

Another way that body image was affected while actually shopping was dependent on whom they went shopping with and the store interactions with clerks. Out of the 14 participants in the study, 11 stated that their favorite way to shop was alone. When questioned further, one woman revealed, “I like to go alone. We [her friends and herself] don’t shop in the same department, like ever. So what’s the point? So I go separately. I’ll walk around with them if they want, but I can’t buy anything.” Other subjects confirmed these feelings, especially in terms of shopping separately because of the lack of variety in sizes in certain stores. The interactions that occurred at the stores also affected how women felt about themselves and their bodies. Four women, mentioned having negative interactions with clerks or workers at the store. These subjects recounted how they had been ignored by clerks, given disgusted looks, or been stopped before fully entering the stores by store clerks informing them they do not have any clothing in their size. While some of these, such as dirty looks may be due to inner scrutiny, one subject discussed she “went into the mall and got very embarrassed...[after being told there was nothing in her size] they recommended another store and I’m like ‘I was just there, they don’t have it

either.' I stopped going to the malls." While this does not contribute to the whole of these women's body image, it does contribute to their feelings on their body in terms shopping for clothing.

One study, through participant observation, looked at how plus-size women experience shopping in a plus-size sized stores and how body image was observed by shoppers (Gruys 2012). Results proved that while some women relished in the ability to find clothing that fits, other women were embarrassed by having to shop in a plus-size only environment one subject stating, "I remember when Real Style [fatshion store] didn't print their logo on the bags. Now I always have to remember to turn the bag around so nobody knows where I have to shop!" (Gruys, 2012, p. 489). Hence, the shopping experience for the women in that study as well as this thesis, varied greatly depending on the individual. In fact, there were divided responses when questioned about whether participants preferred shopping in plus-size only stores or in a mixture of sizes store. This can be due to personal preference, body image, or due to the cultural identity in which the participants may categorize themselves (McRobbie, 1997). Overall, the shopping experience is shaped by past experiences, body image, and their own personal identity characteristics.

### *Fat Activism*

A surprising revelation from this study was the disconnect between accessing fatshion blogs and fat activism. Of the five women who accessed blogs, only one had ever heard or knew what fat activism was. She was the only woman in the whole study who had any knowledge of this concept. However, there were two notable results related to this topic. First, although they were not aware of fat activism, many of the worries that these women had were strikingly close to those discussed within this community. Problems with representations in media, lack of the same opportunities, and discrimination were all topics brought up by all participants. Fat activism aims



to correct this by constructing, “resources for self-esteem, fitness, fashion, socializing, medical advocacy, and defense from discrimination, while creating theater, dance, music, poetry, fiction, magazines, film, and art” (Wann, 2009, p. x). Very few academic pieces have studied the impact of this information in regards to fat activism as a sole practice and community; instead, most research relates it to combating stigma (Dickins, et.al. 2011), self-acceptance (Tenzer 1989), or media messages that either combat or fall into both stigma and acceptance (Johnston & Taylor 2014). All of these areas, are cornerstones of the fat activist movement and most were, if not explicitly mentioned, commented on within this study.

The other major finding was the curiosity that they had, even though they were not sure what fat activism was. After asking if they had heard of it, all of the women inquired what it was, some even asking for websites where they could get more information. Each interview included time spent discussing fat activism as well as the fatshion blogs, and where to access these items. Thus, there is a clear need among these women to engage and have these conversations on a larger scale. Possibly, they are looking for a community or just others who are experiencing the same issues they live with every day.

### **Consumerism and the Plus-Size Fashion Industry**

In terms of the shopping experience, the ideas outlined in intersectionality appeared quite often, specifically how these factors go into buying and how this relates to blogging/media images. Intersectionality, which has its foundations in feminist theory, is the combination of “various social divisions, most often – but not exclusively – focusing on gender, race and class,” these social divisions work in conjunction with one another and affect various aspects of social situations and positions that can be encountered (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p.193). Examples of how this has been examined within literature is how intersectionality can influence everything from violence against women (Crenshaw 1991) to the health disparities which can occur based on

these factors (Weber & Para-Medina 2003). Intersectionality, the interaction between race, gender, and class, in this study was applied to the shopping process and navigating the realm of plus-size fashion. Each of the different parts of intersectionality were discussed at length by each of the participants and how this influenced their personal body image.

