"We portray OURSELVES":
The empowerment potential of fashion blogging
for plus-size women

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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),[1] 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

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[1] 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.[2] 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.[3] However, blog names are not mentioned in the analysis. Instead, I have chosen to use pseudonyms for each blogger.

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[2] 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.

[3] 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.[4] 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".[5] 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".

[4] In the original questionnaire, I used the term "style blog", which was later switched to "fashion blog."

[5] 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

Fashion-driven blogger	Activism-driven blogger
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[6] 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

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[6] 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

Fashion-driven blogger	Activism-driven blogger
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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