

HANNA LIMATIUS

# Communities of Empowerment

Exploring the Discourse Practices of  
Plus-Size Fashion Bloggers



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*Exploring the Discourse Practices of  
Plus-Size Fashion Bloggers*

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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Dedicated to #PSBloggers.



# PREFACE

I have always loved clothes and dressing up, but for the first nineteen or so years of my life, I considered the world of fashion completely out of my reach. However, after moving to a bigger city to begin my university studies, I slowly became more confident and experimental with my personal style. One day in 2011, my then boyfriend – now husband – suggested that I start a fashion blog. What a ridiculous notion! Sure, many of my friends complimented me on my style. I was often asked where I found such nice outfits, especially on a student’s budget. But I was FAT. Surely, a fat girl couldn’t be a fashion blogger?

When I began the preliminary research for my MA thesis on fashion blogs, I found out that, yes, fat girls can indeed be fashion bloggers. In fact, I discovered a group of plus-size women who appeared to form a whole new genre within the broader field of fashion blogging. Intrigued by this discovery, I immediately became a reader of some of these blogs. Soon after, I started writing my own blog. And the more I immersed myself into the world of plus-size fashion blogging, the more I became interested in these women who seemed to break all the rules of the fashion world, at the same time constructing a new kind of online community. From this curiosity, the idea for a doctoral dissertation was born.

Despite my personal interest in the topic, the process of truly getting to know the plus-size blogosphere and all its intricacies has not been easy or straightforward. Luckily, I have not been alone on this (at times rather tumultuous) journey. Many people have helped me in more ways than I ever could have hoped for, and I am sincerely grateful for everything you have done. It would be impossible to list each and every one of you here, but as always, I shall do my best.

First and foremost, I want to thank Professor Crispin Thurlow for agreeing to be my opponent in the public defense of my dissertation. I am greatly honored that a scholar whose work in CMC research first inspired my own interest in this particular field of study has a role in the completion of my project. I am also truly grateful to the pre-examiners of my dissertation, Professor Andreas H. Jucker and Associate Professor Piia Varis.

The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the financial support I received in the form of research and travel grants from the following foundations and institutions: The Eino Jutikkala Fund at the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, The Olvi Foundation, The Finnish Cultural Foundation, Tampere University Foundation, and the City of Tampere. I am extremely grateful for all the opportunities made possible by the funding I received.

Next, I have to mention how immensely thankful I am for my three wonderful, supportive and understanding supervisors. First, I want to thank Professor Päivi Pahta, who also supervised my MA thesis, for encouraging me to embark on this journey in the first place. I am forever grateful that she saw potential in a young woman who, frankly, was a bit lost at the time and did not consider herself to be “academic enough” for an academic career. Second, I want to thank Professor Jukka Tyrkkö for all his help during the project. Thank you for always answering my questions (no matter how dumb I thought they were), as well as introducing me to both interesting new people and interesting new methods. Finally, I want to thank Professor Minna Nevala for agreeing to be my third supervisor. Your insights into the study of identity and discourse made you the perfect addition to our team. I am equally grateful for the emotional support you provided me with during this project. Thank you for listening to all my (numerous) rants about both research and life in general.

I would also like to take the opportunity to thank other academics who have helped and inspired me along the way. I want to thank Professor Sirpa Leppänen for her continuing support and enthusiasm for my research. Thank you to Professor Susan C. Herring, a true pioneer in the field of CMC, for giving me extremely encouraging and thought-provoking feedback on my very first article. I am very grateful to Dr Michele Paule for coming to talk to me after my first ever conference presentation, and for inviting me to visit Oxford Brookes University, where I met some tremendously inspiring, amazing and talented women. A big thank you goes out to the whole Oxford Brookes gang – Leander Reeves, Kate Lonie, Elizabeth Lovegrove, Hanna Klien-Thomas, and everyone else I met and talked with – for all our engaging conversations. I am also thankful to Anu Harju and Annamari Huovinen for meeting with me in the early stages of my project. Thank you for your encouraging words and good advice.

Of course, I am very grateful for the support of my colleagues and fellow doctoral students back home at Tampere University. Hanne Juntunen, Pasi Metsä and everyone else at the Doctoral Programme in Language Studies – thank you for all the lunchtime conversations and coffee break therapy over the years.



I also want to thank my friends and family, starting with my academic sister-from-another-mister, Elina Salomaa. I am so grateful for your friendship and support – not to mention all the bottles of wine we have gone through while agonizing over our respective research projects. Thank you to my dear friends Katariina Kujala, Kaarina Keskitalo, Paula Kirjavainen, Piia Maasalmi, Jenni Vesala, Saara Vielma, Johanna Vornanen, Hanna and Elias Pielikko, Laura Hekanaho, Fahad Sohrab, and many others. Thank you for being there during the good times and the bad times, always ready to either make me laugh or to provide a shoulder to cry on.

A very important thank you goes out to my mother, Merja Ryyänen, who helped me with the frankly embarrassing number of issues I had with Microsoft Word. In addition to your help with proof-reading and technical matters, I am forever grateful for all your love and support. I would also like to thank my father, Martti Ryyänen, and my brother, Timo Ryyänen, for their support. Shout out to my mother-in-law, Outi Kivistö, and my sister-in-law, Katja Limatius, for accompanying me to England on my first ever conference trip, when I was too scared to travel alone.

Next, the most important person in my life: my husband, Jesse Limatius. Words cannot express how much you have helped me during my PhD project, and how grateful I am to have you in my life. Thank you for helping me to bring my vision to life by programming the Blog Extractor, as well as resolving countless other technical issues. Even more importantly, thank you for believing in me when I could not believe in myself. Thank you for always lifting me up when I was down. You are my rock, and I could not have done this without you. I love you.

Last but certainly not least, to all the plus-size fashion bloggers out there – the ones who participated in this study, the ones I have met on my travels, the ones I have admired from afar, and the ones I have become good friends with – thank you. I have learned so much from you, and I hope that through this dissertation, I am able to give something back.

In Sastamala, on Valentine's Day, 14 February 2020

Hanna Limatius



# ABSTRACT

This doctoral dissertation explores the interactions that take place within an online community of plus-size fashion bloggers. Specifically, it focuses on the linguistic and discursive practices that these bloggers use to build community, to construct identities and to establish a sense of empowerment. The group of bloggers under investigation in the dissertation consists of 20 UK-based women who identify as plus-size and author fashion-focused blogs. Methodologically, the dissertation combines the qualitative discourse analysis of blog texts and comments with a quantitative, corpus-based investigation of a larger blog corpus of roughly 4.2 million words. In addition to textual blog material, questionnaire responses collected from the bloggers on two occasions (in 2015 and 2017) were studied using methods of thematic analysis.

Plus-size women have been marginalized in the field of fashion for several decades. They are offered less clothing options than smaller women and ostracized in fashion imagery. Fashion blogs, however, have enabled people who have not had a voice in traditional fashion media to express their sense of fashion and to build relationships with similar others. This dissertation adds an important linguistic perspective to the existing literature on plus-size fashion blogging by addressing the variation within this sub-genre of fashion blogs through detailed linguistic and discursive analyses.

The results reveal that there is more variation within the plus-size fashion blogging genre than previous studies have indicated. While earlier research has highlighted the activist aspects of plus-size fashion blogging, the results of this dissertation show that even though some bloggers identify strongly with the fat acceptance movement and have adopted a fat-activism-driven approach to blogging, others focus on more general fashion-related content, or blog about a wider variety of topics. However, despite these in-group differences, normative practices and behaviors can be observed within the community of plus-size fashion bloggers, and these practices are constructed through and reflected in the language the bloggers use. For example, using specific terms to describe plus-size women's bodies functions as a way of constructing social identity within the blogging

community. At the same time, linguistic and discursive means are also used for maintaining the boundaries of the community by highlighting the differences between group members and outsiders.

In addition to an in-depth investigation of one specific community of bloggers, the four articles included in this dissertation contribute to building a theoretical and methodological model for studying online interaction within other groups. In particular, the dissertation provides a new framework for studying the online interaction of groups that are marginalized in the mainstream media and society. The results show that when it comes to the study of such communities, combinations of different types of data (qualitative and quantitative), as well as several methodological approaches, are needed. This dissertation also illustrates that when researching marginalized groups, researchers should not focus merely on the relationship between a specific group and the societal structures and hierarchies that marginalize this group – the inner dynamics of the community of marginalized people also need to be investigated in detail.

As digital communication has become a part of modern everyday life, communities that are formed on the internet no longer necessarily stay within the online realm, separate from our offline relationships. The findings presented in this dissertation illustrate how a community that starts out as an aggregate of people interacting on a particular digital platform can evolve into a complex, layered and multi-faceted network where individuals communicate through a variety of media, using a variety of shared resources. This type of community development may benefit marginalized individuals both online and offline. For many of the plus-size women investigated in this dissertation, blogging has functioned as a stepping-stone to psychological, societal and financial empowerment.

# TIIVISTELMÄ

Tämä väitöskirja tarkastelee pluskokoisten (engl. *plus-size*) muotibloggaajien verkkoyhteisössä tapahtuvaa vuorovaikutusta. Tutkimuksen fokuksessa ovat ne kielelliset ja diskursiiviset käytännöt, joita blogiyhteisön sisällä käytetään yhteisöllisyyden, identiteettien ja voimaantumisen kokemuksen rakentamiseen. Tutkimuksen kohteena on kahdestakymmenestä naisesta koostuva ryhmä, jonka kaikki jäsenet identifioituvat pluskokoisiksi, kirjoittavat muotiblogeja ja asuvat Iso-Britanniassa. Menetelmällisesti väitöskirja yhdistää blogitekstien ja -kommenttien laadullisen diskurssianalyysin määrälliseen, korpuslingvistiseen lähestymistapaan. Blogista kerättiin tutkimusta varten noin 4,2 miljoonan sanan korpus. Blogitekstien tarkastelun lisäksi analysoin bloggaajien vastauksia kahteen kyselytutkimukseen, jotka lähetettiin heille vuosina 2015 ja 2017. Kyselyvastauksia tutkin temaattisen analyysin keinoin.

Pluskokoiset naiset ovat olleet marginalisoituja muodin kentällä useiden vuosikymmenten ajan. Valtavirtamuodin kuvastossa he ovat näkymättömiä, eikä vaateteollisuus tarjoa heille samaa vaihtoehtojen kirjoa kuin pienempikokoisille naisille. Muotiblogien kautta valtavirtamuodin ulkopuolelle jääneet ryhmät, kuten juuri pluskokoiset naiset, ovat kuitenkin päässeet ilmaisemaan itseään ja tyylitajuaan uusin tavoin, muodostaen samalla sosiaalisia suhteita muiden samassa tilanteessa olevien ihmisten kanssa. Väitöstutkimukseni tarjoaa tähän mennessä puuttuneen kielitieteellisen näkökulman tähän ajankohtaiseen ilmiöön.

Tutkimustulokseni osoittavat, että pluskokoisten muotiblogien genren sisällä on enemmän vaihtelua kuin aiemmat tutkimukset aiheesta ovat esittäneet. Siinä missä aiempi tutkimus on korostanut pluskokoisten naisten muotiblogien ja lihavuusaktiivisuuden suhdetta, omissa tutkimustuloksissani korostuu yhteisön sisäinen monipuolisuus. Toisille bloggaajille aktiivisuus on blogin keskiössä, kun taas toiset identifioituvat ennen kaikkea muotibloggaajiksi ja haluavat tulla nähdyksi samassa valossa, kuin ne hoikat naiset, jotka kirjoittavat samankaltaisia blogeja. Joissakin blogeissa aiheiden kirjo on myös hyvin laaja, eivätkä vartalon kokoon ja siihen perustuvaan syrjintään liittyvät kysymykset näin ollen nouse yhtä keskeisiksi teemoiksi, kuin aktiivisimifokusoituissa blogeissa.

Yhteisön sisäisistä eroavuuksista huolimatta sen sisälle on muodostunut normatiivisia käytäntöjä, jotka ilmenevät myös ryhmän jäsenten käyttämässä kielessä. Esimerkiksi ryhmän sisäistä, sosiaalista identiteettiä rakennetaan käyttämällä tiettyä sanastoa pluskokoisten naisten vartaloiden kuvaamiseen. Ryhmäspesifejä kielellisiä ja diskursiivisia käytäntöjä hyödynnetään myös yhteisön rajojen määrittelyyn ja ryhmään kuulumattomien rajaamiseen sen ulkopuolelle.

Yhden blogiyhteisön syvällisen tarkastelun lisäksi tähän väitöskirjaan sisällytetyt neljä tutkimusartikkelia muodostavat pohjan uudelle teoreettiselle ja menetelmälliselle mallille, jota voidaan tulevaisuudessa käyttää muiden verkkoviestintään pohjautuvien yhteisöjen tutkimiseen. Erityisesti väitöstutkimukseni tuloksia voidaan hyödyntää sosiaalisesti marginalisoitujen ryhmien yhteisöllisyyden tutkimuksessa. Tutkimustulokseni osoittavat, että kyseisten yhteisöjen kohdalla erilaisten aineistojen ja menetelmien yhdistäminen on erityisen tärkeää kokonaiskuvan muodostamiseksi tutkimuksen kohteena olevasta yhteisöstä. Väitöskirjani toimii myös esimerkkinä siitä, että marginalisoitujen ryhmien tutkimuksen ei tulisi keskittyä ainoastaan marginalisoidun ryhmän ja valtavirran välisiin suhteisiin, vaan kiinnittää erityistä huomiota myös ryhmän sisäisiin eroavuuksiin ja hierarkioihin.

Koska digitaalinen viestintä on nykyään osa jokapäiväistä elämäämme, verkossa muodostuneet yhteisöt eivät välttämättä enää pysy erillään internetin ulkopuolisista suhteista. Tämä väitöstutkimus osoittaa, kuinka blogien kirjoittamisesta alkunsa saanut yhteisö voi kehittyä moniulotteiseksi verkostoksi, joka hyödyntää useita viestinnän kanavia ja jaettuja resursseja. Erityisesti marginalisoiduille yksilöille tämänkaltainen verkostoituminen voi olla voimavara sekä internetissä että sen ulkopuolella. Useille tutkimukseni kohteena olleille pluskokoisille naisille blogin kirjoittaminen toimi eräänlaisena ponnahduslautana psykologiseen, sosiaaliseen ja taloudelliseen voimaantumiseen.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

BBS	Bulletin Board System
BBW	Big, Beautiful Woman
CMC	Computer-Mediated Communication
CMD	Computer-Mediated Discourse
CMDA	Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis
IRC	Internet Relay Chat
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
OOTD	Outfit of the Day
TENK	The Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Integrity (Tutkimuseettinen neuvottelukunta)

In the introduction and summary, *italics* are used when introducing or defining a concept. **Bold text** is used for emphasis.



## ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This dissertation consists of an introduction, a summary of findings and four original publications. In the introduction and summary, these publications will be referred to as Articles 1 to 4.

Article 1: Limatius, H. (2016). “A world of beautiful fat babes:” Community-building practices in plus-size fashion blogs. *Language@Internet*, 13, article 4, <https://www.languageatinternet.org/articles/2016/limatius>

Article 2: Limatius, H. (2017). “There really is nothing like pouring your heart out to a fellow fat chick”: Constructing a body positive blogger identity in plus-size fashion blogs. *Token: A Journal of English Linguistics*, 6, 23-49.

Article 3: Limatius, H. (2019). “I’m a fat bird and I just don’t care”: A corpus-based analysis of body descriptors in plus-size fashion blogs. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 31, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2019.100316>

Article 4: Limatius, H. (2019). “We portray OURSELVES”: The empowerment potential of fashion blogging for plus-size women. *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 119 (2), 443-464.



# 1 INTRODUCTION

In this doctoral dissertation, I investigate the discursive and linguistic practices that plus-size fashion bloggers use to build and maintain a sense of community in their blogs, as well as to construct identities in the context of this community. The term *plus-size* refers to clothing “of a size larger than those found in standard”, as well as to people “requiring such clothing” (OED Online).<sup>1</sup> This definition reveals two aspects of plus-size that are of interest in my study. One, it highlights the term’s associations with the fashion industry. Two, it illustrates that being plus-size means being **larger than standard**. Plus-size people are, by definition, positioned outside of what is considered normal in society, breaking societal boundaries by simply existing.

My research explores the ways in which plus-size women use digital media – specifically, blogs – to navigate their identities in the field of fashion: a field that has a long history of disciplining women on the basis of appearance and body size (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). I am particularly interested in the possibilities for empowerment that blogs as creative and interactive platforms offer to individuals who are pushed to the margins in the mainstream media. As the role of language can be considered crucial when constructing online-based *counterdiscourses* (Connell, 2013) to the dominant discourses surrounding body size in (fashion) media and society (LeBesco, 2001), the main focus of my research is on the language that is used within the plus-size fashion blogging community.

The dissertation consists of four articles that have been published in peer-reviewed journals, as well as an introduction and a summary of the findings. In the four publications, I examine textual data from 20 interconnected, UK-based plus-size fashion blogs, and questionnaire responses collected from the blog authors in 2015 (13 respondents) and in 2017 (nine respondents). Both qualitative and quantitative approaches are used in analyzing the data, as I combine methods of (computer-mediated) discourse analysis, corpus linguistics and thematic analysis. In its entirety, the corpus of blogs texts and comments collected for this research

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<sup>1</sup> Alternative spellings: plus-sized, plus size.

project consists of 7,776 blog posts (3,177,959 words) and 32,737 comments (1,000,049 words).

The findings presented in the four articles illustrate the importance of exploring online-based aggregations of people from a variety of perspectives, using multiple methodological approaches. In addition to an in-depth analysis of the community of plus-size fashion bloggers, I present a model for studying other social groups that have developed from online interaction. I suggest the term *digitally-driven community of practice*, derived from the concept of a *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998), for conceptualizing such groups.

## 1.1 The objective of the study

The premise of my study is that blogging as a platform has created new channels of community building and identity construction for plus-size women who are interested in fashion. As such, blogging has the potential to create a sense of *psychological empowerment* (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012) among both bloggers and blog readers. Moreover, blogging may also lead to other types of empowerment, such as *financial* and *societal* empowerment (see section 3.2).

In contemporary Western societies, fat people are surrounded by what Afful and Ricciardelli (2015, p. 2) refer to as “negative cultural assumptions” – that is, fat people are stigmatized and discriminated against in many ways and in a variety of social contexts (Dickins’ et al., 2011; Harjunen, 2009).<sup>2</sup> As the fashion industry in particular is notorious for its intolerance of plus-size women (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), online-based networks formed around fashion blogging can provide important resources to these women. Such resources include, but are not limited to, features observed in other types of online communities, such as peer support (Baym, 2010; Herring, 2004) and enhanced agency (Jäntti et al., 2018; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012). Notably, fashion blogging can also provide plus-size women with opportunities for creating opposing discourses to the hegemonic fashion discourse dominated by imagery of thin, white, young and able-bodied people (Connell, 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> When referring to “Western societies/cultures” or “the West”, I use Cooper’s (2016, p. 2) definition: “liberal democratic capitalist regions, cultures and values influenced by ancient Greece and Rome, as well as Christianity, and which are allied with or settler products of Western Europe and North America”.

The significance that online interaction has for socially marginalized groups has been studied extensively during the past decade (Jaborooty & Baker, 2017; Lukač, 2011; Lingel & Golub, 2015; Marciano, 2014; Muhtaseb & Frey, 2008; Palmgren, 2015; Yeshua-Katz, 2015). However, the majority of these studies approach their topics from only one methodological point of view; that is, researchers tend to either carry out ethnographic studies of selected online sites, or use interviews or surveys, rarely combining the two.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, typically a choice will be made between a qualitative or a quantitative research approach.<sup>4</sup> In addition to a detailed analysis of the plus-size fashion blogging phenomenon, my research adds to the existing literature by addressing the broader theoretical and methodological issues involved in the study of online communities of marginalized people. In the future, the combination of different methodological and theoretical approaches used in this dissertation can be applied to studies of other groups.

This research project was motivated partly by my personal experiences as a plus-size woman and as a fashion blogger, and partly by the lack of language-focused research on the topics of plus-size women, fashion and marginalization. After completing my MA thesis, which focused on the community-building practices of straight-size fashion bloggers, I wanted to explore the specific experiences of plus-size women who blog about fashion.<sup>5</sup> Which aspects of fashion blogging do plus-size women find liberating? Which aspects do they find restrictive? How beneficial is fashion blogging for plus-size women with different backgrounds, approaches and motivations? As a linguist, I was particularly interested in how the answers to these questions can be found in the **language** the bloggers use.

While there are several previous studies that explore the socio-political aspects of life as a fat woman, these studies are located, for the most part, in the fields of feminist and gender studies (Cooper, 1997; Cooper, 2016; Harjunen, 2009; LeBesco & Braziel, 2001; LeBesco, 2004). Plus-size women's blogs have also been studied in the fields of gender studies (Connell, 2013), fashion theory (Downing Peters, 2014) and market research (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). However, in-depth investigations of the language of plus-size fashion bloggers have not been carried out before, even

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<sup>3</sup> However, see Androutsopoulos, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> There are exceptions as well: for example, critical discourse analyses of online communication have been supplemented with quantitative analyses (see Lukač, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> I use the term **straight-size** when referring to sizes that are considered **standard** in mainstream fashion, i.e. smaller than those that are considered plus-size.

though the language that plus-size people use to describe themselves has been considered an important factor in terms of identity construction (LeBesco, 2001). Providing a linguistic perspective to the plus-size fashion blogging phenomenon is therefore one of the central goals of my research project. For this reason, the present study focuses on analyzing textual material. Although visual elements have a significant role in the field of fashion blogging in particular, analyzing the visual aspects of the blogs is not my research objective. There are excellent previous studies on the topic which feature analyses of visual data (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Harju & Huovinen, 2015), and my goal is to contribute particularly to the (so far) lacking research on **language use** within this genre of blogs.

Earlier academic literature on blogging on a general level has highlighted the role of blogs as platforms for self-identification and self-disclosure (Baraket-Bojmel, 2013; Myers, 2010; Siles, 2012), although the community-building potential of blogging has also been studied to an extent (Blanchard, 2004; Wei, 2009). By contrast, my research focuses particularly on the interactive aspects of blogging **within** a specific community. To summarize, I study the discursive and linguistic construction of the community-specific practices of plus-size fashion bloggers, and the potential benefits that such practices have for the members of this blogging community.

## 1.2 Research questions

The main research questions I address in this dissertation are the following:

- (1) How do plus-size fashion bloggers construct a sense of community through discursive and linguistic practices?
- (2) What types of identities do plus-size fashion bloggers express in their online interactions, and in what ways are these identities constructed through language?
- (3) What are the bloggers' experiences of empowerment in the context of blogging?

I address research question (1) in Article 1, in which I investigated blog texts that describe the blog authors' interactions with other plus-size fashion bloggers using Herring's (2004) *computer-mediated discourse analysis* (CMDA) framework. Articles 2 and 3 are geared towards answering research question (2), using qualitative (discourse-analytic) and quantitative (corpus-linguistic) methods, respectively. The final article in the dissertation focuses on research question (3) through a *thematic analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of questionnaire responses



collected from the bloggers. In addition to addressing these broader, over-arching research questions, the individual articles included in the dissertation also answer more specific questions, such as the following:<sup>6</sup>

- (1) In what ways does the group of bloggers function as a community of practice? (Article 1)
- (2) In what ways is a body positive blogger identity discursively and linguistically constructed in plus-size women's fashion blogs? (Article 2)
- (3) How does this (discursive/linguistic) identity construction reflect in-group practices and norms? (Article 2)
- (4) In what ways does the use of body descriptors reflect identity construction? (Article 3)
- (5) In what ways can interacting with other bloggers empower plus-size fashion bloggers? (Article 4)
- (6) What issues within the plus-size fashion blogging community prevent or deter the process of becoming empowered? (Article 4)

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<sup>6</sup> I have listed what I consider to be the most central research questions of the articles here. See the individual Articles 1-4 for lists of more detailed research questions.

## 2 THE PHENOMENON: PLUS-SIZE FASHION BLOGS

In this section, I describe the phenomenon under investigation in the present study: plus-size fashion blogging. The first part of the section focuses on blogging on a more general level. Specifically, I discuss the ways in which blogs have been defined and classified in previous academic research. In the second part of the section, I introduce some of the typical elements that characterize both the broader genre of fashion blogs, and the sub-genre of plus-size fashion blogs.

### 2.1 Classifying blogs

Blogs – originally referred to as *weblogs* – began to appear on the internet in the mid-1990s (McNeill, 2005). In early studies on blogging, blogs were often categorized into two genres: *filter blogs* and *personal journals* (e.g. Blood, 2002; Herring et al., 2004; Herring & Paolillo; 2006). Filter blogs have been characterized as blogs discussing “social, political, or economic issues”, while personal journals contain descriptions of and anecdotes from the blogger’s personal, daily life (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012, p. 371). However, this categorization can be considered outdated, as a large part of the modern blogosphere does not fit the description of either category (Wei, 2009, p. 538), and the blog as a platform for online communication is also constantly changing and evolving (Myers, 2010). *Fashion blogs* (blogs that focus specifically on fashion-related content, see section 2.2) are one example of the type of blog that cannot be placed in either of the two groups. As I will illustrate later, while fashion blogs – perhaps plus-size fashion blogs in particular – may address socio-political issues, they often also feature discussions that reflect the “personal thoughts and internal workings” of the bloggers (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012, p. 371).

Puschmann (2013, p. 98) offers a different approach to categorizing blogs by dividing them according to the authors’ blogging **style**, which he defines as being either *topic-centric* or *author-centric*. While Puschmann’s categorization follows roughly

along the same lines as the filter blogs vs. personal journals model, his focus is on the relationships between the participants (authors and blog readers), as opposed to the subject matter of the blog. In the topic-centric style, the blogger's language tends to be more formal, the goal of the blog text is usually sharing information or opinions about a certain topic, and the *conceptualized audience* is a generic, possibly unfamiliar group of people, as topic-centric blogs rely on the topic to attract readers. Author-centric blogs, by contrast, may use less formal language and tend to be reflective rather than informative. They focus heavily on the blogger's daily life, personal thoughts and emotions, and their conceptualized audience is familiar (i.e., people who know the blogger personally, such as friends and family members). (Puschmann, 2013, p. 101).

Fashion blogs can be generally characterized as topic-centric, as their intended audience is usually wider than merely the blogger's friends and family, and they rely on the subject matter – fashion – to attract readers. However, as Puschmann (2013, p. 100) notes, the division into topic-centric and author-centric blogs is fluid, and there can be variation within the blogging approaches of individual bloggers. As illustrated in the four articles included in this dissertation, plus-size fashion bloggers interact with their readers regularly, which results in the emergence of more author-centric features; for example, it may be assumed that regular followers of a particular blog will come to have a certain amount of knowledge concerning the author's personal life.<sup>7</sup> Informal language and anecdotes from the bloggers' daily lives are also often present.

## 2.2 Characteristics of plus-size fashion blogs

In this dissertation, I use the term *plus-size fashion* blog as a general descriptor for the blogs I study. Broadly speaking, I consider any blog that is authored by a person who identifies as plus-size and produces content related to the field of fashion, including but not limited to topics such as personal style, reviews of fashion products, and commentary on current fashion trends, a plus-size fashion blog. However, as discussed in section 5.1.2, as well as in the four original articles,

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<sup>7</sup>As meeting other bloggers face to face was described as important by the majority of the bloggers in my study, online relationships may also become more “personal” over time (see Articles 1 and 4). Moreover, we can problematize the presumed connection between familiarity and offline relationships, as it is possible for people to have deep and meaningful friendships without ever having met outside of the internet (Bergs, 2006).

this category of blogs includes a variety of sub-categories, and different bloggers have different approaches to writing about plus-size fashion.

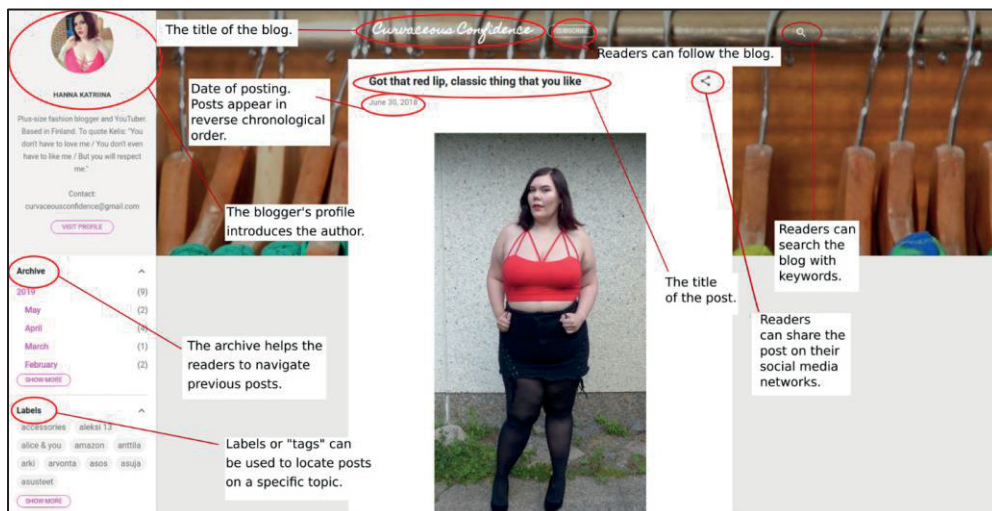
Previous literature on plus-size fashion blogging (Connell, 2013; Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) has, for the most part, utilized the terms *fatshion blog* (for the blogs) and *fatshionista* (for the bloggers).<sup>8</sup> There are two main reasons why I chose not to use this terminology in the present study. First, the bloggers I studied do not use these terms on a regular basis,<sup>9</sup> and some of the bloggers mentioned in their questionnaire responses (see Article 4) that they consider *fatshion* an outdated term that has little use outside of social media hashtags. Second, even though both previous literature and my own findings suggest that the majority of plus-size fashion bloggers use the word **fat** as a neutral, non-derogatory – as Harju and Huovinen (2015) describe it, *reappropriated* – term instead of as an insult, I did not want to assume that all participants identified as fat, especially since there were some bloggers in the data who used the word as a self-descriptor very infrequently, or not at all (see Article 3). **Plus-size**, on the other hand, was used as a self-descriptor by all of the bloggers at some point, although some used it considerably more frequently than others. Plus-size as a term is also more common in the context of the fashion industry, and has connotations to clothing size in particular, as illustrated by its OED Online definition. However, it should be noted that I also use the word **fat** to describe plus-size fashion bloggers in this dissertation. Following the example of (the majority of) the bloggers I studied, I use it as a neutral body descriptor with no negative or derogatory intent.

While the content of a plus-size fashion blog varies from blog to blog, there are certain elements that can be considered characteristic of this category of blogs, or the broader genre of fashion blogs. Figure 1 (taken from my personal blog) below illustrates some of the typical elements of a plus-size fashion blog.

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<sup>8</sup> *Fatshionista* is a play on the words fat and *fashionista*, i.e. a stylish person who enjoys fashion and/or is associated with the fashion industry (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1239).

<sup>9</sup> In the blog corpus compiled for this study (see section 5.1.3), both words are relatively rare. The word **fatshion** occurs 93 times in the corpus of roughly 4.2 million words, while **fatshionista** occurs 35 times.



**Figure 1.** Typical elements of a plus-size fashion blog (source: <https://www.curvaceousconfidence.com/>)

Like all blogs, plus-size fashion blogs consist of dated entries that are presented in reverse chronological order, the latest entry being at the top of the webpage (Blood, 2002; Herring et al., 2005b; Miller & Shepherd, 2004). Bloggers can incorporate several different *widgets* into the blog layout, some of the most common being a search function, an archive of previous posts, a list of labels or **tags**, and links to the blogger's social media channels (e.g. Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Pinterest and Twitter). These widgets are typically placed, depending on the blog layout style, either on the side column of the blog, or at the bottom of the page, below the actual blog entries. Many blogs feature a blogroll; that is, a list of links to other blogs that the blogger enjoys and recommends to her readers (Myers, 2010, p. 24). Some – but not all – bloggers also include advertising space in their blog layout. These advertisements can be provided by Google via Google AdSense, in which case they are tailored for the person reading the blog based on their browsing preferences, or they can be purposefully chosen advertisements of companies that the blogger collaborates with. The blogger may receive a commission based on the number of clicks on the advertisements and/or purchases made via their blogs.

As one would expect, fashion blogs typically contain a lot of photographs, many of them documenting the blogger's daily fashion choices (Chittenden, 2010, p. 506). The blog posts that feature such photos are commonly referred to as *oufit of the day* (henceforth OOTD) posts. In addition to photographs of the blogger

wearing a particular outfit, these posts usually include a list of all clothing items and accessories in the photos, along with information on where the items were purchased and, if available, links to them on the websites of online retailers, enabling the reader to easily locate and buy the products. OOTD posts can also contain reviews of the clothing items, especially if these items have been gifted to the blogger by a fashion brand for the specific purpose of presenting them on the blog.<sup>10</sup>

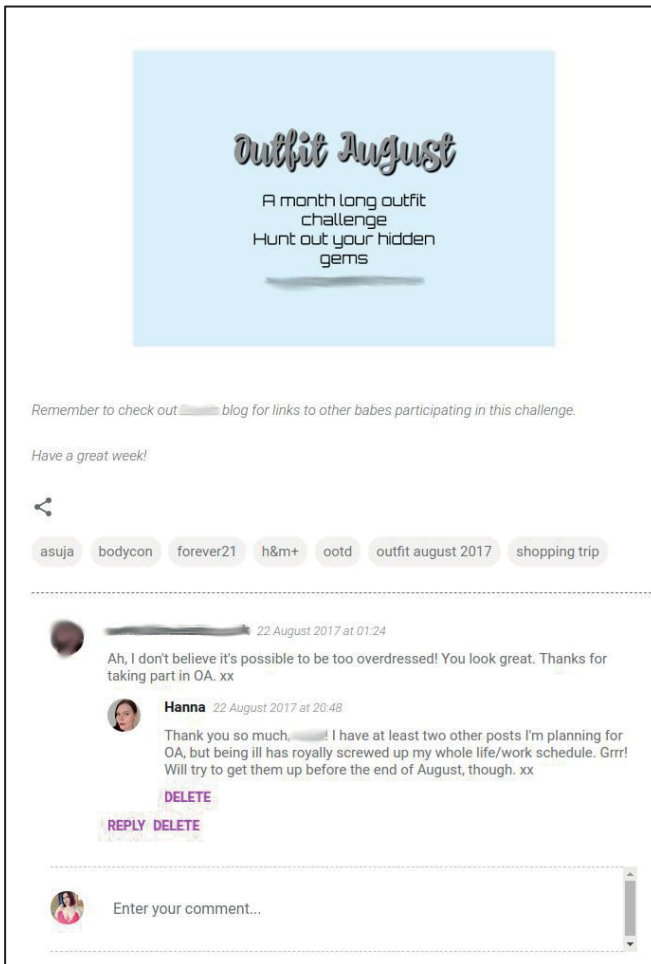
In fact, most fashion blogs contain product reviews, but the products are not always directly related to the field of fashion. Many fashion blogs are *commercialized blogs*, meaning that they provide a source of income to their authors (van Nuenen & Varis, 2017, p. 129). Bloggers review a variety of products and services, ranging from beauty products to home appliances, hotels and restaurants. Due to the popularity of such reviews, it is common for the blogger to state whether they have received free items and/or monetary compensation in the beginning of their blog posts; this ensures that the blogger maintains a reputation as an honest reviewer amongst her followers. As Hänninen (2015, pp. 54-57) points out, many blog readers criticize surreptitious advertising in the blogosphere, placing demands of authenticity on the bloggers.

The bloggers may also discuss current fashion trends and new product launches on a more general level, without having purchased or received the fashion items themselves. For example, several bloggers in my corpus wrote *Wishlist* posts where they listed items that were currently trending from several websites, using pictures taken from these sites instead of original photography (see also Chittenden, 2010, p. 506). Although all the blogs in my data focus mainly on the topic of fashion, they also contain entries with more personal topics. The bloggers discuss their life experiences as plus-size women, including narratives on being discriminated against or bullied, having low self-esteem, and their efforts to accept themselves and to become more confident. They also share stories of their daily lives and participate in socio-political commentary, especially regarding the marginalization of fat people (see Article 2).

A commenting section is another feature typically incorporated into fashion blogs. This means that below each blog entry, there is a space where readers can write and post their own commentary on the topic (Connell, 2013, p. 216). Figure 2 below (taken from my personal blog) illustrates the typical appearance of the commenting section window.

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<sup>10</sup> As discussed in section 1.1., due to the linguistic emphasis of the present study, I did not include any photographs from the blogs I studied in my data.



**Figure 2.** Typical view of a commenting section window on a blog (source: <https://www.curvaceousconfidence.com/>)

The information displayed in connection to comments includes a timestamp – when the comment was posted – the commenter’s name (except in the case of anonymous comments), and possibly an avatar (i.e. a small profile photo of the commenter). As shown in Figure 2, the blogger has the option to respond to the comment or to delete it. Some bloggers moderate comments before publishing them. In such cases, the commenter receives an email confirmation that their comment is awaiting moderation after posting it, and the comment only appears on the blog once the blog author has reviewed and approved it. Depending on the blog, anonymous comments may be allowed.

Connell (2013, p. 216) regards blog commenters as “similar to an audience on a lecture”. While blogging can certainly be regarded as interactive (Soon & Kluver, 2014, p. 501) and conversational (Wei, 2009, p. 537), with most bloggers considering regular interaction with their readership important (Chittenden, 2010, p. 515; see also Article 4), there is a hierarchy within the commenting sections of individual blogs. Since the blogger moderates comments and might choose to, for example, delete or ignore all negative feedback (Hänninen, 2015; p. 62; Rocamora, 2011, p. 416), she holds more power in the discussion. It is, however, still a discussion; without any input from followers, a blogger may become unmotivated and, in some cases, cease blogging altogether. The relationship between bloggers and commenters is thus, to an extent, symbiotic. As Chittenden (2010, p. 514) points out, it should also be noted that many of the commenters are bloggers themselves, which erases the hierarchy to an extent – not completely, however, as there are bloggers who are considered more popular or successful than others are, and they may have a higher social status within the blogging community (see Article 1).



### 3 SOCIETAL BACKGROUND: THE MARGINALIZATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF FAT PEOPLE

In this section, I discuss the societal background of the plus-size fashion blogging phenomenon. The first part of the section focuses on the marginalization of plus-size women, including the previous research that has been carried out on the topic within the interdisciplinary field of *fat studies*, as well as two social movements that have arisen as a response to this marginalization: the *fat acceptance movement* and the *body positivity movement*. In the second part of this section, I will move on to the broader conceptualization of empowerment in the context of my study by discussing the psychological, societal and financial empowerment potential that blogs and other digital media have for marginalized groups.

#### 3.1 Fat studies, the fat acceptance movement, and body positivity

In order to be able to critically examine and analyze the linguistic and discursive practices of plus-size fashion bloggers, one needs to be aware of the wider social context of life as a plus-size person in contemporary Western society. As Klein (2001, p. 20) points out, the current idolization of thinness in fashion and (the mainstream) media can be interpreted to represent one side of “the great pendulum [that] swings between loving thin and loving fat”. Historically speaking, fatness has often been associated with abundance and wealth (Klein, 2001, p. 24; 35). However, since the latter half of the twentieth century, fat has been largely vilified – a change that can be linked to the rise of the diet and fitness industries (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001, p. 2).

It could be argued that due to the broader perspectives to fashion and beauty made possible by globalization and the internet, the Western ideals of beauty are at a turning point. Scaraboto and Fischer (2013, p. 1239) mention that women with

curvy figures, such as Christina Hendricks of *Mad Men*, have recently become more visible in fashion. Harju and Huovinen (2015, p. 1616) also refer to the popularity of the 1950s style silhouettes that emphasize curves in a traditionally “ultra feminine” manner. In the 2010s, celebrities such as media personality Kim Kardashian West and rapper Nicki Minaj became idolized on social media for their curvaceous bodies.<sup>11</sup> However, despite being **curvier** than the supermodels of the 1990s discussed by Klein (2001), these celebrities are still not considered **fat** by any standards, and the current bodily ideal for women in the West remains thin and toned.

Plus-size fashion bloggers are often considered as central figures advocating for changes in the mainstream beauty standards. In their interactions, the bloggers (re)construct and (re)negotiate multiple discourses surrounding fatness, identity, and the body. Such discourses can be linked to the work of several scholars in the fields of sociology and gender studies who have addressed the societal issues related to the marginalization of the female body, thus contributing to the interdisciplinary research area of *fat studies* (Bordo, 1993; Cooper, 1997; Cooper, 2016; LeBesco & Braziel, 2001; LeBesco, 2004; Harjunen, 2009). Since LeBesco (2001, pp. 76-77), whose work in fat studies is seminal, emphasizes the importance of the role of language in fat people’s identity work, the present study can also be considered a pertinent contribution to this field.

Fat people are marginalized in modern, Western society in various ways. As LeBesco (2004, p. 25) states, fat people are “kept from full participation in societal games of health and beauty, in that they are never allowed to win” – fatness is seen as a threat to society both on a level of national health, and on an aesthetic level (i.e. how people **should** look like in order for them to be deemed as socially acceptable). Thus, being fat has its effect on several areas of a person’s life: body mass is connected to social status, and fat people are treated differently because of their weight in a variety of situations ranging from job interviews to interactions with health care professionals (Dickins et al., 2011, p. 1680; Harjunen, 2009, p. 49).

A significant amount of the public discussion on fatness revolves around issues connected to **health**. The medicalized discourse on fatness was popularized in the late 1980s and the 1990s (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001, p. 4). Cooper (2016, p. 3) views the concept of *obesity* as “the idea that fatness is a problem in need of a solution”, the main issue being whether or not fat people can be healthy. Dickins et al. (2011, p. 1681) describe the “dominant paradigm of obesity” as “both socially and

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<sup>11</sup> On Instagram, Kardashian West has a following of 151 million, while Minaj has 107 million followers (data from <https://www.instagram.com/> retrieved November 9, 2019).

medically undesirable” – according to this paradigm, a fat individual bears the responsibility of their excess weight and is expected to strive to lose it in any way possible. The *obesity epidemic* discourse, which Cooper (2016, p. 3), describes as a “rhetorical device to leverage fat panic”, constructs fatness as a plague on society, and the fat individual who does not attempt to lose weight is seen as irresponsible, even deviant. Thus, fatness is connected to excess and indulgence; it breaks boundaries and violates societal norms (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001, p. 3).

The negative connotations of fat and the vilification of fat people are so deeply rooted in our consciousness that even those who are fat themselves often discriminate against fat people (Cooper, 1997, p. 35). Indeed, several of the plus-size fashion bloggers investigated in the present study mentioned negative comments along the lines of “I am plus-size/fat and I would never wear something like that”, which they had received or witnessed from other plus-size women on social media. *Fat-phobia*, according to Hartley (2001, p. 65) is an “acceptable form of prejudice”. Unlike many other features of a person’s appearance, fatness can be seen as a direct result of the individual’s own actions – indulging in food too often, not making the effort to exercise – which makes it easier to criticize without appearing politically incorrect (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001, p. 2). Because of this assumed connection between fatness and so-called unhealthy behavior, plus-size fashion bloggers and fat acceptance activists are often accused of **glorifying** or **glamorizing** obesity if they appear content in their fat bodies and do not express a desire to change. In the mainstream media, such an attitude is usually presented as dangerous to both fat people themselves and to others around them (Connell, 2013, p. 219).

It is important to note that there is also an undeniable connection between weight-based marginalization and gender. Since women’s bodies are objectified and sexualized in the media and society more than men’s bodies, body size is more strongly connected to women’s social acceptability (Harjunen, 2009, p. 29). A fat female body is typically characterized as “unfeminine”, whereas men are allowed to “take up space” with their bodies (Hartley, 2001, p. 62).<sup>12</sup> Because of this type of social construction of acceptable femininity, fat women are particularly marginalized in fields affected by societal beauty standards, such as fashion. Fashion imagery, generally, privileges bodies that are thin, white, able and heteronormative (Connell, 2013, p. 211). Against this background plus-size fashion

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that men do not face discrimination based on weight or body size. Gay men in particular are also subjected to unrealistic beauty standards (Harjunen, 2009, p. 27).

blogging can be considered a countermovement to so-called traditional fashion media, such as fashion magazines.