The ideas of race came up in terms of the lack of diversity in who is blogging and the clothes that are being made. One woman in particular was very upset by the mostly white presentation in blogs, she proclaimed, “it’s all white. I finally found one [blog] that centers on us. [...] I’m sure as hell not in magazines and now I’m not even in the damn blogs.” She later went on to mention how, even independently, she knows of very few non-white producers of clothing. Another facet to intersectionality is gender and, in this case, gender performativity which was especially evident within blogging. Many women mentioned the hyper-femininity the bloggers displayed, often wearing vintage dresses and stylized makeup. Researchers have discussed how the fat female body is often associated with masculinity due to body shape (Hole 2003). This could be one reason intensive gender performativity was occurring within these blogs. Finally, class influenced these women in terms of what they were able to afford and how this constricted their ability to express identity. All of the women in this study mentioned how expensive plus-size clothing was and how much this affects what they can purchase.

In addition, those who viewed blogs discussed how expensive the posters’ outfits were and how this was almost impossible to afford as a college student. Thus, economic class emerged as a salient theme in the interviews, one that shaped and impacted the participants’ engagements with fatshion and fashion media as well as with the everyday practices of fashion consumerism and self-presentation. Class is an important aspect of the social agenda of fashion since “changes in the dissemination of fashion and in clothing choices can be used to trace and interpret” which

influence how individuals conceive of fashion and eventually purchase clothing (Crane, 2012, p. 2).

Overall, there were mixed opinions on the plus-size fashion industry amongst participants. Some still felt there was a lack of differing styles and designs open to plus-size individuals, limiting them to certain fashion standards or charging a ridiculous amount for some of the non-traditional clothing choices. An example of this would be the large amount of “middle-aged wear” that is created in bigger sizes, whereas finding stylish bathing suits will cost a large sum of money. Another point participants made was the difference in price between thinner clothing and plus-size clothing.

On the other hand, some subjects commented on how far the plus-size fashion industry had come. One woman stated, “We’re doing fine. Now we have more options to pick from so...before we didn’t have that. I think we’re doing fine. There are still things that could be better, but we’re okay.” Those who had this opinion recognized how far the industry improved, but did mention how much it should continue to grow.

While blogs were not as popular as predicted, many of the discussions being had in these forums were reflected within the conversations with participants. The majority of the information outlined in the theoretical framework as well as the literature review were found within this study, confirming their validity. In particular, identity, counter-discourse, and gender performativity factored into plus-sized women’s understanding of fashion and their total shopping experience. The last chapter of this paper will discuss how these results answer the research questions and what future research should come from this study.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

### General Conclusions

#### *Body Discourses*

Based on the results from this study discussed in the previous chapter, the answers to the research questions outlined in this research can be resolved. Both avenues for future research and how this study adds to the overarching literature of fashion and fatshion blogging will be explicated.

The first research question (R1) asked: *To what extent are fat women's fashion choices shaped by hegemonic discourses of the body in fashion culture?* Specifically, the aim of this question was to understand whether the plus-size women were adhering to, feeling pressure from, or resisting the dominant ideologies of how to dress. Another facet that emerged from this question was the source of ideological influences. Results suggested that fat women constantly negotiate discursive hegemonies relating to fat bodies and fashion, at times conforming to the dominant discourses of what clothing is “appropriate” for plus-size bodies, at other times responding enthusiastically to the oppositional discourses in the differentiated spaces of fatshion blogs. This is explained below, specifically focusing on outside influences, body image, and how the fatshion industry itself limits what is available and thus shapes the fashion choices that plus-size women are allowed to make, as well as the resistant readings and activist possibilities made available by fatshion blogs.

