Regimenting Bodies, Regulating Lives

Fatness, gender, and relationships of power in makeover television shows from Finland and the United States

SUSANNE ALINE RITTER
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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION
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Susanne Ritter
ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines fatness in weight-loss makeover shows from Finland and the US, focusing on three shows from Finland (Jutta ja superdieetit – Jutta and the Super Diet, Jutta ja puolen vuoden superdieetit – Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet, and Rakas, sinusta on tullut pullukka – Honey, You’ve Become Chubby) and two shows from the US (Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian and Fat Chance). Inspired by feminist critical discourse analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis, it analyses how the ways of representing the fat female body construct, reproduce, and potentially reflect societal discourses of gender, power, relationships, and identity. It aims to uncover structures of control that are enacted on the fat body in general and the fat female body in particular by asking “how are the representations of fat female bodies in makeover TV shows in Finland and the US connected to societal discourses of gender, power, and the body?”. Situated within the context of feminist media studies and feminist fat studies, it takes a critical perspective with the aim of revealing and challenging normative beliefs, inequalities, and oppressive structures.

By shifting the focus from a US-centric perspective onto Finnish makeover shows, this research aims to broaden the field of fat studies by opening up critical space in a debate which has largely been dominated by US and UK scholars. It investigates how societal norms concerning the body, relationships, and gender are expressed in different shows and different cultural contexts, thereby seeking to uncover both similarities and differences. By connecting the analysis of the regulation of the body to its broader implications for an individual’s life, especially concerning romantic relationships, this research helps to grasp the all-encompassing imperative of change visible in the shows.

This dissertation is made up of a summary chapter as well as three original articles, which are attached at the end. The summary chapter delves deeper into the theoretical concepts and cultural contexts surrounding the topic of women and fatness, and presents the data and methods, summaries of the articles, and a discussion of the findings. Each article deals with one to two makeover shows and
approaches the shows through sub-questions, which enables a multifaceted analysis of the issues at hand.

The main theoretical concepts that form the basis for this research are control (over fat women and their bodies, as detailed especially in article I); normalisation (of bodies and lives, as detailed in article II); and liminality in connection with fatness and singlehood (highlighted in article III but present in all three articles). Article I examines the Finnish shows *Jutta and the Super Diet* and *Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet*. Based on Foucault’s theories of surveillance, control, and power (Foucault 1980; 1990; 1995), this article asks questions regarding structures of surveillance and control as well as the relationship between the participants and the expert and the importance of the expert. Article II examines the Finnish show *Honey, You’ve Become Chubby* and *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian* from the US. This article deals with questions surrounding the importance of the female body for a (romantic) relationship and examines underlying normalising structures and implications, leaning on Foucault’s theories of normalisation (Foucault, 1995). Article III examines the show *Fat Chance* from the US, looking at the fat body in the context of impermanence, taking as its theoretical basis Van Gennep’s (1960) and Turner’s (1969) theories concerning rites of passage and liminality as well as theories of fatness as liminal (see e.g., Harjunen, 2009; LeBesco, 2004) and singlehood as liminal (Lahad, 2012).

The enactment of control over the fat female body became visible in all the shows, executed in and through different relationships of power. The research suggests that controlling the fat female body and aiming at normalising it – and with it, individuals’ lives – remains an important feature of dieting makeover shows. The similarity in the shows’ contents, representations, and constructions, regardless of the country of origin, points towards similar views on norms regarding the ideal (female) body as well as appropriate behaviour and lifestyle. This dissertation offers a novel perspective on the extent of control that is enacted on fat women’s bodies and lives, highlighting how women’s lives are regulated through the regulation of their bodies.

Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on laajentaa ja monipuolistaa yhteiskunnallisen lihavuustutkimuksen kenttää keskittämällä suomalaisiin muodonmuutosohjelmiin yhdysvaltalaiskeskisyvyden sijaan. Kahden maan seikkaperäisen vertailun sijaan tutkimus selvittää, kuinka yhteiskunnalliset ruumis-, ihmissuhde- ja sukupuolitutkimukset ilmenevät eri ohjelmissa ja kulttuurisissa konteksteissa, pyrkien löytämään niin yhtäläisyyksiä kuin eroja käsin. Tutkimus auttaa ymmärtämään ohjelmissa ilmenevää kaikenkattavaa muutoksen tarvetta yhdistämällä ruumiin sääntelyyn analyysin sen laajempia vaikutuksia yksilöön elämässä. Ruumisnormien, hierarkkisten rakenteiden ja hyväksyttävien elämäntapojen ilmaisu ohjelmissa voi heijastaa kunkin yhteiskunnan käsityksiä näistä teemoista.