Previous research has demonstrated that by writing fashion blogs, plus-size women can resist the traditionally negative, medicalized portrayals of fatness while constructing new, positive discourses, as well as sharing their experiences as plus-size consumers of fashion with others on a safe platform (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013, p. 279). In addition, fashion blogging can enable plus-size women to manipulate and (re)negotiate “normative understandings of femininity” (Harju & Huovinen, 2015, p. 1618), creating identities that are not presented as possible in mainstream fashion media. For example, in some cases, fashion blogging can act as a stepping-stone for women who wish to pursue careers in the (plus-size) fashion industry, as an increasing number of clothing brands collaborate actively with fashion bloggers. Thus, in addition to enhancing psychological well-being, blogging may result in plus-size women truly gaining more power and influence in the fashion industry (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1244; see also section 3.2 in this dissertation).

As evidenced by the previous studies on the topic, there is an element of activism in plus-size fashion blogging, even though not all bloggers who identify with the genre write extensively about the socio-political issues related to fatness (see especially Articles 3 and 4 in this dissertation). Activist bloggers are typically associated with the broader *fat acceptance movement*, which opposes discrimination based on body size (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1239), criticizes the diet industry (Dickins et al., 2011, p. 1681) and “strives for civil rights for fat people” (Harjunen, 2004, p. 316). The roots of the fat acceptance movement go back to the 1960s, but fat acceptance activism has recently become more widespread due to online communication, including blogging (Dickins et al., 2011, p. 1681; Harjunen, 2004, p. 317).

In recent years, a new social movement called the *body positivity movement* has also started to gain popularity both among fashion bloggers and on social media in general. In fact, the term body positivity has become what Lome (2016) refers to as a “catchphrase in online communities”. As a concept, body positivity can be considered more inclusive than fat acceptance. While it is still strongly connected to size, the body positivity movement strives for the universal acceptance and celebration of all bodies. Similar to the fat acceptance movement, the body positivity movement criticizes the unattainable body goals put forth by the mainstream media and calls for more diverse imagery that displays “all shapes and sizes” (Sastre, 2014, pp. 929-930).

Although the premise of the body positivity movement certainly appears well-meaning, the body positive ideology can also be problematized. As Sastre (2014), who studied body positive websites, discovered, body positive projects are rarely truly ground-breaking. Indeed, the websites investigated by Sastre (2014, p. 935) all supported a specific, prescribed performance of body acceptance, thus doing exactly what the movement claims *not* to do: telling people what they should do with their bodies, or how they should perceive their bodies.

Sastre (2014, p. 935) states that while body positive websites do not directly advocate for the “consumption-oriented bodily practices promoted on [...] makeover shows and magazine covers”, neoliberal ideas about body regulation and consumerism are still reflected in them. A quick glance at social media proves that body positivity is indeed becoming a “catchphrase”, as Lome (2016) stated: when I searched for posts containing the hashtag #bodypositive on Instagram, 10,375,835 results were found (on 26 July, 2019). Some of the most recent posts on that particular day featured photographs of weight-loss products, makeup and beauty products, and exercise equipment. The commercialization of the body positivity movement and the contradictions involved in it were also addressed by some of the bloggers who participated in the present study (see Article 4).

As Sastre (2014, p. 935) points out, the inclusive nature of the body positivity movement may also be called into question, since the majority of the participants on body positive websites appear to be female, white, cis-gendered, and middle-class. Thus, although the body positivity movement can be considered to have more flexible boundaries than the fat acceptance movement, it should be viewed through a critical lens, especially when it comes to intersectionality. Cooper (2016, pp. 11-13) also states that the assumption that fat activism is concerned with body positivity is a *proxy* – a “partial view” – because although the body positivity movement has ties to fat acceptance, it should not be considered fully representative of the broader fat activism movement that extends far beyond social media.

### 3.2 The empowerment potential of online interaction

The search for empowerment is often linked to the online interaction of marginalized people. On the one hand, people and groups who do not have a voice in society or mainstream media can find platforms for sharing their experiences and making themselves visible on the internet (Muhtaseb & Frey, 2008, p. 622;

Wei, 2009, p. 522). On the other hand, because of their relative anonymity, digital media such as blogs can also provide safe places for developing strategies of empowerment to those who are not able to do so publicly (Ahmad, Bromley & Cokley, 2013; Jaborooty & Baker, 2017; Marciano, 2014).

Empowerment has been conceptualized in several ways in previous research. Jaborooty and Baker (2017, p. 79) describe empowerment as “multi-faceted but also dependent on societal context”. Stavrositu and Sundar (2012), who studied the *psychological empowerment potential* of blogging for women, see empowerment as reflecting three themes: “connectedness, mastery and control over aspects of one’s life, and the ability to effect change”; the last one referring to the “perception of one’s own ability to produce an effect” (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012, p. 370). Semino et al. (2017, 62) also associate the concept of empowerment with an individual’s “(perceived) ability to control or react to events for one’s own benefit” – thus, feelings of empowerment can increase (or decrease) according to the amount of (perceived) agency the individual has.

In the context of the present study, various forms of empowerment can be considered relevant; in addition to its *psychological empowerment potential*, blogging can contribute to *financial* and *societal* empowerment. In the four articles included in this dissertation, I view empowerment as closely connected to two other concepts: community and identity. My understanding of empowerment is thus similar to that of Stavrositu and Sundar (2012, p. 382), who name *sense of agency* and *sense of community* as the two main routes towards achieving empowerment. Fashion blogging enables presentations of identity that are not available for plus-size women in traditional fashion media that idolizes thinness, thus increasing the bloggers’ sense of agency. A blog can become a “pulpit” (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012) from where the blogger is able to voice her opinions on the plus-size fashion industry, the treatment of fat people in society, and a variety of other issues. In addition to the agency-enhancing features of blogs, the peer support and feelings of shared experiences within the blogging community can also empower bloggers. As Wen et al. (2011) discovered in their research on breast cancer patients’ use of discussion fora, sharing one’s story can be empowering to an individual experiencing difficult and stressful life circumstances, such as illness (see also Semino et al., 2017). Moreover, helping others who are in a similar situation can also create feelings of empowerment (Wen et al., 2011, p. 352). Thus, blogging has the potential to be empowering to both those who write blogs and to those who read and/or interact with them (Soon & Kluver, 2014, pp. 506-507). Reading blogs authored by people one can relate to may result in feelings of belonging to a group

and finding one's place in the world, which in turn lead to an increased sense of empowerment (Ahmad, Bromley & Cokley, 2013; see also Article 1).

Stavrositu and Sundar (2012, p. 370) focus on the concept of *psychological empowerment* in their work; by psychological empowerment, they refer to the individual's **perception** of connectedness, control and self-efficacy. However, blogging also has the potential to lead to more concrete forms of empowerment, such as *financial empowerment* – commercialized blogging can help an individual turn their craft or hobby into a career (Manosevitch & Tzuk, 2017). As discussed earlier in section 2.2., plus-size fashion bloggers are sometimes able to build part- or full-time careers in the fashion industry through commercial collaboration with fashion brands. A well-known example within the plus-size blogosphere is US-based “body positive activist, designer, and style influencer” Gabi Gregg, who started out as a plus-size fashion blogger in 2008, and has later designed several clothing collections for popular fashion brands, such as lingerie brand Playful Promises and Swimsuits4All, as well as promoting her own clothing line (Huber, 2019).<sup>13</sup>

Finally, empowerment can happen on a societal level. Bloggers who write about socio-political issues may have an impact on decision making, if their message reaches the right authorities (Ahmad, Bromley & Cokley, 2013). As I have discussed in the present study, fat acceptance activists can use online resources, including blogging, to help re-construct societal norms concerning body size and appearance, and to shift the discussion on fatness away from the medicalized obesity epidemic discourse (Harjunen, 2009, p. 39). Such re-constructive processes include attempts to change the ways in which fatness is talked about; for example, normalizing the use of the reappropriated, neutral “fat” in online discussions has the potential to empower plus-size women (Harju & Huovinen, 2015, p. 1612; Harjunen, 2009, p. 22).

However, as will be demonstrated in my discussion of the findings of the present study, not all bloggers experience blogging as empowering, and different bloggers consider different aspects of the blogging process empowering (see also Ahmad, Bromley & Cokley, 2013). Similarly, some community members may consider the use of specific discursive and linguistic practices empowering, while others may perceive the same practices as disempowering. For example, Gustafsson and Hommerberg (2018, pp. 2-3), who studied blogs written by Swedish cancer patients, state that particular metaphors used in cancer talk can be

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<sup>13</sup> Gregg's original blog is no longer active, but her most popular platform is her Instagram page, @gabifresh: <https://www.instagram.com/gabifresh/>

empowering to some patients and disempowering to others living with the same illness.

As illustrated by the findings of Article 4 in this dissertation, those plus-size fashion bloggers who do not gain commercial benefits from writing a blog may experience the commodification of blogging as a disempowering departure from the activism-based roots of the plus-size fashion blogging genre, while those who run successful commercialized blogs may have gained both psychological and financial empowerment through brand collaborations. Thus, on a community level, an increase in one type of empowerment for some may actually coincide with decreased feelings of other types of empowerment for others.



## 4 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this section, I outline the key concepts that structure the theoretical framework of the dissertation. This work is a study of *computer-mediated discourse* (CMD). In the first part of this section, I will discuss the history and present state of CMD research. In the second part, I will focus on conceptualizing two key terms that are present throughout the four articles included in the dissertation: **community** and **identity**.

### 4.1 Computer-mediated discourse

The study of *computer-mediated discourse* (henceforth CMD) is a language-focused branch of the interdisciplinary study of *computer-mediated communication* (henceforth CMC) (Herring, 2001; Zhu, Herring & Bonk, 2019, p. 207). Even though CMC as a communicative medium has technically existed since the invention of computers, academic interest in different types of CMC began to grow in the mid-1990s, as a result of the popularity of personal computers (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004, p. 26). CMD researchers aim to study phenomena related to **language use** within the broader field of CMC (Herring, 2001, p. 612). As defined by Androutsopoulos and Beißwenger (2008), CMD includes all types of interpersonal communication facilitated by the internet. Due to this variety in research topics, a multitude of methods is also required – CMD researchers utilize a wide range of methodological approaches, such as genre analysis, conversation analysis and ethnography (Androutsopoulos & Beißwenger, 2008). According to Androutsopoulos and Beißwenger (2008), “reconceptualizing existing concepts and methods” is also an important goal for CMD research.

CMD started out as the study of text-based communication within online platforms designed for particular types of interaction. For this reason, the analytical methods that were developed in the early stages of CMD research, including Herring’s (2004) *computer-mediated discourse analysis* model (CMDA, see sections 5.2.1 and 6.1), were also designed for studying the language use within specific text-

based online environments, such as discussion forums (Stommel, 2008), email (Georgakopoulou, 2004), Internet Relay Chat (IRC) (Paolillo, 1999; Siebenhaar, 2008), and Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) (Nishimura, 2008). Modern CMD, however, is no longer exclusively text-based, and typically takes place on multiple platforms using a multitude of semiotic modes (Herring, 2018). More recent research interests for CMD scholars include interactive social media platforms such as Facebook (Lingel & Golub, 2015; Sophocleous & Themistocleous, 2014), microblogging platforms like Twitter (Angouri, Boukala & Dimitrakopoulou, 2018; Zappavigna, 2014) and Tumblr (Bourlai, 2018), as well as online gaming (Keating & Sunakawa, 2010; Naidoo, Coleman & Guyo, 2019).

Blogs have been growing in popularity as a topic for CMD research since the early 2000s. As discussed previously in section 2.1, a large part of the early research on blogs focused on defining and categorizing blogs (Blood, 2002; Herring et al., 2005b, McNeill, 2005). As a continuation to these discussions on the specific features that define or characterize a blog, researchers started to look at the social networking aspects of blogging. There have been, for example, attempts to determine whether blogs can be considered **conversational**, as opposed to being merely platforms for self-expression (Herring et al., 2005a; Petersen, 2011).<sup>14</sup> In addition to studies concerning the specific communicative characteristics of blogs as a **medium** of CMC, more recent research in particular has focused on investigating how broader social phenomena, such as issues related to gender and equality, are discussed in the blogosphere (Herring & Paolillo, 2006; Jaborooty & Baker, 2017; Jäntti et al., 2018; Palmgren, 2015).

Since digital media has become a part of everyday life in contemporary Western societies, the need for new approaches to the study of CMD is greater than ever. However, the focus of modern CMD research is not – and should not be – the fact that the communication we investigate is computer-mediated. As noted by Thurlow and Mroczek (2011, xxiii-xxiv), communication in itself is inherently mediated and contextualized, and the medium of communication is not the only, nor necessarily the most important, mediator. Modern CMC – and, by extension, CMD – evolves so rapidly that it is virtually impossible for academic research to keep up to date with its technological innovations. For a discourse analyst, the research interests in the field of CMC are less about the new technologies that enable specific ways of communicating, and more about the ways in which people **use** these technologies for their own purposes. As Grieser (2018) points out,

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<sup>14</sup> Such studies can be linked to a broader issue within early CMD scholarship – namely, the efforts to situate CMD as a new medium between spoken and written interaction. (Herring, 2001, p. 614).

discourse-analytic approaches to online communication can help us understand “interactional processes that can be opaque even to those who are engaged in them”. While online interaction can, as illustrated by the articles included in this dissertation, be an empowering resource to people who do not always have a voice in society, many of the power structures ingrained into our linguistic and discursive behaviors remain even when we move the discussion from offline spaces to online spaces, or from one digital medium to another (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011, p. xxviii). Indeed, as I observe in Article 2 in particular, new norms, rules and hierarchies are bound to arise even within online communities that are specifically built on the premise of challenging societal norms.

## 4.2 Conceptualizing the key terms

### 4.2.1 The community of practice and the virtual community

I view the group of bloggers under investigation in this dissertation as a *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The concept of a community of practice originates from the study of workplace communities (Jucker & Kopaczyk, 2013, p. 7; Lave & Wenger, 1991), but as pointed out by Joseph (2009, p. 14), almost any aggregate of people can be considered a community of practice, as long as behaviors based on shared norms and/or ideologies can be detected within the group. A community of practice is defined both by the members who belong to that specific community, and by the practices in which these members engage in (Eckert & McConell-Ginet, 1992, p. 464).

Wenger (1998, pp. 72-73) characterizes a community of practice as having three central features: *mutual engagement*, a *joint enterprise* and a *shared repertoire* (see Figure 3 below). Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999, p. 175) describe mutual engagement as “the basis for the relationships that make a [community of practice] possible”. In order for a community of practice to develop, there needs to be regular interaction between the members of a particular group of people. For example, in the case of the bloggers under investigation in the present study, there are several ways in which mutual engagement is realized. First of all, the bloggers interact by commenting on each other’s blog posts, and by responding to comments posted by other bloggers and readers. Second of all, the bloggers feature links to other bloggers’ blogs in their own blog, either on a blogroll, or by mentioning and

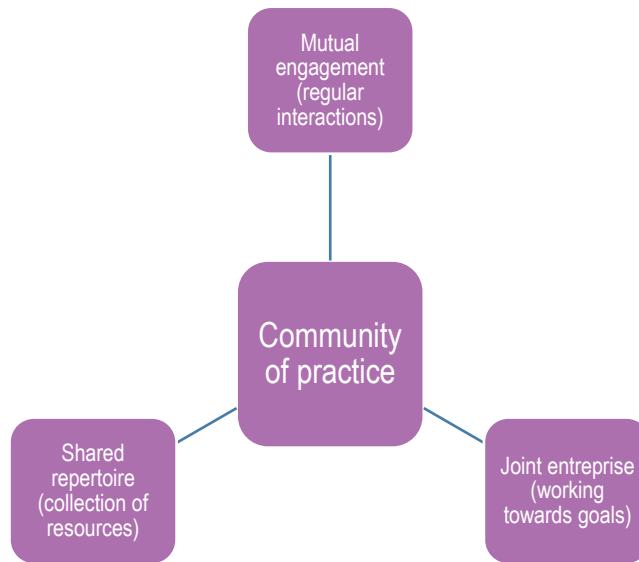
recommending other blogs in their blog entries. Finally, most of the bloggers in this particular community also meet each other face to face often, both at official events designed specifically for bloggers, and at informal get-togethers.<sup>15</sup>

From this regular interaction arises a community's joint enterprise (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999, p. 175; Wenger, 1998, p. 80). This refers to a common goal that the community works towards achieving. In some communities, this goal may be explicitly stated, but it can also be more abstract. A joint enterprise is also a **process** negotiated by the members in their interactions (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999, p. 175); thus, it may evolve as the membership of the community changes. In the community of plus-size fashion bloggers, at least two of such goals can be detected. First, there is a large-scale, macro-level enterprise: making plus-size women more visible in fashion and society and enhancing plus-size women's agency/bettering their overall life quality as a result. Second, a more micro-level enterprise can also be observed in the ways in which the bloggers display solidarity and support towards others in the group, encouraging individual members of the community to accept themselves, to practice self-love and to celebrate their bodies.

The pursuit of such joint goals results, over time, in a collection of in-group resources that Wenger (1998, p. 85) calls a shared repertoire. Broadly speaking, a shared repertoire refers to **how things are done** within the community; it includes patterns of behavior, actions and ways of speaking that have become routinized in the group. This repertoire, crucially, also covers the linguistic and discursive practices of the group, ranging from in-group vocabulary to interactive patterns (Jucker & Kopaczyk, 2013, p. 7). In the community of plus-size fashion bloggers, linguistic and discursive features that are part of the shared repertoire of the community of practice include fashion-focused features, for example the use of fashion lingo and abbreviations such as **OOTD** (see Article 1), and features related to the participants' shared experiences as plus-size women, such as specific ways of describing the plus-size body (see Article 3), and narratives of discovering self-confidence (see Article 2).

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<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that not all online groups that qualify as communities of practice meet offline. However, in the case of the group of bloggers I studied, getting to know the people one had originally met through blogging was considered important (see especially Article 1 and Article 4). Because all the community members were adults who lived within a reasonably close distance from one another (in the UK) and were able to travel, face-to-face meetings became, over time, one of the ways in which the community members interacted. However, I did not observe these face-to-face meetings of the community during my research; my interpretation of the importance of meeting other bloggers is thus based on evidence from the blog text corpus and from the questionnaire responses collected from the bloggers.



**Figure 3.** A community of practice (adapted from Wenger, 1998, p. 73)

A key feature of a community of practice is that learning is involved in the process of becoming a member (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999, p. 174). In some online communities, such as discussion forums, this process may be strictly governed: a forum typically has set rules that the community members must learn as they enter the forum and abide by if they wish to continue to interact on the forum. These types of communities often have appointed moderators who enforce the rules and intervene when a community member has broken a rule.

This aspect of the community of practice framework cannot, however, be applied to the data of the present study. In terms of governance and power relations, blogs are more complicated than most online-based communities of practice, because the community is not tied to a specific platform, nor is it governed by specific people. Even though blog authors can moderate the comments that are published in their individual blogs, the discussion that takes place in the wider blogging community, over several websites (and often also on social media apps independent from blogging platforms, such as on Twitter) cannot have an appointed moderator.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the boundaries of blogging communities are fluid (Jäntti et al., 2018, p. 843) – as I will discuss in connection

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<sup>16</sup> There are exceptions, however – blogging on particular platforms can be moderated by the platform owners (Palmgren, 2015).

with the findings of the present study, blogs are perhaps better described as a **starting point** for a community of practice that goes on to spread to other platforms, including offline interaction.

However, processes of learning exactly how to act as a part of the community are nevertheless present in the blogging community. One does not become a “core member” (Wenger, 1998, p. 118) of a community instantly upon joining a specific (online) group;<sup>17</sup> it takes time for the members to learn the practices of the community. Before that, new members can be characterized as “peripheral members” of the community of practice – although it should be noted that some members may prefer to stay as peripheral members voluntarily, while others go on to become core members (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999, p. 174).

Peripheral members do not have the same level of engagement in maintaining the community as core members, but they contribute to the community in their own ways. As mentioned, membership in a community of practice can be fluid, so while hierarchies exist, the power relations within the community may shift over time (Moore, 2009, p. 126). For example, let us consider the readership of a plus-size fashion blog: a person who actively follows and comments on blogs can be viewed as a peripheral member of the blogging community, even though they may not author a blog themselves. However, many bloggers have begun their activities in the blogosphere as observers, reading and commenting on other people’s blogs before starting their own (see Article 4), which means that a commenter could, at some point, decide to start their own blog and become more engaged in the practices of the community, thus eventually achieving the status of a core member.

In addition, a blogger may belong to two or more communities of practice at the same time and have different roles within these communities. A particular blogger might, for example, belong to one community of practice consisting of plus-size fashion bloggers, and to another one consisting of beauty bloggers or lifestyle bloggers. These communities can also overlap – as I will discuss in more detail in section 5.1.2 of this dissertation, there are **sub-categories** of plus-size fashion blogs, which can be considered to form their own communities that operate **within** the broader plus-size fashion blogging community. Because such layers exist within the group, plus-size fashion bloggers could also be characterized as a “micro-population” (Maly & Varis, 2015): the community is *polycentric*, as different bloggers within the group highlight specific aspects of the blogging experience as more relevant than others. For example, as the results of Articles 3

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<sup>17</sup> In the case of the present study, the act of **joining** the community could include, for example, starting a blog and/or initiating interactions with other bloggers.

and 4 illustrate, there are specific linguistic and discursive practices that appear more important to those members of the blogging community who focus especially on fat acceptance activism.

In this dissertation, I consider the community of practice framework as a theoretical alternative to a concept that has a long history in CMC and CMD research: the *virtual community* (Carminati, Ferrari & Viviani, 2014; Marciano, 2014, p. 825; Paolillo, 1999; Rheingold, 1995). Although virtual communities have been a popular research topic since the very early stages of CMD research (e.g. Herring, 1996; Rheingold, 1995), defining such communities has posed a challenge for scholars from the beginning (Paggacnella, 1997). Herring (2004, p. 344), for example, has criticized early CMD research for labelling all online-based aggregates of people as virtual communities without detailed analyses of the features that make these groups communities.

Rheingold (1995, p. 5) describes virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on [...] public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.” While Rheingold’s work on virtual communities can be considered foundational, his definition raises several questions that are challenging for researchers to answer. For example, how much is a sufficient amount of human feeling? When have the discussions between community members been carried on long enough? In comparison to these criteria, the defining characteristics of a community of practice are better suited for studies of linguistic data. Additionally, the term virtual community in itself is problematic when studying modern CMD, as digital communication has become a part of daily life and is no longer something restricted to the virtual realm. The community of practice framework does not pose such restrictions on the medium of communication – even though the present study emphasizes textual online data, it would be possible to extend the analysis to offline interactions in the future.

Despite these issues concerning the virtual community concept, the fact remains that participants of different online-based social groups often express feelings of belonging to a community based on their online interactions. Thus, CMD researchers have established sets of criteria in their attempts to define the boundaries of such communities (Baym, 2010; Luzón, 2011; Rheingold, 1995). Herring (2004, p. 355), for example, suggests extensive criteria including (but not limited to) the following: active and regular participation, shared norms, expressions of solidarity and support, evidence of conflict (and means to resolve that conflict), self-awareness as a distinct group, as well as roles and hierarchies. As

illustrated in the articles included in this dissertation (Article 1 in particular), such criteria can also be adapted into the community of practice approach. I argue that the community of practice framework enables the researcher to focus on **how** exactly online communities are formed and maintained through shared discursive practices, thereby avoiding the danger of “[painting] internet studies with the broad brush of community” (Fernback, 2007, p. 66).

#### 4.2.2 The discursive construction of (online) identity

In this dissertation, I view identity as socially and discursively constructed (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Hammersley & Treseder, 2007, p. 287; Sophocleous & Themistocleous, 2014). I do not consider identity to be fixed or permanent, but rather fluid, complex, dynamic and context-dependent (Grad & Martín Rojo, 2008; p. 5; Vásquez, 2014, pp. 66-67). It has been shown by previous research that language is central to the construction of identity, and the way people shift their identities depending on the social situation they are in also affects their language use (Goffman, 1990; Sophocleous & Themistocleous, 2014).

Identities can be classified in a variety of ways. For example, we can consider them to be either *situational* or *categorical*; the former arising from a particular situation, and the latter from the ways in which “actors attend to and are attended to by categories in their naturally-occurring interactions” (Stommel, 2008). Leppänen et al. (2014, p. 115) list attributes such as “race, ethnicity, language, nationality, citizenship, gender, [and] sexual orientation” as examples of categorical identifications. They also state that identification can be relational, meaning it may be based on relations between actors (e.g. friendship or professional relations). For example, in their interactions with other bloggers, the plus-size women under investigation in my study use specific linguistic and discursive means to express a **blogger identity** – in their lives outside of blogging (e.g. at home with their family, in the workplace), they are likely to express different identities and to use different kind of language.

Online interaction enables people to construct their identities in ways that are not always seen as possible offline, as online spaces offer opportunities for presenting a variety of different identities (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 102). Thus, specific online platforms can be considered as safe environments for various forms of identity work (and play) that the individual cannot, or prefers not to, express outside of the internet. The relative anonymity provided by online



spaces makes it possible for individuals to, for example, adopt gender identities that are inaccessible in their everyday lives (Marciano, 2014), or to express feelings and experiences they are prevented from publicly expressing in the society they live in (Jaborooty & Baker, 2017). It is important to note that the fact that a particular identity is only presented or performed in online settings does not make it inauthentic – for the individual, their online identity is no less real than the identities expressed outside of online settings (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 102).

As a medium of CMC, blogs have specific characteristics that make them particularly suitable for certain methods of constructing identity. The typical structure of blogs – posts appearing in reverse chronological order, archives of older texts available on the website, open-ended format – makes them **narrative** by nature. Such features also have their effect on the ways in which bloggers construct their identities. Because of the archiving function that most blogs have, changes in identity can be tracked through the evolution of the blog. For example, at the start of her blogging journey, a blogger may present her identity as a person unhappy with and insecure about her body, turning to blogging as a potential solution to these worries. However, in later blog texts, a different type of identity can be observed. As a result of participating in the blogging community, the ways in which the blogger sees herself and her body have changed – she is now more confident, celebrates her body and appearance and acknowledges her self-worth (see Article 2). Thus, it appears that a shift in identity (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 137) has taken place – the blogger now constructs an image of herself that differs from the person she was before. As such, we can view her identity as (auto)biographically or narratively constructed (Grad & Martín Rojo, 2008; Ricoeur, 1991). In the *narrative identity theory*, identity is seen as comprised of a multitude of narratives that the individual constructs for themselves and for others (Grad & Martín Rojo, 2008, p. 10). Different aspects of identity are seen as “roles” played by the same individual in different contexts, and the individual’s identity is the sum of these roles and the ways in which they are interwoven over time (Grad & Martín Rojo, 2008 p. 11).

As well as constructing their identities through the use of categorizations and narratives, the bloggers in my study also express a sense of *social identity* in their online interactions (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Grad & Martín Rojo 2008; Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Sophocleous & Themistocleous, 2014; Tajfel, 1982). According to Grad and Martín Rojo (2008, p. 8), social identities are “created, reproduced, negotiated, imposed, or even resisted through discourse”. Benwell and Stokoe (2006, p. 25) describe social identity as “defined by individual identification

with group: a process constituted firstly by a reflexive knowledge of group membership, and secondly by emotional attachment or specific disposition to this belonging”. Through this type of approach to identity, we can examine the boundaries between the *in-group* and the *out-group*, as social identities are constructed both through similarity to other group members, and through differences between groups (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 25; Grad & Martín Rojo, 2008, p. 12).

The concepts of identity and community become intertwined in the linguistic behaviors of people belonging to specific online groups, such as the blogging community under investigation in this dissertation. The use of jargon or other group-specific linguistic features not only marks the difference between that particular community and other communities; the meanings constructed through in-group language use may be (intentionally or unintentionally) difficult or impossible for outsiders to understand (Nishimura, 2008). Belonging – or not belonging – to a specific group is indexed and maintained through language use in interaction (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Sophocleous & Themistocleous, 2014). In other words, people talk – or, in the case of blogs, write – in ways that are considered **appropriate** within that particular social group (Gee, 2011, p. 106).

Identity construction on social media is always affected by the other users. As Lee (2014, pp. 93-94) states, online interactions are “not just about who we are, but also who we want to be to others, and how others see us”. A person belonging to a specific community may wish to highlight a particular role or aspect of her identity by performing discursive acts that are considered desirable within that community (Goffman, 1990) – and as my analysis in Article 2 illustrates, it is also possible to **fail** in this performance of in-group identity.

## 5 DATA AND METHODS

In this section, I will discuss the process of collecting the data for the study, the compilation of the blog corpus, as well as the analytical methods used in each of the four articles. The study combines the qualitative discourse analysis of blog posts and comments with a corpus-linguistic approach to blog material. In addition to studying the textual material collected from the blogs, I have analyzed questionnaire responses submitted by the bloggers on two occasions (in 2015 and 2017) using Braun and Clarke's (2006) model for thematic analysis. In order to get a more detailed overall view of the practices of the community, I wanted to combine analyses of the participants' online interaction with directly contacting the participants (via email and questionnaires; cf. Androutsopoulos, 2008).

It should be noted that while I refer to all the collected blog data – 7,776 blog posts and 32,737 comments – as the **blog corpus**, the term corpus is also used for the data in the individual articles that investigate smaller data samples from the main corpus (Articles 1 and 2). The materials and methods that were used in each individual article are specified in my discussion of the analytical methods (see section 5.2).

### 5.1 Data

#### 5.1.1 Choosing the blogs

The data collection for the dissertation started in the fall of 2014. My starting point for finding suitable blogs for the study was a private Facebook group called #PSBloggers – For Bloggers Only. At the time, the group had 140 members.<sup>18</sup> To be able to join the group, one needed to contact the moderator and prove one's status as a blogger by sending them a link to one's blog. However, as I am a blogger myself, I was already a member of the group when I started working on my

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<sup>18</sup> In November 2019, there were 179 members in the group.

PhD research project. The #PSBloggers group was a natural starting point for data collection for two reasons.

First, in 2014, the members of the group formed an active, tight-knit community.<sup>19</sup> As I was interested in studying blogging from an interactional, community-driven point of view, choosing a group that was already somewhat established as a community made more sense than, for example, searching for plus-size fashion blogs on Google and using a snowball sampling method to choose the blogs.<sup>20</sup> Second, I predicted that the fact I was a member of the group myself, and at least some of the other members could identify me as a fellow blogger, would increase the chance of the bloggers being interested in the study. Bloggers can be wary of collaborating with academics (Paccagnella, 1997), especially if they use their blogs for the representation of a marginalized identity (Davenport et al., 2018). For example, Dickins et al. (2011) countered some mistrust when recruiting participants for their study of the *fatosphere* (a term they use to refer to the wider community of plus-size bloggers, derived from the terms **fat** and **blogosphere**). My familiarity with the blogging community has been beneficial throughout the research process, and I have been open about my dual role of researcher and blogger in all interactions with all the participants (see also section 5.3 on research ethics).

Once I had decided where to start looking for blogs, I needed to establish criteria for choosing blogs to include in the corpus, as studying all 140 bloggers in the Facebook group was not feasible considering the scope of the research project. Moreover, while all members of the Facebook group had a blog – as it was a requirement for joining the group – many of them did not update their blogs regularly, and several had only recently started blogging, which meant there were very few posts on their blogs. In the end, I decided on the following criteria for narrowing down a suitable corpus.

First of all, the blogs eligible for the study were required to have been active in the year 2014. By **active**, I mean that the author of the blog had posted regularly during that year (roughly once a month or more frequently). This criterion prevented the inclusion of abandoned blogs that had not been updated in years, as well as completely new blogs. Second of all, the blogs eligible for the study were required to have a commenting function, and at least some published comments. This criterion ensured that the bloggers included in the study engaged in blogging

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<sup>19</sup> While the group still exists, it is much less active now than it was at the time of data collection.

<sup>20</sup> Such a method is not uncommon in blog research. See, for example Lukač (2011); Lehti and Laippala (2014).

actively and interacted with others through their blogs. However, I did not consider it necessary for every single post in each blog to have comments. The amount of comments tends to vary from post to post, even in the more popular blogs, as some topics inspire more interaction than others. Finally, only blogs that were written in English were considered eligible for the study.

Although the #PSBloggers group was (and is) open to all who identify as plus-size and have a blog, the majority of its members are women, and based in the United Kingdom. All bloggers whose blogs are included in the blog corpus are also UK-based women, although this geographical emphasis was not intentional. I did not ask the bloggers if they were UK citizens, or if English was their mother tongue. As long as the blog was written in English, it was considered eligible.

After applying these criteria, I ended up with 35 blogs. In January 2015, I emailed all 35 bloggers to inform them about my project and to ask whether they would be willing to let me use their blogs in the research, as well as responding to a questionnaire that would be sent to them later.<sup>21</sup> In my email, I introduced myself as a researcher and a blogger, and briefly described the purpose of my study (see Appendix 1). It should be taken into consideration here that this was in the very early stages of my research, and the research questions became more refined in the course of the project. Nevertheless, the bloggers were aware of the basic premise of my PhD thesis: studying plus-size fashion blogging from an interactive, community-driven point of view, with an emphasis on the language that bloggers use. Out of the 35 bloggers I contacted, 21 replied. Out of those 21, 20 gave their consent. One blogger did not wish to participate in the study, as she said she would not have time to respond to the questionnaire. To minimize the possible effects of the bloggers being aware of the study, I only studied the blog texts and comments that had been published prior to me contacting the bloggers. Thus, all textual material posted in the 20 blogs before January 2015 was included in the corpus.

### 5.1.2 Description of the bloggers

As mentioned above, all authors of the blogs included in the data identified as women and resided in the United Kingdom at the time of collecting data.<sup>22</sup> In

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<sup>21</sup> At this point, I was only planning to send out one questionnaire. However, I later changed it to two.

<sup>22</sup> My interpretation of the bloggers' gender identity is based on blog content. All participants feature photographs of themselves on their blogs, use female pronouns when referring to themselves in

Articles 1 to 3, the blogs/bloggers are referred to with numbers that were randomly assigned at the beginning of my research project; Blog 1, Blog 2, and so on. In Article 4, pseudonyms are used (see the end of this sub-section as well as section 5.3).

The bloggers included in the study were of varying ages and sizes. At the time of data collection in 2015, the youngest bloggers were in their early 20's, while the oldest were in their early 40's.<sup>23</sup> Based on their descriptions in blog texts, the bloggers' dress size ranged from women's UK 18 to UK 28.<sup>24</sup> However, the bloggers' classification as "plus-size" in the study is based on their self-identification as plus-size women, not their dress size.

There was also variation in the amount of time the participants had been blogging. The author of Blog 10 had been active the longest, with the earliest entries on her blog dating back to 2009, whereas the author of Blog 19 had the newest blog, started in November 2013. The majority of the bloggers had started their blogs in 2011 or 2012. However, in the 2015 questionnaire, some of the bloggers mentioned that their current blogs were not the first blogs they had authored. Most bloggers also stated that they had been blog readers before starting their own blog. Thus, publishing the first post on a specific blog does not necessarily mark a blogger's introduction to the world of plus-size fashion blogging.

Some of the bloggers mentioned other marginalized identities that intersected with their identities as fat/plus-size women. Within the group, there were two women of color, one disabled woman, and one woman who identified as queer.<sup>25</sup> However, I acknowledge the fact that as the majority of the bloggers in the data are white, able-bodied, cis-gendered and seemingly middle-class, the results of the study cannot be considered to represent the experience of all plus-size women. Moreover, as the study focuses on women who live in the West, its societal context should not be considered representative of other parts of the world, as beauty standards and the extent of fat/plus-size people's discrimination in society also vary between different geographical areas and cultures.

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third person, and/or use the word **woman** as a self-descriptor. Those bloggers who responded to the 2017 questionnaire all chose **female** when asked about gender identity.

<sup>23</sup> Of the 13 bloggers who responded to the questionnaire I sent out in 2015, the youngest was 20 years old, and the oldest was 41 years old. For the remaining seven bloggers, the age is an estimate, since not all of them mention their age in their blog texts.

<sup>24</sup> Corresponding US sizes: women's 14 to 26; corresponding EU sizes: women's 46 to 56.

<sup>25</sup> Interpretation based on the bloggers self-descriptions in blog texts.

Previous research has, for the most part, treated plus-size fashion bloggers as a homogenous group united in their pursuit of fat acceptance (Connell, 2013; Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). However, I argue that despite their sense of communality and shared interests, there are several sub-groups that can be distinguished within the broader genre of plus-size fashion blogging. In Article 3, I categorize the bloggers into three groups based on their overall approach to blogging about fashion and life as a plus-size woman: *fat activists*, *fashionistas*, and *all-rounders*. The classification is based on the qualitative analysis of blog material; although I did not read each blog post in the corpus word for word, at the beginning of my research project I went through all material that had been posted in the blogs before January 2015, making notes on the different themes and topics that were generally discussed in the blogs. During this observation period, it became apparent that some blogs contained a wider variety of topics – i.e. the bloggers also wrote about things other than fashion or personal style – and that some blogs had a more clearly fat acceptance activism focused approach than others.

I classified bloggers who viewed fashion blogging primarily as a means of making fat women more visible, accepted and empowered, and who frequently discussed themes like the societal discrimination of fat people and resisting mainstream media's beauty standards as *fat activists*. These bloggers also tended to write about the plus-size fashion industry in a more critical manner, pointing out several flaws, clichés and stereotypes in fashion design and advertising. All bloggers included in the fat activist category refer to themselves (and other plus-size people) as “fat” and use the word intentionally as a neutral descriptor to remove it from its traditionally negative connotations.

Bloggers who focused heavily on more general fashion blog content – presenting outfits, reviewing products, providing commentary on current trends – were classified as *fashionistas*. While the fashionista bloggers occasionally discussed the societal aspects of living in a fat body, the main focus of their blogs was presenting fashion to a specific audience: other plus-size women. Fashionista bloggers typically expressed a desire to have the same options as thinner women when it came to fashion. They did not deny or hide their size; rather, they wanted it to be considered only one facet of their identity. Thus, fashionista bloggers can be characterized as bloggers whose blogs are first and foremost about the **field of fashion** – they merely happen to be plus-size, and their size influences their options as consumers of fashion.

The final category of bloggers was named *all-rounders* because their blogs addressed a wider variety of topics than the blogs in the other two categories, including travel, food, photography, beauty products, health, and lifestyle. Many all-rounder bloggers had started their blogging careers by writing about topics other than fashion, but the focus of their blogs had, over time, narrowed down to mainly fashion-related content.

As mentioned earlier in section 4.2.1, the existence of the aforementioned sub-categories could be explained by characterizing plus-size fashion bloggers as a *micro-population* (Maly & Varis, 2015), where some aspects of constructing a sense of identity and/or community appear more relevant to particular individuals than they do to others. For example, the notion of **taking back the power of the word fat** was certainly more central in the fat activist category of blogs than in the other two categories – a fact that is also reflected in the linguistic practices within the group (see section 6.2 and Article 3).

The blogs belonging to each category of bloggers are listed in Table 1 below. As mentioned, these three categories of blogs were established through a qualitative investigation of the blogs. I did not, for example, count the number of posts on each topic in each blog (although as illustrated in Article 3, there are quantitative differences between the categories as well). A categorization such as the one presented in Table 1 should not be considered static, as writing a blog is a dynamic process. For example, a fat activist blogger will occasionally write a commercial product review, a fashionista blogger might post a recipe, and an all-rounder blogger can discuss her feelings on the discrimination she has experienced as a fat person. It is also important to note that the categories are based on the pre-2015 status of the blogs, because the blog data was collected in January 2015. Some blogs that were included in the study have changed their emphasis in the years following the compilation of the blog corpus. For example, there are bloggers in the data who have since become mothers, and they have started to write extensively on the topic of parenting. Some blogs have also become inactive, with the bloggers beginning to focus more on other social media like YouTube or Instagram (see Article 4 and section 7.3). At the time of writing this introduction in 2019, some of the original blogs have been deleted (see Appendix 3), but copies of all blog entries posted by the bloggers before January 2015 have been saved (see section 5.3).

**Table 1.** The three-part categorization of bloggers used in Articles 1 to 3

Fat activists	Fashionistas	All-rounders
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Blogs 1, 2, 4, 8, 11, 13, 15	Blogs 3, 6, 9, 14, 16, 17, 18	Blogs 5, 7, 10, 12, 19, 20
<p>Fashion blogging is seen as a way of normalizing fat bodies / making them visible.</p> <p>Commentary on societal issues that affect fat people is common.</p> <p>“Fat” is used frequently, and as a neutral/positive descriptor.</p>	<p>Interest in current fashion trends and the development of personal style are the main foci of the blogs.</p> <p>Being plus-size/fat is one aspect of the bloggers’ identity.</p> <p>“Plus-size” is used more frequently as a descriptor than “fat”.</p>	<p>Bloggers cover a wide variety of topics, fashion being only one of them.</p> <p>The early content of the blogs is not necessary fashion-focused, but over time the blogs have become more fashion-centered.</p> <p>Descriptive words related to body size are used infrequently.</p>

When I analyzed the questionnaire responses collected from the bloggers in Article 4, I used a slightly different categorization of bloggers for two reasons. The first reason was that since only 13 bloggers responded to the questionnaire, I would not have been able to reliably contrast and compare the results with the three-part categorization that included all 20 bloggers. The second reason was ethical considerations: unlike the publicly available blog material, the questionnaire responses were confidential and pseudonymized. I wanted to protect the respondents’ privacy, which is why I did not directly connect the responses to specific blogs (see section 5.3 on research ethics). In the analysis of questionnaire responses, I categorize the bloggers into two groups instead of three: *fashion-driven* and *activism-driven* bloggers. This categorization is based on the bloggers’ responses to the questionnaires, as well as the topical focus of their blogs. Thus, the categorization used in Article 4 is not directly comparable with the three-part categorization described above. The categorization of the questionnaire respondents from Article 4 is presented in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** The two-part categorization of bloggers used in Article 4

Year	Fashion-driven respondents (pseudonyms)	Activism-driven respondents (pseudonyms)
2015	Jane, Kate, Mel, Liz, Rita, Wendy, Anne	Tina, Claire, Emily, Jessica, Bella, Cassie
2017	Jane, Kate, Mel, Wendy, Anne	Tina, Claire, Jessica, Bella

### 5.1.3 Corpus compilation and developing the Blog Extractor tool

The blog text corpus used in the study contains altogether 7,776 blog posts (3,177,959 words) and 32,737 comments (1,000,049 words). In Articles 1 and 2, smaller sub-corpora chosen based on the research questions are used, while Article 3 explores the whole corpus. Article 4 focuses on the questionnaire responses collected from the bloggers.

All blog texts and comments from the 20 blogs included in the study were downloaded into an online database linked to a corpus-linguistic tool called the Blog Extractor, which was designed by me and programmed by Jesse Limatius. The Extractor, which is hosted on a personal server, allows me to search the corpus without the help of external corpus-linguistic software. It displays all occurrences of a term that can be found in the corpus, alongside the time of posting, the name of the blog, the name of the post, and whether the term appears in the post title (T for **title**), the post text (C for **content**), or a comment (R for **reply**). Figure 4 below illustrates what the concordance looks like after a search for the word “overweight”:



**Figure 4.** An example of the concordance in the Blog Extractor

The search term appears in bold text in the sentences. By clicking on the name of the post in the concordance, I am able to view the post in its entirety for more context. In case the search term appears in a comment (R), I can also see who has posted the comment in order to, for example, find out whether it is a comment from another blogger in the data. If the comment has been posted anonymously, the author of the comment is simply marked as anonymous.