The hegemonic discourses of the body were found to come from different sources, starting with the unwritten “rules” of fashion. These dialogues on fashion “provide consumers with a plurality of interpretive positions that [...] can enable them to juxtapose opposing values and beliefs” (Thompson & Haytko, 1997, p. 15). Thus, these cultural body discourses can allow a comparison of what plus-size women see and experience and their beliefs on what they should be

wearing. When discussing this with participants, the women were less willing to subscribe to traditional ideas of fashion rules such as not wearing white after Labor Day or wearing certain colors during certain seasons. However, when thinking about the rules that apply to plus-size women, their ideas mostly stem from both media images and the women's own body image. In particular, participants stated how there were certain clothes that plus-size women should not wear and that they follow these general understandings. Items of clothing such as "club wear", bathing suits, and short skirts were all mentioned as clothing that plus-size women should not wear, and that they were far less likely to wear them or shop for them. In addition, one participant highlighted how the shopping process for these items, such as shopping for a swimsuit for Spring Break, was grueling both mentally and how it felt almost impossible to actually find an outfit to fit. Thus, the general fashion rules have less of an impact whereas fatshion standards are enforced strictly. The inability to find certain clothing works as a physical manifestation of hegemonic discourses about the body. As one study stated, the "categorical distinctions between beautiful and ugly bodies are normativities constructed and maintained by the marketization of beauty" (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013, p.292). By not being able to purchase age-appropriate clothing, there is a separation between "normal" college students and plus-size women.

The sources of ideological influence included family and friends, the media (fashion magazines and blogs in particular), and the fashion shopping environment. These influences will be discussed in turn below. Because fatshion blogging was the focus of this investigation, I pay close attention to this medium following my analysis of the other ideological factors.

#### *Rules of the game: Family, friends, fashion magazines*

The interview data revealed that the "rules" of fashion are established and imposed in part by the familial and friend influences with which fat women surround themselves. While the

traditional rules of fashion, such as wearing white after Labor Day, were not followed; those which focused on plus-size fashion were. These ranged from wearing dark colors because they were slimming to making sure certain body parts were hidden. As explained in the previous chapter, family and friends provide commentary on what to wear and specifically, mothers had an influence on what the women felt comfortable wearing. A plethora of research has studied the mother-daughter relationship and how it influences purchasing behavior (Minahan & Huddleston 2013, Minahan & Huddleston 2010, Kestler & Paulins 2014), indicating that this connection has a significant impact on conceptions of fashion and behaviors in the shopping process. As one study found, mothers did not necessarily dictate what women purchased, especially college-aged females; instead they were “monitoring appropriateness” of the outfits (Kestler & Paulins, 2014, p. 321). This relates to fat fashion since the majority of hegemonic discourses followed are through deciding what is “appropriate” for plus-size women to wear. Thus, as fashion culture may enforce the idea that some clothes are off-limits for plus-size women, familial and friend influence may reinforce these ideas and discourage resistance against these norms. This was found within this study: both family and friends of the participants often had opinions that were valued by the study participants and provided an understanding of what all the subjects felt they should purchase.

Another influence on how the dominant hegemonic discourses influence plus-size women were media images, in this case, fashion magazines. While many of the women did not consistently access magazines neither online nor in paper form, when they did look at them, they provided information about the current fashion trends while offering pricing information. Fashion magazines have been extensively studied (Shaw 1995, Turner et.al. 1997, Utter et.al. 2003) showing how this medium tends to influence the dominant hegemonic discourses,

specifically the thin ideal. As one of the studies found, “women’s body image satisfaction is, indeed, influenced by their exposure to the thin ideal presented in fashion magazines” (Turner et. al., 1997, p. 611). The thin ideal was mentioned by participants in this study, in terms of the lack of diverse models, even when they were labeled “plus-size” by the magazine. Subjects recognized the difference between the models and themselves and were cognizant of the types of outfits these women were wearing. Since this is so pervasive within this type of medium, it is easy to assume that even a limited amount of access to magazines could affect the overall fashion influences. Multiple studies have examined how magazines influence body image and the way women perceive themselves. As mentioned above, since magazines and other media are “shaping, rather than merely reflecting, societal perceptions of the female body” these help dictate the rules that govern the body (Turner, et.al., 1997, p. 611). Since several of the plus-size women in this study did consume these magazines for fashion advice, this did contribute to their overall conception of what fat women should wear, thereby also contributing to the sociocultural “rule-making” governing fat women’s self-presentation, agency, and body image.

