Breaking Cover: Plus-size Transgressive Dress on YouTube

Arienne McCracken, Mary Lynn Damhorst, and Eulanda A. Sanders,
Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, USA

Introduction: Participatory media platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram, are theoretically available for use by anyone who has a smartphone and access to the internet. Given social media's apparently democratic nature, are groups that may have been previously underrepresented in mass media now more likely to find representation in social media? If so, what is the nature of that representation? To consider these questions, this research examined the phenomenon of plus-sized YouTubers who make videos about women's fashion. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 individuals to investigate their lived experiences, both as fat people and as active participants on this social media platform. Although almost 70% of the United States population can be classified as obese or overweight (Weight-control Information Network, 2012) and the long-term success of weight loss attempts is notoriously low (LeBesco, 2004; Stunkard & McLaren-Hume, 1959), there has been little academic research focused on the interplay of social media, dress, and fat bodies. This research will start to fill a gap in the literature.

Literature Review: The fact that fat or plus-size people experience stigma in mainstream United States society has been widely documented (Greenhalgh, 2015; LeBesco, 2004; Maurer & Sobal, 1999; Saguy, 2013). Fat individuals suffer socially, physically, emotionally, and economically because of mainstream society's antipathy towards their size (Degher & Hughes, 1999). People who are fat learn quickly and internalize beliefs through their daily interactions with others (Deghal & Hughes, 1999; Sobal & Maurer, 1999) that their bodies, selves, and identities are "unsocial, undesirable, lazy, unlovable, shameful, [and] asexual" (Lewin, 2013, p. 16). Related to Goffman's (1963) discussion of the term "stigma," fat individuals, because their deviance is always visible, possess a discredited type of stigma – they can never hide it or pass for "normal" when appearing in person or via visual media.

Traditional mass media has been shown to reinforce anti-fat beliefs (Jung, 2006; Kim & Lennon, 2007; Markey & Markey, 2012). Because participatory media enables the individual to actively participate, some proponents assert that people can use it to directly take part in cultural conversations instead of those conversations being completely filtered through mass media owned by corporations (e.g., Jenkins, 2006; Rheingold, 2000). There is the potential for profoundly disrupting the entrenched thin ideal through a wide variety of individuals taking part in participatory media sites.

Method: After receiving IRB approval for the study, including approval to videotape participants, YouTube's search function was used with two key phrases – "plus size" and "fat fashion" – to find potential interviewees. Potential participants were contacted via email. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 people who identified as fat or plus sized (or a similar appellation) and who make YouTube fashion videos. The interviews were conducted via videoconferencing software. These individuals all identified as women except for one, who identified as non-binary. This participant was included in the study because they mainly shopped for and wore apparel designed for the female body. Data were analyzed using a grounded theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Although it was estimated that 10-15 individuals would be interviewed, data saturation was reached with 13 transcripts.

Findings and Discussion: Goffman (1963) suggested that discredited people will try to "cover," or downplay their stigma as much as possible. Ashamed and embarrassed people who have internalized the societal message that people like them are inferior and grotesque because of their bodies may prefer to

"cover" by dressing to obscure the body underneath the apparel and to draw as little attention to their physical selves as possible. After internalizing society's disdain of fatness throughout one's life, the act of accepting one's body without hating it might be quite radical for a plus-sized individual. Kiara[1] used words of agency along with transgression to communicate how she urged her viewers to take a more active posture in how they lived their lives. She said,

> I just want women to just own their lives, you know? It's our one go-around. I really want women to just live and own their lives, and to not hide and not feel that they have to conform.