Although downloading textual material from the blogs may not seem like an overly complicated process, several technical issues needed to be resolved during the corpus compilation. All blogs in my data were hosted on either Blogger or Wordpress, and both of these popular, freely available blogging platforms allow the bloggers to modify the appearance of their blog to a certain extent, which affects the HTML-code of the website. As I was unable to find an existing program that would download uniform, plain text from the blogs without the modifications to the code affecting the results, an entirely new program for extracting the blog data needed to be developed. The Blog Extractor tool thus had two functions in the research project: 1) extracting textual data from the blogs in a uniform, plain text form, and 2) extracting specific occurrences of words or phrases in the data for me to study in detail.

Downloading comments proved to be even more challenging, as the bloggers used a number of different add-ons (Disqus, Google+, Blogger's and Wordpress' own commenting tools) for the commenting sections of their blogs. Each of these commenting platforms required their own code for extracting the comment data and matching it with the correct author and blog post. For example, in the case of the Google+ add-on (which, as of April 2019, no longer exists), the comments were stored separate from the blog, which meant that they could not be extracted alongside the blog texts. Because of this, manually copying comments one by one from certain blog posts was also necessary in some cases.

In the future, my plan is to develop a new and improved version of the Blog Extractor tool that could be used for storing and analyzing data in other research projects and by other researchers. Currently, however, the Extractor is password protected, and only I have access to it. All the data stored in the Extractor were publicly available online on the blogs at the time of collection, but since I did not explicitly request permission from the bloggers to share my research data, I have chosen not to make it public at this point.

#### 5.1.4 Designing the questionnaires

Although blog texts and comments provide a rich source of data for linguistic research, public blog texts do not necessarily reflect all aspects of the blogging experience. Fashion blogs in particular tend to have a highly positive overall tone, and conflicts between participants – i.e. bloggers and commenters – are rarely visible (Rocamora, 2011, p. 416; see also section 6.1 in this dissertation).

Previously, questionnaire data has been used, for example, to investigate the motivations of bloggers (Muhtaseb & Frey, 2008). In the same way as qualitative and quantitative analyses can complement each other by revealing different aspects of a specific phenomenon (Bamman et al., 2014, p. 139), questionnaire or interview data collected from the members of a particular community can add to the analysis of their online discourse.

Androutsopoulos (2008) advocates for the combination of “systematic observation of online discourse with direct contact with its social actors”. Observing the discursive and linguistic practices in the online interaction of a specific group of people is not always enough to study the **meanings** attached to these practices (Androutsopoulos, 2008). According to Schmidt (2007, pp. 1420-1421), survey data can be helpful in revealing more information about, for example, the bloggers’ sociodemographic backgrounds, as well as their motivations for blogging. Thus, in addition to analyzing textual data from the blogs, I wanted to interview the bloggers about their personal experiences on being plus-size and blogging about fashion.

Since the bloggers included in the study all reside in the United Kingdom and I live in Finland, the easiest way to gather information from them was to send an online questionnaire via email.<sup>26</sup> The first questionnaire was sent to all 20 bloggers whose blogs were included in the corpus in May 2015 (see Appendix 1 for the cover letters of the questionnaires). Google Forms was used for designing the questionnaire and storing the responses. Copies of the responses have also been saved on a personal server that only I can access. During the early summer of 2015, I sent out altogether three rounds of reminders about the questionnaire, before closing it in July 2015. Thirteen out of 20 bloggers completed the 2015 questionnaire during that time.

The main purpose of the 2015 questionnaire can be summarized into three goals: 1) collecting background information on the bloggers, such as how long they had been blogging, 2) gathering more information on the bloggers’ blogging habits and motivations, including the ways in which they interact with other bloggers, and 3) charting the bloggers’ personal experiences of life as a plus-size woman and as a fashion blogger, including their thoughts on the use of particular terminology related to the topic. The 2015 questionnaire in its entirety can be viewed in Appendix 2.

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<sup>26</sup> I met one of the bloggers who participated in the study in 2015. The meeting took place at an informal gathering of friends, and while we shortly discussed my research, I did not interview her.

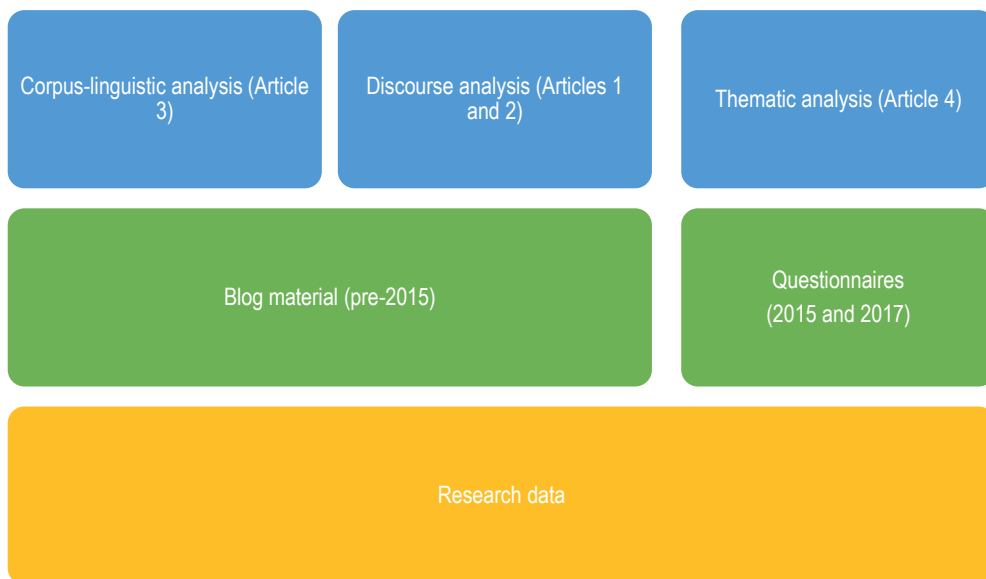
Although it was not in my original research plan to send out more than one questionnaire, the changes I perceived in the blogosphere over the years motivated me to design a new questionnaire in 2017. The main goal of the 2017 questionnaire was to find out whether the bloggers participating in my study had experienced changes in 1) the plus-size blogging community, and 2) the plus-size fashion industry. Since the terminology that the bloggers used to describe plus-size women's bodies had become a central research interest at this point, I also inquired about the bloggers' thoughts on a wider variety of terms, including the names of the two social movements closely connected to plus-size fashion blogging, *fat acceptance* and *body positivity*. Similar to the original questionnaire, the 2017 questionnaire also contained a section on background information. This new questionnaire was only sent to the 13 bloggers who had responded to the 2015 questionnaire, as I wanted to see whether there had been any changes in the ways in which the bloggers described their experiences. Nine out of 13 bloggers completed the second questionnaire. The 2017 questionnaire is also presented in Appendix 2.

Both of the questionnaires were tested on control groups before they were sent out to the respondents. The control group for the 2015 questionnaire consisted of six people, most of whom had experience in blogging. The control group for the 2017 questionnaire consisted of four people, including a blogger, a native speaker of English, and a fellow academic researcher. Before designing and sending out the questionnaires, I participated on a course on academic questionnaire design organized by Sami Borg, a political science expert at Tampere University who specializes in survey data (see e.g. Borg & Kuula, 2008).

## 5.2 Analytical methods

The analytical methods of the study were chosen based on their suitability for analyzing the types of data under investigation, and because of the way they **complement** each other. In terms of methodology, I was less concerned with critiquing the existing, individual methods, and more interested in discovering what type of new results could be achieved by **bringing together** aspects of different, existing methodological approaches. For example, evidence from previous research suggests that a combination of participant observation and interviews or surveys can reveal how community- and identity-building features such as shared norms and routines emerge within a group (Schmidt, 2007, pp. 1420-21;

Androutsopoulos, 2008). In three out of the four articles included in this dissertation, I use methodological approaches that can be characterized as **observation** of the online interaction of plus-size fashion bloggers: I combine qualitative discourse analysis of blog texts and comments (Articles 1 and 2) with a quantitative, corpus-linguistic approach to blog material (Article 3). Finally, in the last article, I analyze questionnaire data collected from the bloggers using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework, thus adding direct contact with the bloggers into my research approach (Article 4).<sup>27</sup> In this section, I present the analytical methods utilized in the four articles in more detail (see Figure 5 below). The results of each of the analyses will be discussed in section 6.



**Figure 5.** The data and analytical methods used in the study

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<sup>27</sup> While the combination of methods I used – the analysis of textual, online-based material, as well as data collected through direct contact with the participants – can be compared to Androutsopoulos’ (2008) model for *discourse-centered online ethnography*, there are also notable differences between the approaches. For example, I did not collect further blog data based on my observations, although I did decide to send out another questionnaire based on the changes I had noticed in the overall blogging “world” during the research process. Also, unlike Androutsopoulos (2008), I did not ask the bloggers I interviewed via questionnaires to evaluate or analyze their own language use by using examples from the blog data. The reason for this was the fact that I wanted to find out whether certain linguistic and/or discursive elements would naturally occur in both blog texts and questionnaire responses, or whether the two types of data would reveal different results. Thus, in the case of the present study, it made more sense to keep the two sources of data separate from the **participants’** point of view.

## 5.2.1 Discourse analysis and CMDA as approaches to blog material

Discourse analysis was chosen as the main analytical method for Articles 1 and 2. In Article 1, I apply Herring's (2004; see also Herring, 2013; 2018) *computer-mediated discourse analysis* (henceforth CMDA) framework to blog posts that describe interactions with other bloggers. In Article 2, I utilize an inductive, discourse-analytic approach to study the identity-constructing practices of the bloggers. In this section, I describe the analytical process of these two qualitative studies, starting with the CMDA approach.

As described by Herring (2004, p. 339), CMDA is an approach that applies methodological tools from language-focused disciplines to logs of online interaction. As in discourse analysis on a more general level, the goal of CMDA is to identify patterns in discourse from specific data (Herring, 2004, p. 342). In Herring's (2004, p. 341) scheme, CMDA applies to the following four levels of language ranging from micro-level to macro-level linguistic and discursive features: 1) structure, 2) meaning, 3) interaction, and 4) social behavior. In some cases, a fifth level consisting of participation patterns – e.g. message length and frequency – can be included (Herring 2004, p. 341).<sup>28</sup>

On each level of language, there are specific linguistic phenomena that are of interest to researchers, and Herring (2004; 2013) provides some examples of the kind of phenomena that are located on specific levels. For example, issues regarding syntax, morphology and typography would be located on the level of structure, speech acts and other units of meaning on the level of meaning, topic development and turn-taking on the level of interaction, and finally, expressions of social hierarchies/status, conflict management and expressions of play on the level of social behavior.

Herring (2013, p. 4) describes CMDA as a **toolkit** or an **approach** rather than a method. By doing so, she highlights the fact that CMDA is actually a set or collection of several methodological tools adapted from linguistic research for the purposes of studying online interaction. However, Herring (2004, p. 343) names *language-focused content analysis* as the “basic methodological orientation” of CMDA. CMDA was developed for the purposes of studying communication through textual material on specific online platforms, as that was what the majority of CMD consisted of at the time – however, in her later work, Herring (2018) has addressed

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<sup>28</sup> In her more recent works, Herring (2013; 2018) uses “interaction management” instead of “interaction”, and “social phenomena” instead of “social behavior”.

the question of making CMDA better suited for modern, multimodal online interaction (see also section 6.1).

When choosing a data sample for a qualitative CMDA study, there are several sampling techniques that Herring (2004, p. 351) lists as possible: random sampling, sampling by theme, sampling by time, sampling by phenomenon, sampling by individual or group, and sampling by convenience. In Article 1, I used sampling by theme, as I was particularly interested in those blog texts where the bloggers talked about other bloggers and their interactions with them. In order to study the community-building practices within the group of bloggers, I collected a sample of 100 blog posts and 496 comments by using the tags or labels included in the blogs (see Figure 1 in section 2.2).<sup>29</sup> Because of my interest in the bloggers' interactions with other members of the blogging community, I looked at tags such as "friends", "event", "meet-up", "challenge", and "psbloggers",<sup>30</sup> as well as the names of specific events geared towards bloggers, such as "Plus North", an annual event organized by and for UK-based plus-size bloggers that was very popular at the time. In case tags were not available, I used the search function embedded into the blogs to find relevant posts by searching for terms that other bloggers had used in tagging their posts.

The blog posts that were chosen for the analysis in Article 1 were posts that contained either 1) references to meeting fellow bloggers, or 2) other mentions of fellow bloggers. The main criterion was that the relationships and interactions with other bloggers were apparent in either direct references to others, links to others' blogs, or the overall topic of the post. I classified the blog posts in the sample according to topic (for example, describing the blogger's experience of attending a blogging-specific event, or participating in a blogging challenge with other bloggers), as well as according to the discourse practices that could be identified on the four levels of Herring's (2004) model. I then compared the discourse practices I had identified with criteria for online communities established in earlier studies (Baym, 2010; Herring, 2004; Luzón, 2011; Rheingold, 1995), as well as observing how the different linguistic and discursive features present in the blog texts and comments reflected the key characteristics of a community of practice: mutual engagement, joint enterprise(s) and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998).

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<sup>29</sup> The number of comments here includes response comments from the blog authors. In Article 1, I only mention the number of comments posted by blog readers (323), but the response comments posted by the bloggers were also taken into account in the original analysis.

<sup>30</sup> Short for **plus-size (fashion) bloggers** – a term and a hashtag commonly used by the members of the blogging community, as well as the name of the Facebook group where I started my data collection from.



In Article 2, I studied the construction of a body positive blogger identity (see section 6.2) in a sample of 200 blog posts and 1066 comments.<sup>31</sup> Again, the sampling was done according to theme (Herring, 2004, p. 351): instead of OOTD posts or commercial products reviews, I focused on personal blog texts that discussed, for example, self-acceptance, bullying, health, or the bloggers' life in general. Methods similar to those used in Article 1 were employed to find blog posts that were pertinent for the research questions; that is, I utilized the tagging systems and search functions of the blogs to identify relevant topics. Blog posts featuring tags such as “body positivity”, “confidence”, “lifestyle”, “life”, “health” and “personal” were identified in blogs where tags were used. If tags were not used, I searched for words that had appeared as tags/labels on other blogs or identified relevant posts by title.

My analysis in Article 2 focused particularly on the relationship between identity construction and the in-group norms of the community of practice. Thus, I was interested in how the *body positive blogger identity* was linguistically and discursively constructed in the context of the group, and which ways of constructing identity were considered acceptable (and unacceptable) by the community members. Because of this emphasis on identity construction, the analysis was built on a framework consisting of three theoretical perspectives to identity – *social identity* (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Sophocleous & Themistocleous, 2014; Tajfel, 1982) *narrative identity* (Grad & Martín Rojo, 2008; Ricoeur, 1991), and *categorical identity* (Leppänen et al., 2014; Stommel, 2008). However, I approached the blog material from an **inductive** standpoint, identifying relevant discourse practices through repeated readings of the material instead of devising a coding scheme beforehand. For example, I chose to focus on narrative identity construction in the analysis since I observed that the bloggers in the data utilized the narrative elements of blogs in specific ways to construct their identity.

## 5.2.2 Corpus-linguistic analysis of blog material

In Article 3, I used a quantitative, *corpus-linguistic* approach (Biber, Connor & Upton, 2007; Biber & Conrad, 2009; Baker, 2006; 2010). Specifically, I investigated 45 terms that were used for describing plus-size bodies in the corpus using the Blog Extractor tool introduced in section 5.1.3. Unlike in the first two articles,

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<sup>31</sup> The number of comments here includes response comments from the bloggers.

where data sampling according to theme was used, Article 3 explored the corpus as a whole. As previous research on body descriptors used by plus-size bloggers – my own work in Articles 1 and 2 included – had focused mostly on the role of the word **fat**, my goal was to investigate what other types of descriptors the bloggers used and how common these descriptors were in the corpus. I also compared and contrasted the use of body descriptors within the three categories of bloggers – fat activists, fashionistas, and all-rounders – introduced in section 5.1.2, as well as exploring the differences in the use of these terms between the main blog texts and the commenting section discussions.

Corpus linguistics provide methodological tools for the analysis of large datasets while avoiding cherry-picking (McDonald & Woodward-Kron, 2016, p. 158). This makes corpus-linguistic methodology a useful companion to qualitative, discourse-based research on online interaction (Biber, Connor & Upton, 2007; Baker, 2006; Drasovean & Tagg, 2015). Through a corpus-linguistic approach, it is possible to explore the frequency and distribution of group-specific linguistic features identified in qualitative studies; thus, this method enables the researcher to investigate whether particular patterns that were identified in smaller, qualitative datasets extend to a larger amount of textual data (Drasovean & Tagg, 2015).

I began the analysis by determining the scope of terms used for describing plus-size bodies in the blog corpus. For this purpose, the Word List function in AntConc (Version 3.4.4, Anthony, 2015) was used (see also Limatius, 2018). As a result, a list of 45 body descriptors was compiled. The rest of the analytical process was conducted using the Blog Extractor tool that was created specifically for this research project.<sup>32</sup> I searched for each of the 45 terms in the Extractor, after which I manually went through the resulting concordance to see which occurrences of the terms were relevant for the research questions posed in the study. Since the focus of the study was on the identity-constructing practices of the bloggers, I narrowed down the focus to uses of the terms that concerned describing people and/or their bodies, including parts of the body (e.g. “I have fat thighs”). Because the 45 terms included several words that were commonly used for other purposes – such as **big** – I manually inspected every hit for each term to determine their relevance for the study. If a body descriptor was used as a part of a proper name, such as a name of a fashion brand (Curvy Kate, Lady Voluptuous), I did not include it in the study, as its occurrence could not be considered to be based on the blogger’s conscious choice to use the term for describing a person or a person’s body.

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<sup>32</sup> In its current form, the Extractor does not have a feature that would help identify all body descriptors in the blog texts as efficiently as the Word List function in AntConc.

As the blogs included in the corpus are of varying sizes, some bloggers writing more often and/or longer texts than others, the frequencies of the terms were normalized to a common base of 10,000 words for the analysis. I calculated the standardized frequency for each term, and then compared and contrasted these frequencies within the corpus as a whole, as well as within the three categories of bloggers: *fat activists*, *fashionistas* and *all-rounders*. The main blog texts and the commenting section discussions were treated as two separate sub-corpora in the study and I also compared the frequencies of body descriptors within these two corpora (see section 6.2 as well as Article 3).

### 5.2.3 Thematic analysis of questionnaire responses

The questionnaire responses were analyzed using the model for *thematic analysis* by Braun and Clarke (2006), who view thematic analysis as a “foundational method for qualitative analysis” (p. 78). Broadly speaking, thematic analysis is concerned with identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns according to theme in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79; see also Attard & Coulson, 2012; Nowell et al., 2017). What makes thematic analysis different from other qualitative approaches, such as discourse analysis, is the fact that it is not bound to any particular theoretical position. The strength of the method thus lies in its flexibility. (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

When analyzing the questionnaire results, I wanted to focus on the bloggers’ personal experiences and the meanings they attach to specific concepts related to blogging and being plus-size. For example, I avoided using the term **community** in questions regarding the interaction between bloggers (see Article 4 and Appendix 2) – all occurrences of this word in the responses were thus a result of the bloggers themselves choosing to use the term to describe their experiences. Both questionnaires consisted primarily of open-ended questions, and featured sections where the bloggers were requested to describe how they felt about, for example, particular terminology, without posing any restrictions on their expression.

I began the analysis by reading through all 22 (13 from 2015, nine from 2017) responses. First, I organized the responses to the individual questions according to author. In this way, I was able to arrange the data into blogger-specific narratives. This, in turn, made it easier for me to observe, for examples, changes that took place in the language use of a particular blogger between 2015 and 2017 (provided

the blogger had responded to both questionnaires). Each respondent was classified either as an *activism-driven* or a *fashion-driven blogger* (see section 5.1.2).

Next, I organized the responses to each question by theme. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 82), a theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question”, as well as representing some form of patterned behavior within the dataset. In my study, the themes were identified through an inductive approach – that is, my research questions evolved throughout the analytical process, and the themes that were identified were not always directly connected to the questions asked in the questionnaire (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 83-84). In fact, some of the questions included in the 2015 questionnaire (see Appendix 2) turned out to be irrelevant for the final research questions.

As an example to illustrate the coding process, eight themes that were identified on the first round of coding in the responses to Question 7 in the 2015 questionnaire – “What are the best things about blogging?” (see Appendix 2) – are presented below:

- 1 - Freedom of expression
- 2 - Commercial perks
- 3 - Interacting with the community
- 4 - Finding a sense of purpose
- 5 - Receiving feedback
- 6 - Gaining confidence
- 7 - Helping others
- 8 - Influencing fashion

On the next round of coding, I combined these detailed themes identified in the first phase under more general, macro-level themes. The eight themes presented above, for example, were grouped under the following four broader themes:

- 1 - Creative agency
- 2 - Commercial gain
- 3 - Community engagement
- 4 - Self-improvement

I also coded the responses according to whether they reflected positive (**P**) or negative (**Ne**) experiences of blogging and interactions within the blogging community. If the response could not be interpreted to reflect neither a positive nor a negative experience, it was coded as neutral (**N**). In some cases, it was not clear from the context whether the respondent intended their response negatively or positively; in these cases, all possible interpretations were taken into account in the analysis. The following examples are from Question 15 in the 2017 questionnaire, where the bloggers were requested to describe their thoughts on the term **body positivity** (see Appendix 2):

- 1 - Feeling OK about one's body at any size **P**
- 2 - Something brands get wrong **Ne**
- 3 - A minefield **Ne**
- 4 - Easy to cause offence **Ne**
- 5 - Negative phrase **Ne**
- 6 - Overrun by white/thin/conventionally attractive young people **Ne**
- 7 - Edging fat people out of their own spaces **Ne**
- 8 - Commercialized **N/Ne**
- 9 - All bodies are good bodies **P**
- 10 - Born out of the fat acceptance movement, but no longer connected **N/Ne**
- 11 - Tarnished **Ne**
- 12 - Sadly a trend **Ne**

### 5.3 Research ethics

Due to the popularity of social media, academic studies of online interaction have increased exponentially in recent years. This has also raised concerns about the ethical guidelines of the study of social media and online communities. Which online data are appropriate to use in academic research? Does the researcher need to obtain permission from the participants of online discourse to study it? How can we protect the privacy of the participants? Currently, there are no universal guidelines when it comes to the use of public blog texts as research material. Some researchers consider all publicly available online material that is freely accessible without registration eligible for use without asking for permission (Davenport et al., 2018; Herring, 1996, p. 5; Paccagnella, 1997). Others consider it enough to inform the bloggers about the study and include the blogs in their data if the blog authors do not explicitly forbid them (Myers, 2010, p. 162). In such cases, not

replying to the researcher's email is interpreted as consenting to the use of the blog material.

In the present study, I only included blogs whose authors had given me their explicit consent to use their blogs as research material in the corpus. Permission was requested via email (Appendix 1). It is stated in the European Commission's guidelines for ethics and data protection (2018, p. 10) that a research subject's agreement "may take the form of a written statement, which may be collected by electronic means, or an oral statement". Copies of the emails where the bloggers give their consent for using their blogs in the study were saved and stored on my personal computer as well as on a password-protected, personal server. Any questions the bloggers had were also responded to via email, and I only included the blog in the data when I was certain the blogger had 1) understood what I was planning to do with the blog data, and 2) explicitly stated that I had permission to use the blog data.

The names of the bloggers, as well as other people mentioned in the blog texts (e.g. friends, spouses), were omitted from the examples used in the research articles, as promised in my initial email to the bloggers (see Appendix 1).<sup>33</sup> However, when it comes to public blog texts, omitting names and pseudonymization do not guarantee anonymity, since the blogger's identity can be revealed by searching for the examples on a search engine such as Google. On the use of public (open-source) online data, the European Commission's (2018, p. 13) guidelines state that the fact the data is public does not guarantee it is ethical to use it; the researcher "must assess whether those persons actually intended to make their information public (e.g. in the light of the privacy settings or limited audience to which the data were made available)", and there should not be "any reasonable expectation of privacy" from the participants. As the blogs in my data were specifically meant for public viewing, even allowing and encouraging comments, linking and sharing from the general public, I consider there to be a clear intent of making the texts publicly available.

As for the comments, it would have been virtually impossible to obtain consent from each and every person who had posted a comment on one or more of the blogs in the data, especially considering the fact that many of the blogs allow anonymous comments, and commenters can also use several different pseudonyms. Since it is the blogger herself who moderates the commenting section of her blog, I considered it more important to obtain the bloggers' permission for studying the public comments on their blogs. In the examples used in the articles, I

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<sup>33</sup> With the exception of public figures, such as celebrities or politicians, mentioned by the bloggers.

do not refer to any outside commenters by name. However, if a comment has been posted by another blogger who participated in the study, I have mentioned it (e.g. “comment in Blog 4 by the author of Blog 2”).

In the analysis of the questionnaire responses in Article 4, I use pseudonyms for the respondents. Moreover, I used different categorization schemes for the questionnaire responses and the blog data, so that it would be more difficult to connect the responses of a particular blogger to their public blogs (see also section 5.1.2). The questionnaires do not contain any questions on sensitive information such as race, religion or sexual orientation, with the exception of one question on gender identity in the 2017 questionnaire. The bloggers were not requested to give any identifying personal information such as (real) names, addresses or dates of birth. I did ask them to include their blog addresses so that I personally would have an identifier for each respondent, but the blog addresses are not connected to the questionnaire responses in the actual analysis in Article 4.

Concerning data collection and storage, my research is in compliance with the ethical guidelines for research in the humanities and social and behavioral sciences provided by the Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK). The research I conducted did not include any features that would have required submitting a research plan to ethical review (see the Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics, 2009, p. 3).<sup>34</sup> In Finland, only medical research involving human beings is regulated by law; however, research in the humanities is generally expected to follow the ethical guidelines recommended by TENK.

When considering the ethical aspects of my research, my dual role of researcher and blogger also needs to be addressed. The motivation for this study has its origins partly in my personal experiences as a fashion blogger, and as a plus-size woman. I have authored my own blog since 2011.<sup>35</sup> In addition, I have been a reader of fashion blogs (both plus-size and straight-size) for more than a decade. I am aware of the fact that my personal background as a blogger provides me with a specific angle to the research topic – not to mention increased responsibility when it comes to maintaining objectivity. However, in my view, my existing knowledge of fashion blogging practices has been beneficial for the study. According to Kytölä (2017, p. 71), it is ideal for a researcher to be “immersed” in the discourse

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<sup>34</sup> TENK recently issued a new set of recommendations that were published on September 19, 2019 and are in force from October 1, 2019. However, the 2009 guidelines apply to research that commenced within a research organization before this organization signed up to the new guidelines <https://www.tenk.fi/en/ethical-review-in-finland>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.curvaceousconfidence.com/>

of the (online) community they analyze, because it makes it easier for them to detect in-group practices and meanings, such as expressions of jocularity and sarcasm.

As I was a reader of some of the blogs investigated in this dissertation prior to starting my research, in addition to being a part of the same Facebook group as the participants, I can be considered a *peripheral member* (Wenger, 1998) of the blogging community (of practice). Similar to Cooper (2016, pp. 4-5), who has studied fat activism while also participating in the movement herself, I utilized my knowledge and expertise in the field – plus-size fashion blogging – while conducting in-depth research on other actors in the same field. The blog corpus contains 45 comments posted by me, but as I had written these comments prior to starting my research, I included them in the corpus and treated them in the same way as any other comments in the data. As the corpus contains altogether 32,737 comments, my comments make up 0,14 % of the commenting section sub-corpus analyzed in Article 3. The percentage of words written by me in the commenting section corpus is 0,1%. There are two occurrences of body descriptors in the comments I posted – one occurrence of “big” and one occurrence of “wide” – and these occurrences were included in the frequencies of body descriptors calculated in Article 3. As for the qualitative studies, there were two comments posted by me in the data sample of 100 posts and 496 comments studied in Article 1, and three comments posted by me in the data sample of 200 posts and 1066 comments studied in Article 2. My comments were not a factor in choosing the posts for analysis.

Although familiarity with the discursive and linguistic practices of a group can be an advantage, it also contains some risks when it comes to conducting the analysis. In some cases, familiarity may lead to the researcher overlooking certain features or taking them for granted. Gee (2011, p. 20) stresses the fact that if the researcher is an “insider” to the group they study, they must “learn to look at the data the way an outsider would”. As I am, in Gee’s terms, an *insider* to the community investigated in the present study, I have attempted to observe the data from an outsider’s point of view – although I am aware that this is not always entirely possible. However, the comments provided by my supervisors, the peer reviewers of each of the four articles, and numerous colleagues at conferences, workshops and seminars have been immensely helpful in identifying issues that for me, as an “insider”, would have perhaps otherwise seemed obvious.



## 6 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The four peer-reviewed articles included in this dissertation are centered around three main themes: **community**, **identity** and **empowerment**. Article 1 focuses on the community-building aspects of blogging through a qualitative study of blog texts and comments that is based on Herring's (2004) CMDA approach, as well as the community of practice framework (Wenger, 1998). Articles 2 and 3 focus on the linguistic and discursive construction of identity in the blogs, using qualitative (discourse-analytic) and quantitative (corpus-linguistic) methods, respectively. Finally, the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of questionnaire responses in Article 4 focuses on the potential processes of empowerment involved in writing a blog and interacting with other bloggers.

Although the individual articles can be classified under particular themes, the concepts of community, identity and empowerment are all present throughout the articles, and they also overlap. For example, the feeling of belonging to a specific community affects the ways in which a person constructs their identity, and specific community- and identity-building practices may result in empowerment over time (Batenburg & Das, 2015; Chittenden, 2010; Soon & Kluver, 2014).

However, for clarity, the key findings of the articles are summarized in three parts in the following sub-sections, according to the three themes of community, identity and empowerment. Thus, the first sub-section discusses mainly the findings of Article 1, the second sub-section focuses on Articles 2 and 3, and the final sub-section addresses the findings of Article 4.

### 6.1 Building community

Three categories of practices for community-building were observed in the blog posts that described interactions with other bloggers: 1) a sense of belonging to a group, 2) a sense of solidarity among plus-size fashion consumers, and 3) a sense of support. The bloggers portrayed their sense of belonging to a group as a novel experience – something they had been missing in their pre-blogging lives – and as

something that had particular significance to plus-size women because of their marginalized position in both society and fashion. As the author of Blog 6 put it, seeing women who looked similar to her walking on the catwalk at the Plus North fashion event “completely overwhelmed” her and “opened a whole world up to [her] that [she] didn’t really know existed”. For her, being able to relate to people in a **fashion context** had not been possible before she started blogging and interacting with other bloggers at events such as Plus North. Achieving this sense of belonging was, however, a gradual process. Several bloggers expressed feelings of initial nervousness and anxiety when interacting with other bloggers offline – in particular, novice bloggers were intimidated by more established bloggers that were higher up in the blogging hierarchy (see also Chittenden, 2010, p. 514). However, despite these mentions of initial apprehension, all references to other bloggers in the data sample were framed as positive; this was especially visible in the frequent use of positive adjectives such as “lovely” and “wonderful” in connection to other bloggers’ names.

In blog posts describing events organized by fashion brands, the bloggers expressed demands for the same treatment and options as thinner women. The need for visibility and acceptance as consumers of fashion was highlighted both on a personal level, and in terms of the larger plus-size community. While representatives of fashion brands were included in the community in some of the posts, the brands were also openly criticized if they failed to meet the demands of the consumers – by contrast, such criticisms were not directed at fellow bloggers in any of the posts. Solidarity towards other bloggers was also apparent in linking practices, crediting others for their work (e.g. when borrowing photographs), as well as in the use of positive speech acts such as complimenting and congratulating. The author of Blog 9, for example, congratulated three other community members for being nominated for a blogging award, referring to them with affectionate nicknames such as “uber babes” and “sister from another mister” – despite not being nominated herself. The presence of such supportive practices in blog texts is particularly interesting when contrasted with the questionnaire data from 2017 (see section 6.3 and Article 4), where competitiveness within the blogosphere was highlighted.

Several characteristic features of a community of practice could be observed in the blog posts where other bloggers were mentioned. There were boundary markers, such as the use of the inclusive pronouns **we/us/our** when referring to community members, as well as in-group linguistic and discursive features, such as vocabulary related to plus-size fashion and routinized ways of referring to other

bloggers. Evidence of roles, hierarchies and established norms could also be observed in, for example, the practices of linking to others' blogs and crediting others.

The results of Article 1 challenge the theoretical concept of the virtual community, and I argue that when discussing modern, online-based aggregations of people, the community of practice approach is a better theoretical starting point. Moreover, my findings highlight how the term **virtual community** in itself is outdated, since digital communication is now a part of everyday life, and the line between offline and online friendships has become blurred. Although the bloggers in my data expressed a sense of community, many of them explicitly describing feelings of belonging to a community, their interactions were not restricted to the virtual world. Rather, their blogs appear to have acted as a stepping-stone into a network of relationships with multiple actors ranging from other bloggers to representatives of plus-size fashion brands. Interactions based on mutual engagement through blogs – regular reading, commenting and linking – have resulted in other types of interactions, including face-to-face meetings and commercial collaborations.

Thus, alternatives for the concept of the virtual community are needed. In her work on workplace email communication, Hössjer (2013, p. 618) presents the term *digitally-based community of practice* as an online-based alternative for what she refers to as *physically-based communities of practice*. While the term in itself appears to be a suitable replacement for virtual community, Hössjer's (2013, p. 618) definition is too narrow for two reasons. First, Hössjer considers digitally- and physically-based communities of practice as **separate entities** instead of interwoven and overlapping. Second, she states that a digitally-based community of practice is “typically (although not necessarily) [...] realized through one medium (email, a chat room, etc.)” (Hössjer, 2013, p. 618). As these two aspects of Hössjer's framework are problematic in the context of both the present study and modern online interaction on a more general level, I suggest the term *digitally-driven community of practice* as an alternative.

While the origins of a digitally-driven community of practice are rooted in online communication, the interactions between participants are not restricted to a particular medium, nor do they necessarily remain separate from offline relationships. As the findings of Article 4 illustrate, in addition to meeting offline, bloggers also use a variety of online media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) other than their blogs to interact with each other (see section 6.3). Thus, the key difference between a digitally-based (Hössjer, 2013) and a digitally-driven

community of practice is that in the case of the latter, the practices the community members engage in on a specific online platform (such as blogs) are, in most cases, merely a **starting point**. The rules, values, and in-group behaviors that are established within an online community are the **driving force** behind a (potentially) more widespread network of participants, as well as **ways of participating**. Such networks have the potential to evolve both in terms of their membership – in addition to bloggers, blog readers and representatives of the fashion industry, for example, can become members – and in terms of platforms (other social media, offline meetings). When a community spreads to other platforms outside of its starting point, its boundaries become less clear than those of a community that is situated only on one particular platform. For this reason, the role of group-specific linguistic and discursive features is even more emphasized in constructing membership in a digitally-driven community of practice.

The results of Article 1 also demonstrate that Herring's (2004) CMDA model needs revising as a response to the rapidly changing world of digital media. Public social media platforms that are popular in contemporary Western society, such as blogs, Instagram and YouTube, are mostly built around asynchronous communication.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, this communication can take place simultaneously on multiple sites; for example, an Instagram comment can reference a blog post, or a blogger can embed a link to a YouTube video that includes comments from viewers on her blog. Herring's model is lacking particularly when it comes to its interactional aspects (e.g. patterns of turn-taking), as it was designed for studying online communication with more traditionally conversational (and often synchronous) features, such as chat room and discussion forum interactions. The level of *social behavior* in Herring's model can also be critiqued, as there are phenomena on all levels of language use, including the levels of *structure*, *meaning* and *interaction*, that construct social relations and hierarchies. For example, "us vs. them" pronoun use is classified as a structural feature in Herring's (2004, p. 361) model, but in my data, it is also used for drawing boundaries between social groups, such as plus-size women and thin women, or bloggers and non-bloggers (see also section 6.2 and Article 2).

Herring herself (2018) has addressed the fact that, in its original form, the CMDA approach works best on textual – as opposed to multimodal – discourse, and for studies of communication that takes place through one semiotic mode. As

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<sup>36</sup> With the exception of live streams where commenters can communicate directly with the person producing content. Both YouTube and Instagram currently have a live-streaming function.

a response to the constantly evolving CMC technologies, Herring (2013; 2018) has proposed changes to the CMDA model, as well as encouraging other researchers to move forward in developing new methods for analyzing CMD. However, much of this discussion focuses on multimodal online communication in particular. My work in Article 1, however, illustrates that there are aspects of CMDA that can be challenging even when studying purely textual communication.

An interesting finding regarding the relationships between different members of the blogging community is the fact that all mentions of other bloggers in the dataset for Article 1 were decidedly positive and supportive. As no community is completely harmonious and conflict-free, an analysis such as the one I carried out in Article 1 most likely does not reveal the whole truth about the blogging community's in-group relations. The bloggers may want to avoid "open" conflict with other bloggers on their blogs for multiple reasons. First of all, a blog with an overall positive tone may appear more attractive to clothing brands and other potential commercial collaborators. Second of all, the bloggers' avoidance of publicly criticizing other bloggers on their blogs can also be an effort to maintain harmony within the community. However, conflicts can still take place on other channels that are less directly connected to the personal brands the bloggers have created on their blogs, such as on other social media platforms or in **behind the scenes** conversations. Regardless of the reasoning behind only discussing other bloggers in positive contexts in public blog texts, it is important to be aware of these possible factors and to use other research methods to supplement the analysis of blog material when possible. Methods such as interviews and questionnaires are well-suited for this purpose (see also Androutsopoulos, 2008).

## 6.2 Constructing identities

While several intersecting identities can be detected in the interactions of plus-size fashion bloggers, the majority of the identity work within the group of women I studied focused around the idea of accepting – even celebrating – a body type that is traditionally shunned in both society and the fashion industry. There appears to be a particular identity category that is looked up to and sought after within the community of plus-size bloggers. I refer to it as the *body positive blogger identity*.

The bloggers expressed their social identity as a part of a community of plus-size fashion bloggers in several ways, at the same time drawing boundaries between members of this particular group and other groups (e.g. thin or straight-size

women, women who do not blog) (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Grad & Martín Rojo 2008; Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Sophocleous & Themistocleous, 2014; Tajfel, 1982). This was evident, for example, in the practices of inclusive (and exclusive) pronoun use similar to those present in Article 1. In the data sample I studied in Article 2, the bloggers used **they** for outsiders and **we** for other plus-size bloggers (see also Davenport et al, 2018). In addition to pronoun use, stylistic features were also utilized in drawing the boundaries of the body positive blogger identity group. More neutral language was used when describing outsiders, whereas jocularity was often present in describing insiders. The author of Blog 4, for example, jokingly referred to other plus-size women as “fellow chubsters/fat chicks”, while using the more polite “slim friends” when talking about thin women.

There was evidence of norms that had been established within the community concerning the use of body-related descriptors. For example, the majority of the bloggers used the term **fat** intentionally and without negative connotations. However, the bloggers also engaged in processes of (re)negotiation over the use of certain vocabulary according to what was perceived as acceptable within the community. Some bloggers considered the use of **fat** acceptable only in specific contexts and by specific people (e.g. when fat people **themselves** used it). The author of Blog 11 self-identified with the identity category of a **BBW** (an acronym of “big, beautiful woman”), considering it a term that celebrates the beauty of plus-size women, but some of her readers criticized her use of the term because of its connotations to fetishism and pornography.

Narratives were commonly used in the identity construction practices of the bloggers. Puschmann (2013, p. 91) points out that “[the] core cohesive element of a blog is time” – as discussed earlier in section 4.2.2, the fact that blog posts are presented in reverse-chronological order and old texts are archived on the sites makes blogs themselves narratives, where changes in identity can be observed over the course of the blog’s history. However, the bloggers in my data also utilized a narrative style in individual blog posts where they discussed their past experiences and reflected on the changes that had taken place in their relationships with their bodies. Body positivity and self-acceptance were frequently characterized as **journeys** and discovering plus-size fashion blogs and/or starting one’s own blog was described as a turning point on such a journey by several bloggers. For these women, blogging had helped turn self-loathing into self-love. They perceived that through this process, they had become different people. Similar *turning point* discourse was also observed by Davenport et al. (2018) in their study of *size*

*acceptance bloggers*. Learning about alternative perspectives to mainstream media's medically focused discourse on fatness and size had helped the bloggers in Davenport et al.'s (2018) data reconstruct their relationships with their bodies.

However, while the bloggers in the present study can be considered to break away from mainstream media's and society's (bodily) norms by becoming a part of the plus-size blogging community, there is evidence of normativity, hierarchies and restrictions within the blogging community itself. Restrictive in-group norms were especially visible in the weight-loss discourse present in the blogs. Bloggers expressed their worry over "betraying" their community by losing weight, reassured their audience that they were "still body positive", and justified their weight-loss with non-aesthetic reasons, such as "trying to be healthier". There appeared to be a consensus within the community that weight-loss is at odds with the body positive ideology; one cannot claim to have the categorical identity of a body positive blogger whilst losing weight. Instead of seeing a person's relationship to their body as fluid and dynamic, the body positive blogger identity seemed to rely on the idea of static and stable self-love – accepting and celebrating one's body **as it is now**.

Interestingly, however, all comments on weight-loss related posts in the data sample were supportive – while negative comments could have been deleted by the bloggers, it nevertheless appeared that the concern over weight-loss was mostly the bloggers themselves self-policing the boundaries of the community. Thus, weight-loss in itself does not seem to be unacceptable within the community – it is how a person **expresses** their desire to lose weight that is significant. The author of Blog 16, for example, stressed that losing weight was her personal decision through repeated use of the first-person singular pronoun: "I feel like I'm above my maximum weight for my body [...] I'm doing this for me..." By highlighting her agency in making the decision to lose weight, the blogger avoids performing a *face-threatening act* towards other members of the community who do not wish to lose weight (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

As different ways of describing the plus-size body had appeared relevant for the community- and identity-constructing practices in both Articles 1 and 2, I wanted to further investigate the role of body descriptors. In Article 3, I carried out an in-depth analysis of the variety of body descriptors used by all bloggers in the corpus. Body descriptors can be considered particularly significant when it comes to the identity construction of plus-size women. As LeBesco (2001, pp. 76-77) states, changing the ways in which plus-size/fat women are talked about can be viewed as a way for them to "take back" their agency and to redefine the discourses

surrounding the fat body in society. By describing their bodies with specific terms, plus-size women define both how they want to be seen by others, and what kind of vocabulary they self-identify – and do not identify – with.

In the corpus as a whole, the most common body descriptors turned out to be **fat**, **plus-size**, **big**, **large**, and **curvy**. While this finding was fairly unsurprising based on my previous observations of the bloggers' language use in the qualitative studies, there were interesting differences between individual bloggers and sub-categories of bloggers, as particular terms (such as **BBW**) were used frequently by some, and very infrequently (or not at all) by others. When comparing the blog posts and commenting sections, it became clear that the bloggers used a wider variety of terms than the commenters – however, there were also some blogs in the corpus where the audience used more descriptors than the blogger herself, such as Blog 1.

When it comes to the differences between the three sub-categories of bloggers introduced in section 5.1.2, fat activists, unsurprisingly, used the word **fat** more often than the other two categories of bloggers, but the overall difference in the frequency of body descriptors was not statistically significant between fat activists and fashionistas. All-rounders, who posted more on topics that did not require discussing body shape or size, used body descriptors less than the other two groups (the difference was statistically significant). Interestingly, in the commenting sections, the differences between all three groups were statistically significant, with the commenters of fat activist blogs using body descriptors the most, and the commenters of all-rounder blogs using them the least. There are several possible reasons for these differences, and they require further research. It may be that fat activist bloggers respond to comments more actively, thus increasing the number of body descriptors in the commenting sections (as the commenting sections also contain response comments from the blog authors). Another possible reason is that the readers of fat activist blogs use body descriptors in their comments more frequently because they are more likely to mimic the core members of their community (the bloggers). This, in turn, could imply that there is a stronger sense of shared identity amongst the activism-focused bloggers (and their followers).