Finally, fashion culture contributes to a hegemonic discourse about the body by what is made available for purchase in certain sizes. While this may not be an obvious way of conveying the thin ideal, a large portion of the population in this study complained about how unfair and difficult it was to find clothing in the correct sizes. As mentioned within the last chapter, certain clothing was challenging to find, many participants complained of having to go to multiple stores or shop online to discover something they could properly wear. One subject ended up changing her wedding plans after being unable to find a suitable plus-size wedding gown that would both fit her well and she could afford. This could possibly be categorized as the most significant factor that both communicates the ideology of the body while also affecting the shopping

process. If someone is not able to find a certain clothing item or style, not only does this affect their ability to purchase the item, and thus disrupts their shopping process, but also it can communicate what plus-size women should be wearing. Moreover, it sets up spatial limitations in terms of where they are permitted to shop, restricting their mobility and agency as consumers of fashion.

When thinking about the extent to which women's choices are influenced by discourse, it is clear to see that these communicators of fashion rules, such as family and friends or store staff, play a large role in women's fashion choices. Plus-size fashion rules are communicated via magazines, clothing choices, etc. and can be reinforced during the buying process by those who shop with them. In addition, all of the women confirmed that, although they do not succumb to traditional fashion rules, they are much more likely to conform to those specifically for plus-size individuals. Overall, it was clear to see the recognition of such overarching discourses that are permeating this population's decisions to purchase or not.

### *The Influence of Blogs*

The second research question, broken into two parts, continues along with same line of thought, analyzing the potential of fatshion blogs and fat activism to influence the overall shopping experience. The first part of the second research question (R2a) reads: *Do the discursive ideologies in online fashion blogs and the online market for fatshion clothing, influence fat women's shopping process? If so, how?* While not all of the participants in the study used these blogs, those who did were confident about the blogs ability to affect their shopping process and their own self-image. In particular, blogs influenced the women who used them in their shopping in three ways. First, the posts encourage resistance in the form of flaunting bodies and wearing what makes "you" feel comfortable. Another way this is done is through emphasizing the exploration of new style choices, which is communicated through



postings by both individual and community bloggers. Finally, although clothing options may be limited offline, blogs offered a new perspective by helping connect identity to clothing choices. These three different perspectives portrayed on blogs alter not only how the women view themselves but what they consider worthwhile purchases.

One of the main reasons that blogs influence women was as a form of resistance to the dominant body discourse. By following the personal journeys of the bloggers, participants outlined how they had seen a counter-discourse presented. Specifically, bloggers tend to post non-traditional wear and offer alternative perspectives on why being plus-size should not be viewed as an inherently negative position. As one subject stated, on these blogs there is a culture of “flaunting fat” and dressing in clothes that, as mentioned above, are sanctioned as off-limits to plus-size women. When questioned whether this had any effect on her, she replied “confidence-wise totally. Would I do it? [long pause] Yeah. You know. Why not?” Other participants had similar statements highlighting the refreshing inspiration of seeing defiance of the norms of dress by these fat bloggers. As the women who use blogs see what bloggers recommend and the perfected images of “living fat,” this alters the understanding of both clothes and what it means to be a plus-size woman. Multiple studies have shown how people seek out reviews about their shopping choices and that, “the recommendations of bloggers may influence several stages of buying process” (Hsu, Chuan-Chuan, & Chiang, 2013, p.80). Thus, as these women see plus-size bloggers resisting the dominant ideologies by wearing certain clothing there is a significant chance, as confirmed by participants, this will influence their shopping process. Whether this is through looking at alternative ways of obtaining clothing, such as at Goodwill or online, or if this encourages the wearing of non-traditional clothing, these blogs are having an impact.

Fatshion blogs, in particular, can be cited as counter-discourse that combat the necessity of

following the fashion industry norms. One study explained that although bloggers may simply be posting about their fashion experiences, “these conversations often turn personal experiences with body image into political discussions about sizeism and body politics”; specifically this is done by, “feature[ing] the fashion of fat women of color and queer fat women” and communally sharing stories related to sizeism and systemic bias (Conway, 2014, p. 9 & 20). These messages of inclusion were not reflected in this study; however, messages of counter-discourse were still explicated in these spheres. Thus, fatshion blogs can fit into the larger category of resistant activism online.

