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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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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).

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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[1]. 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?

[1] In the present study, the word "fat" is used as a neutral adjective with no intention of being offensive.

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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"[2] online community; to protect their group

[2] 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[3] – 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.

[3] For an in-depth discussion on online communities and the criteria for defining one, see Herring (2004).

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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[4] 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*.

[4] 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.

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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 –

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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

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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[5].

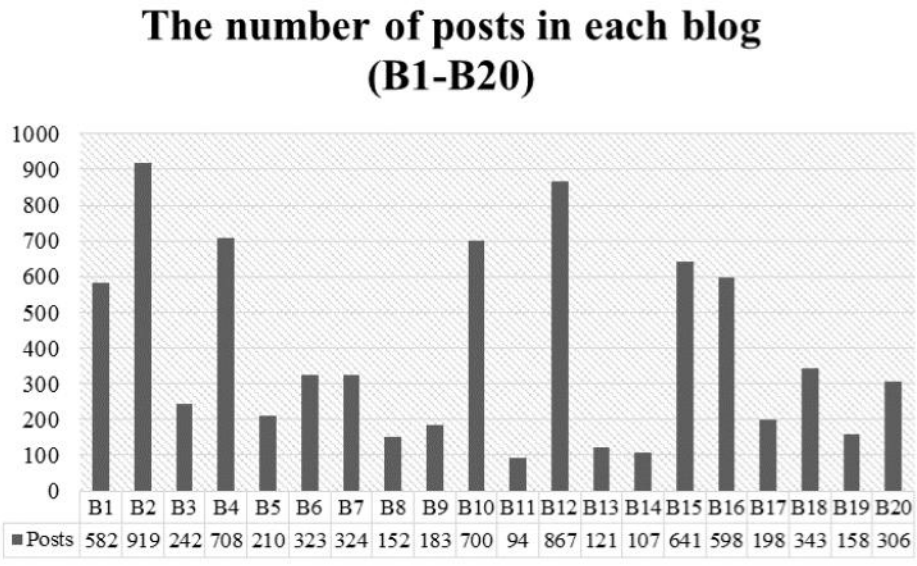

Figure 1. Number of posts in each blog

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

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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[6]. 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[7]. 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

6 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).

7 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.

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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[8] 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

[8] 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.

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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
Whole corpus	**200**	**144820**	**1066**	**56968**

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 topiecs, 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

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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").

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(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)

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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[9]. It should also be noted that some bloggers use the reclaimed

[9] 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.

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"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

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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:

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(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.

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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.

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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

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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

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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[10]. 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

[10] However, as most bloggers moderate comments, it is possible that negative responses would not have been published.

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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

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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[11] 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

[11] FatGirlFlow's video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEzHgukgEAs&t=4s, accessed August 2017.

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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[12]

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

[12] 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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