All in all, the results of Article 3 illustrate the variety within the plus-size blogosphere. While there are norms connected to the use of body descriptors – and, by extension, patterns of identity construction – within the community, these norms are more apparent in specific blogs. For example, throughout the study, the frequencies of the descriptors used in Blog 11 were notably high in comparison to the other blogs. This was most likely caused by the author's habit of writing meta-



discursive commentary on terminology (e.g. whether one should use a certain term when describing a plus-size person or not, in what contexts are different terms appropriate, and so on), as well as the relatively small size of the blog. The author of Blog 12, in contrast, used body descriptors rarely, and preferred traditionally positive or neutral descriptors such as **curvy** and **plus-size** over **fat**. Thus, Article 3 demonstrates why analyzing larger amounts of data is necessary in order to form a complete picture of a particular community. The quantitative data gives us information that is impossible to gain from a close reading of a small set of blog posts, while the qualitative analysis gives us context and helps us understand the **reasons** behind the differences in the use of specific linguistic and discursive features.

### 6.3 Establishing empowerment

The questionnaire data that was collected from the bloggers in 2015 and 2017 was used for the purposes of studying the empowerment potential of plus-size fashion blogging. As mentioned in the earlier sections, the interactions between the members of the blogging community that take place in public blog texts tend to be largely positive. However, in questionnaire responses, there is no audience consisting of followers and other bloggers. Because of this lack of audience, the community members are more straightforward about their experiences, as no *face-saving* practices (Brown & Levinson, 1987) are required. In addition to discussing the empowering aspects of blogging, the participants describe the difficulties and negativity they face as plus-size fashion bloggers. Thus, the questionnaire data also gives us more insight into the in-group dynamics of the blogging community.

In the responses to the 2015 questionnaire, the ages of the respondents ranged from 20-41 with a median age of 32. The respondents had different backgrounds in blogging; some of them were hobby-bloggers while some considered writing a blog a part-time occupation, and some bloggers had been blogging longer than others. In their responses, the bloggers emphasized the creative and interactional aspects when describing their motivations for blogging. Many of them had begun their **journey** into the blogosphere as readers of other blogs and started their own blog after being inspired by others. The bloggers also enjoyed the creative freedom enabled by blogging. Thus, both *agency-enhancing* and *community-building* (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012, p. 382) motivations for blogging could be detected in the responses. *Financial empowerment*, in other words the commercial aspect of blogging, was also

mentioned as a positive feature. However, the bloggers highlighted the fact that commercial gain should not be the main motivation for writing a blog. Similar to the blog readers in Hänninen's (2015) study, the bloggers expected authenticity from the other members of the blogging community.

The importance of interacting with others through blogging was heavily emphasized in the questionnaire responses. Most of the interactions with other bloggers were described as pleasant, but unlike the blog texts studied in Article 1, the questionnaire responses also contained criticism directed towards other bloggers. There were descriptions of instances when the bloggers did not get along, and negative social aspects of blogging, including jealousy, competitiveness, drama, bullying and trolling were mentioned. Some bloggers also stated that they felt pressured to provide new content on their blogs and struggled with stress and time management issues.

Most bloggers who responded to the questionnaire commented on others' blogs at least occasionally. However, responding to comments on their own blogs was viewed as a more important form of interaction. Other social media like Twitter and Facebook were also used to maintain relationships with other bloggers. Rather surprisingly, all of the bloggers had met other bloggers in face-to-face settings, 12 out of 13 in both blogging related events and in their spare time. These face-to-face interactions were described as mainly positive. Interestingly, the only blogger who described a negative experience was Anne<sup>37</sup> – the one blogger who had not met others in her spare time, only at blogging related events. A sense of communality could also be observed in the bloggers' reading preferences: 11 out of 13 bloggers said they were more likely to read plus-size fashion blogs than fashion blogs written by straight-size women. The most common reason for this was the desire to be able to relate to the blogger.

Communality also extended to individuals who were not bloggers, but **other people the bloggers had met as a result of blogging**. One of the bloggers, Jessica,<sup>38</sup> stated that she had met “wonderful people, bloggers and non-bloggers alike” whom she “never would have met had [she] not started blogging”. Jessica's statement can be interpreted to indicate that, at least from her point of view, the digitally-driven community of practice has come to include people who do not author blogs themselves. Due to the lack of context, we do not know exactly who these people are, but it is likely that Jessica is referring to either the followers of her

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<sup>37</sup> Pseudonym, see section 5.1.2.

<sup>38</sup> Pseudonym, see section 5.1.2.

blog who regularly interact with her online,<sup>39</sup> or people she has met at the fashion events she has participated in as a blogger (for example, the representatives of plus-size fashion brands, or other plus-size women who attend such events).

In general, the respondents viewed plus-size fashion blogs as a positive alternative to the discourse on women and fatness in the mainstream media. According to the bloggers, blogging enabled the women **themselves** to affect their portrayal and thus resulted in feelings of agency and being in control. When discussing terminology, being described as **plus-size** was viewed as acceptable by all respondents, although there were mentions of problems related to the ambiguity of the term. Ten out of 13 bloggers also considered **fat** a neutral, even positive word (“just an adjective”). Many had previously shied away from the word but accepted it when they started to accept themselves and “embrace” being a plus-size woman.

All nine bloggers who responded to the 2017 questionnaire agreed that the so-called plus-size blogging “scene” had changed in the two years that had passed since the first questionnaire. They also considered the plus-size fashion industry to have changed. Seven out of nine respondents felt that the changes in the blogging community had been negative. According to them, blogging in 2017 was commercialized and competitive; it had become more focused on products and brands, and less concerned with achieving visibility and representation for plus-size women. However, two people saw the increase in both the overall number of bloggers and the commercial opportunities available for bloggers as a positive change. Thus, the respondents had differing views on the effects that the increased commercialization of plus-size fashion blogging had on empowerment.

As for the changes in the plus-size fashion industry, the most positive change seemed to be the fact that the amount of options available for plus-size women had increased. However, brands were still criticized for their size ranges, the quality and style of clothing, and the lack of brick and mortar stores. For eight out of nine bloggers, their personal relationship to blogging had also changed. Some had shifted the focus of their blogs from fashion to other topics, while others were starting to lose interest in blogging in general, migrating to other social media platforms such as Instagram. Instagram, alongside YouTube, was considered to be the most influential social media platform in 2017 by the respondents.

There were no major differences in the bloggers’ attitudes towards the terms **plus-size** and **fat** between the 2015 and 2017 responses, as both were still viewed

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<sup>39</sup> It should be noted that in this context, the verb “meet” does not necessarily refer to a face-to-face meeting; one can also “meet” people, such as other bloggers and blog readers, online.

as necessary and mostly positive. However, there was more variation when it came to other body descriptors, which echoes the results of Article 3. Especially **curvy** received mixed reactions. Interestingly, six out of nine respondents problematized the term **body positivity**, connecting it to commercialization. One blogger, Tina,<sup>40</sup> claimed that big businesses used the body positivity movement to “edge out” fat people from previously empowering online spaces. Although body positivity as a term was not addressed in the 2015 questionnaire, being body positive was still portrayed as a desirable quality in the blog texts posted prior to January 2015, as the results of Article 2 suggest. **Fat acceptance**, on the other hand, was seen as a positive or neutral term by all respondents of the 2017 questionnaire, with no mentions of any problematic connotations.

The analysis of the questionnaire responses reflects several important phenomena related to plus-size fashion blogging and empowerment. Firstly, the bloggers construct blogging as a community-driven, interactional activity that enables peer support and a sense of belonging to a group. It also gives plus-size women a platform where they can express their creativity and personal sense of style, thus increasing their sense of agency. The second observation is that compared to the results of Article 1 (and, to an extent, Article 2), the analysis reveals more tension and conflicts between individual bloggers. As predicted, bloggers are more likely to discuss the negative aspects of the blogging community in questionnaire responses than they are in public blog texts. Thus, if only public blog data is investigated, some aspects of a blogging community may not be revealed to the researcher. Finally, the analysis highlights the changes happening in both the plus-size blogging community, and the world of blogging and social media in general. As online communities become more and more fragmented and spread out to different platforms, researchers need to develop new approaches to be able to study the consequences that this has for online communities of marginalized people.

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<sup>40</sup> Pseudonym, see section 5.1.2.

## 7 DISCUSSION

The results of the four articles presented in this dissertation will be of interest to both academia and the plus-size fashion industry. From an academic perspective, the theoretical and methodological approaches applied to the interaction within the plus-size fashion blogging community in my study can prove useful in studying other online groups; perhaps especially those that consist of socially marginalized individuals. From a commercial perspective, the study provides a critical, in-depth investigation of how plus-size women perceive their position in the field of fashion. This section discusses the theoretical, methodological and practical impact of my work, in addition to some concluding remarks and notes on possible further research.

### 7.1 Theoretical and methodological impact: A new model for studying online communities

The combinations of different methodological approaches (qualitative and quantitative) and different types of data (public blog texts and comments, questionnaire responses) used in this dissertation demonstrate the importance of approaching an (online) community from multiple perspectives. In Article 3, the corpus-linguistic analysis of the blog texts and commenting sections reveals statistically significant differences between different sub-categories of blogs (as well as individual blogs). Such differences are much less visible in qualitative analyses of small sub-corpora, such as Articles 1 and 2. However, the qualitative, discourse-analytic approach to the blog texts complements the corpus-based analysis by giving more context as to **why** these differences within the blogging community exist; for example, they illustrate the relevance of fat acceptance activism, in-group norms, and the bloggers' different blogging approaches.

Similarly, the findings of the questionnaires analyzed in Article 4 present a new perspective to the inner dynamics of the blogging community. When compared to the exceedingly positive (Article 1), or at least carefully polite (Article 2)

representations of interacting with other members of the blogging community in public blog texts, the questionnaire responses are, at times, rather critical of some aspects of blogging. Thus, while the individual methods used in the study all have their strengths and weaknesses, it is the way in which they are **combined** to shed light onto the different aspects of the plus-size blogging phenomenon that makes them valuable tools in the case of the present study and, potentially, in future studies of other groups.

When it comes to theoretical aspects, my research challenges and expands upon previous theoretical approaches to CMD, such as Herring's (2004) CMDA framework. I argue that the *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) as a theoretical framework is more applicable to studying modern online interaction within specific social groups than the somewhat troublesome concept of the *virtual community*. However, I also argue that the community of practice framework needs to be slightly adapted in the case of online-based communities such as the blogging community I investigated. Because the interaction within the community takes place on multiple platforms (several blogs, other social media, face-to-face meetings), the boundaries and the membership of the community are more fluid than in a traditional community of practice, such as a workplace environment. As a result, the linguistic and discursive practices that are used to highlight community membership become particularly important. I suggest the term *digitally-driven community of practice* as a new theoretical concept for describing communities such as the blogging community under investigation in this dissertation.

The present study also adds to the literature on identity, gender, and the body – particularly when it comes to the interdisciplinary field of fat studies. Linguistic perspectives to fatness and identity have so far been lacking, despite LeBesco (2001, p. 77) stating a need for such perspectives almost two decades ago. Based on the results of the four articles included in this dissertation, time appears to be an important factor in the discursive and linguistic construction of plus-size and fat identities. The bloggers included in the present study rarely used the terms **fatshion** or **fatshionista**, which have been consistently used in earlier literature on plus-size fashion bloggers (Connell, 2013; Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). In the questionnaire responses, the bloggers mainly associated these terms with social media hashtags. Similarly, the term **body positivity** was problematized because of its commodification in the majority of the responses to the 2017 questionnaire. However, when I searched the corpus consisting of blog texts that were posted pre-2015, none of the 92

occurrences I discovered – 45 hits for “body positivity”, 47 for “body positive” – had connotations to problematic commercialism. The main issues regarding body positivity in the blog corpus were those described in Article 2; the bloggers struggled with **defining** body positivity. For example, can you be body positive and lose weight; what is the relationship between body positivity and health; and what type of people can be considered body positive? Thus, the concern about body positivity becoming commercialized and being **taken away** from the original contributors to the movement (i.e. fat acceptance activists) appears to be a more recent phenomenon. Because of this, more explicitly diachronic perspectives into how fatness and the related terminology have been talked about over time are needed in the future.

The present study can be considered a basis for a model for studying the online interaction within specific (marginalized) communities through the following framework:

In order to gain a comprehensive view of the online community, at least two different sources of data (e.g. textual material collected from online discussions and interview/survey data) should be used. This enables the researcher to combine the analysis of micro- and macro-level features of online communication. Some phenomena that are apparent in, for example, one-on-one interview material, may not be present in the online-based data, and vice versa.

A combination of multiple theoretical and methodological approaches should be applied to the data. The use of quantitative methods, such as the corpus-linguistic analysis in the present study, helps us understand how widespread specific linguistic or discursive features are, and makes it easier to avoid cherry-picking. Qualitative approaches, on the other hand, deepen the researcher’s understanding of the societal factors that affect the use of certain features within specific groups.

Interaction and in-group norms should be emphasized in the analysis. When studying marginalized groups in particular, investigating power relations should not stop at the level of **the mainstream media/society vs. the marginalized group**. As illustrated in the four articles included in this dissertation, the divisions and hierarchies that can be found within the community itself may, in some cases, hinder the empowerment potential of marginalized individuals just as much as those present in mainstream media and society.

The participants’ different levels of engagement with the community and different ways of utilizing online resources also need to be acknowledged. Exploring the layers and variety within online communities helps avoid over-

generalization when describing specific social groups. For example, based on my results, we can observe that not all plus-size bloggers prioritize fat acceptance activism, and those that **do** prioritize it do so in different ways and to a different extent.

## 7.2 Practical impact

The practical impact of the study concerns both the future academic applications of the theoretical and methodological model described in section 7.1, and the potential benefits of the results for the plus-size fashion industry. As mentioned above, my framework for studying *digitally-driven communities of practice* is, potentially, especially beneficial to studies of online communities of marginalized people.<sup>41</sup> Even though different communities of marginalized people are likely to develop discursive and linguistic practices that are exclusive to that particular community, there are parallels that can be drawn between the plus-size fashion blogging community and other online communities consisting of marginalized individuals. For example, the *Pro-Ana* community (Yeshua-Katz, 2015) and other online aggregations of people living with eating disorders (Palmgren, 2015; Stommel, 2008) have practices that are comparable to those of the plus-size fashion bloggers. Similar to fat people, individuals living with eating disorders are stigmatized – even demonized – in the mainstream media and in society. Studying such groups using the approach outlined in this dissertation can help provide a broader, more multifaceted perspective to their in-group dynamics.

As Herring and Anroutsopoulos (2015, p. 141) state, studies of CMD can lead to “more comprehensive theories on discourse and social action” – the more we know about the ways in which marginalized individuals use CMD to empower themselves, the more we learn about the societal issues that these groups experience as disempowering. For example, for the participants of the present study, the fact that they were able to **affect their representation** in the blogosphere was a crucial factor in increasing their sense of equality (see Article 4). The way they were portrayed – or **perceived** to have been portrayed – in the mainstream media was more negative because in the media, fat women lacked this type of agency. The importance of being able to affect one’s representation

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<sup>41</sup> While the role of digitally-driven communities of marginalized people is underlined in the present study, the framework I present above can also be applied to other types of data and to other types of communities.



through blogging could be of interest to, for example, NGOs working with marginalized groups.

The findings of this dissertation also create a basis for further linguistic explorations on fashion and fatness. The results show that the role of language is, undoubtedly, central in the ways in which plus-size women build communities, construct new identities and (re)define themselves as empowered agents in the field of fashion. However, the relevance of linguistic research does not stop here. As the public discussions on the societal marginalization of fat people progress, new terminology for different counter-movements is also coined – for example Davenport et al. (2018) use the term “size acceptance”, whereas Cooper (2016, p. 2), who focuses on issues concerning **fat people** in particular, uses “fat activism”, “fat liberation”, “fat politics”, “fat pride” and “fat rights”. As both of the aforementioned studies are fairly recent, parallels can be drawn between their terminological choices and the findings of the present study. It is possible that the widespread commercialization of the *body positivity movement* has caused fat activists – including both researchers and bloggers – to return to the roots of the *fat acceptance movement* by promoting the use of terms that are explicitly related to size and fatness and thus harder for outsiders to appropriate.

Finally, the findings of the present study can also be of use to the plus-size fashion industry. Despite their different backgrounds and approaches to blogging about fashion, all bloggers in my data express a need for improvement in the industry. From explicitly stating what they want as consumers (a wider size range, opportunities to shop in store as opposed to just online, clothing that follows similar trends as fashion for straight-size people) to expressing how they wish to be addressed (the use of descriptive terminology), the present study provides new information on how plus-size women perceive their position in the field of fashion. While some companies that focus on plus-size fashion already consult and collaborate with popular plus-size fashion bloggers, academic research offers a broader, more critical perspective to plus-size fashion marketing. For example, a fashion brand representative may not be aware of the potentially problematic meanings associated with referring to their plus-size clothing line as the “Curve Range” or posting slogans such as “real women have curves” on social media. Through research on blogs and other types of social media content produced by plus-size women, it is possible to gain new insights into making the field of fashion more equal and inclusive.

### 7.3 Concluding remarks

The discursive and linguistic analyses of blog data and questionnaire responses illustrate that there is more variety within the plus-size fashion blogging community than previous studies have demonstrated. While the fat acceptance and body positivity movements are undeniably linked to the so-called *fatosphere* (Dickins et al., 2011), it would be an over-generalization to say that all bloggers who identify as plus-size and blog about fashion subscribe to these movements. Even within a relatively small community of bloggers from a particular cultural and geographical area (The United Kingdom), a wide range of approaches to blogging about fatness and fashion can be observed. However, despite this variation, these bloggers appear to experience a strong sense of community and shared identity, which is also reflected in their linguistic and discursive practices; there are things that are acceptable and unacceptable to say or do within the boundaries of the community. Thus, blogging becomes a balancing act between expressing one's personal identity and contributing to the wider discourse of the blogging community.

When I started this research project in the fall of 2014, the plus-size fashion blogging phenomenon was steadily gaining more and more popularity and visibility. During the past few years, however, there have been major changes in both plus-size and straight-size fashion blogging. More importantly, the field of fashion itself is currently at a turning point because of the global climate crisis. As consumers start to prioritize clothing that is either recycled or produced in a way that is environmentally sustainable (Matthews & Rothenberg, 2017), it will be interesting to see the response of the plus-size fashion industry, as (fashionable) thrifted or vintage clothing is typically particularly hard to find in larger sizes. One might see a new niche for plus-size fashion bloggers here – instead of presenting brand new clothing, bloggers may start to share advice on how to alter clothing, or where to shop for ethically-made plus-size fashion.

As the term **body positivity** becomes more and more popular – and increasingly commodified – on social media, further research into this movement and the contexts in which body positivity discourse is used is needed. Questions of intersectionality and gender are particularly important here, as the majority of body positive online spaces are geared towards women and, even more significantly, despite its claims of inclusivity, the movement continues to be dominated by white, cis-gendered, middle-class women (Sastre, 2014, p. 935). Many of these women post content featuring beautiful clothing, impeccable makeup and flattering

lighting, yet highlight the fact that they are displaying their “real” selves in the name of body positivity (van Es, 2019).

The results of Article 4 in particular emphasize the changes within the digitally-driven community of practice of plus-size fashion bloggers I investigated in this doctoral dissertation. At the time of writing this summary in the fall of 2019, some of the bloggers I studied have either abandoned their original blogs and moved on to other social media channels, or broadened their brand by, for example, starting a YouTube channel in addition to blogging. As illustrated by the questionnaire responses in Article 4, social media that emphasize **visuality**, such as Instagram and YouTube, were already seen as more important and influential than blogs in 2017. In addition to the increased visualization of CMC, the demand for multimodal online content creation appears to be growing. Many bloggers now identify as social media *influencers*, who create – and are expected to do so by their followers – content using several different modes of online communication, ranging from blogging to microblogging and video production (Abidin, 2016; Torres, Augusto & Matos, 2019). The rise of this type of *influencer culture*, as well as the increasing commercialization of social media, pose new and complex questions regarding the empowerment potential that online communication has for marginalized groups. Exploring these questions is the next step for the *digitally-driven community of practice* framework presented in this dissertation.

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# APPENDIX 1: EMAILS SENT TO THE BLOGGERS

The original email sent out to 35 bloggers in January 2015

“Hi!

I’m a PhD student and a plus size style blogger from Finland. You may have seen my name or a link to my blog in the #PSBloggers Facebook group. I’m contacting you because of my PhD thesis, which investigates plus size style blogs from the perspective of online community.

After writing a blog for three years, I have noticed that as well as being channels for self-expression, blogs can also have community-building features. I chose to focus my research on plus size style blogs because in my experience, there is a particularly strong sense of community among us plus size bloggers. Plus size women are often marginalized by traditional fashion media (such as fashion magazines), so discussing fashion online is perhaps especially important to us.

I would love for you and your blog to be involved in my project. My plan is to investigate the ways in which a sense of community is expressed in blog texts and comments posted in several different plus size style blogs. All examples from the blog texts that are used in my thesis will be anonymous – I will not publish any bloggers’ or commenters’ screen names or real names. Any other names that appear in the blog posts will also be changed or omitted.

I’m only going to study written material, which means I will not use any photographs or videos posted in the blogs.

If you are willing to let me use your blog in my research, I would also appreciate it if you could answer a questionnaire I will send out at a later time. Naturally, the answers to the questionnaire will also remain anonymous.

Please let me know whether or not you would like to be involved. If you don’t want your blog to be used in the research, I will of course respect your decision. I also welcome all questions and comments regarding my project.

Best wishes,

Hanna Rynnänen

Doctoral Programme in Language Studies, University of Tampere, Finland

Email: rynnänen.hanna.k@student.uta.fi

Blog: <http://koyhatkauniitjakurvikkaat.blogspot.fi/>”

The cover letter for the 2015 questionnaire

“Dear [blogger’s name],

I contacted you in January regarding my PhD project on plus size style blogs. I am now sending you a link to an online questionnaire on the same topic. I would be very grateful if you could find the time to answer the questionnaire – every reply helps a lot!

The answers you submit will be used only for research purposes. The results of my study will be reported in the PhD thesis I am currently working on at the University of Tampere, Finland. My thesis instructors are professors Päivi Pahta and Jukka Tyrkkö.

It will take you about 15 minutes to answer the questionnaire. Please submit your answers before June 8th, 2015.

Follow the link below to get to the questionnaire:

[Google forms link]

If the link does not work or you have other technical problems with the questionnaire, please send me an e-mail.

Thank you very much for your help!

Kind Regards,

Hanna Rynnänen

Doctoral student

The School of Language, Translation and Literary Studies

University of Tampere, Finland

Blogger at “The Poor, the Pretty and the Curvy”  
(<http://koyhatkauniitjakurvikkaat.blogspot.fi/>)”

The cover letter for the 2017 questionnaire

“Dear [blogger’s name],

In 2015, I sent you a questionnaire about blogging and being plus-size as a part of my PhD research at the University of Tampere, Finland. I’m doing a short follow-up survey to complete the previous study, as well as to see if and how things in blogging and plus-size fashion have changed in the past two years. It will take about 10 minutes to respond.

My research has progressed according to schedule and your previous responses have been very helpful. Once again, I am extremely grateful for your help and support during this process!

The responses will be used for research purposes only and they will be anonymised before publication. I am conducting research for a PhD thesis at the University of Tampere, and my thesis supervisors are Päivi Pahta, Jukka Tyrkkö and Minna Nevala.

In case you have any problems with the questionnaire or other questions, please feel free to contact me.

When you get to the last page of the questionnaire, remember to press “SUBMIT” so that I will receive your responses!

Here is the link to the questionnaire on Google Forms:

[Google forms link]

Thank you very much for your time! I hope you have a wonderful spring and summer 2017.

Kind regards,

Hanna Limatius (née Ryyänen)

PhD candidate / Grant researcher

University of Tampere, Finland

Blogger at [www.curvaceousconfidence.com](http://www.curvaceousconfidence.com)'

## APPENDIX 2: THE QUESTIONNAIRES

The 2015 questionnaire



## A Study on Plus Size Style Blogs

Answer the questions below (unless told otherwise in the description). Depending on the question, either choose the appropriate option or write your answer in the field provided for it. Remember to submit your answers when you are done.

\* Required

### Personal information

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1. Age: \*

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2. Years as a blogger: \*

How long have you been blogging?  
Mark only one oval.

- Less than a year
- 1-2 years
- 2-3 years
- More than 3 years

3. For you, blogging is: \*

Mark only one oval.

- A hobby
- A part-time occupation
- A full-time occupation
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Is your current blog your first blog? \*

Mark only one oval.

- My current blog is my first blog
- My current blog is not my first blog

5. The name of your current blog \*

The name of your blog will not be published. If you currently have more than one blog, name the blog that focuses on plus size style and fashion.

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### Blogging

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6. What made you decide to start writing a blog? \*

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7. What are the best things about blogging? \*

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8. What are the worst things about blogging? \*

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9. What features make you want to read another person's blog? \*

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10. Do you comment on other blogs? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Often
- Never
- Sometimes

**11. What kind of posts do you tend to comment on?**

Answer this question if you replied "Often" or "Sometimes" to the previous question. Skip this question if you replied "Never" to the previous question.

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**12. Do you respond to the comments other people post on your blog? \***

Mark only one oval.

- Often
- Never
- Sometimes

**13. What kind of comments do you tend to respond to?**

Answer this question if you replied "Often" or "Sometimes" to the previous question. Skip this question if you replied "Never" to the previous question.

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**14. What kind of comments do you NOT respond to and why?**

Skip this question if you always respond to all comments.

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**15. In what ways do you link to other blogs in your blog? \***

You can choose more than one option.

Check all that apply.

- I have a blogroll
- If I mention another blogger in a post, I link to their blog
- I do not link to other blogs in my blog
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

16. Which social media channels (other than blogs) do you use to keep in touch with other bloggers? \*

You can choose more than one option.

Check all that apply.

- Twitter
- Facebook
- Google+
- Instagram
- I do not use social media to keep in touch with other bloggers
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

17. Do you ever meet other bloggers in real life? \*

Mark only one oval.

- Yes, both at blogging events and in my spare time
- Yes, but only at blogging events
- Yes, but only in my spare time (I have not attended blogging events)
- No, but I would like to meet them
- No, and I do not particularly want to meet them
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

18. If you have met other bloggers in real life, how would you describe the experience?

Answer this question if you have met other bloggers. Skip this question if you have not met other bloggers.

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## Plus size blogs

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19. What made you decide to start blogging about plus size fashion? \*

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20. How do you feel about the term "plus size"? \*

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21. How do you feel about the word "fat"? \*

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22. How would you feel about your blog being described as a "plus size style blog"? \*

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23. How would you feel about your blog being described as a "fatshion blog"? \*

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24. Among style blogs, are you more likely to read blogs whose authors are other plus size women? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

**25. Why do you / do you not read style blogs written by other plus size women?**

Elaborate on your answer to the previous question. If you are more likely to read style blogs written by plus size women, why? If you are not more likely to read them, why not?

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**26. What are your favorite plus size style blogs and why?**

Name at least two blogs. Skip this question if you do not read plus size style blogs.

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**27. Do you think plus size women are portrayed differently in the blogosphere than they are in mainstream media (such as TV, magazines, newspapers)? What kind of differences have you noticed? \***

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## **Feedback**

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**28. Feedback on this questionnaire**

Here you can add any additional comments regarding the questionnaire. All feedback is welcome.

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## Plus-size style/fashion blogging in 2017

This is a follow-up to a questionnaire you were sent in 2015. Please respond to all questions. Do not forget to submit your answers when you are done.

\* Required

### Background information

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1. Age \*

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Gender

*Mark only one oval.*

Male

Female

Prefer not to say

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. The name of your blog \*

This information will not be published in connection with your responses.

\_\_\_\_\_

### Plus-size blogging in 2017

4. Do you think the plus-size style/fashion blogging "scene" has changed in the past couple of years? If it has changed, how?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you think the plus-size fashion industry has changed in the past couple of years? If it has changed, how?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. Has your relationship to blogging changed in the past couple of years? If it has changed, how?

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7. Which social media platforms do you consider most important/influential in 2017 (e.g. Blogs, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook)?

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### Words and terminology

In a few words, describe what you think about the following terms. Do not try to come up with a "correct" definition for the words; say what they mean to you or what comes to your mind when reading them. There are no wrong answers!

8. "Fat"

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9. "Plus-size"

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10. "Chubby"

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11. "Curvy"

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12. "Obese"

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13. "Fatshionista"

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14. "Fat acceptance"

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15. "Body positivity"

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### **Feedback**

Here you can leave feedback on the questionnaire, if you wish. Thank you for your time!

16. **Feedback on the questionnaire**

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## APPENDIX 3: BLOGS INCLUDED IN THE CORPUS<sup>42</sup>

Adventures of a Riot Grrrl: <http://www.adventuresofariotgrrrl.com/>

Beautiful Youniverse:<sup>43</sup> <http://mayahcamara.com/>

Call Me Kim:<sup>44</sup> <http://www.callmekim.net>

Cardifforniagurl: <http://www.cardifforniagurl.co.uk/>

Does My Blog Make Me Look Fat: <https://www.doesmyblogmakemelookfat.com/>

Fabulously Fat Fashion:<sup>45</sup> <https://fabulouslyfatfashion.wordpress.com/>

Fashion Loves Photos: <http://blog.fashionlovesphotos.com/>

Fatbeautyx: <sup>46</sup> <http://lucielovesit.com>

Frivolous Mrs D:<sup>47</sup> <https://www.elenalucie.com/>

Just Me, Leah:<sup>48</sup> <http://www.xloveleahx.co.uk/>

Mrs BeBe Blog:<sup>49</sup> <http://www.beckybarnesblog.co.uk/>

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<sup>42</sup> In alphabetical order according to the blog name at the time of collection in 2015. Some blog names and URLs have since been changed.

<sup>43</sup> Blog name and URL changed since data collection.

<sup>44</sup> Blog has been deleted, but all blog entries are saved in the Blog Extractor.

<sup>45</sup> Blog has been deleted, but all blog entries are saved in the Blog Extractor.

<sup>46</sup> Previous blog URL [www.fatbeautyx.co.uk](http://www.fatbeautyx.co.uk) has been deleted, but all blog entries are saved in the Blog Extractor.

<sup>47</sup> Blog name and URL changed since data collection.

<sup>48</sup> Blog name and URL changed since data collection.

<sup>49</sup> Blog name and URL changed since data collection.

Nerd about Town:<sup>50</sup> <http://www.nerdabouttown.com/>

Plus Size & Proud:<sup>51</sup> <https://plussizeproud.co.uk/>

Pretty Big Butterflies: <https://prettybigbutterflies.com/>

Rad, Fat Feminist:<sup>52</sup> <http://www.radfatfeminist.com/>

Seeing Spots: <http://www.seeingspots.co.uk/>

She Might Be Loved: <https://www.shemightbeloved.com/>

Sugar, Darling: <http://www.sugar-darling.com/>

The Curved Opinion: <https://www.thecurvedopinion.com/>

What Laura Loves: <https://www.whatlauralovesuk.com/>

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<sup>50</sup> Blog has been deleted, but all blog entries are saved in the Blog Extractor.

<sup>51</sup> Blog has been deleted, but all blog entries are saved in the Blog Extractor.

<sup>52</sup> Blog has been deleted, but all blog entries are saved in the Blog Extractor.



# PUBLICATIONS



# ARTICLE

1

## **“A world of beautiful fat babes”: Community-building practices in plus-size fashion blogs**

Hanna Limatius

*Language@Internet*, 13, article 4.

<http://www.languageatinternet.org/articles/2016/limatius>

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## "A World of Beautiful Fat Babes":

### Community-Building Practices in Plus-Size Fashion Blogs

HANNA LIMATIUS  
*University of Tampere*

urn:nbn:de:0009-7-44165

#### Abstract

This paper focuses on the community-building practices of plus-size fashion bloggers. Because of the stigmatization of fatness in mainstream fashion media, plus-size women have turned to online resources to express their sense of fashion and to construct communities with others who have similar interests. In a qualitative analysis that builds on Herring's (2004) computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) approach and Wenger's (1998) community of practice theory, three categories of community-building practices are identified in blog data. The bloggers show their engagement with the group by expressing a sense of belonging, negotiate a joint enterprise by vocalizing a sense of solidarity among plus-size fashion consumers, and offer support to each other through a shared linguistic and discursive repertoire.

#### Introduction

Plus-size fashion bloggers, as described in this article, are women who write style- and fashion-focused blogs and who are above the average dress size. Because of the social stigma associated with being overweight and the lack of representation of larger women in fashion media, a network of plus-size women pursuing their interest in fashion through blogging can be considered an example of an online community of marginalized people. Thus, the study contributes to a current topic in blog research: blogging as a means of empowering and supporting marginalized groups.

Specifically, I study the ways in which plus-size fashion bloggers describe their in-group interactions in blog posts and comments in order to answer the following questions:

- 1) How do these bloggers construct and maintain a sense of community in their interactions?
- 2) In what ways does this group of bloggers function as a community of practice?

Using a computer-mediated discourse analysis approach (CMDA, Herring 2004, 2013), I identify and discuss the linguistic and discursive features that can be characterized as community-building in a corpus compiled from 20 interconnected blogs. I consider the group of bloggers to be a community of practice (e.g., Wenger, 1998): an aggregate of people who get together to engage in particular activities and, in the course of their interactions, negotiate shared practices, including shared linguistic behaviors.

Today's blogosphere is full of blogs constructed around specific interests. In recent years, the discursive and linguistic features of blog genres such as academic blogs (Luzón, 2011), politicians' blogs (Lehti & Laippala, 2014), and even dog blogs (Leppänen, 2015) have been studied. Modern blogs have also followed the general trend of online content becoming increasingly focused on social interaction (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014, p. 3). Indeed, as a result of commenting and connecting with other blogs through hyperlinks and social media, blogging has become quite conversational (e.g., Wei, 2009, p. 537). Although the community-building potential of blogging has been investigated before (e.g., Blanchard, 2004), due to the ever-evolving nature of the blog (Myers, 2010), new research is needed on the ways in which a sense of community is constructed through and reflected in the language of specific blogging groups. Language-focused approaches to online communities of marginalized people are also needed, because the study of CMD can "potentially lead language scholars to forge more comprehensive theories of discourse and social action as a result" (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015, p. 143).

I will begin by discussing recent research on online groups of marginalized people. In the next section, the concept of plus-size fashion blogging – also known as "fatshion" blogging<sup>1</sup> – is introduced in more detail. After that I discuss the theoretical concepts of virtual community and community of practice, illustrating why the latter is a useful framework for studying online interaction. Following the theoretical sections, I describe my data and my methodological approach, before moving on to the results of the empirical investigation of the blog corpus.

My findings show that the community-building practices of plus-size fashion bloggers can be grouped into three categories: Community is constructed through a sense of belonging, a sense of solidarity among plus-size fashion consumers, and a sense of support. These practices also reflect the three characteristics of communities of practice, as defined by Wenger (1998): mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. I argue that the community of practice approach is a beneficial framework for studying interaction within online groups because it enables us to move away from the often problematized question of "what is virtual community" to focus instead on how the members of different social aggregates are "doing" community through shared practices. The findings of the study are in line with previous studies of plus-size fashion blogging (e.g., Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Harju & Huovinen, 2015); however, they provide a new, linguistic perspective on this category of blogs.

## Online Interaction and Marginalized Groups

The potential benefits of online interaction for marginalized groups have been widely recognized in recent literature. Marciano (2014), for example, studied online interaction in an LGBTQ group, focusing on the Israeli transgender community. The study illustrated that cyberspace potentially fulfilled three functions for transgendered users: It could be a "preliminary sphere" where the users were able to "virtually go through" certain experiences before enacting them in their offline lives, a "complementary sphere" that acted as an addition to their offline social worlds, or an "alternative sphere" that enabled them to adopt identities that were not possible offline (Marciano, 2014, p. 830). In Kupferberg and Hess' (2013) study of online social interaction among adults living with visual impairment and blindness, it was discovered that the participants "interactively co-constructed a multi-functional and safe virtual space" where they could share their thoughts and emotions, as well as present problems and receive support. This idea of a group finding a "safe place" online is also present in Vaisman's (2011) study of Hebrew blogs written by teenage girls labeled as *Fakatsa* – a subculture of girls facing social judgement because of their preoccupation with appearance and fashion (p. 181). In a way comparable to the plus-size fashion bloggers under investigation in the present study, *Fakatsa* girls embraced a derogatory label and turned it into a positive resource, constructing their blogs as shared social spaces where they could interact and "be recognized and understood by their in-group peers" (p. 191).

The online interaction of people living with eating disorders has also been studied extensively. In a recent study of the Pro-Ana online community, Yeshua-Katz (2015, p. 1348) found that group members "police group identity by creating community norms and using boundary maintenance strategies." To fight the public stigmatization of their community, the group members engaged in a process of identifying and removing members who were referred to as "wannarexics"; people who did not have an "authentic" eating disorder, but used the community as a way to gain information on dieting. The "wannarexics" were seen as a threat to the safe space that the group members had constructed online, and the authentic members attempted to eliminate this threat by using "implicit norms and explicit rules" to police and maintain group identity (p. 1356). Similar "policing" was also evident in Stommel's (2009) study of a German discussion forum on eating disorders, where "novice" members used discursive and linguistic means, such as humor and group-specific abbreviations, to "apply for" community membership (p. 145).

Based on the existing literature, two themes can be distinguished that characterize the online interaction of groups of marginalized people. On the one hand, online environments are constructed as shared, "safe" spaces where marginalized individuals can receive peer support and form relationships with others who are in a similarly marginalized position. On the other hand, these environments are also characterized by a strong sense of "in-groupness" that defines through shared rules and norms who is accepted into the community and who is not. Both of these characteristics can be observed in the discourse of plus-size fashion blogs.

## Fashion and Plus-Size Women

Personal fashion blogging has "enabled women traditionally excluded from the realm of fashion imageries to enter its visual scape" (Rocamora, 2011, p. 421). Although there has been an increase in the representation of plus-size women in mainstream media in recent years, they are still largely ignored in the world of high fashion. This has led to fashion-forward plus-size bloggers creating new spaces for themselves online and, by doing so, producing their own fashion discourses (e.g., Connell, 2013).

Blogs written by plus-size women have been the topic of some recent studies in the fields of consumer research (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), market research (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Harju & Huovinen, 2015) and women's studies (Connell, 2013). Harju and Huovinen (2015), for example, studied a sample of 12 "fatshion" blogs from seven Western countries as a "post-feminist identity project" (p. 1604). Drawing on Butler's concept of performative identity and Bourdieu's cultural and social capital, they discovered that the bloggers used four discursive practices in negotiating their (performative) identity: *destigmatisation of fat*, *reappropriation* of older fashion styles and social space by demanding cultural and social visibility, *communality*, and *mimicry* (p. 1606, 1616). They concluded that these practices – which they divided into two broader categories of "similarity-seeking" and "diversity-asserting" tactics – "display skillful appropriation, manipulation and negotiation of existing cultural discourses surrounding gender, fashion and the market" (p. 1618). Both types of practices could function as resistance to normativity, although similarity-seeking tactics could also be seen as sustaining normativity (p. 1620). Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013, p. 277) also investigated how plus-size bloggers "both subscribe to and challenge beauty ideas" through a theoretical lens of queer theory, discovering that the bloggers "(re)negotiate cultural notions of beauty through three performative acts – coming out as fat, mobilising fat citizenship and flaunting fat" (p. 280). However, while the bloggers challenged the normative construction of beautiful and ugly bodies, their "beauty experiences [were] nevertheless situated within the 'mainstream' material domain" (p. 292). Both studies reflect an interesting conflict that seems to characterize the plus-size fashion blogging phenomenon: The bloggers are simultaneously situated within the sphere of fashion media and outside of it, resisting certain aspects of the normativity of fashion but sustaining others.

Whether they are sustaining or resisting normativity, the popularity of plus-size fashion bloggers has had its effect on the fashion markets. Many retailers exclude larger sizes from their clothing lines, or offer significantly fewer options in these sizes, which is viewed as discriminatory by the Fat Acceptance Movement (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Popular plus-size bloggers can use their publicity to act as representatives of women dissatisfied with the clothing options available in their size, and they may even influence the retailers. Scaraboto and Fischer (2013, p. 1244) refer to these bloggers as "institutional entrepreneurs" who "attempt to change aspects of institutional fields and who are sometimes successful in doing so."

As well as being marginalized by the fashion industry, fat people are marginalized by society. Fatness can be considered a *stigma* (Goffman, 1990), and in modern Western society, fat people are often openly disparaged and made fun of. Fatness is connected to "reckless excess, prodigality, indulgence, lack of restraint, violation of order and space, transgression of boundary" (LeBesco & Braziel 2001, p. 3). Moreover, as Harjunen (2009, p. 15) points out, the marginalization of the fat body is also a gendered phenomenon, since "body size has become a central determinant of social acceptability for *women*" (emphasis added). In addition to fighting marginalization by the fashion industry, plus-size bloggers seek to challenge this connection between being a certain size and being socially acceptable. For example, although the word "fat" has negative connotations, many bloggers use it deliberately as a way to lessen its stigmatization (e.g., Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013).<sup>2</sup>

There is clearly a desire among plus-size women<sup>3</sup> to change the way they are perceived both in fashion and in society, and blogging is one conduit for this. Harjunen (2009, p. 39) considers the popularity of "fat blogging" as one sign of the shift that is happening from "a medical paradigm of 'obesity' towards a more diverse paradigm of fatness." Plus-size bloggers, and the communities of practice they form, can thus be considered a part of *online participatory culture*, which "weakens the power of mass media in defining social reality and truth" (Androutsopoulos, 2013, p. 49).

## Virtual Community

Although "virtual community" is one of the most researched topics in the field of computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Marciano, 2014, p. 825), the concept remains a subject of debate among scholars. For example, early CMC research has been criticized for labelling all groups that interact online as virtual communities, often without attempting to ground these claims in empirical evidence (Herring, 2004).

Despite the difficulty of defining virtual communities, a number of researchers (e.g., Baym, 2010; Herring, 2004; Luzón, 2011; Rheingold, 1995) have produced sets of criteria which can be useful tools in studying the online interaction of specific groups. These include properties that can be observed in discourse, such as humor, identities, and information sharing, as well as linguistic features, such as specialized uses of vocabulary words, punctuation, and abbreviations.

Herring (2004, p. 344) assumes that "virtual community is possible, but that not all online groups constitute virtual communities." Following Herring, I take this assumption as my premise. I am interested in "the ways in which [...] users imagine and discursively construct online communities, and what the consequences of this are for the way people communicate via social media" (Sergeant and Tagg, 2014, p. 10). However, instead of asking "what is a (virtual) community," my interest lies in how individuals are "doing" community online. The concept of a community of practice provides a useful theoretical lens for investigating these processes.

## Communities of Practice

The communities that form around fashion blogs are based on a common interest rather than geographical proximity.<sup>4</sup> Therefore they can be studied from the point of view of a community of practice: "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992, p. 464). In the course of this endeavour, "ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge" (p. 464.).

The concept was originally developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) for the purpose of describing workplace communities (see also Jucker & Kopaczyk, 2013), but it can be applied to recreational groups as well. Communities of practice do not just refer to groups of people who "share a characteristic feature;" they can also be groups of people who "interact and share ways of doing things" (Jucker & Kopaczyk, 2013, p. 6). A community of practice is thus defined both by its members and by the practices of those members (Jucker & Kopaczyk, 2013, p. 8).

According to Wenger (1998, p. 72-73), three features define practice as a source for community: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire (see Figure 1 below). Mutual engagement refers to regular interaction (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999). This regular interaction arises from a shared interest (e.g., plus-size fashion) that connects the members of a certain group of people. A joint enterprise, in contrast, refers to a shared aim that the group members work towards in their interactions; something they engage in pursuit of (Jucker & Kopaczyk, 2013, p. 7). How explicit this enterprise is depends on the community, but in the blogging community under investigation here, offering support, challenging fashion's beauty ideals, and pressuring the fashion industry to provide more choice for plus-size women can be seen as contributing to the joint enterprise. Finally, a shared repertoire can be described as a collection of community-specific characteristics and resources that shape the way the participants say or do things within the community, including, for example, linguistic resources such as group-specific vocabulary, phraseological conventions and interactive patterns (Jucker & Kopaczyk, 2013, p. 7).