Next, the blogs encouraged women to explore new style choices they previously would not have considered. Participants commented on how they were exposed to different designs they had not seen in their daily lives and this was a revitalizing way of experiencing fashion that made them want to explore their fashion choices. One subject mentioned how the bloggers encouraged exploration of fashion not only for those who were viewing the blogs, but also for people to suggest different styles for the blogger herself to try. She stated, “It’s cool with the feedback. Like she gives tips to like dressing professionally but still wants comments and takes submissions of stuff.” This can change and challenge the preexisting ideas that may have been suggested by magazines or familial/friend relations. This can have an effect on the shopping process in conjunction with the previously mentioned counter-discourse that comes from these blogs. It emphasizes that fashion is a continual process, where change can be made at any point and in which that change can be resistant to their original presuppositions about their fashion choices.

Finally, bloggers highlighted the idea of identity, which resonated with the women in this study. The only participant who contributed to the blogs herself commented on the

distinctiveness which each blogger has, in terms of style, but that the most successful blogs, in her opinion, were in constant flux with new styles. Especially with the singular bloggers, identity was established and consolidated through what they wore and how they recommend clothing to others. What participants witnessed on these blogs, particularly their responsiveness to the portrayal of identity that was communicated, led to the questioning and reimagining of their own identity. Thus, the discourses that are created on fatshion blogs, do influence not only the personal body image of viewers but also their shopping process in terms of reexamining the rules of fashion, exploring their own identity, and encouraging positive body image. The blogs work not only as a fashion inspiration but also as a message of resistance to encourage blog-users to shop for themselves and by their own identity and style versus the ones given by dominant ideologies of the body.

The second part of this research question aimed at looking at fat activism discourses and how this may influence plus-size women. Specifically this inquiry asked (R2b): *Do the discursive ideologies of fat activism influence fat women's shopping process? If so, how?* As only one of the subjects knew what fat activism was, it is logical to conclude that this did not directly influence the shopping process for the study participants. However, one of the most interesting results from the study was how women were engaging in topics that are often covered in the fat activism circle without recognizing it as such. One of the most popular fat activist organizations, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), describes its goal and thus, the overarching objective of fat activism, as working “to eliminate discrimination based on body size and provide fat people with the tools for self-empowerment through advocacy, public education, and support” (NAAFA, 2014, “NAAFA: About Us”, para. 1). This mirrors the conversations that participants said they had with others, with themselves, or that they witnessed

being articulated on these fatshion blogs. Thus, fat activism does not directly affect the shopping process; however, there is an indirect influence on the discourses perpetuated by this community that is disseminated through the fatshion blogs some of the subjects followed and through interpersonal channels of communication.

One of the most revealing dimensions in this research was the fervor at which women inquired about what fat activism was and how they could access more information. The majority of the women in this study were pleasantly surprised that this concept and the NAAFA actually existed. Overall, this study found that women's shopping process is highly flexible and dynamic in regards to being influenced by other sources, specifically through blogs that are layered with body positive and resistance-laden messages. While fat activism did not have a direct influence on any of the women, the same themes found in this sector were reflected in participant's personal ideas about what needs to be improved for both fashion and society.

### *The Power of Identity and Style*

The final research question selected two of the most popular topics in fashion research and aimed to understand whether this is present within in the fatshion community and with college women in particular. The third research question was (R3): *What role does (a) gender and/or (b) personal identity/style play in fat women's clothing selection?* Gender was found to have a significant effect on the clothing selection process, particularly in the fact that some women moved from shopping in the women's section to the men's section to find clothing that fit. In fact, as another study found (Peters 2014), a couple of women mentioned having to shop in men's departments for certain clothing such as coats, jeans, and boots. The two women who mentioned this were a part of the plus-size population only, and one stated the shame she felt having to purchase men's clothing, saying "I usually send my fiancé to do it." This was the only time participants discussed gender in terms of their own shopping experiences. However, some

contributors brought up the fact that on online blogs there were clear gender portrayals, such as hyper-femininity that were perpetuated by the community. Some blog-users were interested and connected with these portrayals while others rejected the representations that were presented online. While this was present on the blogs, it did not positively influence their selection of clothes or their feelings of the blogs. Seeing a predominance of homogeneous and hegemonic gender portrayals consistently distanced one woman from accessing the blogs more often. Therefore, gender was present in the women's lives and in the blogs, with it having a substantial effect in what the women in this study were selecting to wear for themselves.