Most interviewees often purposely dressed to stand out. One of the outfits Claire wore to New York Fashion Week was a custom-made, hot pink fringed jumpsuit. This is not the uniform of a shrinking violet or a discredited person trying to cover. Interviewees spoke passionately of their desires to consciously break the unspoken rules that governed their lives as fat individuals, both generally and in relation to dress. This was often coupled with a fervent hope that their viewers would be strong enough also to commit transgressive acts. For interviewees, breaking the rules was a necessity on the journey to greater self-esteem and acceptance. Transgression was often performed by wearing clothes that one "shouldn't" wear or showing a part of the body that a fat person "shouldn't" show. Nelly noted:

> I would say that there are no rules, or there are less rules than you think they are, or you don't have to follow the rules. That's what I would say to anyone who follows me, because there's all these rules, especially for fat people, about what's flattering and what colors you can wear or what patterns you can wear and what your gender can wear, and there aren't any rules. And if you want to wear something, wear it and rock it.

Toni specifically wore garments that she knew plus-size women "shouldn't" wear:

> I'm attracted to crop tops. I'm attracted to rompers. Anything that shows areas where, traditionally, bigger women shouldn't show or be proud of, like my legs. I wear things a lot with my arms out. And that's usually a sour spot for a lot of plus-size women. My shoulders out, my belly out…

Tabitha remembered one of her first plus-size fashion role models, the social media personality FatGirlFlow (Corissa Enneking), who broke fashion rules:

> I found her super inspirational, you know, because she is wearing crop tops, and she's putting it all out there. Then you go down the rabbit hole of other videos and Instagram and all of that. It's like stuff that I wouldn't have considered wearing before, seeing other people of different shapes and sizes wearing them.

Like FatGirlFlow, Tabitha hoped to inspire her viewers to "wear what they want and not care."

Conclusion: Breaking the rules by being unashamedly fat in public and in the media is one obvious transgression that the interviewees practice on a regular basis. Beyond that, interviewees regularly committed transgressive acts through what types of apparel they wore. Not only do they not "cover," in Goffman's (1963) parlance, but many of them were excited about wearing trendy, body-baring garments such as shorts, bikinis, and crop tops, even though some of them admitted that the idea of wearing these types of apparel made them uneasy at times. These YouTubers are in effect performing an ongoing cultural criticism, even if that is not a conscious motivation of all of the vloggers.

---

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

References

Degher, D., & Hughes, G. (1999). The adoption and management of a "fat" identity. In J. Sobal & D. Maurer (Eds.), *Interpreting weight: The social management of fatness and thinness* (pp. 11-28). New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York: Touchstone Books.

Greenhalgh, S. (2015). *Fat-talk nation: The human costs on American's war on fat.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: NYU Press.

Jung, J. (2006). Media influence: Pre-and postexposure of college women to media images and the effect of mood and body image. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal, 24*(4), 335-344.

Kim, J.-H., & Lennon, S. J. (2007). Mass media and self-esteem, body image, and eating disorder tendencies. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal, 25*(1), 3-23.

LeBesco, K. (2004). *Revolting bodies? The struggle to redefine fat identity.* Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

Lewin, S. (2013). *Fat looking: Exploring the dialogue between visual representations of the body*. Retrieved from http://commons.pacificu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1023&context=cgeconf

Markey, C. N., & Markey, P. M. (2012). Emerging adults' responses to a media presentation of idealized female beauty: An examination of cosmetic surgery in reality television. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture, (1)*4, 209-219.

Maurer, D., & Sobal, J. (1999). The social management of fatness and thinness. In J. Sobal & D. Maurer (Eds.), *Interpreting weight: Social management of fatness and thinness* (pp. 3-8). New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Rheingold, H. (2000). *The virtual community: Homesteading on the electronic frontier*. Boston: MIT press.

Saguy, A. C. (2013). *What's wrong with fat?* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Sobal, J., & Maurer, D. (1999). Body weight as a social problem. In J. Sobal & D. Maurer (Eds.), *Weighty issues: Fatness and thinness as social problems* (pp. 3-8). New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Stunkard, A., & McLaren-Hume, M. (1959). The results of treatment for obesity: A review of the literature and report of a series. *AMA Archives of Internal Medicine, 103(*1), 79-85.