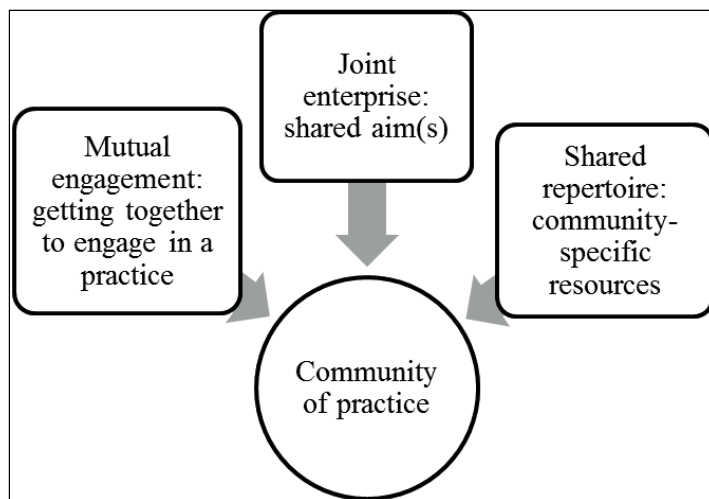


Figure 1. A model of a community of practice

## Data and Methodology

The empirical data for this study consist of textual material collected from 20 blogs that were discovered through a Facebook group aimed at plus-size fashion bloggers. In choosing suitable blogs for the study, the following criteria were implemented. The blogs eligible for the study had been active in the year 2014, i.e., the authors of the blogs had posted new content regularly (roughly once a month or more frequently) during this year. Blogs that had not been updated at all towards the end of 2014 or had been updated only sporadically during the same year, were excluded, as were blogs that were relatively new and thus only contained a few posts. Because I am interested in the interactive aspects of blogging, only blogs that contained at least some comments were chosen for the study.<sup>5</sup> However, not all of the individual blog posts included in the final corpus contained comments, and the distribution of comments within the corpus varies. To qualify for the study, the current,<sup>6</sup> overall theme of the blog had to have a clear emphasis on plus-size fashion. All authors of the chosen blogs are based in the United Kingdom and write their blogs in English.

At the time of data collection the Facebook group had 140 members, and after the implementation of the aforementioned criteria I ended up with 35 blogs. Initial contact with the authors was made in early 2015 via email. Since the blogs were discovered through a private Facebook group, I considered it ethical to seek informed consent from the authors before using their blog material. Because I wanted to be open about my own identity, I also mentioned the fact that I myself write a blog with similar content, knowing that some of the bloggers might recognize my name from that context. The actual names and screen names of the bloggers were anonymized, as were the names of any other people who appeared in the blog texts or comments used in the research, excluding celebrities and other public figures. Bloggers who participated in the study appear in the examples as "Blogger\_1," "Blogger\_2," and so forth with randomly assigned numbers. When other names are omitted from the text, an explanation is provided in square brackets, e.g., "[another blogger]."

Out of the 35 bloggers I contacted, 20 replied to my email, and I compiled the final corpus from the public archives available on their blogs. Since my research interest is the social interaction among bloggers and the ways they describe it, the corpus consists of blog posts where the topic is meeting other bloggers (e.g., fashion event posts and posts about informal blogger "meet-ups"), or other bloggers are otherwise explicitly mentioned (e.g., challenge posts, where a blogger challenges other bloggers to write a certain type of post, such as a post where they "style" one another). It should be noted that most of the bloggers in the study interact with each other offline as well as online. While it was not my intention to focus on blog posts that described offline meet-ups, these types of posts contained the most references to other bloggers, and thus they ended up being a substantial part of my data. Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013, p. 283) also identify "fatshion specific events" as an important part of the communal activity of plus-size bloggers.

Most blogs include "tags" that make it easier to find posts related to a specific topic; if tags were included, I used them to find posts relevant to the analysis. If tags were not included, I searched for relevant posts from the blog archives manually, utilizing the search engines incorporated into the blogs. When possible, I chose posts about events and challenges that were discussed in several of the blogs. Altogether the corpus for the study consists of 100 blog posts, including 323 reader comments (as well as the reply comments written by the bloggers). Depending on the total amount of relevant posts in each blog, 4-6 posts per blog were included. In addition to a close qualitative analysis of the corpus, I also observed other material that had been posted in the blogs in order to gain a better understanding of the social world of the bloggers.

The analytical approach I used in my investigation of the corpus was Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) as defined by Herring (2004, 2013). The CMDA approach applies methodological paradigms used in linguistic research to the analysis of logs of verbal interaction that takes place in online environments (Herring, 2004, p. 339). Rather than being a single, clear-cut method, CMDA is a toolkit "grounded in linguistic discourse analysis for mining networked communication patterns of structure and meaning" (Herring, 2013, p. 4). According to Herring (2004, p. 341), CMDA applies to four domains of language: 1) structure, 2) meaning, 3) interaction, and 4) social behavior. On the structural level, phenomena of interest include the use of special typography or orthography and new word formations. On the meaning level, CMDA

researchers can focus on the meaning of words and speech acts, as well as larger functional units of language. The interactional level consists of phenomena such as turn-taking and topic development, while on the level of social behavior, occurrences of conflict, power relations, group membership, and expressions of play can be studied. As a possible addition to these four domains of language, Herring identifies a fifth domain, which consists of participation patterns. These can be observed in, for example, posting frequency and message length.

As in linguistic discourse analysis in general, the goal of CMDA is "to identify patterns in discourse that are demonstrably present, but that may not be immediately obvious to the casual observer or to the discourse participants themselves" (Herring, 2004, p. 342). A CMDA study may be conducted using either quantitative or qualitative methods (Herring, 2004, p. 343); in the present study, I employ a qualitative approach, because many of the discourse practices I am interested in would be difficult to study using quantitative methods. I read through each blog text and comment, making notes of any repetitive themes or patterns that could be observed in the four domains of language. As I focused on the textual features of the blogs, I did not include the fifth domain of participation patterns in my analysis.

I manually classified the blog posts according to: a) topic (e.g., challenge post, fashion event post, blogger meet-up) and b) types of discourse practices that could be identified. To help in the classification of the discourse practices, I compared my observations to a set of features that have been characterized as properties of social interaction in online communities in previous research (Baym, 2010; Herring, 2004; Luzón, 2011; Rheingold, 1995). These properties are presented in Table 1 below, where they are grouped according to their respective domains in the CMDA framework. I also compared my observations with the three characteristics of a community of practice as defined by Wenger (1998). Figure 2 illustrates how I approached each research question in my analysis.

Domains of language (Herring, 2004)	Properties of social interaction in online groups
<b>Structure</b>	Genres and jargon (e.g., Baym, 2010, p. 77), references to group, abbreviations, "us vs. them" language (e.g., the use of first-person plural pronouns in contrast to third-person plural pronouns) (Herring, 2004, p. 356-60), acronyms, punctuation, emoticons (Luzón, 2011, p. 253)
<b>Meaning</b>	Advice (e.g., Baym, 2010, p. 82-86), exchanging knowledge (e.g., Rheingold, 1995, p. 13-18), acts of positive politeness (Herring, 2004, p. 356)
<b>Interaction</b>	Evidence of social relations over space and time, e.g., mentions of earlier interactions (Rheingold, 1995), addressing other participants by name, direct references to others' messages (Luzón, 2011, p. 253)
<b>Social behavior</b>	Affective use of humor (Luzón, 2011, p. 253), roles and identities (e.g., Baym, 2010, p. 84-89), emotional support (e.g., Rheingold, 1995, p. 13), verbal reactions to violations of appropriate conduct, evidence of governance and rituals (Herring, 2004, p. 356), forms of play (e.g., Baym, 2010, p. 77)

Table 1. Properties of online social interaction used in the analysis of blog material

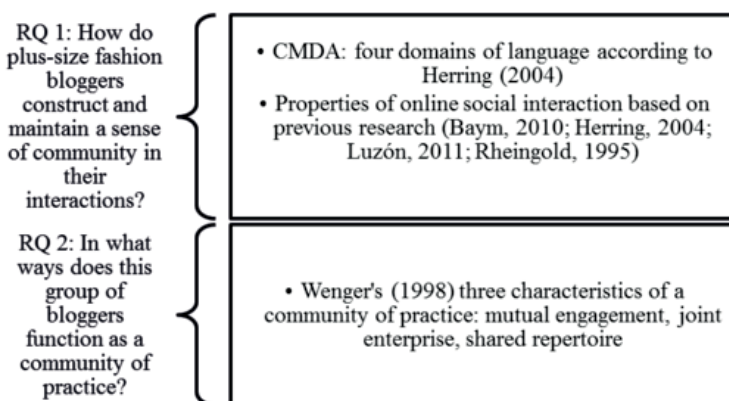


Figure 2. Research questions

Three groups of community-building practices were discovered in the analysis: practices that expressed 1) a sense of belonging to a group, 2) a sense of solidarity among plus-size fashion consumers, and 3) a sense of support. In the following sections, I discuss the discursive features of these three groups of practices in detail. Bolded text is used in the blog extracts to emphasize specific discursive or linguistic features.

## Part of Something Bigger: A Sense of Belonging to a Group

When describing their experiences of attending events, the bloggers stressed the importance of spending time with other plus-size women, and they expressed a strong sense of belonging to a group. Meeting fashion-forward plus-size women and being able to relate to them was often described as out of the ordinary. It was "something very new" (Example 1) that opened up "a whole world" (Example 2) to these women – hinting that this feeling of being a part of a group had been absent in their pre-blogging life.

(1) Plus North last year was a real game changer in my life and the highlight of my year. **Being surrounded by people who had had similar life experiences to myself and knew how it felt was something very new to me.** (Blogger\_1)

(2) Being exposed to so many plus size women in one place who were confident, happy and had access to relevant fashion had such an impact on me. My favourite thing about Plus North is that they use non-professional models for the catwalk (including me, heyyyy!). **Seeing women who had fat tummies, cellulite on their chubby thighs and body parts that I could relate to walking down the catwalk confidently completely overwhelmed me** and made me a bit teary! It **opened a whole world up to me that I didn't really know existed** and I am forever grateful to Plus North for that! (Blogger\_6)

In these descriptions of belonging, life as a plus-size woman was discursively constructed as an identity-defining experience, something that only the members of that particular group could understand. At the same time, the group was also juxtaposed with the "others," meaning thinner, "straight-size" women.

(3) For the first time I was surrounded by women who had experienced the same troubles, stereotypes and wardrobe malfunctions as myself! What became apparent to me is how so many of the current fashion brands are embracing **us bigger girls as women who can look just as stylish as our smaller counterparts**, and that we also deserve that right. (Blogger\_14)

(4) Boohoo have created a line that truly stands out against the other plus size retailers because **they've designed what many of us plus size girls have always wanted and that's clothes that our slimmer friends would want to wear.** (Blogger\_12)

Herring (2004, 355) refers to this phenomenon as "self-awareness of group as an entity distinct from other groups." This can be observed in the inclusive use of the first person plural pronoun "us" in reference to a particular group: "us bigger girls" (Example 3) and "us plus size girls" (Example 4). The group is then contrasted with another distinctive group; "our smaller counterparts" (Example 3) and "our slimmer friends" (Example 4). Interestingly, I could not find any examples in the corpus where the bloggers referred to smaller women as "they." "Us vs. them" language, which is mentioned as a part of the structural level of Herring's (2004, 361) CMDA framework,<sup>7</sup> was thus achieved only partially, through the use of inclusive pronouns.

The bloggers' descriptions of feeling a sense of belonging also reflected the marginalized position that plus-size women have when it comes to fashion imagery. The blogger in Example 2 mentions how seeing women on the catwalk with "fat tummies" and "cellulite on their chubby thighs" overwhelmed her because she simply is not used to seeing women who look similar to herself in a fashion context. As Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013, p. 280) point out, there is great power in seeing people with bodies similar to our own being confident and happy. At the same time, the fact that the bloggers simultaneously resist and sustain the normativity of fashion (see also Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Harju & Huovinen, 2015) is evident in Examples 3 and 4. While the bloggers highlight a sense of "groupness" with other plus-size women by using the inclusive "us," they also express an aspiration to be similar – or at least treated similarly – to straight-size women, saying that they can look "just as stylish" (Example 3) as smaller women and expressing a desire for "clothes that our slimmer friends would want to wear" (Example 4).

Although all of the bloggers voiced positive feelings of belonging to a group, participating in face-to-face blogger events – especially for the first time – was also constructed as a source of nervousness and anxiety for many. It became clear that even though a sense of community had been established online, face-to-face meetings could still be nerve-racking. Nine bloggers described these fears in their posts, followed by a narrative of overcoming the anxiety.

(5) I went with my husband and spent the entire time deep breathing my way through panic attacks and not speaking to people. Fortunately for me three **wonderful** ladies sat on a table with my husband and I and eased my anxiety by being generally **lovely**. (Blogger\_6)

(6) I must confess that **I was very nervous to go to the meet up**, not only because the only person I had met in the flesh before was [another blogger], but also because I was meeting some bloggers that I had admired from reading their blogs and was a little **'blogger star struck'**. [...] I had a brilliant time and **I think we definitely need to do it again. Spring Fling anyone?** (Blogger\_1)

In Example 5, the blogger begins her narrative by describing a very powerful, negative reaction to being in a new situation and meeting new people – a panic attack – but then goes on to praise the other "wonderful" bloggers for easing her anxiety by being "lovely." Describing the other bloggers with positive adjectives can be seen as an act of positive politeness towards these women who are part of the same community; this illustrates the meaning level of the CMDA framework.

On the level of social behavior, the presence of roles and hierarchies within the blogging community was also evident. In Example 6, a blogger refers to being "blogger star struck" by other, more well-known bloggers she has admired from afar. By mentioning this, she takes on the role of a "newbie," a junior member of the blogging community, while placing the other bloggers higher in the hierarchy – a typical move in an online community of practice (see, e.g., Stommel, 2009 on the roles and identities in an online community of eating-disordered girls). However, her own status seems to change as her account of the evening progresses. When she ends her post, she portrays herself in a more confident manner by taking the initiative to suggest a new meeting. Again, the use of the inclusive "we" marks the blogger's engagement with her community (i.e., the other plus-size bloggers who read her blog). It appears as though interacting with other, more "prestigious" members of the blogging group lessened her anxiety and increased her confidence, making her feel like a part of a community.

While nervousness and anxiety about meeting other bloggers in "real life" were frequently expressed, it was always highlighted that despite the initial nervousness, everyone felt welcomed and free to be themselves.

(7) **I felt instantly at ease amongst this group of women**, something which didn't even strike me as odd until I sat down to write this post 36 hours later. I was instantly myself - joking around, not afraid of being too loud or too weird. My anxiety didn't come into play at all **as it usually would in social situations** and much of that is down to **the fabulous** [other blogger] for letting me know she was so looking forward to meeting me. **Normally I'd have been a bag of nerves** on meeting a lot of new people but there wasn't so much of a flutter of an impending panic attack. VICTORY! (Blogger\_2)

(8) **I often have this fear that I'm not welcome**. I go to some events and don't talk to anyone or end up on my own (this is getting less and less) **but when I meet up with this bunch I never feel like that**. (Blogger\_16)

Thus, the face-to-face meetings of "this bunch" (Example 8) of bloggers were portrayed as events where one could feel comfortable, confident, and "instantly at ease" (Example 7). The use of the adverbs "normally" (Example 7) and "often" (Example 8) attributes the nervousness to the bloggers' character and helps them to avoid performing a face threat towards the rest of the community; anxiety is something that happens on a regular basis, as opposed to something caused by these specific people (on face work see Brown & Levinson, 1987).

The idea of feeling like a part of a bigger collective was also echoed in the comments, where the readers expressed feelings similar to the bloggers':

(9) **I can completely relate** to the first two paragraphs of this post, because I wanted the same out of blogging, and I've found that contentment with who I am from blogging, too! **All thanks to the plus size community!** It's as if you jumped in my head and stole my thoughts! **I'm glad you've found your confidence and acceptance**. There's a lot to be said for **blogging in this community**, isn't there?! (Reader comment for Blogger\_1)

In Example 9, the reader – who also writes a blog – reinforces the sense of belonging described by the original poster by sharing her own experiences as well as displaying emotional support (Baym, 2010, p. 83-84): "I'm glad you've found your confidence and acceptance." The commenter's repeated use of the word "community" also strengthens the feeling of being part of the same social group and highlights her engagement with others who write similar blogs. As opposed to merely finding "confidence and acceptance" through the freedom of self-expression that comes with blogging, the positive change is connected to blogging specifically "in this community."

## A Focus on Fashion: Solidarity among Plus-Size Consumers

Although all of the fashion event posts in the corpus included references to other bloggers, there were some that focused less on the social interaction and more on the topic of the events themselves: fashion. In these fashion-focused posts, the bloggers' marginalized position as consumers and their joint enterprise of wanting to improve the current situation became apparent. Reviewing products and brands is a common practice in fashion blogs in general, and this practice was notably present in the posts where the bloggers discussed events organized by brands, such as fashion shows and store openings. However, the presence of certain discursive elements made the marginalized position of plus-size women visible. Much like the bloggers studied by Harju and Huovinen (2015), the bloggers in my data sought visibility and acceptance as fashion consumers, both for themselves and for the larger community of plus-size women.

(10) Everything about the new Simply Be store makes it a joy to go shopping, a true experience that **makes you feel proud to be curvy rather than ashamed**. I love the design of the store, it is roomy but with a fantastic selection of clothes and the store staff are only too happy to help. (Blogger\_12)

(11) What I love about this brand is that they aim to be fun, fresh, bold and edgy and they are carving out a look that really is all theirs! In all honesty **what I love the most about their clothes is that they break all of the pre-dated rules for us "bigger women"**! (Blogger\_14)

(12) I had the pleasure of going to their event in London showcasing some of the new summer range, [and] boy let me tell you. **Nobody throws an event quite like Curvy Kate. I was twerked with, grinded on and groped up and that was just the PR at Curvy Kate!** (Blogger\_19)

Brands that were "brave" enough to make plus-size customers "feel proud to be curvy rather than ashamed" (Example 10) and to "break all of the pre-dated rules" (Example 11) were applauded for their efforts by the bloggers. On the interactional level of the CMDA framework, bloggers repeatedly mentioned their favorite brands by name and linked to their products, and on the meaning level, brand representatives were included as part of the plus-size blogging community through expressions of light-hearted camaraderie and positive politeness that were similar to references to other bloggers (Example 12). The relationship between brands and bloggers is a mutually beneficial one; while the brands often gift bloggers with free products and can increase their blogs' visibility through the social media coverage of their collaborations, the bloggers also act as an important link between brands and plus-size consumers. Influential bloggers can build a brand up, but they can also tear one down (see Myers, 2010, p. 24 for similar discussion on political bloggers and candidates).<sup>8</sup>

Harju and Huovinen (2015, p. 1615) noted "great parallelism" between plus-size blogs and traditional fashion blogs in their study. This was evident, for example, in the way the bloggers posed in outfit photographs. Similar "mimicry" could also be observed in the linguistic behavior of the bloggers I studied. On the structural level of CMDA, the vocabulary used in the fashion-focused blog posts reflected the bloggers' position as both "insiders" and "outsiders" within the sphere of fashion media. The posts contained terminology from traditional fashion discourse (e.g., "fashionista," "lookbook," "pencil skirt," "peplum," "jeggings," "creepers") as well as jargon clearly specific to plus-size fashion (e.g., "visible belly line" (often abbreviated to VBL), "curvy illusion," "fat swap," "wide fit"). Both types of terminology can be treated as in-group jargon, since the bloggers appeared to assume that their readers would be familiar with the terms. Thus, general fashion vocabulary and plus-size fashion vocabulary were both part of the shared repertoire of the community.

While interactions with other bloggers were portrayed in an unflinching positive light, there were instances in the corpus where a blogger expressed disappointment with some aspect of a fashion brand or event.

(13) Plus North 2014 was a blast. **There were issues with the venue and if you went you'll know what I mean, I got [a] chance to see friends, meet people I speak to online and have a jolly good time.** (Blogger\_16)

*Comment* (from Blogger\_2):

The whole place was ill thought out, what with the lighting, the lifts, the air con and everything else. **It's a shame that the girls' hard work was slightly marred by the surroundings. But I still had loads of fun! x x**

(14) **Despite feeling disappointed over the beauty side of the night, the company definitely made it worth going** and I'm already looking forward to next year's event where I shall definitely be saving up to take full advantage of the night! (Blogger\_7)

In Example 13, the critique of the event is carefully constructed by both the original poster and the commenter. As a display of solidarity to the bloggers who were involved in organizing the event, the bloggers place the blame firmly on the venue, while the positive experiences of interacting with other bloggers are highlighted. The blogger in Example 14 uses a similar tactic, stressing that while she was disappointed by the (commercial) event itself, the company of other bloggers more than made up for it. On the social behavior level of CMDA, examples such as these can be seen as evidence of an *implicit norm* (Baym, 2010, p. 79) within the group of bloggers: when negative feedback is given, it must be constructive and directed at a non-blogger entity, such as a brand or a venue.

## Beautiful Fat Babes: Empowerment through Support

Support has been discussed extensively in previous literature on online social interaction (e.g., Baym, 2010; Herring, 2004), and it is often said to be a key feature of a virtual community. In the case of marginalized groups, finding a supportive environment online is perhaps especially meaningful, considering that these groups are often ostracized or even attacked in "mainstream" online discussions. As Harju and Huovinen (2015, p. 1615) discovered, communal activity can be a source of empowerment for plus-size bloggers. In the interactions among the bloggers in my data, linguistic and discursive practices of showing support were frequent and varied. On the meaning level of CMDA, support was evident in the use of speech acts denoting positive politeness, such as congratulating and complimenting one another, as well as using affectionate nicknames like "uber babe" and "sister from another mister" (Example 15) and urging readers to follow each other (Example 16). Such displays of support and encouragement can be interpreted as what Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013, p. 283) refer to as the bloggers' "mobilizing fat citizenship."

(15) At Plus North this year I was fortunate to meet some **uber babes who I have become (life long I hope) friends with.** These ladies are [Blogger\_20], [Blogger\_19] and **(my sister from another mister)** [another blogger] (we're the middle foursome below.) All three ladies were nominated for best newcomer blog and **I couldn't be prouder of all of them.** [Blogger\_20] scooped the award and I'm soo happy for her. (Blogger\_9)

(16) Some nice simple ballerina flats in lilac as [another blogger] is a busy mummy on her feet all day but still looks stylish while doing so. **Go check out her awesome blog and also check out the other bloggers taking part in this challenge.** See if you can spot who styles me! (Blogger\_17)



When participating in a blogging challenge, linking to the other participants' blogs was an explicit norm – a prerequisite for taking part in the challenge. This was evident in the fact that all bloggers who participated in a particular challenge included a copy-pasted list of other participants' names and blog addresses in their posts. Similarly, when using photos taken by another blogger, crediting them and including a link to their blog was a consistent practice, even though not all bloggers explicitly stated that they must be credited if their photos were used. Although a group of individual blogs lacks the same kind of governance as, for example, a discussion forum with a moderator, it became evident that there are rules when it comes to participating in collective challenges and borrowing material from others. As is typical of a community of practice, these rules are negotiated and maintained in interaction; a mutually beneficial, supportive atmosphere is sustained by crediting and mentioning others.

On the structural level of CMDA, support was also apparent in the way the bloggers regularly referred to others with positive adjectives such as "lovely" (Example 17) or "gorgeous" (Example 18). Occurring in 63 out of the 100 blog posts in the corpus, this habit was so frequent that it could also be interpreted as an implicit normative practice within the group.

(17) So after work on the 23rd I jumped on a train to London where I met **lovely** [another blogger] at the station and we whizzed to Covent Garden on the tube. (Blogger\_18)

(18) I arrived into London around lunch time and met up with **the gorgeous** [Blogger\_6], after some lunch and a flying visit to Primark we headed over to Evans HQ just off Oxford Street. (Blogger\_4)

Another concept closely related to support that came up in the corpus frequently was that of inspiration. On the social behavior level of CMDA, bloggers credited other bloggers for giving them the confidence to start their own blog as well helping them to develop a more positive outlook on their body:

(19) **For an awfully long time the only fashion inspiration that I had was kinda unrelatable and caused me more sadness than happiness.** I'd look through fashion magazines and see clothes that I would never be able to buy because they weren't available in my size and then I'd just get frustrated that I couldn't find something similar in plus sizes and wish I was thinner. Well that was a few [years?] ago now, **before I started reading fashion blogs and delved into a world of beautiful fat babes that inspire me and help me feel proud of my chub every single day**. Here are a few of those **babes** in some recent outfit posts that are currently rocking my fashion world... (Blogger\_18)

Once again, the marginalized position of the plus-size woman is vocalized in Example 19. For this blogger, fashion used to be "unrelatable" because the imagery offered by mainstream fashion media (magazines) made her feel excluded. The blogger uses a temporal contrast between what she used to be like before and what she is like now to highlight the significance of being inspired and empowered by other bloggers. Similar to the "overcoming anxiety" discourse that was used in event posts, the blog posts that described the author discovering plus-size fashion blogging frequently had narrative elements. In Example 20, the author's switch from past to present tense marks the change occurred in the way she sees herself:

(20) **Before I started blogging I was incredibly self-conscious** about my arms and would keep them covered up until I couldn't take the heat anymore. **Now, I don't care.** I wouldn't say I like my arms but I'm just not bothered about them or by what other people think which, actually, is probably nothing. (Blogger\_11)

In this way, the discovery of the plus-size blogosphere and the support offered by this online environment is discursively constructed as a significant turning point regarding the blogger's self-confidence. However, while the support available through online resources was portrayed as essential, interacting with other bloggers face to face was also important:

(21) Whoooooo! **I look forward to meeting you next year.** :)

It was really nice to see everyone. **I think for me, because most of my interactions with the plus size world are on the internet, it's easy to miscalculate how much of what I put out there gets heard.** There needed to be some face to face interaction to gauge how people feel about me, and **now I feel a lot more connected than I did before.** So I really hope you get that experience soon. It's really life affirming! x x (Blogger\_2 in reply to a comment from Blogger\_17)

In Example 21, the blogger addresses another blogger who has not been able to participate in offline meet-ups, saying that meeting other bloggers in an offline context made her feel more "connected." However, she makes sure to protect the other blogger's face by opening with a positive statement ("I look forward to meeting you") and stressing that this view is based on her personal experience ("I think for me...").

## Discussion and Conclusion

The plus-size fashion bloggers in this study construct and maintain a sense of community through practices that express a sense of belonging to a group, a sense of solidarity among plus-size fashion consumers, and a sense of support. The linguistic and discursive phenomena that characterize these three groups of practices are summarized in Table 2 below, where they are organized according to the four domains of language in Herring's (2004) CMDA model.

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CMDA domain	Community-building practices
<b>Structure</b>	"Us vs. them" language; inclusive references to group; fashion-related jargon  Terminology specific to plus-size fashion; repeated use of the construction [positive adjective] + [another blogger's name]
<b>Meaning</b>	Speech acts of positive politeness: complimenting, congratulating, displays of loyalty and affection towards bloggers and brands
<b>Interaction</b>	Links and references to other bloggers and brands (addressivity); references to previous interactions
<b>Social behavior</b>	Evidence of hierarchies and power relations within the group; narratives of overcoming anxiety when attending events and being "blogger star struck"  Norms of appropriateness (brands and events can be critiqued, other bloggers cannot)  Narratives of becoming empowered by discovering plus-size blogging; displaying knowledge of other bloggers' styles; normative practices of linking in challenge posts and crediting others when using their photographs  Naming other bloggers as inspirational role models

Table 2. Community-building practices in the discourse of plus-size fashion bloggers

While the CMDA model was a useful approach to analyzing the blog data, I did encounter some challenges in categorizing the discourse practices according to Herring's (2004) four domains of language. For instance, although the blogs contained a lot of interaction, the interactional level of CMDA is somewhat difficult to apply to blogs because it is more inclined towards conversational interaction. In the blog data, the interactional level was mostly apparent in cases of "addressivity," i.e., "naming the next speaker" (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015, p. 137) through a link or a mention. Additionally, some phenomena that are grouped under "structure" in Herring's model are also clearly indicative of patterns in social behavior; a good example of this is inclusive pronoun use. In the CMDA model, pronoun choice is an indicator of "us vs. them language" (Herring, 2004, p. 361) and categorized as a structural feature, but I would argue that when pronoun choice is clearly influenced by the desire to include and exclude certain groups of people, it is also indicative of social hierarchies and power relations, which in turn belong to the social behavior level of CMDA. In fact, many of the practices I observed that belonged to the first three levels also had a social component to them, which made having a separate analytical level of "social behavior" problematic at times. While the CMDA model is still relevant in 2016, it requires updating to address the challenges of today, when CMD is more focused on the "social" than ever before. The model could be reformulated to accommodate the vast spectrum of online social interaction induced by new media and technologies. Herring (2013) herself has already addressed the challenges of CMDA in analyzing so-called "Web 2.0" phenomena by adding a new level for multimodal communication.

My findings give further support to the idea that recreational online-based groups can be approached through Wenger's (1998) community of practice theory. A mutual engagement can be observed in the way the bloggers act as both authors and commenters; while their primary focus may be producing new content to their own blogs, they also comment on other bloggers' posts to express an interest in their content, thus keeping up interactional ties between participants. The fact that the blog posts contained references to previous meet-ups and interactions, and the way the bloggers displayed knowledge of each other's styles in challenge posts, also show that the blogging group has a history of interacting together. Thus, the bloggers have had time to develop routinized, shared practices. Even though the the blogs exhibit characteristics typical of fashion blogging in general, such as reviewing products and the use of fashion terminology, a joint enterprise of advancing plus-size women's rights as fashion consumers is visible in the way brands are judged by what they offer to plus-size consumers in particular, as well as in the way the bloggers adapt fashion related genres and terms to suit their own needs. Additionally, a sense of community is constructed through practices that display a shared discursive repertoire, such as the seemingly normative use of positive adjectives when referring to other participants. There is also evidence of both explicit (e.g., linking to others when taking part in a blogging challenge) and implicit (e.g., not criticizing other bloggers) rules that have been negotiated within the community.

The combination of Herring's (2004) CMDA framework and Wenger's (1998) community of practice theory is a valuable approach to analyzing social interaction within online groups, because while CMDA acts as a methodological toolkit that enables the researcher to break down the data and to explore the specific linguistic and discursive features that characterize the interaction, the community of practice theory offers a way to move forward from the problem of defining "virtual community." Studying the shared practices of specific online groups is more fruitful than trying to generalize a definition for virtual community, especially in the case of marginalized communities where the ways in which people do and say things are often incomparable with "mainstream" communities.

To provide further insights into the language use of specific blogging communities, large scale corpus linguistic studies are needed in the future. Such studies could, for example, reveal more about the use of in-group vocabulary by comparing

corpora compiled from blogs in a specific category with larger, more general CMC corpora. In the case of plus-size fashion bloggers, another relevant topic for future research would be the role of other social media platforms that the bloggers use to distribute their content and to interact with their audience, such as Twitter and Facebook. The interaction I observed in the blogs in this study was remarkably positive, which might be partly due to the fact that the bloggers are able to moderate and delete any negative responses. On other social media channels, the interaction may be less filtered. Moreover, because the bloggers in my study interacted offline as well as online, studies of blogging groups that only operate online are needed to provide a more diverse picture. This is especially important because although there were instances in my data where a blogger was unable to participate in face-to-face meetings, many bloggers seemed to consider face-to-face interaction important.

The present study contributes to a timely topic in the field of CMC: researching the ways in which socially marginalized groups make use of the new resources provided by digital media. Although the study's findings are in line with previous literature on plus-size fashion blogs (e.g., Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Harju & Huovinen, 2015), they add an important linguistic perspective to the topic, as well as shedding further light on the interactive aspects of plus-size fashion blogging. Like other research that has been conducted on online communities of marginalized people, the findings show the construction of shared, "safe" spaces online as well as boundary work between insiders and outsiders; at the same time, they reveal how community is discursively and linguistically constructed within this particular category of bloggers. In the future, detailed studies on how different marginalized groups use online resources are required to better understand the advantages of organizing as communities on the Internet.

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## Notes

1. I use the term "plus-size fashion blog" as opposed to "fatshion blog" because it is the preferred term among the bloggers I studied.
2. This is a similar phenomenon to what Vaisman (2011, p. 181) observed for Hebrew teenage bloggers and their use of the term *Fakatsa*; although the word has derogatory connotations, among bloggers it came to have a positive meaning of "being feminine and up to date with fashion."
3. I use the term "plus-size", but when the word "fat" is used, it is used as a neutral descriptive with no derogatory intent.
4. Proximity may be a factor as well: UK-based bloggers often interact with each other more than they do with, e.g., US-based bloggers.
5. Most active fashion blogs contain at least some comments. Blogs with no comments are usually fairly new and thus would not have met the criteria for the study, in any case.
6. Some of the blogs I investigated had started out with a more general outlook and later focused on fashion.
7. This can be argued to be a social feature as well, however (see discussion).
8. I observed bloggers reacting negatively to a plus-size fashion brand in late 2015, when a representative of a UK-based brand addressed a customer impolitely on the brand's Facebook page. Within hours, bloggers had expressed their displeasure towards the brand all over social media.

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## Fulltext



# ARTICLE

## 2

**“There really is nothing like pouring your heart out to a fellow fat chick”:  
Constructing a body positive blogger identity in plus-size fashion blogs**

Hanna Limatius

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**“There really is nothing  
like pouring your heart out to a fellow fat chick”:  
Constructing a body positive blogger identity  
in plus-size fashion blogs**

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*University of Tampere*

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on practices of identity construction in plus-size fashion blogs. Specifically, I investigate the construction of a body positive blogger identity, and the ways in which this identity is reflected in the language use of a group of 20 UK-based plus-size fashion bloggers. The data for the study consists of a corpus of 200 blog posts (including reader comments). In a qualitative analysis, four categories of practices for identity construction are examined: 1) constructing identity through word choice, 2) constructing identity through group membership, 3) constructing identity through narratives, and 4) constructing an identity that is stigmatized within the group. The results of the study show that while adopting a body positive blogger identity can be empowering, it also contributes to the creation of in-group norms and restrictions.

Keywords: blogs, marginalization, norms, identity, fashion.

## **1. Introduction**

In this article, I study the ways in which plus-size women use language to construct and negotiate identities in their fashion-focused blogs. My premise is that a lot of the identity work in plus-size fashion blogs revolves around the concept of *body positivity*: a movement of body acceptance that emphasizes inclusivity and challenges the idolization of thin, toned bodies in the mainstream media (Sastre 2014: 929-930).

In my analysis, I view identity as constructed and performed in interaction, as opposed to essential (Joseph 2009: 14). The focus of the study is on what I refer to as a *body positive blogger identity*. The idea of body positivity is closely related to the *fat acceptance* movement, which opposes sizeism, i.e. discrimination based on body size (Scaraboto – Fischer 2013: 1245), and promotes equal rights between fat people and those who are not considered fat<sup>1</sup>. Currently, both body positivity and the fat acceptance movement appear ubiquitous on the Internet, with an increasing number of activists and their followers forming online communities (Limatius 2016) and *safe spaces* (Sastre 2014: 929) via social media. According to Harjunen (2009: 56-57), fatness is “increasingly a site of identity politics work” and a lot of that work takes place on fat-acceptance-influenced blogs. Thus, blogs are in a key position in shaping the discourse on fatness (Harjunen 2009: 39).

Despite the growing online presence of the body positivity and fat acceptance movements, fat and/or plus-size people continue to face marginalization in their everyday lives. This marginalization is especially apparent in the field of fashion (e.g. Connell 2013; Downing Peters 2014), a fact that consistently shapes the discourse of plus-size fashion blogs, as well as the bloggers’ identity construction. In fashion imagery, thin bodies are what is expected or considered normal, while fat bodies are unexpected, even deviant. Retailers also offer fewer clothing options in larger sizes, which results in plus-size women being left with “little sartorial agency” (Downing Peters 2014: 49), even though they are hardly a minority in modern Western societies. For example, a recent study (Christel – Dunn 2017: 134) suggests that the clothing size of the average American woman is “between a Misses size 16-18, and a Women’s Plus size 20W, with greater distinctions among racial and ethnic groups”.

Drawing on previous research on identity construction within online groups of marginalized people, as well as the theoretical frameworks of *social identity*, *narrative identity* and *categorical identity*, this article aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) In what ways is a body positive blogger identity discursively and linguistically constructed in plus-size women’s fashion blogs?
- 2) How does this identity construction reflect in-group practices and norms?

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<sup>1</sup> In the present study, the word “fat” is used as a neutral adjective with no intention of being offensive.

The qualitative analysis of blog texts and comments is structured around four themes: constructing identity through word choice, constructing identity through expressions of group membership, constructing identity through narratives, and constructing an identity that is stigmatized within the group.

Although plus-size fashion blogs have been studied from the perspective of identity before (e.g. Gurrieri – Cherrier 2013; Harju – Huovinen 2015), apart from discussing the bloggers reclaiming the word “fat”, previous research has paid little attention to the role of language in practices of identity construction. Further explorations into this topic are required, as language can be an important factor in challenging what LeBesco (2001: 76) refers to as the “spoiled identity of fatness”. The present article contributes to the growing amount of literature on plus-size women, fashion and identity by providing a language- and discourse-focused approach, as well as investigating the role of in-group norms in the identity construction that takes place within one specific online community of plus-size fashion bloggers.

## **2. Norms and identities in the online interaction of marginalized groups**

In recent years, there have been several studies on practices of identity construction within online communities of marginalized people. The online interaction of people with eating disorders, for example, has been studied extensively. Stommel (2008), who studied a German discussion forum on eating disorders, discovered that the forum participants expressed various identities to construct group membership, including categorical identities (such as “anorectic”) and situational identities (such as “new member”). Eating-disordered identities were also the focus of Palmgren’s (2015) research on Swedish blogs written by girls with eating disorders. According to Palmgren (2015: 45), the bloggers used their blogs as platforms for performing an eating-disordered identity and established normative practices within the group, such as using special punctuation in words related to weight and eating as a way to prevent moderators from finding the blogs and deleting them (for example, writing the word “fat” as “f.a.t.”) Comparable practices were also discovered in Yeshua-Katz’ (2015: 1348-1351) study on the “Pro-Ana”<sup>2</sup> online community; to protect their group

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<sup>2</sup> According to Yeshua-Katz (2015: 1348), while the “Pro-Ana” movement is often defined as rejecting the idea of anorexia as an illness and instead treating it as a lifestyle choice, this definition is not unproblematic. See Yeshua-Katz (2015) for a more in-depth discussion.

from “wannarexics” (i.e. people who do not have an eating disorder, but want to access the information provided by the community to be able to lose weight quickly), the participants policed group identity through norms and boundary maintenance.

The online communities of LGBTQ+ groups have also been investigated from the perspective of identity. Marciano (2014: 824) studied the online interaction within the Israeli transgender community, illustrating three ways in which transgender users utilized cyberspace: as *preliminary*, *complementary* and/or *alternative* spheres. Using online environments as preliminary spheres allowed transgender users to experience certain aspects of their lives virtually before going through these experiences in the offline world, while using them as complementary spheres enabled them to complete their offline world with another social setting (in addition to school, work, etc.) (Marciano 2014: 830). Finally, online environments could also act as alternative spheres, which allowed for “parallel worlds” where users could adopt an identity that contributed to their well-being, but was perceived as impossible to perform in their offline lives. For example, some transgender women maintained an online relationship while hiding their biological sex, stating that this enabled them to identify as “real biological women” (Marciano 2014: 830). A similar way of using online spaces to express alternative identities took place in the Brooklyn drag community studied by Lingel – Golub (2015); instead of creating fan pages on Facebook, the artists created new, separate personal profiles for their stage personalities, stating that fan pages did not allow for enough interaction.

Based on the previous literature on identity construction within online communities of marginalized people, online spaces are often used as platforms for performing identities that are problematic or even impossible to express in offline settings. Being able to express such an identity in a safe environment can thus be an empowering experience. However, previous studies also show that in all online communities<sup>3</sup> – whether they consist of marginalized individuals or not – norms and restrictions exist to moderate who is accepted into the group and what kind of behavior is expected of them. These in-group norms also dictate what kind of identities are perceived as acceptable. Even within marginalized communities where the existence of the group is, to a certain extent, based on the idea of differing from the norm, a distinction is often made between what is considered normal *within the group* and what is not.

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<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth discussion on online communities and the criteria for defining one, see Herring (2004).

In the identity construction that takes place in plus-size fashion blogs, both the empowering effects of online interaction, and the possibly restricting effects of in-group norms are present. The bloggers in my data referred to the blogosphere as a safe space where plus-size women can express their interest in fashion without being subjected to judgement or ridicule, but they also appeared conscious of the fact that as a part of an online community of plus-size fashion bloggers, specific ways of acting and communicating were expected of them by other community members, as well as – to an extent – community outsiders.

Indeed, much of the previous research on plus-size fashion bloggers discusses norms or normativity. In an earlier study that focused on the community-building practices of the same bloggers (Limatius 2016), I discovered that, much like the eating-disordered forum participants in Stommel’s (2008) study, the bloggers could be considered to form a *community of practice* (e.g. Wenger 1998). As a result of interacting with each other on a regular basis, the bloggers had formed a community with group-specific communicative practices, norms and behaviors, such as using linguistic politeness strategies, establishing an etiquette for crediting others when borrowing their material and linking to others’ blogs (see Limatius 2016). Normativity was also a central concept in the work of Harju – Huovinen (2015: 1603), who studied how “fatshion” bloggers<sup>4</sup> coped with the hegemonic cultural norms that dictate female identity positions, as well as the subversive identity strategies they engaged in. They discovered that the 12 bloggers they studied employed several performative practices that displayed *appropriation, manipulation* and *negotiation* of the cultural discourses constructed around gender, fashion and the market (Harju – Huovinen 2015: 1618). Gurrieri – Cherrier (2013: 277) also addressed normativity in their research by considering how plus-size women used fashion to both subscribe to and challenge mainstream beauty ideals, as well as the ways in which this affected their identity work. The bloggers in Gurrieri – Cherrier’s (2013: 290) study used three performative acts to (re)negotiate normative beauty ideals: *coming out as fat, mobilizing fat citizenship* and *flaunting fat*.

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<sup>4</sup> In previous research, plus-size fashion bloggers are often referred to as “fatshion” bloggers or “fatshionistas” (a term derived from the adjective “fat” and the neologism “fashionista”, i.e. an avid follower of fashion) (Scaraboto – Fischer 2013: 1239). As the bloggers in my data rarely use these terms themselves, I have chosen to use “plus-size fashion blogger”. I also consider this term more appropriate because not all plus-size fashion bloggers necessarily identify as “fat”, and the term can thus be interpreted to cover a larger demographic than “fatshionista”. However, I use “fatshion blogger” or “fatshionista” when citing authors that have used these terms in their own work.

Downing Peters (2014) studied the *sartorial biographies* of three plus-size women in order to explore how fat identities are formed through practices of self-fashioning, as well as social channels such as blogging. She observed that for the women she studied, being fat was “not the only or even primary facet of their being”, but it was a prominent theme when it came to dressing their bodies, and especially the way they perceived they *should* be dressing their bodies (Downing Peters 2014: 64).

Thus, the identity construction of plus-size fashion bloggers seems to be influenced by two kinds of norms. On the one hand, it is influenced by the beauty ideals of mainstream media that place plus-size women in the realm of the abnormal and, as a result, awaken a desire to resist these norms by creating new discourses around fatness and fashion. On the other hand, however, it is also shaped by the plus-size fashion blogging community itself, as specific ways of being a plus-size blogger are established within the group.

### 3. Social identity, narrative identity and categorical identity

In my analysis of blog posts and comments, I view the practices of identity construction through three theoretical lenses: social identity, narrative identity and categorical identity. I argue that the combination of these three perspectives provides a useful framework for my analysis, as they all highlight different aspects of identity, yet coexist and complement each other in the discourse of plus-size fashion blogs.