On the same spectrum, both identity and style had a large impact on what types of clothing participants were planning to, and eventually did, purchase. When asked about what their personal style was, many answered with terms like girly, sporty, fancy, professional, and other adjectives. This, along with price, color choice, and design, were the most important factors influencing what they chose to purchase. In terms of how this weighs against other factors, it was clear that personal identity was more important than other influences, except one. Specifically cost was the deciding factor into whether to purchase or not, especially for those who were a part of the mixed population of shopping in both plus or thin sizes. This was most likely due to the fact that the women interviewed were in college and thus, their incomes are greatly reduced from those who have established careers or high school students whose clothing are primarily bought by parents. A subtext of the interviews thus addressed socioeconomic status or class, with the higher prices of plus-size clothing further marginalizing and exploiting fat women, who already experienced discrimination because of their nonconformist bodies.

There was a large difference between style and identity conceived by the two populations of this study. Even defining their specific identity was harder for those who solely were plus-size.

For the plus-size women, the most common definitions of personal style were “comfortable” or “fits well.” When I brought up cost, many participants stated that, “there's not enough places out there that I could find things that I actually want. Cause I don't find anything I'll have go up to \$25 for a shirt...which is too much, but what choice do I have?” Thus, unlike the other population, these women felt they did not have the luxury to be judicious with either budget or particular style. Although this group's subjects had difficulty stating their own personal style, when asked about their “dream style” there was a multitude of answers ranging from punk rocker chick to vintage '50s housewife. Many were also able to paint a vivid picture of what their dream outfit was, describing everything from shirt and accessories to where they would wear the outfit, if they owned it. When asked, the three women in this population who used blogs said that while they sometimes saw these styles on the blogs, their own exact styles were never truly portrayed.

Overall, when thinking about the power of gender, personal style, and identity within shopping, it was obvious this was dependent on the nuance of body size and self-categorization within the study population. The gendered categories of fashion worked to marginalize and shame some of the women, mainly those who only wore plus sizes. The main result for this question was how personal style/identity and price concerns are constrained by what clothing is available, especially for those who are limited to plus-size fashion only. In terms of intersectionality both gender and class provided constraints on the shopping experience, particularly for the plus-size only shoppers. For those who moved between plus-size and thinner sizes, personal style could be more indulged and price became more of a deciding factor for these women. The women who could cross over into more mainstream sizes attained more choice and agency as fashion consumers and accordingly, were able to perform and communicate their identities to a greater degree.

### **Contribution to Literature**

This study contributed to fashion literature in a few major ways. First, it affirmed the importance of interpersonal influences (especially mothers) and personal identity within both shopping and in terms of conceiving what stylish fashion is. Identity was important to all of the women, and fashion worked as a communicative tool to express this information, but size determined how much agency and choice women had to use fashion as a conduit for identity. Body size impacted the extent to which women were categorized as solely plus-size shoppers or whether they could cross over into thinner dress sizes, and this categorization affected their ability to use fashion to make identity claims. Thus, fashion is not an easily accessible signifier for women on the outer margins of the fashion industry's size benchmarks.

In addition, these findings complicate the understanding of factors that influence the shopping experience. Previous studies have shown that some of the main factors influencing the shopping experience include the store environment (Donovan, et.al. 1994), the mood of the customer (Swinyard 1993), and customer's expectations (Ofir & Simonson 2007); however, this study has shown that those in differing populations, such as plus-size women, may alter the importance of these ideas. In regards to factors, environmental factors, such as whom the person shops with, how kind the shopping attendants were, and whether they could purchase the clothing online were also mentioned. Finally, discourses of the body in the media and in the culture at large restrain plus-size women's clothing options, and this research helped prove that not only are a number of plus-size women cognizant of these, but they also struggle with simultaneously complying with and wanting to defy these ideas.