According to Benwell – Stokoe (2006: 25), social identity is “defined by individual identification with a group: a process constituted firstly by a reflexive knowledge of group membership, and secondly by emotional attachment or specific disposition to this belonging”. Thus, language is used to mark an individual’s belonging in social groups (Sophocleous – Themistocleous 2014), and group membership is made visible through shared linguistic and discursive practices. As well as identifying with a specific group, social identity is also constructed through dissociation with other groups. While individuals are perceived to share features with those in their in-group, differences with other groups’ members are also accentuated (Grad – Martín Rojo 2008: 12). In my data, through the use of terminology and discourse, plus-size fashion bloggers both construct their identities as part of a specific social group (e.g. plus-size women, bloggers), and simultaneously distance themselves from outsiders (e.g. thin women, people who do not write blogs).

According to the narrative identity theory, identity consists of narratives that individuals construct for themselves and others (Grad –

Martín Rojo 2008: 10). Identity is a story, “where changes are part of the continuity and a host of narratives of being in the past, present and future are interwoven” (Grad – Martín Rojo 2008: 11). The blog as a genre has narrative elements, both when it comes to individual blog texts and the blog as a whole, since blogs usually contain archived texts from several years back. Blogs, while interactive via linking and commenting, and potentially community-building (Limatius 2016), are a genre that encourages the expression of personal experiences and opinions (Myers 2010: 118). Because of this, blogging is often characterized as an ego-centric form of online activity (Puschmann 2013: 88). However, a blogger nevertheless assumes the existence of an audience that is interested in their narrative – I find Myers’ (2010: 8) comparison of blogs with television soap operas particularly apt, as both are “open-ended by definition”, and “dead” when there are no longer new chapters to add. In the case of plus-size fashion blogs, the notion of narrative identity appears especially relevant, since many bloggers use their blogs to document their journey into the world of plus-size fashion and body positivity. When – or if – this journey is completed, the blogger might move on to other topics, or stop blogging altogether.

By categorical identity, Stommel (2008) refers to the ways in which actors “attend to and are attended to by categories in their naturally co-occurring interactions”. Categorical identities such as “fashion blogger” or “fat acceptance activist” can be used in self-presentation in the interaction that takes place in the blogs, similar to the way eating-disordered girls in Stommel’s (2008) study utilized categories like “anorectic” and “bulimic” in their forum posts.

The discourse phenomena I observed in my data sometimes featured overlapping identities – for example, in blog posts that discussed discovering body positivity, both concepts of narrative identity and social identity were relevant. Additionally, the line between social identity and categorical identity was not always clear. However, as category-based identity constructions can also be used to highlight the experience of an individual, as opposed to a member of a social group, I consider all three perspectives relevant for the present study.

#### **4. Data and method**

The data for the study consists of a corpus compiled from 20 UK-based, fashion-focused blogs (see Appendix 1) that are written by plus-size women. I searched for suitable blogs from a Facebook group aimed at plus-size



fashion bloggers, and contacted all bloggers that 1) had blogged actively in the year 2014, 2) had evidently interacted with other bloggers in the community (for example, through comments), and 3) whose blogs currently focused on the topic of plus-size fashion. The corpus was collected from the blogs of the 20 people who replied to my email and gave their consent for using their blogs as research material. The blogs are interconnected, as the bloggers often comment on each other's blogs, as well as interacting on other social media platforms. Most of the bloggers have interacted with each other face-to-face as well as online. Although all bloggers were active at the time of collection (January 2015), there was variation regarding the number of posts in each blog (see Fig. 1). Some of the bloggers had been blogging for several years, while some had only been blogging for roughly one year. Additionally, while some bloggers posted new content almost daily, others posted sporadically. As the group of bloggers included both well-known, semi-professional bloggers, and bloggers who were in the early stages of their blogging careers, I consider the group to be a fairly accurate representation of the UK-based plus-size fashion blogging community at the time of collection<sup>5</sup>.

### The number of posts in each blog (B1-B20)

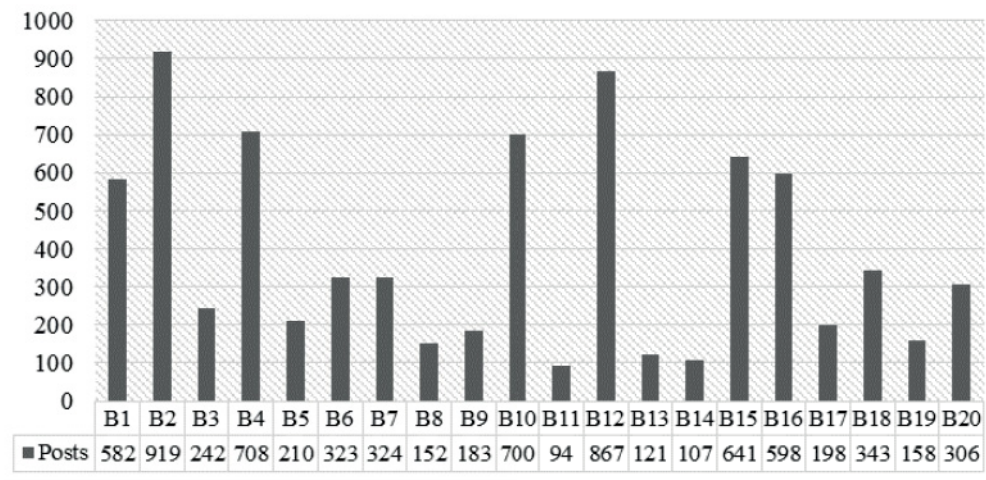


Figure 1. Number of posts in each blog

<sup>5</sup> As plus-size fashion blogs have since become more common, the number of active bloggers has increased in the past two years.

Since altogether 7776 blog texts had been posted in the blogs before January 2015, it would not have been feasible to perform a qualitative analysis of all blog material. Before narrowing down the data to a corpus that could sufficiently answer my research questions, I studied the blogs carefully. Although I did not read every blog post word for word, I did look at all posts spanning from the beginning of each blog to January 2015, which gave me an insight into what kind of topics were typically discussed by the bloggers. Plus-size fashion blogs, as well as fashion blogs in more general terms, mostly focus on fashion promotion: the bloggers take photos of their outfits and write a review of the clothing items they are wearing. The idea is to give readers information about products they might be interested in purchasing – the blogger thus acts as a link between fashion brands and consumers. In some cases, the blogger has purchased the clothing items herself, but companies also send free samples to bloggers and pay them to promote their products. In addition to clothing, many plus-size fashion bloggers review other types of products and services.

The selection of blog posts for the corpus was based on qualitative interpretation<sup>6</sup>. Since the review posts focus heavily on the products and less so on the blogger herself, it became apparent that analyzing them would not reveal enough about practices of identity construction. For this reason, I decided to focus on posts that dealt with more personal issues<sup>7</sup>. I used three methods to find such posts. If the blog contained tags – i.e. keywords for identifying posts related to a specific topic – I used them to search for posts that appeared more personal and less commercial, such as posts tagged with the keywords “body positivity”, “confidence”, “life”, “lifestyle”, “health”, “fat acceptance”, “personal”, “mental health”, etc. For the blogs that did not use tags but contained a lot of material, I used the search engines incorporated into the blog layout, and searched for terms that had appeared as tags on other blogs. If the blog did not contain tags but was smaller in size (i.e. consisted of a relatively small number of posts), I picked posts that appeared suitable based on their title. For example, if a post was titled “Alexi Accessories”, it was reasonable to assume that the main content of the post would be a review of accessories provided by the brand Alexi. However, if the post was titled “What a week...”, I considered it more likely to contain details of a blogger’s personal life, and thus focus more on her

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<sup>6</sup> The present study is one part of my article-based PhD thesis, and while this paper has a qualitative emphasis, I have also studied a more extensive blog corpus and utilized quantitative, corpus-linguistic methods (see Limatius, under review).

<sup>7</sup> Although the line between a commercial review and a personal post is not always clear, since some bloggers can insert reviews in posts that also discuss other topics.

identity than a product review. I included posts from various points in time. I first chose a month in the blog's archive – for example, June 2013 – and then picked the first relevant post I could find. Then I chose another month to find another post, and so on. However, I allowed for one exception in the sampling process. The majority of the bloggers had participated in a blogging challenge called “What being a fat woman is really like” in February 2014, and since those posts were particularly focused on the identity of a plus-size woman, I included all of them in the corpus.

Although previous research has mostly treated plus-size fashion blogs as one, coherent group, there is variation when it comes to the content of these blogs (see also Limatius, under review.) Some blogs in my data mainly focused on reviews, while others were heavily fat-acceptance-focused with extensive discussions on the blogger's identity as a plus-size woman. To achieve a balanced sample, I chose 10 posts per blog, resulting in a corpus of 200 blog posts (144820 words). As I was interested in the in-group dynamics of this specific group of bloggers, I also included all 1066 comments<sup>8</sup> that had been posted to the 200 blog texts before January 2015. Although not all comments on blog posts are from other bloggers, the bloggers I studied often interacted with each other through blog comments. The number of blog posts, the number of comments, and the word counts of blog posts and comments respectively are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Blog posts vs. comments in the corpus

Blog	Number of posts	Words in posts	Number of comments (before 2015-01-01)	Words in comments (before 2015-01-01)
1	2	3	4	5
Blog 1	10	6588	41	1796
Blog 2	10	9468	260	21769
Blog 3	10	5503	36	519
Blog 4	10	6646	67	3938
Blog 5	10	7392	2	50
Blog 6	10	8963	61	3338
Blog 7	10	8978	41	636
Blog 8	10	4579	43	1718

<sup>8</sup> It should be mentioned that I myself write a blog and have interacted with some of the bloggers in my data prior to starting my research. There are three comments in the sample that have been posted by me. As the comments were posted before I started my research project, I chose not to exclude them from the sample.

1	2	3	4	5
Blog 9	10	6261	18	929
Blog 10	10	4523	30	1367
Blog 11	10	8459	35	2261
Blog 12	10	9239	44	1962
Blog 13	10	6530	39	2023
Blog 14	10	11972	38	2005
Blog 15	10	6317	13	2550
Blog 16	10	6637	58	1500
Blog 17	10	7026	32	863
Blog 18	10	4683	41	1100
Blog 19	10	9310	124	5120
Blog 20	10	5746	43	1524
<b>Whole corpus</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>144820</b>	<b>1066</b>	<b>56968</b>

In addition to the themes of fat acceptance, self-confidence and body positivity, the bloggers discussed a variety of other topics, such as traveling, their families, health, feminism, careers, and the blogging process itself. However, even in the posts that were not directly about being plus-size, the identity of a plus-size woman was often present. For example, when writing about traveling, a blogger might discuss not being able to go on an amusement park ride because of her size.

Topics related to life as a plus-size woman	Topics related to marginalization (based on other features than being plus-size)	Other topics
Fat acceptance Criticizing brands Challenging beauty ideals The meaning(s) of the word “fat” Weight loss Achieving body confidence Daily struggles of accepting one’s body	Issues related to marginalization based on age, sexual orientation, height, etc. Discussion of taboo topics, such as facial hair on woman, anxiety and depression, health issues	Lifestyle and travel Careers Blogging advice Everyday “tips and tricks” Personal information about the blogger, such as mentions of friends and family

Figure 2. Topics discussed in the blog corpus

Several of the bloggers expressed other marginalized identities that intersected with their plus-size identity; issues related to being a short woman, a queer woman, a woman with facial hair and a woman in her forties were mentioned. The topics discussed in the corpus can thus be divided into three

categories: topics related to life as a plus-size woman, topics related to other marginalized identities, and more general topics. Examples of the topics discussed in the corpus are illustrated in Fig. 2 above.

The analysis of blog posts and comments was based on an inductive approach; I did not devise coding categories beforehand, focusing instead on patterns of identity construction that became apparent as I read the material. This approach turned out to be fruitful, because while I expected to find some of the phenomena that were present, it also revealed features that were unexpected. For example, the abundance of weight-loss-related identity work was not anticipated. The analysis combines linguistic analysis and discourse analysis, as I discuss both linguistic features (the bloggers' lexical and pronominal choices, see e.g. Herring 2004) – and discursive features (narrative elements, weight loss discourse) as means of identity construction.

## 5. Results

In the following sub-sections, I present the four types of identity construction I observed in the corpus. I will illustrate each category with excerpts from the blogs. Bolded text is used in the excerpts to highlight specific linguistic and discursive features.

### 5.1 Word choice: Fat or curvy?

Different perspectives to the body and its relationship with identity were reflected in the bloggers' choices in terminology when describing their (and other people's) bodies. In fact, these words were sometimes the topic of discussion in blog posts focusing on body positivity. The bloggers appear to engage in constant negotiations over the appropriate terminology that is to be used within the community. By describing themselves as "fat", "plus-size", a "BBW" (short for "big, beautiful woman"), "curvy" or "obese", they make a choice that defines how they want to be seen – and at the same time risk being criticized by other members of the community who may view these terms differently. In (1), a blog reader problematizes the author's use of the term "BBW" due to its connections to the adult entertainment industry – although she does cushion her statement by beginning with positive feedback ("I love your picture") and ending with a hedge ("that's only my personal experience with it").

- (1) **I love your picture.** The first time I ever heard of BBW was 2-3 years ago, and **to be honest, I just do not have a good connotation of that term.** Most of the time that I see that, it is in a filthy almost pornographic type of content if it is not outright pornographic, and I just cannot get down with that terminology – **but that’s only my personal experience with it.** (Comment on Blog 11)

To the commenter, the categorical identity of a “BBW” has negative connotations, while the blogger who wrote the original post found it to be more positive – a celebration of the beauty of bigger women.

The most prevalent phenomenon associated with word choice and identity construction in the blogs was the reclaimed use of the word “fat”. While it is usually used as an insult in informal discourse (see Harju – Huovinen 2015 on the *destigmatisation* of fat), plus-size bloggers often strive to strip “fat” of its derogatory connotations by normalizing its use. Thirteen bloggers in the corpus used “fat” as a neutral self-descriptor, often purposefully:

- (2) If someone wants to call me fat, it’s **an obvious statement** of a visual tangible thing. So yes, I agree. I have fat, that’s ok. Because I DO have fat. [...] **That fat is there and it really isn’t going anywhere** at the precise moment someone wants to use it in a negative term [...] **Claim the word fat back** and YOUR right to not be threatened by a word with no power. (Blog 20)

In (2), the blogger names “fat” as an accurate word for describing her body; she has excess fat which “isn’t going anywhere”. For this blogger, self-identification as “fat” transforms the word from an insult into a factual statement, thus stripping it of its negative connotations. However, while this was a popular discourse on fatness in the corpus, there were also individuals who admitted that using the word outside the blogosphere was problematic because of other people’s reactions, which were portrayed as a source of amusement and frustration:

- (3) I am fat. I often laugh when people try to be ‘nice’ and pretend I’m not and they really don’t get that **for me it is not a word I use to insult myself with.** It is simply a statement of fact and is not a reflection on how I feel about my beauty. **I am beautiful ... and fat,** and the two go together. (Comment on Blog 4)

In (3), the commenter discloses that people perceive her calling herself fat as her insulting herself, although in fact she does not feel like being fat makes her any less beautiful. “Fat” is connected to ugliness in everyday talk, but in the discourse of plus-size fashion blogs, the concepts of “fat” and “beautiful” are not mutually exclusive. Thus, the word has acquired a new meaning when used in the context of the blogging community. However, one blogger also hinted that she would not be comfortable with outsiders using the word:

- (4) **Even if I use a word to describe myself that doesn't mean I give everyone else permission to.** I guarantee that every single person regardless of their size has used a word to describe themselves before that if someone else used against them, would be completely heartbroken. The notion that fat = something bad is everywhere. (Blog 6)

While the commenter in (3) was frustrated with outsiders not accepting the word “fat” as a non-derogatory descriptor, the blogger in (4) admits that she does not grant everyone the permission to use “fat”, despite using it to describe herself. For her, “fat” can be empowering, but only when it is used by the people who can claim ownership over the term, i.e. people who belong to the social identity group of plus-size/fat people. Similar norms about using negative slang terminology exist in the LGBTQ+ community (e.g. Kelsey 2009), as well as other marginalized groups.

There were instances in two blogs in the corpus where “fat” was used in a way that clearly had negative connotations (e.g. a blogger saying that a dress made her “look fat”). Additionally, on one occasion, a blogger described herself as a “porker” in a clearly negative context. However, these occurrences took place in blog posts that were written in the beginning of the bloggers’ blogging careers, so it is possible that at the time, the bloggers had not yet been familiar with ideas of body positivity and reclaiming “fat”, as they would not have been integrated into the blogging community at this point<sup>9</sup>. It should also be noted that some bloggers use the reclaimed

<sup>9</sup> As another part of my PhD project, I interviewed the bloggers via an online questionnaire and inquired how they felt about the word “fat”. Out of the 13 bloggers who replied only one admitted to currently having an issue with the term, and even she deemed the word “OK, when used in context”. However, several bloggers mentioned that they had viewed the term negatively in the past, but had since grown to accept it – a result that can be seen to reflect the present study, since the only occurrences of derogatory “fat” were found in posts that were written early in the bloggers’ blogging careers.

"fat" more frequently than others – in a quantitative investigation of body descriptors within the same group of bloggers, I discovered that bloggers who emphasized fat acceptance activism were more likely to use the term than bloggers who focused mainly on fashion- and beauty-related content, who in turn favored the term "plus-size" (Limatius, under review.) While none of the bloggers openly opposed using the word "fat" in their blog posts, two bloggers voiced their dislike towards the word "curvy", which traditionally has more flattering connotations than "fat":

- (5) ...**for the love of all things please do NOT say that I'm curvy.** I do not take it as a compliment because I am not/do not view myself to be curvy and I feel that saying it is purely trying to **make my fatness fit in to yet another socially accepted norm/standard.** (Blog 11)

The blogger in (5) considers being called "curvy" more insulting than being called "fat", because she feels that people who use the word are trying to mold the concept of fatness into a more socially acceptable form – she emphasizes this by using capital letters in the word "NOT", as well as the exclamation "for the love of all things". If a plus-size woman does not identify as "curvy", other people's use of the term can appear as patronizing sugar-coating of facts. Again, the difference between using a certain term in the plus-size blogosphere and using it in other social contexts becomes apparent – while most people would assume "fat" to be an insult and "curvy" a compliment, here the connotations of both words become more complicated.

## 5.2 Group identity: "Us fat girls"

It was common for the bloggers to construct their social identity as one part of a larger group: plus-size women interested in fashion. In-groupness was particularly visible in statements where the blogger referred to the plus-size blogging community (or plus-size women in general) with the inclusive pronouns "we" and "us":

- (6) Fat girls shouldn't wear crop tops. **YES WE SHOULD!** (Blog 18)
- (7) The media really isn't kind to **us "Fat Birds"**, however, I read [...] that yesterday, for the first time, Plus-Size Models were in New York Fashion Week! Could this be the beginning of a new era? First



NYFW, then the World! FATfashion World Domination... **Let's make it happen!** (Blog 8)

In (6) and (7), the bloggers use the inclusive pronoun both to state their own identity as “fat girls/birds”, and to include their plus-size followers into a group that seeks to challenge the normative order of fashion. The blogger takes on the role of a leader, telling her audience what they can achieve through collective action, as a group (the courage to wear clothes traditionally considered unflattering on plus-size bodies such as “crop tops”, or a “FATfashion World Domination”). A similar strategy is frequently used in political discourse (e.g. Fetzer 2014).

There were also instances in the corpus where the blogger did not construct group membership through inclusiveness, but rather by making a distinction between plus-size women and other groups – usually meaning thinner, straight-size women:

- (8) There really is nothing like pouring your heart out to a **fellow fat chick**. I love my **slim friends** and could share anything with them, but nobody quite gets you and has that sense of shared experience quite like a **fellow chubster**. (Blog 4)

The blogger in (8) describes the connectedness she feels when interacting with other plus-size women, to whom she jokingly refers to as “fellow chubsters”. While calling others “fat chicks” or “chubsters” could be considered a *face-threatening act* (Brown – Levinson 1987) in most social situations, the fact that the blogger herself identifies with these words and includes herself in the group by using the word “fellow” justifies the terminology. Although she is also careful to protect the face of her “slim friends”, the implication that only those who share her identity as a plus-size woman truly understand her is clear. It is also notable that the blogger uses more courteous language – “slim friends” instead of, for example, “skinny chicks” – when talking about the out-group. Using traditionally derogatory language like “fat chicks” in a humorous manner can be interpreted as a sign of in-groupness and closeness, while the politeness towards slim people signals distance.

Although the bloggers avoided being openly negative towards slim women – not all readers of plus-size fashion blogs are plus-size, and the body positivity movement also emphasizes the acceptance of all kinds of bodies – policing of the fat/slim boundary did take place in the corpus:

- (9) Being plus-sized myself, I would never read “**normal**” fashion blogs as I could never really relate to the blogger and/or find the clothing in my size [...] I now tend to **exclusively** read plus-sized blogs and bask in all the awesome fashion and confidence that is put out from these amazing women. (Blog 10)

In (9), the blogger states that she only reads fashion blogs that are written by plus-size women, because she does not find anything she can relate to in straight-size fashion blogs. Interestingly, she categorizes all fashion bloggers that are not plus-size under the term “normal” (in scare quotes); for her, a clear dichotomy exists within the fashion blogging genre, and it is based on body size.

Although most of the in-group/out-group divisions focused on the fat/slim boundary, there were instances in the corpus where the bloggers constructed divisions within the identity group of plus-size women. Five bloggers brought up concerns about plus-size women *body-shaming* each other, as well as jealousy and competitiveness within the community, and two more bloggers referenced to a distinction between an acceptable type of fatness and an unacceptable type of fatness in the context of weight loss discourse (i.e. they stated that while they had no desire to be thin, they wished to be *smaller* plus-size women). In (10), the blogger is referring to other plus-size women commenting negatively on bloggers’ photos on a plus-size fashion brand’s Facebook page:

- (10) The thing which I find most shocking is a lot of the crappy comments are coming from **other fat women**. Us **plus bloggers** tend to be quite confident, and because we see so many types of bodies represented in plus fashion we’re very accepting of all kinds of bodies. I think a lot of it comes down to **their** own internalised fat hatred, and because **THEY** wouldn’t dream of wearing something, **they** try to bring down or embarrass those who can. Really the best thing **they** could do is read the blogs of some of the people **they’re** sniping about, and then **they** might learn to love themselves, and consequently others. (Comment by the author of Blog 2 on Blog 8)

In this comment, plus-size fashion bloggers (“us”) are portrayed as having an expert identity when it comes to both fashion and body positivity, whereas the commenters (“they”) are portrayed as non-experts, and their criticism is attributed to their own body image issues. A clear boundary is drawn between the two groups through the use of personal pronouns.

### 5.3 Narrative identity: Body positivity as a journey

When discussing self-confidence, the bloggers structured their posts as narratives of discovering body positivity. All twenty bloggers in the corpus discussed the process of growing to accept their body, recounting a shift in identity “from one kind of person to another” (Benwell – Stokoe 2006: 137):

- (11) I **hated** my body, I **was disgusted** with my size because every day I **was reminded** I wasn't normal. I **didn't look** like my friends, or girls on the TV, I **was verbally abused** by people at school, or insults were hurled at me in the street. I **was touched inappropriately** by boys who thought I should be grateful for the attention because I **was fat**. But nowadays, I **can genuinely say** I **hold** my head high and **have** embraced my body and **am** unapologetically fat. (Blog 4)

In (11), the blogger gives her readers a detailed view into who she used to be: a woman who strongly disliked her appearance and faced discrimination and abuse because she “wasn't normal”. Following this account, however, she returns to the present moment, describing a different type of identity: a person who has accepted her body. Interestingly, although the blogger's past problems appear to have been caused by other people, such as bullies at school and the boys who harassed her, the focus of the narrative is the change that happens in her own identity. The blogger transforms from a passive object of insults and abuse to an active agent who is “unapologetically fat”.

- (12) I **was** so low...and then out of nowhere, I found a website called Tumblr which changed my life. There was girls and boys on there that challenged **the “norm”** and said that all bodies are beautiful regardless of shape, size, gender, age, background or lifestyle [...] And **slowly**, I **stripped away years and years of scar tissue and baggage** that I carried around with me and I **became** one of those girls. (Blog 13)

Many of the narratives of discovering body positivity also included a social aspect – for fourteen of the bloggers, the change began with (online) social interaction. The blogger in (12) uses vivid imagery, such as stripping away “years and years of scar tissue and baggage”, to describe her journey to self-acceptance, which culminates in her becoming part of the community that inspired her in the first place. The change that happens in her identity is attributed to her discovering a social group of body positive bloggers.

Similarly, the blogger in (13) names blogging as a catalyst for normalizing her body:

- (13) Plus size blog reading helped me feel more confident, **like there was a place for me in the world after all**. Blogging myself has given me even more – I know my shape and what suits me so much better from looking at photos of myself I take almost every day (vain, yup!) and my own body has become **normalised**. The more I look at myself, the more I like myself. (Blog 2)

Interestingly, all three bloggers in (11), (12) and (13) mention the concept of *normality* in their narratives. At first, they feel excluded from the category of normal, but as their narratives progress, it appears that the change in their identity also creates new ways of being normal within the newly discovered community.

#### 5.4 Stigmatized identity: Weight loss

One group of plus-size fashion bloggers that seems to be struggling with their identity are those who are in the process of losing or wish to lose weight. Eleven bloggers in the corpus mentioned a desire to lose weight at some point. While one of these bloggers was open about the fact that she wished to lose weight to feel and look more attractive, and was unapologetic about it, others appeared concerned about possible criticism from the community, and weight loss was often justified with health-related motivations. Health-motivated weight loss was considered more acceptable than wanting to, for example, fit into smaller clothes:

- (14) **Just a quick note to say I've rejoined Weight Watchers tonight. I don't care about the numbers on the scale** but I do care about how my clothes fit and how I look, **as vain as that might sound**. For a while I've been going on about how I feel like I'm above my maximum weight for my body and that I need to do something about it. I'm **not planning on blogging much about it on here** but as it's **part of who I am** I wanted to share. I will be blogging on the WW site (weekly I hope) to share my progress. **I'm** doing this for **me** and **I hope you all wish me well in this xxxx** (Blog 16)

The excerpt in (14) is from a typical coming out as being on a diet post. The blogger feels the need to confess to rejoining Weight Watchers, because she

wants to be open about being on a diet, but at the same time she assures her readers that there will not be any weight-loss-related content on her blog. Thus, she assumes that this kind of content would not be well received. She also downplays the significance of her confession by framing the post as “just a quick note”, and adds a self-deprecating remark about sounding “vain”. Throughout the post, the blogger emphasizes the fact that weight loss is her personal choice by repeatedly using the first person singular pronoun, thus protecting the face of those readers who are overweight but do not wish to diet. She ends her post with a plea for support and a row of “kisses”, represented by the letter “x”, to display affection and solidarity towards her readers.

Even when the reasons behind the decision to lose weight were health-related, bloggers were apprehensive about sharing the information. In (15), the blogger states that she is “genuinely worried” she will be ostracized by some community members:

- (15) Being comfortable with myself and even loving certain parts of my squishy body **doesn't mean that I'm not allowed to want to change it**. I've been **scared** of openly admitting that I want to be **healthier** in fear of being accused of **not loving myself or others**. I am genuinely worried that there are certain people in this plus size community that will not believe that I am 100% fat accepting and body positive simply because I want to change something. It's built up the point that **I feel the need to justify** why and I suppose this is what this post is about.  
(Blog 6)

Interestingly, the same blogger had mentioned going to Weight Watchers meetings in blog posts that took place early on in her blogging career. In those posts, weight loss was only mentioned in passing, and no justification or apology was provided. A similar pattern could be observed in three other blogs as well – it appeared that these bloggers had started to view weight loss differently after becoming more involved in the plus-size fashion blogging community, which indicates the construction of a social norm within the group.

The emphasis placed on body positivity within the community makes weight loss discourse problematic – since accepting your body in its current state of being is viewed as a fundamental part of body positivity, voluntary changes to one's appearance potentially violate the norm. In her study on eating-disordered bloggers, Palmgren (2015: 49) discovered that there was

a hierarchy connected to eating disorders within the group: “one cannot have an eating disorder if one is not thin enough”. The normative construction of body positivity in plus-size women’s blogs has similar features: one cannot be body positive if one wants to change one’s body. The categorical identities of body positive blogger and dieter are seen to contradict each other.

Interestingly, however, there were no negative responses from other bloggers in any of the weight-loss-focused posts in the corpus<sup>10</sup>. On the contrary, it was typical for other bloggers to show their support in the comments:

- (16) **Body confidence is about loving your body at whatever size** you are, not just if you are fat and happy with that. And at the end of the day [it’s] **your body, do with it as you wish!** X (Comment on Blog 11)

The commenter in (16) stresses the blogger’s agency in deciding what is best for her body, stating that body confidence is not about staying the same but rather about “loving your body at whatever size”. Again, the comment ends in an affectionate “kiss”.

The bloggers’ apprehension about sharing their weight loss plans might stem from the fact that those plus-size bloggers who focus on fat acceptance activism strongly oppose the diet industry and the idea that women should change their bodies to be socially acceptable. Indeed, three bloggers in the corpus expressed that they were personally against dieting, although they made sure to state that they did not mind other people losing weight:

- (17) **I have chosen not to diet, I have chosen not to attempt to lose weight.** [...] **This doesn’t mean I think you should,** I would never, ever tell someone not to diet or [lose] weight, that is **their choice** but what **I do ask is that you do it sensibly,** by making life long changes to your food intake and activity levels. (Blog 4)

The blogger in (17) goes on to describe her personal history with diets, thus justifying her opinion. Similar to the coming out as being on a diet posts, the blogger stresses that weight loss is a personal decision. However, in the same sentence she also contributes to the construction of an in-group norm by emphasizing the health aspect – one can lose weight, as long as one does it

<sup>10</sup> However, as most bloggers moderate comments, it is possible that negative responses would not have been published.

in a way that is deemed healthy. Both sides of the discussion on weight loss appear to be seeking middle ground, attempting to reconcile their personal views with what they think is the norm within the community.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of the present study show similarities with previous research on plus-size fashion bloggers (e.g. Gurrieri – Cherrier, 2013; Harju – Huovinen, 2015) when it comes to the empowering effects that blogging has for plus-size women. Through blogging, these women have been able to construct safe spaces where they can feel a sense of belonging and peer support, as well as engage in identity work that transforms them from fashion outsiders to active agents who create their own fashion discourses. In my data, this was particularly apparent in narrative identity constructions, where engaging with the online community was pinpointed as a positive turning point. However, the findings also illustrate the significance of the in-group norms that restrict the expression of identity within the community. Although the idea of body positivity is based on equality between different types of bodies, the social identity of the bloggers is defined by an in-group/out-group mentality. Slim – or, as one blogger put it, “normal” – women are, unsurprisingly, seen as the *other*, but plus-size women can also be excluded if they fail in their performance of body positivity. Possible failures that were illustrated in the corpus included criticizing other plus-size women’s appearance, and wanting to change one’s body for reasons that were not health-related.

Considering one of the performative acts in Gurrieri – Cherrier’s (2013) study was *coming out as fat*, it is interesting that the bloggers in my study used similar discourse when talking about losing weight. These bloggers seem to view body positivity as accepting the body in its current state – as something static. Because of this, weight loss is perceived as a violation of the norm. The use of apologies and justifications in weight loss posts shows how some bloggers are contradicted by their desire to lose weight, but at the same time remain a part of the community. Many of these justifications revolve around being healthy – another concept closely connected to the ideal of normality. However, even though the bloggers who were losing weight appeared to fear other bloggers’ judgement, there was little evidence of bloggers reacting openly negatively to others’ weight loss posts. While the members of the “Pro-Ana” online community studied by Yeshua-Katz (2015) policed group

membership through community norms to prevent false members from participating, the bloggers in my data seemed to police *themselves* based on a perceived notion of body positivity. Because of the bloggers’ desire to be accepted as normal within the community, a body positive blogger identity, although meant to be empowering, could also be restrictive.

The concept of body positivity, and the ways in which social media influencers use it to their advantage is a relevant topic for further research. In September 2016, a US-based blogger, FatGirlFlow, stated in a YouTube video<sup>11</sup> that one could not be body positive if one followed a weight loss regime promoted by the diet industry, such as Weight Watchers. Following the publication of her video, she received a barrage of angry comments, as well as response videos where others explained their view on body positivity. In many of these responses, issues of marginalization and finding a safe place online were highlighted; on the one hand, people were afraid that if they lost weight, they would be shut out from the online community that had previously been a source of empowerment and support to them. On the other hand, those who supported FatGirlFlow’s view stressed that there is already an abundance of safe places available to non-plus-size individuals on the Internet. The conversation around body positivity continues as the movement gains more and more publicity and, in the process, becomes increasingly commercialized.

The case of plus-size fashion bloggers illustrates that identity construction within online communities of marginalized people remains an important area of study. Since some of the practices for identity construction in the corpus – such as using the word “fat” as a non-derogatory term, or justifying weight loss with health reasons – seemed to develop over time as the blogger became more involved in the blogging community, diachronic perspectives to identity construction in online communities such as this are required. The present study offers a glimpse into the language-based identity construction of plus-size fashion bloggers through a qualitative analysis on 200 blog posts, but more extensive corpora are needed to see exactly how common certain phenomena, such as the reclaimed use of the word “fat”, actually are (a project I am currently working on using corpus-linguistic methods; see Limatius, under review). Goals for future research include providing us with a better understanding of the potential benefits that online social interaction has for marginalized people, but also

<sup>11</sup> FatGirlFlow’s video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEzHgukgEAs&t=4s>, accessed August 2017.



investigating the norms, rules and restrictions that are constructed within these communities. The bloggers in my data use their blogs to provide detailed accounts of their life experiences as plus-size women, including information on how they wish to be treated as consumers of fashion as well as social actors, what type of vocabulary they identify with, and what kind of problems they face in their everyday lives. Such information, publicly available through thousands of personal blogs, is certainly of interest to various actors ranging from corporations to NGOs and governments.

#### APPENDIX 1<sup>12</sup>

- Blog 1: <http://www.thecurvedopinion.com/>, accessed January 2015  
 Blog 2: <http://www.xloveleahx.co.uk/>, accessed January 2015  
 Blog 3: <http://www.callmekim.net/>, accessed January 2015  
 Blog 4: <http://www.beckybarnesblog.co.uk/>, accessed January 2015  
 Blog 5: <http://blog.fashionlovesphotos.com/>, accessed January 2015  
 Blog 6: (Original blog no longer exists, but the author has a new blog and her earlier posts are available there) <http://www.frivolousmama.com/>, accessed September 2017  
 Blog 7: <http://www.shemightbeloved.com/>, accessed January 2015  
 Blog 8: <https://plussizeproud.wordpress.com/>, accessed January 2015  
 Blog 9: <http://www.cardifforniagurl.co.uk/>, accessed January 2015  
 Blog 10: <http://www.nerdabouttown.com/>, accessed January 2015  
 Blog 11: <http://www.radfatfeminist.com/>, accessed January 2015  
 Blog 12: <http://www.whatlauralovesuk.com/>, accessed January 2015  
 Blog 13: (No longer active, but available online): <https://fabulouslyfatfashion.wordpress.com/>, accessed January 2017  
 Blog 14: <http://mayahcamara.com/>, accessed January 2015  
 Blog 15: <http://www.doesmyblogmakemelookfat.com/>, accessed January 2015  
 Blog 16: <http://www.seeingspots.co.uk/>, accessed January 2015  
 Blog 17: <http://www.adventuresofariotgrrrl.com/>, accessed January 2015  
 Blog 18: <http://www.sugar-darling.com/>, accessed January 2015  
 Blog 19: (No longer active, but available online): <http://www.fatbeautyx.co.uk/>, accessed January 2017  
 Blog 20: <http://prettybigbutterflies.com/>, accessed January 2015

<sup>12</sup> Bloggers can hide posts from public viewing at any point after publication. As the posts for this corpus were collected in 2015, not all of them are currently visible on the blogs. However, I have archived copies of all posts and comments used in the corpus into a separate database, which enables me to access hidden posts as well as the publicly available ones. All posts in the corpus were publicly available at the time of collection in 2015.

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# ARTICLE

3

## **“I’m a fat bird and I just don’t care”: A corpus-based analysis of body descriptors in plus-size fashion blogs**

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# “I’m a fat bird and I just don’t care”: A corpus-based analysis of body descriptors in plus-size fashion blogs ☆

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## ABSTRACT

Plus-size women have traditionally been, and continue to be, in a marginalized position in contemporary Western societies. This marginalization is especially visible in the field of fashion, since mainstream fashion media promotes thinness as the bodily ideal for women. However, the field of fashion is slowly but surely becoming more diverse in its representation of beauty. Fashion blogs, along with other social media platforms, are instrumental to these changes. Through blogging, plus-size women can actively participate in constructing new fashion discourses, as well as forming communities around their shared interest in fashion. One way of reconstructing the hegemonic discourses built around fashion and being plus-size is the *reappropriation* of words used to describe the plus-size body, such as “fat”. In this article, I apply corpus-linguistic methodology to investigate the role of body descriptors in twenty UK-based, plus-size fashion blogs. The frequency and distribution of forty-five terms that are used to describe a plus-size woman’s body in a self-compiled blog corpus are discussed alongside qualitative examples from blog texts. The results of the study reveal the variety within the genre of plus-size fashion blogs: *fat acceptance activism* influenced bloggers use certain body descriptors more than bloggers who focus on fashion trends and personal style. The study highlights the importance of combining qualitative and quantitative methods in research on online communities.

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## 1. Introduction

In this article, I investigate the language use of plus-size women who write fashion-focused blogs. More specifically, the study explores the variety of terms these bloggers use to describe their (and other plus-size women’s) bodies in their blogs. Following LeBesco (2001, p. 77), I believe that studying the language fat people<sup>1</sup> use will help us understand the shifting discourses around fatness, identity, and the body. Language can be seen as a key player in the “revolution” (LeBesco, 2001, p. 76) against the negative and highly medicalized perceptions of fatness rooted in contemporary Western culture. As previous studies on plus-size women and identity (e.g. Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Downing Peters, 2014; Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Limatius, 2017) have demonstrated, body descriptors have an important role when it comes to identity construction.

The use of body descriptors is also one part of the *shared repertoire* (cf. Wenger, 1998) of the blogging community. The bloggers in the present study belong to a larger collective of plus-size women who blog about fashion, often referred to as the *fatosphere* in earlier literature (e.g. Harju & Huovinen, 2015, p. 1603; Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013, p. 279). As the bloggers I investigated interact with each other regularly, express shared goals and have developed community-specific routines and behaviors, the social group they have formed can be viewed as a *community of practice* (e.g. Wenger, 1998).

The present study explores a corpus compiled from 20 UK-based plus-size fashion blogs. I examine the frequency and distribution of 45 body descriptors that appear in public blog texts as well as the commenting sections of the blogs. I also investigate the differences between three sub-categories of bloggers within the group: *fat activists*, *fashionistas* and *all-rounders*. Some plus-size fashion bloggers identify with social movements such as the *fat acceptance movement* (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015) and the *body positivity movement* (Sastre, 2014), while others emphasize mainly fashion-focused content, with little sociopolitical engagement.

I seek to answer the following research questions:

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, the words “fat” and “plus-size” are both used as descriptors for the bloggers under investigation. Following the example of the bloggers themselves, these terms are used as neutral descriptors with no derogatory intent.

- (1) What kind of body descriptors do plus-size fashion bloggers use?
- (2) How much variation exists in the use of body descriptors within the blogging community?
- (3) What differences are there in the use of body descriptors between blog texts and commenting section discussions?
- (4) In what ways does the use of body descriptors reflect identity construction?

I will begin by discussing the plus-size fashion blogging phenomenon and how it relates to the social marginalization of bigger women, as well as the role of positive identity construction through blogging, with an emphasis on body descriptors. Following the discussion on plus-size fashion blogging, I will focus on the concept of a *community of practice* (e.g. Wenger, 1998; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999) and the ways in which the blogging community under investigation in the present study functions as such a community. After that, I will discuss previous corpus-linguistic and corpus-aided studies of online communities, highlighting the benefits of a corpus-based approach. In the data and methods section, I will explain the process of corpus compilation as well as my analytical approach. Lastly, the results of the study are presented, followed by a discussion and concluding remarks.

## 2. Plus-size women, identity and language

The idolization of thinness is deeply rooted in contemporary Western culture, especially when it comes to women. According to Hartley (2001, p. 62), large female bodies are presented as “unfeminine”, and “treated with derision in our society” – men, who are traditionally allowed to “take up more space” than women, do not face such strict judgement for being fat. Harjunen (2009, p. 29) also underlines the role of gender in size-based marginalization; according to her, (straight) male bodies are generally not objectified and sexualized to the same extent as women’s bodies, and body size does not define men’s social acceptability in the same way as it does for women. However, both Harjunen (2009, p. 27) and Hartley (2001, p. 67) mention that gay men also face strict beauty standards; thus, those who are objectified by the male gaze are more likely to be discriminated against for being fat.<sup>2</sup>

Fatness is also a characteristic that can be openly criticized, unlike many other features of a person’s appearance; Hartley (2001, p. 65) names fat-phobia as “one of the few acceptable forms of prejudice left” in Western societies. The mainstream media’s construction of an *obesity epidemic* discourse, where fatness is presented as a medical and economical strain on society, but the blame for it is nevertheless placed on the individual (Dickins et al., 2011), is a relevant example of the systematic marginalization of fat people.

In the world of fashion, the societal prejudices against fatness are even more pronounced (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Even though contemporary fashion can be argued to be changing and becoming more diverse, thin bodies still dominate mainstream fashion imagery (Connell, 2013). Against this background, fashion blogging, i.e. authoring a blog that is focused on the presentation of the individual style of the blogger, and/or reviews of current fashion trends, can offer women with marginalized bodies new ways of participating in fashion discourse (Rocamora, 2011, p. 421), or, more importantly, constructing *counterdiscourses* (Connell, 2013) to traditional fashion media. As earlier studies have shown, for plus-size women in particular, blogging about fashion can be an empowering experience that enables the construction

of a positive identity (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Limatius, 2017).

Language is in a key role in the formation of this identity. As LeBesco (2001, p. 76) states, “language can be used to carry out the revolution that replaces the spoiled identity of fatness.” According to LeBesco (2001, pp. 76-77), fat people can use the power of words – spoken and written – to reconstruct their identity, which is why it is important to examine the terms that fat people use to describe themselves. As LeBesco (2001, p. 77) states, the use and *reappropriation* of (traditionally negative) terminology can be considered a strategy for “talking one’s way into a subject position”; the way fat people construct their identity through self-descriptive terms has the potential to *redeploy* and *destabilize* dominant discourses. Considering their focus on personal narratives (Titton, 2015; Limatius, 2017), fashion blogs are suitable material for investigating the use of these terms.

Previous research on the language of plus-size fashion bloggers has mostly focused on the role of the word “fat”. Harju and Huovinen (2015, p. 1612) discuss reappropriating “fat” as a way for plus-size women to (re)construct their identities as empowered subjects. Similarly, Scaraboto and Fischer (2013, p. 1239) refer to fat acceptance activists, including (but not limited to) bloggers, contesting the negative connotations of the word. This process is comparable to the reappropriation of derogatory terms within other marginalized communities, such as the black community (Allan, 2015, pp. 189-190), and the LGBTQ+ community (Kelsey, 2009).

However, as LeBesco (2001, p. 77) states, fat acceptance activists have differing opinions about the ways in which the discourses surrounding fatness and the body can be redefined; while some wish to “be able to make claims on behalf of all fat people”, others want to focus on their individual experience and “speak for themselves”. Bloggers who focus less on fat acceptance and more on presenting fashion may prefer other terms than “fat”, but perhaps do not use body descriptors in general as often as activism-driven bloggers. Moreover, within the fashion industry, “plus-size” is generally used more than “fat”, and thus considered appropriate and “neutral” by many bloggers (Limatius, forthcoming 2019). Brands that offer larger sizes also tend to include “flattering” terminology that has connotations to femininity, such as “curvy/curves/curve” or “voluptuous”, in the names of their clothing lines.<sup>3</sup>

There is variation within the plus-size blogosphere, just like there is variation within the fat acceptance movement, which is why I consider it important to study a wide range of body descriptors and their relationship to identity construction.<sup>4</sup> Even though LeBesco (2001, p. 77) expressed “a need to examine more closely the range of terms used and reappropriated by fat people” almost twenty years ago, systematic investigations of such terms have not been done before.

## 3. Blogs as communities of practice

One theoretical concept that is useful in studying the role of body descriptors within the group of bloggers is the *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Following Wenger (1998), three characteristics that define a community of practice can be distinguished: *mutual engagement* (e.g. interacting with other bloggers on a regular basis), a *joint enterprise* (e.g. a common goal of reconstructing fashion discourse), and a *shared*

<sup>3</sup> Some examples of popular clothing brands that use this strategy: ASOS Curve, Fashion Nova Curve, Curvy Kate, New Look Curves & Plus Size, Lady Voluptuous.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, in addition to textual practices, bloggers use visual means such as “outfit of the day” photographs to construct their identities (cf. Harju & Huovinen, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> We should, however, note that modern Western media presents unattainable beauty goals for all gender identities and sexual orientations.



repertoire (a collection of resources, including linguistic features, that characterize the interaction of the group). Specific ways of using body descriptors within the blogging community – such as the reappropriated “fat” – fall within the shared repertoire of the group.

One of the key features of a community of practice is the fact that becoming a community member involves a process of learning (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999, p. 174). A new blogger might be familiar with the practices of plus-size fashion bloggers if she has been a reader of this genre of blogs for a long time; however, it will take time for her to truly immerse herself in the community and to learn how group-specific meanings are constructed in interaction. A community of practice is defined both by its members and the practices these members engage in (i.e. who the members *are*, and how the members *act* within the community) – thus, as the community develops and new members join, the practices and behaviors that are considered characteristic of the community also evolve (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992, p. 464). A particular body descriptor can have an empowering meaning within the community at a specific point in time, but this meaning may shift along with changes that take place in the context of the community. The community members constantly engage in processes of negotiating the meanings of specific terms.

A community of practice tends to have *core members* and *peripheral members* (Wenger, 1998), as some members have a more established role within the community, while others might be newcomers, or simply choose to be less active. In the case of the present study, blog readers who comment on blogs but do not author their own blogs could be considered peripheral members, and the bloggers themselves also display different levels of engagement with the community – for example, some bloggers post less frequently than others.

#### 4. Corpus-based approaches to studying online discourse

The field of corpus linguistics offers methodological tools for collecting and analyzing large data-sets of language (Drasovean & Tagg, 2015). In corpus-assisted or corpus-aided discourse analysis, corpus-linguistic methods are used to identify keywords and recurring patterns in corpora, illustrating whether a discursive feature identified in a qualitative analysis extends to a larger amount of texts and/or speakers (Drasovean & Tagg, 2015). A corpus-based approach complements qualitative research by avoiding the danger of cherry-picking and producing results that are more easily reproduced (McDonald & Woodward-Kron, 2016, p. 158).

Corpus-linguistic methods have been utilized in studying the language use in various digital media, including TED Talk videos (Drasovean & Tagg, 2015; Mattiello, 2019), YouTube comments (Ivković, 2013), Tumblr blogs (Bourlai, 2018), and Twitter (e.g. van der Bom et al., 2018; Zappavigna, 2014; Sifianou, 2015). While blogs in general are popular material for different types of corpus-based studies (e.g. Kehoe & Gee, 2012; Lutzky & Kehoe, 2016; Lutzky & Kehoe, 2017; Lehti & Laippala, 2014), previous research on *fashion blogs* consists mainly of ethnographic case studies of small data-sets. As such, the present study brings a new perspective both to the study of the fashion blogging phenomenon in general, and plus-size fashion blogs in particular.

An online group's expressions of community and shared identities can be reflected in quantitative data in various ways. Bourlai (2018, p. 54), for example, found that Tumblr users who participated in fan communities (“fandoms”) used certain tagging practices frequently. It could be theorized that the members of the fandoms expressed their membership by following the “rules” of tagging within the existing community (Bourlai, 2018, p. 48). Twitter hashtags had similar community- and identity-constructing

functions in Zappavigna's (2014) study of the CoffeeTweets corpus. Zappavigna (2014, pp. 152–153) discovered two types of identities of coffee drinkers on Twitter: Coffee Connoisseurs and Coffee Addicts. The former discuss coffee in a context of quality and appreciation, while the latter identify it as a necessity, which shows in the use of hashtags such as #ineedmorecoffee (Zappavigna, 2014, p. 154).

McDonald and Woodward-Kron (2016) compared the language of long-term members and new-comers in an online support group for people living with bipolar disorder. They discovered, among other things, that long-term members used an “I would + adjunct” construction (e.g. “I would strongly suggest that you discuss it with your pdoc”) when giving advice to newer members, thus “highlighting their shared role as people living with bipolar disorder” (McDonald & Woodward-Kron, 2016, p. 165). Additionally, those who had been members for a longer time used community-specific jargon more, and constructed a shared identity with other users on the board, whereas newer members tended to make a division between their individual identities and the online community (McDonald & Woodward-Kron, 2016, pp. 167–169).

In the present study, I view body descriptors as markers of identity. By describing their bodies in specific ways, plus-size fashion bloggers can communicate how they wish to be seen and what kind of terms they identify with. Similarly, choosing to *not* use a certain term, or using it in negative contexts, can signal the blogger's wish to dissociate herself from that term. Body descriptors can also be used to index group membership – for example, the use of the word “fat” as a self-descriptor continuously and on purpose can be interpreted as the blogger aligning herself with the values of the fat acceptance movement.

#### 5. Data and method

##### 5.1. Compiling the corpus

Corpus-linguistic or corpus-aided studies of blogs are often based on large corpora such as the Birmingham Blog Corpus (Kehoe & Gee, 2012; Lutzky & Kehoe, 2017). The blog corpora that have been compiled by the researchers themselves for specialized studies tend to be relatively small and contain randomly chosen blogs that focus on a specific area of interest or are authored by people who fit certain criteria. For example, Lehti and Laippala's (2014) corpus of French politicians' blogs consisted of roughly 700,000 words, and the researchers utilized blogs that were “found using web search engines and through links displayed in blogs already found.” Lukač (2011), who studied pro-eating disorder blogs, also used a search engine to locate blogs centered around a particular theme; blogs that were found as a result of a Google search for “pro-ana” were included in a corpus of 222,464 words.

The premise of the present study is somewhat different from both types of previous studies. Instead of studying *blogging* as a phenomenon, or blogs that simply share a similar topic, the blogging community I investigate already existed as a network of bloggers who followed and interacted with each other at the time of corpus compilation. Since blogging can be characterized as a “journey” (Limatius, 2017), and blogs change and evolve over the years, I wanted to include all textual material that had been posted in the blogs since the beginning of each individual blog. The corpus was compiled specifically for this project.

The first stage of corpus compilation took place in January 2015, when I contacted 35 members of a private Facebook group called #PSBloggers – For Bloggers Only.<sup>5</sup> At the time, the group had roughly 140 members, and I chose bloggers based on the following criteria:

<sup>5</sup> As a blogger myself, I was already a member of said Facebook group at the time.

(1) they had blogged actively in 2014, (2) the language of their blogs was English, and (3) their blogs featured comments from readers. I sent the bloggers an email where I asked for permission to use their blog texts in my research, and twenty of them gave their consent.<sup>6</sup> I did not include any of the blogs whose authors did not respond to my email in the corpus. The finished corpus consists of all blog texts and comments that had been published in the 20 blogs before January 1st, 2015. All 20 blogs included in the corpus were authored by UK-based women who identified as plus-size. The blog texts and comments were downloaded into an online database which is hosted on a password-protected, personal server. The data is stored in a way that allows me to search the corpus without the aid of separate corpus-linguistic software.

The corpus contains 7776 blog posts (3,177,959 words) and 32,737 comments (1,000,049 words). Fig. 1<sup>7</sup> below illustrates the number of blog posts and the number of comments in each blog, as well as the number of words in posts and comments in each blog. For ease of analysis, and to protect the bloggers' privacy, each blog has been randomly assigned a number from one to twenty as an identifier (Blog 1, Blog 2, etc.)

### 5.2. Analyzing the corpus

I compiled a list of all descriptors for plus-size bodies in the corpus by using the Word List function in AntConc Version 3.4.4 (Anthony, 2015). Because several of the terms were frequently used as descriptors for other things than plus-size bodies, I manually removed any instances that did not refer to people and/or bodies from the concordance (e.g. "big fat cake"). Terms that were used to describe specific body parts (e.g. "fat thighs") were included in the analysis.<sup>8</sup> However, I did not include any instances where a term was only used because it was a part of a proper name (e.g. the name of a clothing brand, such as Curvy Kate). Alternative spellings (e.g. plus-sized; plus size) and comparative and superlative forms were taken into account when counting the frequencies. Terms that referred to people who are not plus-size ("thin", "skinny"), as well as words that described physical attributes not related to weight or body shape ("short", "tall") were excluded from the analysis.<sup>9</sup> Altogether 45 terms were analyzed (see Fig. 3). As I will illustrate in Section 6, some of the terms were used by only one blogger, while others were used by most of the bloggers at some point in time.

In the analysis, I treat the blog posts and the comments published in the blogs' commenting sections as separate data-sets, or sub-corpora. The commenting section contains responses from the bloggers as well as comments from visitors. Thus, it can be regarded as a "discussion" that takes place between the authors and their followers. Although many people that comment on blog texts are bloggers themselves, some of them only follow and comment on blogs without authoring their own blogs. Depending on the blog, the discussion may allow anonymous comments.

I classified the 20 bloggers into three categories based on the overall topic of the blog and/or the blogger's approach to writing

about plus-size fashion (cf. Limatius, 2018). *Fat activist* bloggers (Blogs 1, 2, 4, 8, 11, 13, and 15) wrote about the sociopolitical aspects of being fat frequently and considered it important for fat people to gain more visibility in the (fashion) media. *Fashionista* bloggers (Blogs 3, 6, 9, 14, 16, 17, and 18) focused more on personal style and commenting on current fashion trends; while they occasionally addressed issues regarding the marginalization of fat people in fashion and in society, such commentary was not the main purpose of their blogs. Finally, *all-rounder* bloggers (Blogs 5, 7, 10, 19, and 20) blogged about a wider variety of topics ranging from photography to beauty products, and many of them had only recently focused their blogs on fashion. In the analysis, these categories are represented by the letters **A** (activist), **F** (fashionista), and **R** (all-rounder).

While the present study emphasizes quantitative data, the analytical method can be considered a mixed method; in addition to analyzing the frequency and distribution of the body descriptors used by the bloggers, I complement the analysis with qualitative examples from the blogs.

## 6. Results

In this section, I will present the results of the analysis. First, I will discuss the frequency and distribution of different descriptors in the corpus in general. Second, I will examine the role of the blogger categories (fat activists, fashionistas and all-rounders) in the use of body descriptors. Third, I will explore the differences between the two sub-corpora: blog posts and the commenting section discussions. Textual examples from the corpus are presented alongside the quantitative data. Bold text is used to highlight specific words in the examples.

### 6.1. The frequencies of different body descriptors in the corpus

Since there was variation in the overall number of words in each individual blog, the frequencies of terms were normalized to a common base on 10,000 words. As demonstrated by Fig. 2 below, even after normalizing the frequencies, one blog – Blog 11 – is clearly different from the other nineteen. Blog 11 belongs to the fat activist category of bloggers and contains a lot of metadiscourse on the use of body-related terminology; for example, the author explicitly states why she prefers to describe herself using certain words and expresses her thoughts on words that she does not like:

**Example 1.** "It annoys me that, as a size 22–24 model, it would appear to some people that I should market myself an **obese/fat** model instead of as **plus size**." (Blog 11, **A**)

When discussing her modelling career, the author of Blog 11 expresses her annoyance at being called an "obese" or "fat" model, instead of the industry standard, which is "plus-size". No doubt the medical connotations of "obese" play into this, but interestingly enough, the blogger in question does not normally have a problem with the word "fat"; in fact, she uses it rather often, and even states her desire to normalize the word. Example 1 thus illustrates the importance of context – the blogger considers it unfair that she should have a different descriptor than smaller women in the context of *plus-size fashion modelling*.

The type of metadiscursive commentary on body descriptors present in Example 1 naturally leads to the blogger using body descriptors relatively often. Blog 11 is the smallest blog in the corpus (39,902 words in posts and 12,693 words in comments), which makes the contrast between this particular blog and other blogs especially noticeable.

<sup>6</sup> There are no set ethical guidelines to the use of blog material in research; some researchers consider any public online material that does not require registration appropriate to use without asking for permission, while others are of the opinion that the blogger needs to be notified. I personally wanted to obtain informed consent from the bloggers whose blogs I studied.

<sup>7</sup> I would like to thank Jukka Tyrkkö for his help in designing the visualizations of data for the present study.

<sup>8</sup> One exception was made in the case of "fuller", which is often used in makeup reviews in reference to lips or eyelashes, but also as a descriptor for bodies in other types of posts. In the analysis, I included hits such as "designed for a fuller figure" but excluded hits such as "this lip gloss makes your lips appear fuller".

<sup>9</sup> It should be mentioned that the words used to describe the out-group are also relevant in terms of identity construction. In the future, the present study could be expanded upon by analyzing body descriptors used for women who are not plus-size.

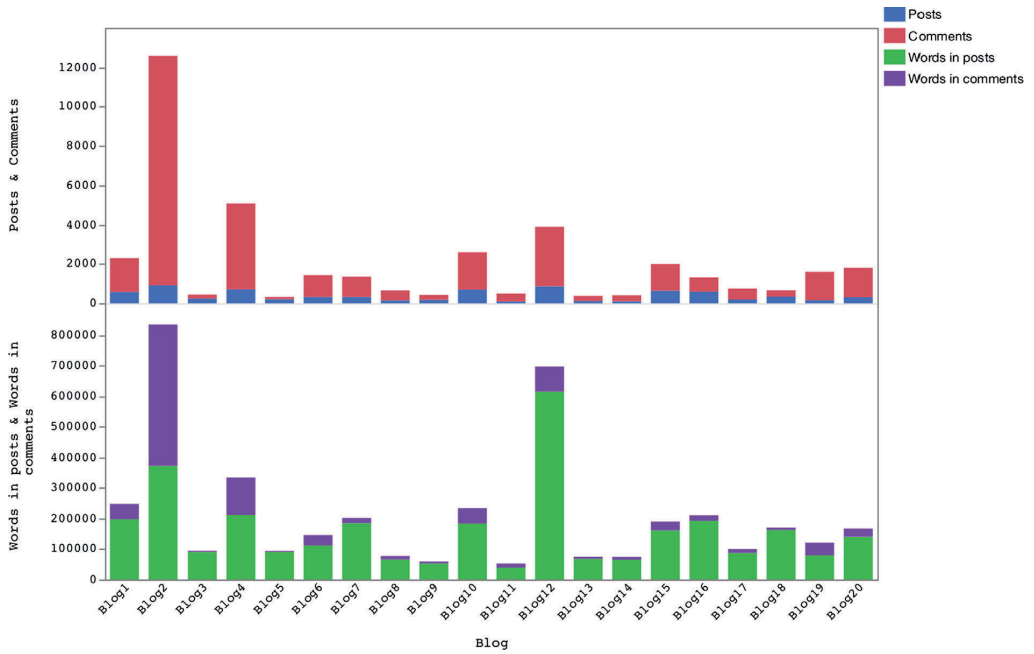


Fig. 1. The number of posts, comments and words in the corpus.

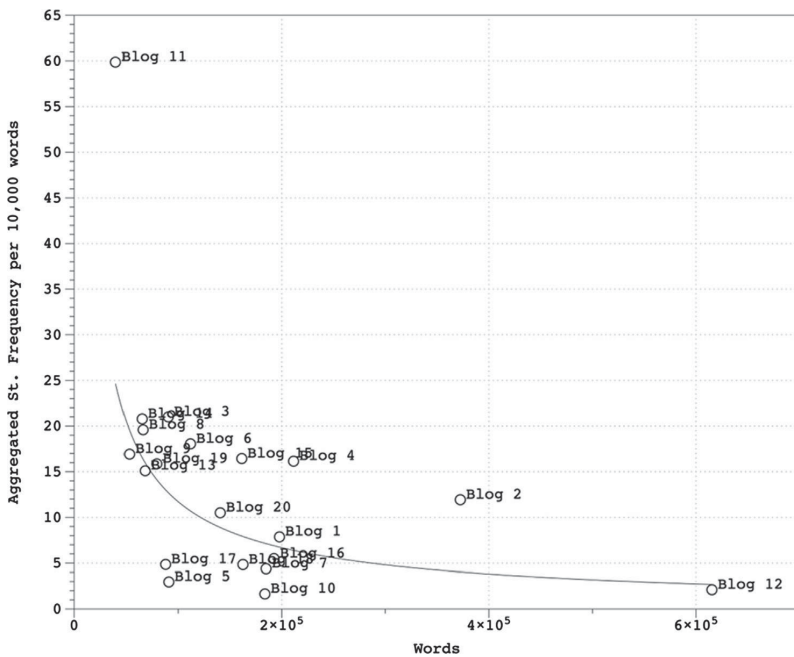


Fig. 2. Aggregated standardized frequency of body descriptors vs. the number of words in the blogs

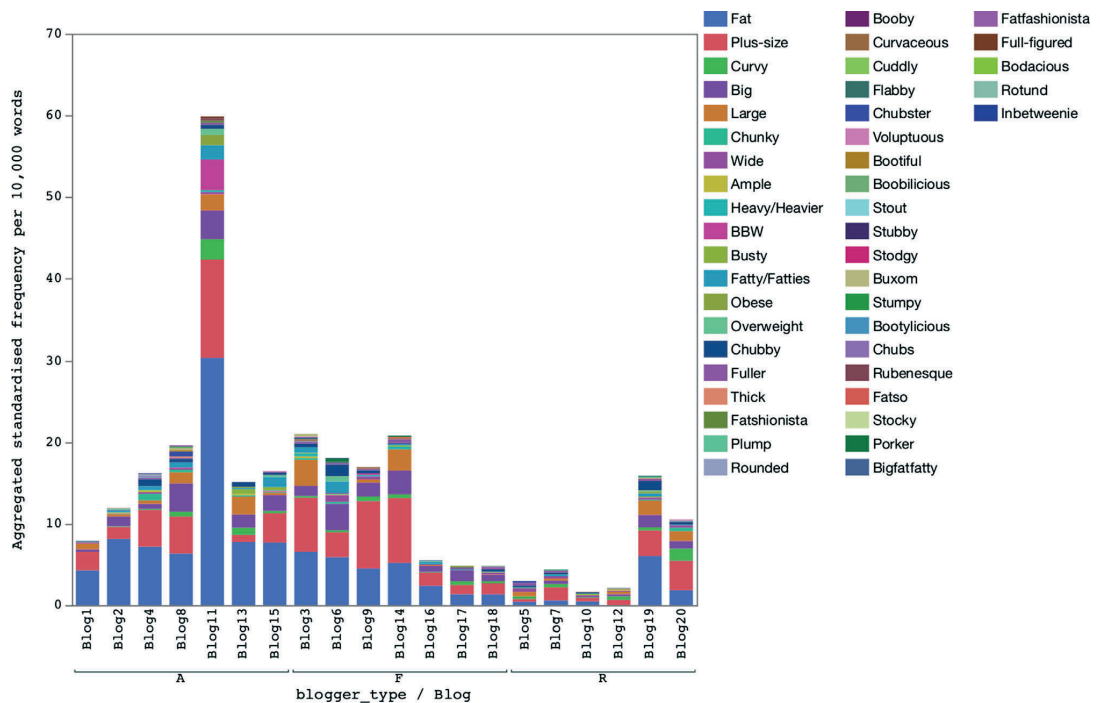


Fig. 3. Frequency and distribution of terms in blog posts.

The standardised frequencies of all terms that appeared in blog posts are presented in Fig. 3 below. Overall, “fat” was the most common term (mean standardised frequency 5.42), followed by “plus-size” (mean: 3.45), “big” (mean: 1.39) and “large” (mean: 0.89), with “curvy” completing the top five (mean: 0.49). As Fig. 3 illustrates, the use of body descriptors in general was most common in the highly exceptional Blog 11. If Blog 11 is not taken into account, the differences in the use of the terms become smaller, although the order in the top five – “fat”, “plus-size”, “big”, “large”, “curvy” – does not change. However, there are some terms that are clearly affected by the presence of Blog 11: “BBW” (an acronym of “big, beautiful woman”) seems fairly popular in blog posts with a mean of 0.2, but if Blog 11 is removed from the equation, the mean drops to 0.02.

The least popular terms in blog posts were “boobilicious” and “stodgy” (mean: 0.0015), both of which were used only once (by the author of Blog 2), as well as “bootylicious”, “rotund” and “booby”, which were completely absent in the blog post sub-corpus. Thus, the least popular descriptors seem to be either creative word formations used by specific bloggers, or traditionally “unflattering” terms. “Bootylicious” most likely originates from the popular 2001 Destiny’s Child song, while “boobilicious” is derived from the same term but used to refer to large breasts instead of a large “booty”. Neither “rotund” nor “stodgy” can be considered as particularly flattering or witty words for describing the plus-size body, yet they are probably not common enough as insults to undergo the process of reappropriating a word with negative connotations, as in the case of “fat”.

**Example 2.** “My hair’s a bit bedraggled, my lipstick has worn off and I’m a bit **stodgy** after my tea, but my skin looks good and so do my lady lumps!” (Blog 2, A)

In Example 2, the blogger uses “stodgy” in reference to her state of being after eating, in a context where one might use, for example, “bloated”. Yet, she finds that her skin and “lady lumps” still look good; thus, “stodgy” seems to describe a temporary view of the blogger’s body, rather than a term she uses intentionally to construct her identity as a plus-size woman.

Several terms that were present in the blog post sub-corpus did not appear in the commenting section discussions. Altogether sixteen terms out of the 45 that were investigated were missing from the commenting section corpus. Again, these terms included creative word formations (“bigfatfatty”, “inbetweenie”, “boobilicious”, “bootiful”, “chubs”, “fatfashionista”) and words that have traditionally unflattering connotations (“fatso”, “stocky”, “stodgy”, “stout”, “stubby”, “chubster”). In addition to these terms, “full-figured”, “bodacious”, “buxom”, and “rubesque” were missing from the commenting sections. The absence of the last set of terms might be explained simply by the fact that the terms in question are less commonly used in everyday language than, for example, “fat” or “plus-size”. Another explanation could be that as peripheral members of the blogging community, the commenters have not adopted as wide a variety of descriptors as the bloggers. Moreover, since blog authors tend to be creative people with an appreciation for wit (see Limatius, forthcoming 2019), they are perhaps more likely to use colorful vocabulary.

Although the general trend is that body descriptors are more common in blog posts than in the commenting section discussions, there are some interesting exceptions. For example, the word “fat” was clearly more common in the commenting section of Blog 1 (standardised frequency of 24.99) than in the blog posts of the same blog (standardised frequency of 4.29). As can be seen from Fig. 4 below, the frequencies of body descriptors in Blog 11 are not as exceptional when looking at the commenting sections; in fact, body descriptors are used more by commenters in Blogs 1 and 13.

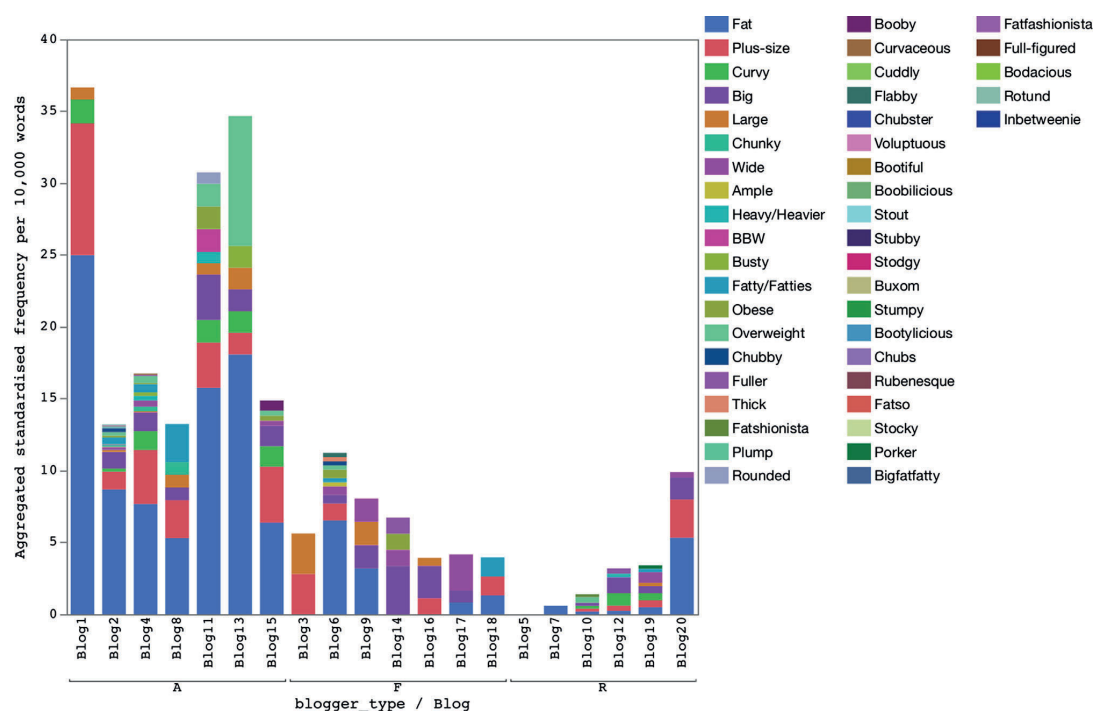


Fig. 4. Frequency and distribution of terms in commenting section discussions.

The top five most frequent terms are slightly different in the two sub-corpora. While “fat” (mean standardised frequency 5.28), “plus-size” (mean: 1.78) and “big” (mean: 1.07) make up the top three in the commenting section discussions, as they do in blog posts, “overweight” (mean: 0.62) is more common than either “large” (mean: 0.47) or “curvy” (mean: 0.46) in the commenting section corpus. However, this is mostly due to the fact that “overweight” appears rather frequently in the commenting section of Blog 13 (standardised frequency of 9.04).

If we do not take into account the terms that are completely absent in the commenting sections, the least popular terms in this sub-corpus are “stumpy”, “bootylicious” and “rotund” (each with a standardised frequency of 0.001). Each of these three words only appeared once in the corpus. Interestingly, all three words were once again found in the commenting section of Blog 2. The author of Blog 2 appears to have a penchant for particularly colorful language, which might also affect the vocabulary used by her followers. Even though people who comment on blogs without authoring one themselves can be considered as peripheral members of the blogging community, the actual bloggers are likely to be looked up to and mimicked by the commenters because of their core membership (cf. Wenger, 1998; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999, p. 174).

## 6.2. The variation between different blogs and categories of bloggers

As expected, the all-rounder bloggers use body descriptors in their blog posts less than fat activist or fashionista bloggers.<sup>10</sup> The reason for this is the fact that the all-rounder blogs contain a

<sup>10</sup> The aggregate frequency differences are statistically significant between all-rounders and both fashionistas (non-parametric Mann-Whitney *U* test:  $Z = -2.07$ ,  $p = 0.038$ ) and activists (Mann-Whitney *U* test:  $Z = -2.38$ ,  $p = 0.018$ ). The difference between fashionistas and activists is not statistically significant (Mann-Whitney *U* test:  $Z = -0.255$ ,  $p = 0.79$ ).

wider variety of topics, which means that there are many posts where weight and body shape/size are not discussed. Unsurprisingly, “fat” is most frequently used among the fat activist bloggers, but when it comes to the use of the more neutral “plus-size”, the difference between fat activist and fashionista bloggers is not very obvious (see Fig. 5).

In the commenting section discussions, the difference between fat activist bloggers and the other categories becomes more pronounced, especially when it comes to the use of “fat” (see Fig. 6 below).<sup>11</sup> However, it should be noted that there are some fat activist bloggers, most notably the author of Blog 2, who respond to comments very actively. If the blog author uses a term frequently in their blog posts, it can be assumed that they use it when responding to comments as well. Thus, the differences in the use of descriptors in commenting section discussions are not only affected by what terms the readers use when commenting, but also the ways in which the author of the blog responds to comments.

## 6.3. Blog posts vs. comments

As mentioned above, a wider variety of body descriptors was present in the blog post sub-corpus than in the commenting section discussion sub-corpus. Now I will examine the differences between the use of descriptors in the blog posts and in the commenting sections in more detail.

As Fig. 7 below illustrates, there are notable differences in the amount of body descriptors found in the commenting section discussions of different blogs. The most occurrences of body descriptors are found in the commenting sections of blogs that belong to

<sup>11</sup> The aggregate frequency differences are statistically significant between all three blog types: all-rounders and fashionistas (non-parametric Mann-Whitney *U* test:  $Z = -2.07$ ,  $p = 0.038$ ), all-rounders and activists (Mann-Whitney *U* test:  $Z = -2.92$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ), and fashionistas and activists (Mann-Whitney *U* test:  $Z = -3.06$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ).

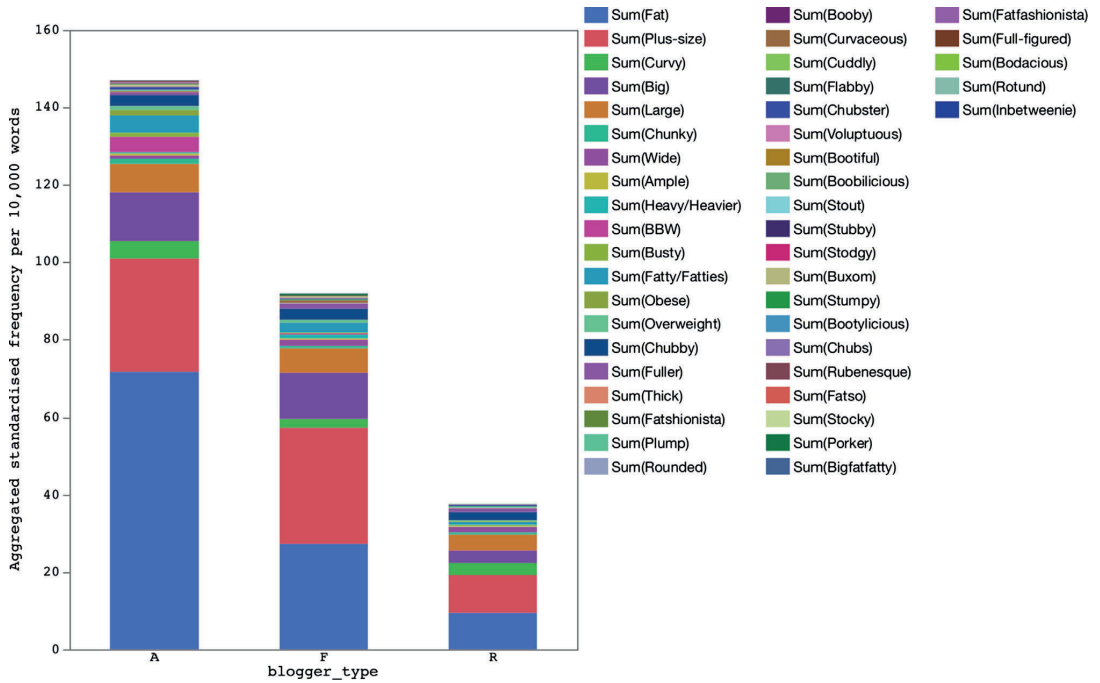


Fig. 5. Terms in different blog categories (blog posts).

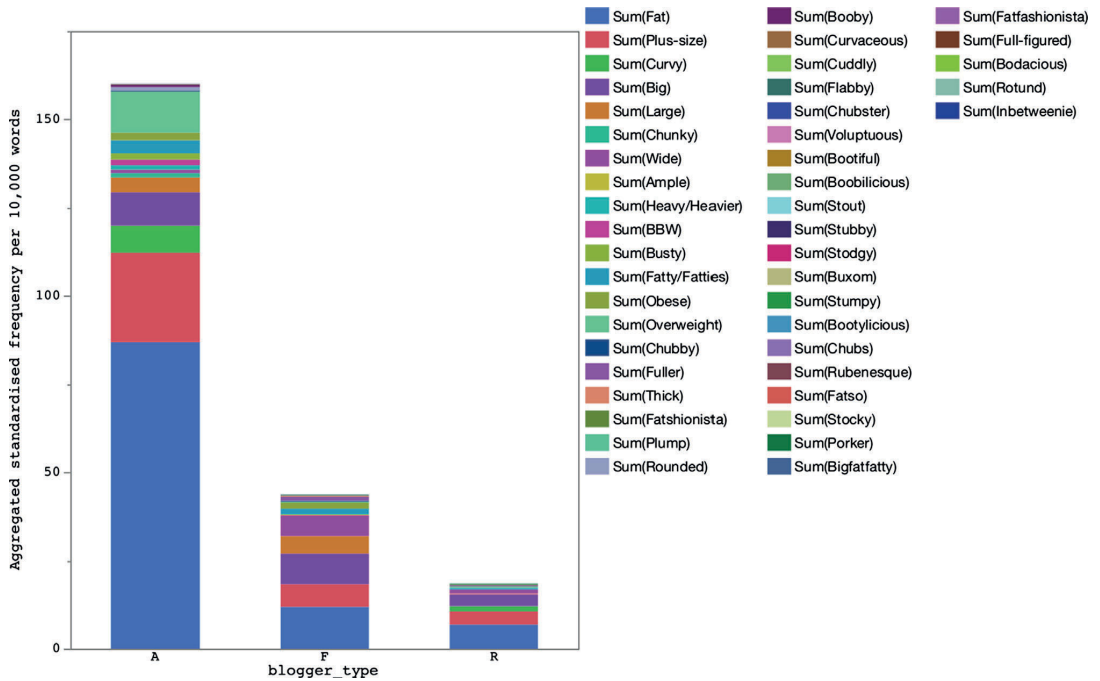


Fig. 6. Terms in different blog categories (commenting section discussions).

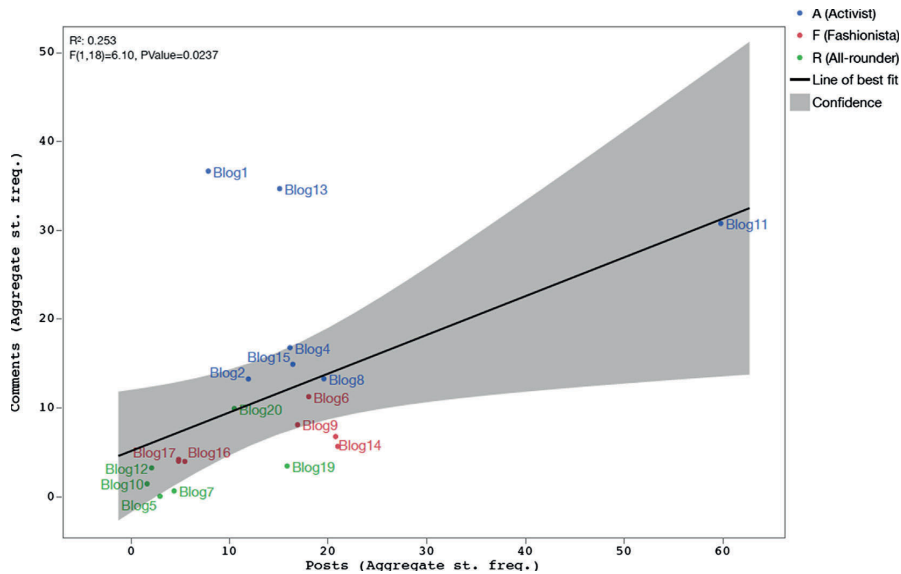


Fig. 7. The distribution of body descriptors between blog posts and commenting section discussions.

the fat activist category. The commenters of fat activist blogs clearly use body descriptors more than the commenters of fashionista and all-rounder blogs. These results further imply that people who read fat-acceptance-focused blogs have adopted the use of in-group terminology, such as the reappropriated “fat”; it could be that using a variety of body descriptors has become a part of the shared repertoire of a kind of micro-community of fat activist bloggers (although, as mentioned before, the results are also affected by the response comments of the authors themselves).

Special attention should be paid to Blogs 1 and 13 here; in these blogs, the commenting section discussions feature more body descriptors than the actual blog posts. This is especially apparent when we look at some of the more popular terms in detail: for the word “fat”, the standardised frequency is 4.39 in the blog posts of Blog 1, while the standardised frequency of the same word is 24.99 in the commenting section of Blog 1. In Blog 13, “overweight” does not occur in the blog posts at all, but it has a standardised frequency of 9.04 in the commenting section. A qualitative investigation of the occurrences of “overweight” in the commenting section of Blog 13 reveals that commenters appear to view the term as a “neutral” descriptor:

**Example 3.** “I think this doctor lacks sympathy and is being lazy lumping all your issues under the umbrella of being **overweight**.” (Comment in Blog 13, A)

The comment in Example 3 is from a blog post where the author of Blog 13 discusses her health; mental health in particular. It is notable that the blogger refers to herself as “fat” in the title of the post, but the commenter criticizes the blogger’s doctor for “lumping all [her] issues under the umbrella of being *overweight*”.

Blog 11 also continues to be somewhat exceptional. As we saw earlier in Fig. 2, the small size of the blog and the extensive metadiscursive discussion on the appropriateness of specific body descriptors result in elevated numbers in the relative frequency of such descriptors. However, as Fig. 7 illustrates, Blog 11 does not stand out as much when we only compare the frequencies of body descriptors in the commenting sections. Even though the frequencies are still high when compared to most of the other blogs

(especially those in fashionista and all-rounder categories), body descriptors are more frequent in the commenting sections of Blogs 1 and 13 (and the other fat activist blogs are not very far behind). This further highlights the fact that it is the *author* of Blog 11 who uses body descriptors particularly often; the use of these terms by the audience is not as frequent.

When considering the role of body descriptors in identity construction, the metadiscursive commentary in Blog 11 requires qualitative analysis. Even though a word occurs relatively often, it does not mean the author of Blog 11 identifies with or endorses the use of the term in question (cf. Example 1). The use of “curvy” is a good example of such occurrences:

**Example 4.** “I’m bottom heavy but I’m not **curvy**, meaning my body shape isn’t in the ‘good fat’ or ‘popular’ demographic.” (Blog 11, A)

**Example 5.** “. . . I can tell you what not to say. . . for the love of all things please do NOT say that I’m **curvy**.” (Blog 11, A)

In Examples 4 and 5, the author of Blog 11 uses “curvy” as a body descriptor but underlines the fact that she personally does not fit that description, nor does she *want* to be referred to as “curvy”. She criticizes the term by mentioning its association with so-called “good fat” bodies, meaning voluptuous, pin-up style “hourglass” shaped bodies (cf. Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015, p. 15) that are considered socially acceptable and attractive. However, it should be noted that the same blog also contains mentions of “curvy” in a positive or neutral context:

**Example 6.** “And you are **curvy**, you just have **curves** in different places to others!!” (Comment in Blog 11, A)

The commenter in Example 6 questions the blogger’s definition of “curvy”, suggesting that bodies with all types of “curves” could be described by the term, including those that do not conform to the “hourglass” stereotype. Blog authors and commenters can have differing views on the meanings associated with particular body

descriptors, and as is typical of a community of practice, these meanings can also change through a process of learning and mutual interaction.

## 7. Discussion and conclusion

The corpus-linguistic analysis of body descriptors reveals that plus-size fashion bloggers use a wide range of terms to describe plus-size bodies in their online discussions. However, a number of these terms, especially creative word formations, are only used by specific bloggers, whereas more established terms like “fat” and “plus-size” are (with minor exceptions) fairly popular across the board.

Qualitative examination of the data reveals that for the most part, “fat” is used by the bloggers and commenters as a descriptor purposefully and with no derogatory intent. Thus, it can be tentatively concluded that the plus-size blogging community has reappropriated the word:

**Example 7.** “I’ve never bothered hiding the fact I’m a **fat** bird and I just don’t care.” (Comment in Blog 4, **A**)

However, there were also a few instances where “fat” was used in a context where its traditionally derogative connotations could be detected:

**Example 8.** “My Mum is the type of mum who makes your friends want her for their own, she’s the type that doesn’t judge you, that you can talk to like a sister, who doesn’t force you to do something that doesn’t make you happy, and tells you straight away if a dress does make you look **fat**.” (Blog 7, **R**)

Even though the author of Blog 7 does not explicitly say being fat is a bad thing, the implication is that one does not want to wear a dress that makes one “look fat”, and that telling a person this can be considered doing them a favor.

While the overall frequency of “fat” appears to support the claims made in previous studies about the reappropriated use of the term, the influence of fat activist blogs is clear here. In fact, “plus-size” is slightly more popular in the other two categories, and there were also bloggers who used “fat” very rarely, such as the author of Blog 12 (all-rounder category).

The fact that “plus-size” is more common than “fat” in the more fashion-focused blogs also reflects the reality of the plus-size fashion industry; while bloggers may have reappropriated “fat”, clothing companies continue to play it safe by relying on more neutral, traditionally flattering terms. Words like “curves” and “curvy” are still often found in the names of clothing ranges for plus-size women. These terms have connotations to the “good” kind of fat that is presumed to make a woman’s body sexually appealing – full breasts and hips, narrow waist – and are thus more attractive to businesses. Interestingly, the results of the present study illustrate that “curvy” is considerably less popular than “plus-size” or “fat” among bloggers. If bloggers are seen to represent the “average” plus-size woman, there appears to be a dissonance between the consumers’ identity and the identity categories presented to them by the fashion industry. However, that is a topic that requires further research.

As for the benefits of the corpus-linguistic approach, Blog 11 (fat activist category) serves as a good example of the usefulness of combining methods. A case study focusing around Blog 11 would have produced rather different results than the present study, as the size of the blog and the author’s penchant for metadiscursive discussion on terminology have a notable effect on the relative frequency of body descriptors. On the other hand, as shown in Section 6.3, a qualitative investigation of Blog 11

reveals features that might have been overlooked in a purely quantitative study, such as the fact that body descriptors are also used when dissociating oneself from a particular identity category.

The comparison between the blog post and commenting section sub-corpora also reveals some interesting findings. Overall, the commenters of fat activist blogs appear to use body descriptors actively. There are several possible reasons for this. Firstly, it can be theorized that if a blogger uses specific linguistic features often, their readers will start to use them as well to show solidarity and to express a sense of shared identity with the blogger – they are learning the “rules” of the community of practice. However, as in the case of Blog 1, sometimes the commenting section contains more body descriptors than the actual post texts of the blogs. It could be that people who read fat-acceptance-influenced blogs, and comment on them actively, are more likely to use body descriptors in general. [Afful and Ricciardelli \(2015, p. 4\)](#) refer to the process of fat acceptance activists “coming out” as fat on their blogs by making themselves visible in a context where they have previously been invisible, such as fashion. The readers of fat activist blogs may have already “come out” and are now looking for resources for expressing their identity by reading and commenting on blogs, even if they do not write blogs themselves.

When addressing the differences between the commenting section discussions, we should keep in mind that the commenting section discussions also contain comments by the blogger herself. In the present study, these we not treated as a separate data-set, but it would be interesting to do so in the future to see whether fat activist bloggers communicate with commenters more actively than other categories of bloggers. In the present study, both the blog posts and comments in Blog 2 featured a variety of terms that were not used in other blogs. This is probably affected by the fact that the author of Blog 2 appears to respond to comments actively, but it is also possible that her habit of using a wide range of descriptors has affected the language of her readers. Although bloggers consider responding to comments important ([Limatius, forthcoming 2019](#)), they do this to different extents, with some bloggers responding to every comment, and others only addressing concerns or questions presented by the commenters. A more detailed study of the commenting section discussions could provide new information on blogs as interactive communities of practice, and the roles that different actors have within these communities.