The main contribution of this study is to the small area of fatshion literature that exists. Currently, most of the research that has occurred focuses on a small population of fatshion blog producers. While this is valid and important information, this thesis turns the focus on a larger

population and those who use the blogs and how they are actually being applied. The results from this study show that the impact of these blogs are on the opinions of the body rather than using them as an alternative way to shop or a direct, implicit action done during the shopping process. This study is also significant in the discovery of a new population of both those who shop exclusively in one size category and those who fluctuate between sizes. This population could add new dimensions to fatshion research by making it more applicable to a larger community of those who occasionally shop for bigger sizes. In addition, there was a disconnect found between the recognition of fatshion blogs and fat activism; although, many of the opinions found within this activist community were reflected in the participants' answers.

### **Future Research**

Future research should focus on surveying a larger population for fatshion research, in particular. While this study did not have a large number of participants, that majority of the research reviewed had between three to eight subjects total. As the population of people who qualify as overweight and obese grows worldwide, the more research needs to examine more than the content creators of blogs. This population should be extended to males as well, since one blog-user mentioned seeing men submit photos to fatshion blogs. While there may be significantly fewer men posting within these forums, research should not be limited to women and fatshion or women and the fat activism movement. While men have often been sectioned to fat admirers (FA) in the fat activist movement, the same struggles and issues that face plus-size women may influence them as well. In addition, by widening this population by talking to groups such as high school students, people of different genders, or focusing on specific ethnicities, topics such as intersectionality may be analyzed to a greater extent.

Another topic for future research would be examining the population of those who shop in multiple departments, such as those who wear some clothing from the plus-size section and the



thinner sizes. While some of how these women felt surfaced within this study, the research questions that were outlined before this population was discovered were not directed to this subgroup. Thus, studies specifically questioning how women navigate and negotiate the boundaries of size categories, and how those delineations impact identity, agency, and self-image, could add to the existing literature on consumerism and the shopping experience.

Although this is one sector of cross-over relationships, we could also use more research delving into those who shop in both men's and women's department. Two of the plus-size women in this study discussed how they needed to shop in men's department, which, for them, was viewed as a negative but for others may not be. Other research could delve into women who use maternity clothes or make their own clothing to compensate for the lack of sizing or styles available. In addition, some online sellers such as on Etsy or other websites, could be examined in terms of a viable alternative for shopping at chains or Goodwill.

One reason alternatives to shopping may not have been mentioned was the age population of those studied. Thus, conducting a cross-generational study on plus-size fashion may allow for an understanding on how each sector of consumers shops and their considerations when shopping. Along with this line of research, cross-cultural studies could focus on how the body image of different races plays into the understanding of plus-size fashion consumption and, in turn, affects the "rules" of fashion that may govern them. Finally, a large-scale textual analysis of the blogs themselves would provide a greater understanding of all the messages that are being communicated on these forums. In addition, this could allow for inclusion of not only blogs that follow traditional gender norms but also those that subvert these ideas. Within this study, the women who used blogs had only used those that displayed hyper-femininity; however, a wider exploration of the blogosphere would be able to concisely discern between the conservative and

radical blogs and their popularity. s

Finally, as this thesis was written, it was obvious that a general understanding of who actually visits and participates in the fatshion blogs is necessary. Is it simply the same people running the blogs that are viewing others? Through this study, it is clear that is not the case, but a large scale survey addressing this could prove to be helpful in creating meaningful research about the digital environment and its role in body-related issues. Another aspect of this overarching survey could include determining whether individuals are simply viewing this material or participating in the lively cultures of resistance at work in these blogs. Again, in this study only one woman actually submitted photos to these sites, but there is no way to determine whether this is the norm or if this an anomaly. Especially since blogging sites like Tumblr or LiveJournal do not provide a visible number for how many followers each blog has, it is impossible to determine how expansive this group actually is. Research should expand to differing populations who connect within these communities and try to determine, on a larger scale, where fatshion blogs fit within the larger realm of fashion blogs.

Overall, this study revealed the tensions, complexities, and active engagements of fat college women concerning body ideologies in society and in the media. In its focus on fatshion blogging, this study found that blogs have the potential to spark opposition in ways that could mobilize a more positive self-image as well as nonconformist self-presentations through a heightened awareness of the possibilities for opposing dominant ideologies. The women's negotiations of fashion and fatshion offer crucial insights into the processes by which marginalized communities — particularly those who are marginalized because of body politics — grapple with dominance and resistance, and the role that blogs play in these processes.

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### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

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## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

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