In regard to identity construction, both the fact that “fat” is the most commonly used body descriptor in the corpus as a whole, and the fact that there still exists such a wide variety of other terms that different bloggers use are interesting. Of course, the evidence of variety could imply that not all plus-size women have reappropriated “fat”, and that some still see it as a negative term. However, a more optimistic interpretation is also possible; removing “fat” from its traditionally negative connotations has perhaps been merely the first phase of the “revolution that replaces the spoiled identity of fatness” ([LeBesco, 2001, p. 76](#)). The next step could be extending this empowering process of reappropriation to other terms. In the corpus, we can see hints of progress to this direction – in Example 9, different terms are listed as equally valid ways of describing a plus-size person’s size:

**Example 9.** “I am **plus size; fat, curvy, big, heavy, plump, chubby**... however you want to put it is fine by me.” (Blog 20, **R**)

The present study of body descriptors used by plus-size fashion bloggers has highlighted the fact that corpus-based approaches can complement qualitative studies of online discourse. In the future, similar methodological combinations could also provide new perspectives into the online interaction of other marginalized groups.



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## Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

## Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2019.100316>.

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# ARTICLE

## 4

### **“We portray OURSELVES”: The empowerment potential of fashion blogging for plus-size women**

Hanna Limatius

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“WE PORTRAY OURSELVES”:  
THE EMPOWERMENT POTENTIAL OF FASHION BLOGGING  
FOR PLUS-SIZE WOMEN

**Abstract**

This paper investigates the empowerment potential of fashion blogging for plus-size women. Two sets of online questionnaire replies collected from UK-based fashion bloggers who identify as plus-size are explored using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006). The bloggers’ responses reveal that the *sense of agency* and *sense of community* (Stavrositu & Sundar 2012) associated with blogging empower plus-size women. However, the results also show divisions within this group of bloggers. There are aspects of blogging that empower some women, while others may feel disempowered by them; most notably, the increasing commercialization of blogging. In-group divisions become particularly clear when comparing data from 2015 and 2017. Both the empowering and dividing aspects of blogging are also apparent in the discourse practices of the bloggers, such as boundary management, the use of in-group lingo, and identity construction. Based on their shared practices, the bloggers can be considered to form a *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger 1991; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992; Wenger 1998; Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999).

*1. Introduction*

This article explores the ways in which writing a fashion blog and interacting with other bloggers can empower plus-size women, as well as the challenges that hinder empowerment through blogging. The data consist of questionnaire replies from UK-based women who write blogs that focus on fashion, and identify as plus-size. Responses were collected from a specific group of bloggers in 2015 (13 respondents) and 2017 (nine respondents), and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) was used as the analytical approach. The paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways can writing a fashion blog empower plus-size women?
2. In what ways can interacting with other bloggers empower plus-size fashion bloggers?
3. What issues within the plus-size fashion blogging community prevent or deter the process of becoming empowered?
4. What changes have taken place in the plus-size fashion blogging community between 2015 and 2017, and how are these changes reflected in the bloggers’ sense of empowerment?

Stavrositu and Sundar (2012), who studied the psychological empowerment potential of blogging for women, established *sense of agency* and *sense of community* as the main paths to empowerment. Similar themes will arise in the present study: the

respondents construct the blog as a “pulpit” for expressing opinions and displaying creativity. At the same time, social interaction and maintaining relationships are considered as important goals of blogging. As the bloggers regularly communicate with each other, group-specific practices emerge. Thus, they form a *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger 1991; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992; Wenger 1998; Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999).

The present study also reveals issues that disrupt the empowerment potential of writing a blog within this community, such as time-management issues, stress, competitiveness, and jealousy. These aspects have not been addressed sufficiently in earlier studies of blogs written by plus-size women (Limatius 2016; Harju & Huovinen 2015; Connell 2013; Gurrieri & Cherrier 2013),<sup>1</sup> as the discussion on disempowerment has mainly focused on criticism towards the fashion industry and its hegemonic beauty standards (e.g. Scaraboto & Fischer 2013). The present study illustrates that while direct contact with the bloggers themselves can confirm the use of in-group discourse practices observed in blog texts and comments, it can also reveal characteristics that are not present in publicly available data (cf. Androutsopoulos 2008).

## 2. *Empowerment and online interaction*

Based on previously established theories on empowerment, Stavrositu and Sundar (2012: 370) conceptualize empowerment as reflecting three criteria: *connectedness*, *mastery and control over aspects of one’s life*, and the *ability to effect change*. They also distinguish a psychological facet of empowerment: the individual’s perception of these three features. As Muhtaseb and Frey (2008: 636) point out, the interactive nature of the internet can empower marginalized groups, since they can make choices and engage in activities online that would not be possible offline. Moreover, as an “unregulated global medium”, the internet offers marginalized people opportunities to express perspectives that are not offered in mainstream media (Muhtaseb & Frey 2008: 636; see also e.g. Marciano 2014; Yeshua-Katz 2015).

Soon and Kluver (2014) studied political bloggers from the perspectives of collective identity and online activism. According to them, bloggers who identified as political activists perceived empowering others and inspiring them to engage with socio-political movements as important goals. For these bloggers, “a shared vision of promoting political empowerment” (Soon & Kluver 2014: 507) was also tied to their sense of community as a part of a larger group.

Wen et al. (2011) studied the role of online discussion fora for breast cancer patients using a case study approach. Consistent with previous literature on support

<sup>1</sup> Some negative phenomena associated with blogging have, however, been addressed in research on other blogging communities. For example Manosevitch and Tzuk (2017: 14) mention time-management issues in their study on craft bloggers.

groups for cancer patients, their results indicated that as well as facilitating coping and helping to process emotions, participation in online support groups could enhance the users' self-empowerment (Wen et al. 2011: 356). The subject of their case study "gained a sense of control and empowerment" (2011: 353) by sharing her story with others. Wen et al. (2011: 352) also suggest that the ability to offer help to others can be more empowering to the individual than receiving help.

In their study on the psychological empowerment potential of blogging for women, Stavrositu and Sundar (2012: 382) identify two "parallel routes" towards empowerment: sense of agency and sense of community. Thus, blogging offers users two types of gratifications: *agency-enhancing* and *community-building*. Those lacking empowering social networks in their offline lives can connect with like-minded individuals through blogging, and those who want to make socio-political contributions can use blogs as platforms for expressing their opinions (Stavrositu & Sundar 2012: 382).

Blogging can also offer individuals opportunities for financial empowerment. Manosevitch and Tzuk (2017) studied twelve Israeli craft bloggers, focusing on the processes that bloggers undergo to transform their craft from a hobby into a money-making endeavour. They state that women often start blogging as a means of psychological empowerment and discover business opportunities later in their blogging careers (Manosevitch & Tzuk 2017: 4). Based on semi-structured interviews with bloggers, Manosevitch and Tzuk (2017) present a five-stage process for blogging as economic empowerment. First, the blogger turns to the internet as a source for information regarding their hobby, thus connecting with others who share the same interest. Next, they become immersed in an online community, sharing their work with others and eventually developing a sense of community. In the third stage of the process, the blogger develops a sense of commitment to their work through managing relations with their followers and other bloggers. After becoming an established blogger, they start to market their blog to gain more followers and to further cement their status in the community. At this stage, bloggers usually collaborate with others and engage with their readers through community-specific practices, such as holding competitions for their followers. In the final stage of the process, the blogger becomes aware of the money-making potential of their hobby, turning it into a business. (Manosevitch & Tzuk 2017)

### *3. Blogs as communities of practice*

In my research, I view the group of bloggers as a community of practice. Originally developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), who applied it to workplace environments, the concept of a community of practice was introduced to language and gender research by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992; see also Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999: 174). According to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 464), a community of practice is defined simultaneously by the members of the community and the practices they engage in. From the point of view of linguistic and/or discourse

studies, relevant practices that define membership include “global or specific aspects of language structure, discourse, and interaction patterns” (Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999: 175). Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999: 175) also note that gaining knowledge of the specific practices of the group, and learning how to utilize these practices, is part of the process of becoming a member of the community of practice.

Previous research (e.g. Stommel 2009; Peuronen 2017) has considered several platforms for online interaction, including blogs (Dennen 2014), from a community of practice perspective. As Dennen (2014: 351) points out, blogs have the potential to become two types of communities; they can either encompass one blog and the readers of this blog (cf. Blanchard 2004), or they can consist of a network of bloggers interacting with each other, as is the case in the present study. In communities such as this, drawing the boundaries of the community may be difficult, as the members can have a different sense of who belongs to the community. Nevertheless, certain in-group practices are likely to emerge.

Wenger’s (1998: 72–73) three-part definition of a community of practice can be applied to the group of plus-size fashion bloggers under investigation here. There is *mutual engagement* within the group: the bloggers regularly interact with each other in specific ways, such as commenting on blog texts, or communicating through other social media platforms. They also share *joint enterprises*, such as making plus-size women more visible in fashion, gaining self-confidence, and becoming empowered. Finally, the bloggers have a *shared repertoire* of resources that are used to communicate meaning (Wenger 1998: 85; Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999: 176). As Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999: 176) point out, a shared repertoire includes linguistic features, such as in-group vocabulary, but it can also refer to other patterns of routinized behaviour. In a community of practice, the participants – here, the bloggers – construct their belonging to a specific social group through certain actions and ways of communicating, and at the same time, the community evolves as the members learn new practices, adapting them into their repertoire.

#### 4. Plus-size fashion blogging

The content of plus-size fashion blogs often focuses on “outfit of the day” posts, where the goal is to introduce and review a particular outfit. A combination of text, photographs, hyperlinks and video clips can be used for this purpose. Fashion blogs in general are based on both the bloggers’ “enactment of [...] self-identity in relation to dress practices” and the “negotiation and incorporation of their knowledge of fashion media imagery.” (Titton 2015: 203) As mainstream fashion imagery marginalizes plus-size women, plus-size fashion blogs have an element of activism; the bloggers produce *counterdiscourse* (Connell 2013: 212) to the hegemonic fashion media discourse that idolizes thin, toned, able and predominantly white bodies. Many plus-size fashion bloggers identify with more widespread social movements that promote equality between people of different



sizes, such as *the fat acceptance movement* (e.g. Scaraboto & Fischer 2013) and *the body positivity movement* (Sastre 2014).

Earlier research has established that fashion blogging can have various positive effects for plus-size women, including features that enhance feelings of empowerment, such as a sense of belonging to a group (Limatius 2016), the ability to influence fashion (Scaraboto & Fischer 2013) and the possibility to redefine norms (Harju & Huovinen 2015). These benefits were also mentioned by the bloggers in their questionnaire responses; as a result, the present study adds to the discussion on the positive effects of (fashion) blogging for plus-size women. It should be noted, however, that there is variety within this blogging genre – some blogs are more activism-driven, meaning that the bloggers frequently discuss the socio-political aspects of being plus-size, while others focus more on presenting current fashion, and some incorporate topics not directly related to being plus-size, such as reviews of beauty products (Limatius 2018). The present study also expands the discussion to aspects of blogging that are not perceived as positive or empowering by the bloggers.

### 5. Data and method

Earlier studies on plus-size fashion blogging and empowerment have stressed the role of blogging in challenging the dominant fashion media imagery, focusing on the relationship between the blogger(s) and the fashion industry. However, although my previous work (Limatius 2016; 2017) shows that interactions between plus-size fashion bloggers in public blog texts and comments are largely positive, I argue that the internal social structures of blogging communities are also worth investigating in the context of empowerment. Because the bloggers know other community members read their blogs, they may wish to avoid face threatening acts (Brown & Levinson 1987) in public. Thus, bloggers are more likely to openly discuss all aspects of their experience through private correspondence, which is why I chose to use questionnaires in the present study.

Questionnaire replies were collected from a group of UK-based bloggers in 2015 and 2017. I had previously compiled a corpus consisting of blog texts and comments from 20 blogs for my PhD project, and the first questionnaire was sent to the authors of these blogs. The questionnaire was sent out in May 2015, and after three rounds of reminders, it was closed in July 2015. Out of the 20 bloggers I approached, 13 completed the questionnaire. In May 2017, I approached the 13 bloggers that had responded to the original questionnaire. Again, I sent out three rounds of reminders, and nine bloggers responded. Both questionnaires were tested on control groups; a group of six people in 2015, and four people in 2017. The control groups included people who had experience in blogging.

The responses were coded manually, and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006: 86) was used to identify repeated patterns of meaning. First, I read through the responses several times, making notes of my impressions. I then proceeded

to code the responses one question at a time. I grouped the responses of each individual author together, which made it easier for me to connect the responses of a specific blogger into one, cohesive narrative, and to observe possible changes or inconsistencies in this narrative. For each question, I first developed more detailed sub-themes: for example, for a question that dealt with the bloggers' favourite things about blogging, sub-themes such as "freedom to express oneself", "helping others", "achieving a sense of purpose", "free products and perks" and "interacting with similar others" were established. On the second round of coding, these sub-themes were grouped into more general themes, such as "creative expression", "self-improvement", "commercial gain" and "community engagement". I also differentiated between negative and positive responses.

Based on my earlier work on blog texts and comments (Limatius 2016; 2017; 2018) as well as each blogger's responses, I determined whether the overall theme of the blog was (*fat*) *activism-driven*, or *fashion-driven*. Bloggers who frequently discussed topics related to the marginalization of fat women in fashion and/or in society were considered activism-driven, while bloggers whose main focus was displaying creativity and sense of fashion were considered fashion-driven.

It should be noted that since I had been in contact with the bloggers earlier, they were aware of the topic of my PhD research (studying blogs from an online community perspective) at the time of responding to the questionnaires. However, as the first questionnaire was sent out almost six months after my introductory email, and I did not mention my research focus on the questionnaire nor on the cover letter, it is unlikely that knowing my PhD research topic would have had any major influence in the bloggers' responses. I also consciously avoided using the term "community" in the questions. Because I am a blogger myself and have been acquainted with some of the respondents prior to starting my research, my goal has been to remain as open as possible when it comes to my dual role of blogger and researcher.

The original questionnaire had three sections. In the first section, the bloggers were requested to provide background information: their age, how long they had been blogging, whether their current blogs were their first blogs, and whether blogging was a hobby, a part-time occupation or a full-time occupation to them.<sup>2</sup> I also requested the names of their blogs so that I would be able to connect each blogger's responses to blog texts if needed.<sup>3</sup> However, blog names are not mentioned in the analysis. Instead, I have chosen to use pseudonyms for each blogger.

<sup>2</sup> On the first questionnaire, I did not include gender in the background information, as empirical evidence from the blogs (such as pronoun use and referring to oneself as a "woman") indicated that all respondents identified as women. However, it should be noted that one cannot be certain that the identities that are portrayed in the blogs are the respondents' true identities. Moreover, one cannot deduce a person's gender identity to be female simply because they "appear to be" women. To correct this oversight, I included a question on gender identity in the second questionnaire.

<sup>3</sup> Due to length constraints, I decided against analysing blog texts in the present study.

The second part of the questionnaire focused on blogging habits. The bloggers were asked what motivated them to start blogging, and what aspects of blogging they considered positive (“best”) and negative (“worst”). I also asked about interaction: whether the bloggers commented on other blogs and replied to the comments on their own blogs, and what kind of posts and comments they responded to. Additionally, I asked about linking practices and the role of different social media platforms in interacting with other bloggers. Finally, the bloggers were asked whether they had interacted with other bloggers face-to-face and requested to describe such experiences.

The final part of the 2015 questionnaire focused on life as a plus-size woman and blogging about plus-size style/fashion.<sup>4</sup> The bloggers were asked what made them focus their blogs on plus-size fashion, whether they were more likely to read blogs written by other plus-size women, and who their favourite plus-size bloggers were. I also asked how the bloggers felt about the terms “plus-size” and “fat”, and how they would feel about their blogs being described as “plus-size style blogs” or “fatshion blogs”.<sup>5</sup> Finally, I asked the bloggers whether they thought plus-size women were portrayed differently in the blogosphere as opposed to the mainstream media. I also requested them to describe the differences they had noticed.

The 2017 questionnaire was more compact, as its main goal was to identify possible changes that had taken place in the community over the two-year period. Once again, I asked for background information in the first part of the questionnaire. The second part of the questionnaire focused on plus-size fashion blogging in 2017. The bloggers were asked to identify what kind of changes (if any) had taken place in the plus-size blogging “scene” and in the plus-size fashion industry. They were also requested to describe their current personal relationship to blogging and whether that had changed. In addition, I asked the bloggers to name what they considered to be the most important and influential social media platforms in 2017. The final part of the 2017 questionnaire focused on terminology, as the relationship between identity construction and in-group terminology is a central research interest in my PhD project, and the use of group-specific vocabulary can be an important shared resource in a community of practice. I asked about the bloggers’ thoughts on the following terms: “fat”, “plus-size”, “chubby”, “curvy”, “obese”, “fatshionista”, “fat acceptance” and “body positivity”.

<sup>4</sup> In the original questionnaire, I used the term “style blog”, which was later switched to “fashion blog.”

<sup>5</sup> I am aware that the verb “feel” is sometimes considered unsuitable for academic research. As I wanted the bloggers to discuss their personal experiences, I consider it suitable in this context.

## 6. *The 2015 questionnaire*

In this section, I analyse the results of the 2015 questionnaire. The analysis will focus on questions that are relevant for the research questions posed in this paper.

### 6.1. *Background information*

Thirteen bloggers responded to the first questionnaire. The respondents' age ranged from 20 to 41 with a median age of 32 (in 2015). Four respondents had been blogging for 1-2 years, five had been blogging for 2-3 years and four for more than three years. For seven respondents, their current blog was their first blog, whereas six had authored other blogs before. Seven respondents reported that blogging was a hobby to them, while five people identified blogging as a part-time occupation. One respondent, Jane, described herself as a full-time blogger and freelance social media manager. The respondents' pseudonyms are presented in Table 1 below, where I have classified them based on the overall theme of their blog: fashion-driven vs. (fat) activism-driven. In the analysis, the theme of the blog is represented by the acronyms "FD" and "AD" following the bloggers' names. For example: Tina, who writes an activism-driven blog, will be "Tina\_AD".

**Table 1.** 2015 respondents

<b>Fashion-driven blogger</b>	<b>Activism-driven blogger</b>
Jane, Kate, Mel, Liz, Rita, Wendy, Anne	Tina, Claire, Emily, Jessica, Bella, Cassie

### 6.2. *Blogging habits and motivations*

The motivations for starting a blog could be agency-enhancing, community-building, or circumstantial. Most respondents (10 out of 13) named reasons related to *creativity*. These bloggers had always enjoyed writing and creative work, and for them, starting a blog was a natural progression. Others stated that they had wanted a platform for expressing their opinions, and a blog seemed like a suitable medium. Mel had a professional background in fashion and wanted to share her expertise online. Tina and Jane had received encouragement from friends and family, and Emily had been a new mother looking for something to occupy her time at home.

Blogging was a social activity from the start. Five bloggers had started a blog after reading other people's blogs, some outright stating they had wanted to become a part of the online community:

1. "I was a reader before I started my own. I loved how empowered these women seemed and wanted to be a part of it." (Bella\_AD)

For Bella, moving from the periphery to the in-group was a strong motivator for taking the first steps into blogging. As a reader of plus-size fashion blogs, she observed

features that she interpreted as empowering, and wanted the same experience for herself. This type of reasoning for starting a blog was typical in the data.

The role of social interaction was further emphasized when the bloggers were asked about the “best” aspects of blogging. All 13 respondents mentioned meeting and interacting with others as one of the most positive aspects of blogging. Out of the 13, six bloggers used the word “community” in their responses, and four referred to other bloggers as “friends”. For Emily, the fact that she was able to help her readers was the best part of blogging (cf. Wen et al. 2011: 352). Generally, having a connection with readers and receiving feedback and support from them were considered important. Blogging was about the *people*, first and foremost:

2. “The people; I’ve met so many wonderful people, bloggers and non-bloggers alike, that I never would have met had I not started blogging.” (Jessica\_AD)

In her response, Jessica refers to interacting with “non-bloggers” as well as bloggers. In a community of practice, different members have different roles, some becoming (in time) the *core members* of the community, while some remain *peripheral members* (Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999: 174). Jessica’s response implies that those who read and comment on blogs could also be considered as part of the community. Authoring one’s own blog is not necessarily a requirement for entering the community (Dennen 2014: 350), but it might enable one to become a core member and, as Bella’s response in (1) suggests, more empowered.

The commercial aspects of blogging also played a role in terms of motivation. Four bloggers referred to “perks” like free clothes, invitations to events and collaborations with fashion brands. While seemingly materialistic, such commercial features can also be interpreted as agency-enhancing, considering the marginalized position of plus-size women in the fashion industry. Gaining access to new fashions and being able to showcase them on one’s blog can be an empowering experience for a person who has previously felt out of place in the field of fashion.

Both social and commercial features of blogging also came up as negative aspects of blogging. Although all respondents regarded interacting with other bloggers and followers as a positive side, some mentioned “jealousy”, “negativity” and “drama” among bloggers. Four bloggers named competitiveness as a negative side, and “trolling” was also mentioned. Jane expressed her dislike for people who started to blog “just to get free things from the companies,” although she also considered “exciting campaigns such as events” and “being sent to weekends away” as positive sides of blogging. A blogger was entitled to enjoy their commercial success, as long as it was not their *main* motivation.

Wendy’s replies were especially thought-provoking, as she simply named “other bloggers” as the worst aspect of blogging, without further elaboration. However, she also named “the community” as the best aspect, again with no explanation. It could be that when referring to “the community”, Wendy means a specific group

of people (e.g. the plus-size fashion bloggers, people who follow her blog), and by “other bloggers”, she means bloggers who are not part of what *she* considers as “the community” (cf. Dennen 2014: 351). Another interpretation of Wendy’s responses is that interacting with fellow bloggers is both the best *and* the worst thing about blogging.

Wendy’s responses also stood out because of their bluntness. Most responses that mentioned interaction with other bloggers as a negative side were carefully worded and contained hedging – for example, according to Emily, interaction with other bloggers “can be hard sometimes:”

3. “It’s very rare but I do get targeted online by bullies and perverts. Also maintaining relationships with fellow bloggers can be hard sometimes.” (Emily\_AD)

Similar face-saving techniques were present in a previous study on blog texts and comments (Limatius 2016), which implies that maintaining a certain degree of politeness towards other bloggers is an established norm within the group.

While Jessica considered new relationships with both bloggers and non-bloggers as positive, Claire drew a boundary between the two groups:

4. “...Even the people who are plus size too, non bloggers, seem to sometimes hate those with confidence as I see many horrible comments from people on FB pages like SimplyBe and Yours<sup>6</sup> when bloggers pictures are shown.” (Claire\_AD)

Such *boundary management* or *policing of membership* is also a common practice in other online communities, such as the “Pro-Ana” community (Yeshua-Katz 2015). However, once again Claire “softens the blow” towards other plus-size women by hedging – they “seem to sometimes” hate those with confidence – and justifies her opinion by presenting evidence: “as I see many horrible comments from people”.

Four respondents mentioned time management and stress as negative aspects of blogging – for example, Bella said that blogging “can seem like a second job”. Although the bloggers enjoyed the creative freedom and social interaction facilitated by blogging, they acknowledged that these positive effects came with the price of having to put a lot of time and effort into their blogs. It seems likely that if blogging starts to feel like a “second job”, or the blogger feels constantly pressured to provide new content, the empowering effects of blogging also suffer.

As a means of maintaining in-group relations, eight bloggers commented on other people’s blogs “sometimes”, while five commented “often.” The respondents were

<sup>6</sup> Two well-known plus-size clothing brands, Simply Be and Yours Clothing.

likely to comment on posts they found interesting or informative, including product reviews, lifestyle/opinion posts and personal stories. Five bloggers commented on outfit posts if they found the author's fashion sense relatable. Wendy participated in "comment swaps" (bloggers agree to comment on each other's posts, thus sharing resources and promoting each other), while Cassie stated she was more likely to comment if she had a personal relationship with the blogger. Only one blogger said she almost always commented, regardless of topic:

5. "Most that I read to be honest even if it isn't a topic I would write about because I appreciate how much hard work goes into blogging and how much of a lift it is when you do get comments and appreciation." (Anne\_FD)

Anne wants to show solidarity towards other bloggers, as she knows from personal experience how encouraging comments can be. Previous studies on plus-size fashion blogging have also highlighted such practices of expressing support and solidarity towards others (Limatius 2016; Gurrieri & Cherrier 2013). However, some bloggers admitted that although they read blogs, they rarely took the time to comment. The bloggers were more likely to respond to the comments on their own blogs than to comment on other people's blogs.

In general, responding to comments was considered important, but three bloggers mentioned that they had deleted insulting or harassing comments from their blogs. As most bloggers moderate the comments that are posted on their blog, negative interactions do not necessarily show up on the blog itself, which might explain why previous studies of blog data paint such a positive picture of the blogging community.

Linking, which Myers (2010: 31) refers to as the "currency" of the blogosphere, is also an important community-building practice between bloggers – by linking to another blog, you show your support to the blogger by recommending their content to your own followers. All respondents linked to other blogs when mentioning them in their blog posts, and six had a blogroll (a hyperlinked list of their favourite blogs in the sidebar of the blog). The respondents also utilized various social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to interact with fellow bloggers – Dennen (2014: 353) refers to this type of interaction as *backchannel engagement*.

All respondents had met other bloggers offline, 12 out of 13 both in their spare time and at blogging-specific events. When asked about their experiences of meeting other bloggers, 12 bloggers described them as positive. However, there was a fair amount of variation in the responses. While others used markedly positive descriptors like "amazing", "empowering", and "life-changing", some bloggers admitted there was also tension:

6. "Wonderful! The first time I met the people I'd been talking to online for months, it was a life changing experience. I finally felt like a part of a community. I felt like I belonged, and I'd never had that before." (Tina\_AD)

7. “It’s usually positive; fun and enjoyable. On the odd occasion there’ll be someone that I don’t particularly like, but it doesn’t often happen and when it does I just try to interact with them as little as possible” (Jessica\_AD)

Although both Tina and Jessica give a positive account of meeting other bloggers, their responses construct different discourses. Tina’s response is extremely positive; for her, interacting with other bloggers has had considerably empowering effects. She describes these meetings as a turning point in her personal narrative and stresses a sense of belonging. Jessica, on the other hand, is more reserved. She describes meetings with other bloggers with positive adjectives – “fun”, “enjoyable” – but she also admits that she does not like everyone she meets. Hedging and qualifiers are used to lessen the impact of her statement (“usually”, “on the odd occasion”, “it doesn’t happen often”).

Three bloggers mentioned that meeting other bloggers offline could also be a source of anxiety (cf. Limatius 2016). Liz and Kate described the meetings as initially “intimidating” or “nerve-wracking”, but ultimately rewarding. Anne compared her experience to “starting at an all-girls school”, but said she might become more relaxed “with time”:

8. “It was like starting at an all girls [sic] school on the first day. I felt awkward as hell and like I couldn’t really relax but I guess this goes with time.” (Anne\_FD)

Interestingly, Anne had only met other bloggers at blogging-related events, whereas the other 12 had also participated in less formal gatherings. It could be that the informal meetings increased the sense of empowerment more than meetings that were organized around blogging, as the latter likely had a more competitive atmosphere. For example, at an event organized for bloggers by a fashion brand, the bloggers would potentially compete for collaboration opportunities with the brand. From a community of practice point of view, informal meetings can also add to the shared resources of the group in different ways; they can result in new stories and inside jokes that enter the shared repertoire of the community (cf. Wenger 1998: 130–131; Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999: 176).

### 6.3. *Blogging and being plus-size*

When asked why they decided to focus their blogs on plus-size fashion, the respondents’ replies were similar to their reasons for starting blogging in general. Five bloggers had wanted to share their sense of fashion and to inspire others. Agency-enhancing reasons such as gaining self-confidence, accepting oneself and developing one’s personal style were also mentioned. For many respondents, having “always” been plus-size and interested in fashion, it was natural that their blogger identity also developed around these themes.



As for the in-group terminology of plus-size fashion bloggers, the respondents considered “plus-size” as mostly positive. It was described as useful when shopping and searching for new blogs to read, although Bella mentioned that it “means something different to everyone”, and Emily only found the term acceptable “until a suitable alternative is found”. The term was characterized as inoffensive and practical, although somewhat difficult to define.

For the most part, the bloggers also embraced the word “fat”. Ten out of 13 bloggers considered it a neutral, even positive, descriptor; a finding that is in line with previous research on plus-size fashion bloggers *reclaiming* “fat” (Gurrieri & Cherrier 2013; Harju & Huovinen 2015). Several bloggers stressed the fact that once removed from its derogative connotations, “fat” is merely an adjective. To highlight this interpretation, the respondents compared it to words like “short”, “tall”, “brunette” and “freckled”. However, they also acknowledged the stigma connected to the term:

9. “Ok, when used in context. I have an issue with people using it as an insult.” (Liz\_FD)

For Liz, the meaning of the word changes with the context. This could mean, for example, that only the in-group are “permitted” to use the word in specific contexts (cf. Limatius 2017). Several bloggers expressed a temporal change in their attitude towards the term – for example, Cassie had previously disliked the word, but was currently “good with it”.

Eleven respondents identified “plus-size style blog” as an accurate description of their blog, while two respondents felt that although they had no problem with people describing their blog as such, it was not completely accurate, as they blogged about other topics as well. Most bloggers also accepted the label “fatshion blog” (cf. Gurrieri & Cherrier 2013; Harju & Huovinen 2015; Scaraboto & Fischer 2013) although Kate found the term “a little twee”, and Jessica said she did not use that term herself and did not see it being used by other people often, either. The word “fatshion” was framed as an in-group term. Tina mentioned “fatshion” hashtags as a “way for fat women to find other fat women” on social media, while Bella described it as “lingo”:

10. “I think being a blogger and knowing the lingo means I know that these phrases aren’t meant in a negative way, they are a way of identifying like minding [sic] people.” (Bella\_AD)

Being a part of the community and knowing the shared lingo – for example, learning the different nuances between the empowering, reclaimed use of “fat” and its derogatory uses – appear to be linked. The importance of shared terminology, and the way these terms can be used to find similar others in the blogosphere, is

highlighted further by the fact that most bloggers were more likely to read fashion blogs authored by other plus-size women. Only Jane and Mel (both fashion-driven bloggers) said they did not have a preference between plus-size and straight-size fashion blogs:

11. “I WILL read plus size fashion blogs for outfit inspiration, but I’ll read anyone’s blog. Their size does not matter to me.” (Jane\_FD)

For the remaining 11 respondents, however, plus-size fashion blogs were the primary source of fashion inspiration. The most common reason for preferring blogs written by other plus-size women was being able to relate to the author, as well as being able to envision what the clothes would look like on the respondents themselves. Other reasons included community-building factors, like maintaining personal relationships within the blogging community, the desire to help other plus-size women, and finding “kindred spirits”. Although the respondents were generally careful not to discriminate against straight-size women in their responses, Tina stated that she simply “did not care” about thin women’s fashion, and justified only supporting plus-size bloggers with her past (negative) experiences in the field of fashion:

12. “...I’ve been shut out of fashion for so long I really don’t care what thin women are wearing. I want to see what other plus size people are wearing and draw inspiration from them.” (Tina\_AD)

For the final question of the 2015 questionnaire, the respondents were asked whether they thought plus-size women were portrayed differently in the blogosphere than in the mainstream media. Eleven respondents considered the portrayal of plus-size women to be more positive in the blogosphere. Wendy said she did not know how plus-size women were portrayed in the mainstream media, as she actively avoided any mainstream media content where plus-size people were represented, saying she had “no interest in seeing it, good or bad”. Kate’s response was ambiguous; her wording made it unclear whether she was talking about the blogosphere or the mainstream media.

The bloggers considered the representation in the blogosphere to be more positive because blogs enabled them to have agency – to truly represent themselves:

13. “Yes it’s a lot more positive in the blogosphere and if there is any negativity we flush it out immediately and tell people that body shaming is wrong. Mainstream media just sees fat people as evil and bad for the world which is ridiculous.” (Jane\_FD)
14. “Yes, we’re portrayed as being sexy, with agency, not women under the grip of the ‘obesity epidemic’. We are portrayed, no, we portray OURSELVES as stylish women who want just the same things from fashion as slim women

do. Women in the mainstream media are problems to be fixed, someone to use as a foil to make yourself feel better. Fuck that. Women in plus size blogging are strong, as varied in style and personality as we want to be, interesting, of worth.” (Tina\_AD)

Both Jane and Tina use the inclusive pronoun “we” when referring to the plus-size fashion blogosphere, as well as describing how plus-size women can affect their representation (“if there’s negativity *we* flush it out immediately”, “*we* portray ourselves”). Tina also uses capitalization (“OURSELVES”) and colourful language (“Fuck that”) to highlight her point. In the blogosphere, plus-size women are empowered subjects, whereas in the mainstream media they are “evil”, “bad for the world”, “problems to be fixed”, or “under the grip of the obesity epidemic”. Both bloggers also construct the average consumer of mainstream media as an “other” who “sees the tiniest bit of fat as bad” and uses women “as a foil to make [themselves] feel better”. Again, a boundary is drawn between “us” (plus-size bloggers/activists) and “them” (the mainstream media, its presumed consumers).

### 7. The 2017 questionnaire

In this section, I discuss the findings of the 2017 questionnaire. Out of the original 13 respondents, nine responded to the second questionnaire. The age of the respondents ranged from 22 to 43 with a median age of 34 (in 2017). All respondents identified as women. The respondents are listed in Table 2 below. The same pseudonyms are used for both questionnaires.

**Table 2.** 2017 respondents

<b>Fashion-driven blogger</b>	<b>Activism-driven blogger</b>
Jane, Kate, Mel, Wendy, Anne	Tina, Claire, Jessica, Bella

#### 7.1. Changes in plus-size fashion blogging

All respondents agreed that the plus-size fashion blogging “scene” had changed during the past two years, but there was variation in the bloggers’ attitudes towards these changes. Seven respondents identified the changes as mostly negative, while two respondents saw them as positive. Indeed, the different perspectives presented in the bloggers’ responses themselves display the divisions within the community. One overarching theme that could be distinguished from the responses was a move from opinion-based, activism-driven blogging to commercialized blogging: blogging that offers a source of income to the author and engages them in processes of self-branding (van Nuenen & Varis 2017: 129). This, according to six out of nine respondents, had resulted in increased competitiveness between bloggers, which had negative effects for the sense of community.

Some bloggers worried that activism was no longer the focus of the plus-size fashion blogosphere. Modern blogging was “norm-centric” and “all about numbers”.

15. “It’s turned into more of a career for some rather than to help other plus size women feel good in their bodies. It feels to me like it has become slightly selfish and cynical. Making a career is of course no bad thing, but it leaves those of us who do care about women left out in the wilderness.” (Tina\_AD)

While Tina does not condemn the commercial aspects of blogging completely (blogging is a source of income to her as well), she does position commercialized blogging against blogging to “help other plus-size women feel good in their bodies”. It is clear which type of blogging she identifies with: “those of us who do care about women.” The emphatic “do” implies that those who focus on commercial blogging do not, in fact, care about women.

Two respondents in the data – Jane and Mel, both fashion-driven bloggers – considered the changes in the blogosphere as positive, even empowering. From their perspective, the increase in both the number of plus-size fashion bloggers in general and in the commercial opportunities offered to bloggers boosted the confidence of plus-size women:

16. “[It’s] incredibly saturated and competitive but people are also a lot friendlier on sharing advice now. Companies are using bloggers more and more for campaigns, to promote new things, and even in adverts on the TV. Bloggers are taking over!” (Jane\_FD)

Jane acknowledges the fact that blogging is more competitive now, but she also reports an increase both in the sense of community (bloggers are “friendlier”) and in the sense of agency (bloggers are “taking over”). However, in contrast to her 2015 response (13), she no longer uses an inclusive pronoun when she talks about the blogging community – *we* are not “taking over”, *bloggers* are.

All respondents agreed that the plus-size fashion industry had changed. These changes are linked to the changes in the blogosphere; as more brands branch out into plus-size fashion, more commercial opportunities for bloggers arise. However, once again there was variation in how individual bloggers viewed the changes. Six out of nine bloggers stated that although there were more fashion options for plus-size women now, many new brands and collections had major flaws. The most common issue was the size range (fewer options in larger sizes). The quality and style of the clothing were also criticized, along with the lack of brick and mortar stores.

Eight out of nine bloggers said their personal relationship to blogging had also changed. For some, the blog’s content had changed, the author’s focus shifting from plus-size fashion to other topics, such as lifestyle/opinion-based blogs. There were also changes in attitudes towards blogging, which manifested as the bloggers

distancing themselves from the blogging community. Some did not experience the same sense of community as they had before, while some lacked interest in blogging in general. Jane and Bella had moved from blogging to other mediums of online interaction (running an online magazine and focusing on microblogging such as Instagram, respectively). Three bloggers admitted that their relationship to blogging was tumultuous, and Tina and Mel specifically mentioned that the competitiveness within the blogosphere had affected them. As Stavrositu and Sundar (2012: 382) point out, people who are “at odds with themselves” can benefit from blogging by receiving external validation. When bloggers are constantly competing for the same opportunities, some are inevitably left without this feeling of validation. Although Mel was one of the bloggers who saw the commercialization of blogging as a generally positive phenomenon, she had trouble with her personal relationship to blogging:

17. “My personal relationship is one that goes up and down. It’s suddenly become competitive and bitchy. You see the same people used time and time again and sadly it seems to be a small corner of the pick that are achieving things” (Mel\_FD)

The fact that some bloggers had distanced themselves from the plus-size fashion blogging community was also reflected in what they considered to be the most important and influential social media platforms in 2017. Instagram was clearly the most influential, as all nine bloggers mentioned it in their responses, although Mel speculated that Instagram’s popularity was declining. YouTube and Twitter were both mentioned four times, while blogs were only mentioned twice.

### *7.2. In-group terminology in 2017*

There were no major changes in how the respondents viewed the terms “fat” and “plus-size” between 2015 and 2017. While Bella mentioned that “fat” was “normally used negatively”, the eight other bloggers stated that they viewed the word merely as a descriptor and did not consider it an insult. Three respondents identified “fat” as something positive, saying that they personally liked the word or found it empowering. As for “plus-size”, most respondents connected the word with fashion and, like in the 2015 questionnaire, found it useful when looking for clothes to buy or blogs to read. Anne provided a more specific definition for the term (“larger than a [UK] size 14”), while Claire and Kate regarded it as a “supposedly nicer”, more politically correct way of saying “fat.”

There was more variation in the interpretations of other terms. “Chubby” was either connected to cuteness (babies and animals, being cuddly), being a “smaller fat” (an “inbetweenie”; a person who is not truly plus-size but “on the cusp”) or, like “plus-size”, attempting to be polite about describing someone as “fat”. None of the respondents personally identified as “chubby”. Kate particularly disliked the term, associating it with fetishism. Reactions to “curvy” were even more mixed,

with six bloggers regarding the term as problematic. “Curvy” was connected to a socially acceptable type of fatness; something that had been “co-opted by brands” to reach out to specific customers (i.e. smaller plus-size women with hourglass shaped, voluptuous bodies; Harju & Huovinen 2015: 1616). Jessica and Claire openly stated their dislike for the term – Claire even accused fellow plus-size women of “deluding” themselves if they identified as “curvy”:

18. “You are deluding yourself if you call yourself curvy instead of fat. Fat is not an insult!” (Claire\_AD)

Claire sees “curvy” as harmful “sugar-coating” of fatness (Limatius 2017), which makes the empowering process of reclaiming “fat” more difficult. Three respondents also pointed out that “curvy” could be applied to straight-size people as well, although many plus-size fashion brands have chosen to use the term in their advertising due to its flattering connotations. For example, the head buyer of Marks & Spencer stated that they named their new plus-size line as “Curve” because pre-launch research showed there was “no fear” for the term (Cartner-Morley 2018).

“Obese” was considered either a negative or a neutral term by all respondents. Unsurprisingly, seven out of nine respondents identified “obese” as a medical term. Tina and Anne strongly disliked the term, and Tina considered “obese” to be a concept “created by doctors” for the explicit purpose of making plus-size people feel disempowered. Wendy, however, stated that she had “no real issue” with the term.

All bloggers considered the term “fatshionista” either positive or neutral, with connotations to stylish, fashion forward plus-size people. Tina especially liked the fact that the term had the word “fat” in it. However, four respondents considered it to be an outdated term that was rarely used within the community outside of hashtags. Mel was the only blogger who self-identified with the term. “Fatshionista” appears to have moved to the periphery of the in-group vocabulary while “fat” and “plus-size” have retained their community-specific meanings.

The final questions on terminology concerned the names of the two social movements commonly associated with plus-size women and empowerment: *fat acceptance* (e.g. Scaraboto & Fischer 2013) and *body positivity* (Sastre 2014). “Fat acceptance” was identified as a positive or a neutral term by all respondents. It was connected to accepting one’s body and helping others, as well as equality between fat people and those who are not fat. Jessica described the term as “radical”, and a distinction was also made between “fat acceptance” and “body positivity”:

19. “The break away from body positivity which is no longer about fat positivity.” (Kate\_FD)

Claire, Jane and Bella identified “body positivity” as a helpful movement; as truly accepting one’s own and other people’s bodies. However, the remaining six

respondents pointed out that the term was also problematic. It was described as “tarnished”, “commercialized”, “a trend”, a “minefield”, and “overrun by thin, conventionally attractive young people”, who had “edged out” fat people from their own (online) spaces. The empowerment potential of body positivity has been recently debated in the mainstream media as well, with alternatives like “body neutrality” and “body respect” named as possible replacements (Kessell 2018).

### 8. Discussion and conclusion

In the bloggers’ responses, blogging was constructed as an activity that enabled peer support and a sense of belonging, as well as a useful platform for plus-size women to promote their interest and competence in the field of fashion. The interactional, community-building, and agency-enhancing features of fashion blogging all have the potential to empower plus-size women.

However, the analysis also reveals negative phenomena connected to plus-size fashion blogging, including stress, time-management issues, and perhaps most importantly, the negative effects of in-group divisions and competitiveness. The results illustrate that there are aspects of blogging that some plus-size women will find empowering, while others will not. This is an important finding, especially considering the changes that have taken place within the community in recent years. Whether it be the use of certain terminology to construct their identities as empowered plus-size women, or the ways these women perceive the empowering potential of commercial blogging, both academic research and the plus-size fashion industry can benefit from a closer look at the variation within the plus-size fashion blogosphere. For example, based on the results of the present study, the concept of “body positivity” and the word “curvy” both seem problematic from the perspective of plus-size women – yet many companies and advertisers use these terms frequently.

In 2017, the tensions and divisions between bloggers that were already, to an extent, visible in 2015, had become more prominent. The main cause for these divisions appeared to be the increased commercialization of blogging, which many – but not all – bloggers viewed as problematic. Blogging for commercial gain seemed to be at odds with the original “pulpit mentality” of plus-size fashion blogs as a channel for producing counterdiscourse to mainstream fashion media, especially for activism-driven bloggers. However, while commercialization has made the blogosphere more competitive, it has also increased plus-size women’s sense of agency, as they now have more choice and visibility in fashion (cf. Downing Peters 2014).

The fact that the bloggers reported changes in their personal relationship to blogging and considered Instagram and YouTube to be more influential than blogs in 2017 indicates that the nature of blogging itself is changing. There were also differences in the interpretation of in-group terminology. *Fat acceptance* and *body positivity* both have their origins in social movements that are meant to

empower women, but not all bloggers identify with these movements, or find them empowering. While “fat acceptance” was widely recognized as a helpful term in the responses, “body positivity” was problematized by most respondents because of its commercialization. To an extent, the bloggers’ reactions to these two terms reflect the juxtaposition between activism-driven blogging and fashion-driven blogging.

Although there is empowerment potential for communities of marginalized people in the blogosphere, the internal hierarchies and divisions of blogging groups need to be taken into consideration in future studies. While the formation of a community of practice does not presuppose harmonious interaction (Wenger 1998; Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999: 176), means of conflict resolution within the community are necessary for its survival. The present study illustrates how research on online communities can benefit from direct contact with the members of the community in addition to systematic observation of online discourse (Androutsopoulos 2008). The thematic analysis of bloggers’ questionnaire responses brought up issues that were not present in previous analyses of public blog texts written by the same bloggers (Limatius 2016; 2017). Future research should pay attention to the constantly shifting foci of blogs, and the extent of their influence in the rapidly changing world of social media. The results of the 2017 questionnaire imply that plus-size fashion bloggers are migrating to other social media platforms which may lend themselves to new, different processes of empowerment.

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