Väitöskirja koostuu yhteenvetoluovuusta ja sen loppuun liitetystä kolmesta vertaisarvioidusta artikkelista. Yhteenvetoluovussa syvennyttää tarkemmin...
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In this doctoral dissertation, I examine fatness in makeover television shows in Finland and the US. Through analysing three shows from Finland (Jutta ja superdieetit – Jutta and the Super Diet (2012); Jutta ja puolen vuoden superdieetit – Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet (2013–2015) and Rakas, sinusta on tullut pullukka – Honey, You’ve Become Chubby (2013–2016)1 and two shows from the United States (Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian (2017–2019) and Fat Chance (2016)), I investigate how the ways of representing the fat female body construct, reproduce, and potentially reflect societal discourses of gender, power, relationships, and identity.

I first became interested in makeover shows from a scholarly point of view when I took a course on gender in the media during my bachelor’s studies at the University of Vienna in 2009. We watched the German makeover show Extrem schön! Endlich ein neues Leben! (Extremely Beautiful! A new life, at last!) (2009–2017), and I was fascinated by the fairy-tale-like narrative of the show; not necessarily fascinated in a positive way, however. In this particular course, we talked more about the technicalities of presentation, such as the framing of the shots, music, lights, and narration, since it was a course focused on television techniques, but the societal implications of the contents captivated my interest. While analysing this show, I felt that it reproduced stereotypical assumptions commonly connected to fat individuals: that they are lazy, undisciplined, disgusting, and neither loveable nor worthy of fair treatment. The show’s narrative highlighted their need to change, which was enforced by so-called experts and accomplished through extreme diets and plastic surgery. I was surprised that the rather unethical treatment of the fat participants was considered entertaining and accepted without much criticism. This sparked my interest to study makeover shows more closely, to examine and uncover the underlying beliefs and to highlight discriminatory norms and structures expressed in and through the makeover paradigm.

1 All translations are by SR unless noted otherwise.
In my master’s studies at the University of Helsinki, I revisited the topic of makeover shows, focusing on two weight-loss shows. The Canadian show Bulging Brides (2008) showed brides that were trying to lose the last kilos before their wedding in order to fit into their wedding dresses, and My Big Fat Revenge (2013) from the US featured fat women losing weight in order to take revenge on their partners (or anyone who had done them wrong). After the master’s thesis, I continued to be fascinated by this type of show, contemplating not only why and how they could be so popular, but also what the shows might reveal about a country’s or culture’s views on norms, structures of power, questions of gender, and the (un)acceptability of certain bodies. I continued to watch makeover shows in my free time, not only as a guilty pleasure, but also continuously wondering about the phenomenon as a whole. Since I felt I had not explored the topic far enough in my master’s thesis, I decided to continue my research at the doctoral level, and explore how norms concerning bodies, gender, and lives are expressed in different shows and different cultural contexts.

This dissertation has come into existence due to my continuous interest in reality television and makeover shows as a cultural and societal phenomenon, especially in connection with the representation of fat bodies and fatness. “Media matters” (Raisborough, 2016, p. 7), and the more mainstream and circulated images become, the more “societal weight” they carry (Kyrölä, 2014, p. 1), which may influence our relationship with our bodies. Despite a decline in ‘traditional’ television usage, reality television forms a huge part of television programming, with more than 100 reality shows from around the world available on the streaming service Netflix alone as of June 2023 (List of Netflix Original Reality TV, 2023), and reality television making up 60% of traditional network television programming in the US (Castillo, 2023). In Finland, reality television shows continue to be among the most watched shows on traditional television (Finnpanel, 2023a) as well as on streaming services (Finnpanel, 2023b).

Reality television in general can be seen as one of the most important sites for “the representation of larger people, issues of fat and diet, and spectacles of weight loss” (Raisborough, 2016, p. 19), and norms concerning the body (and its size) may be observed in weight-loss television shows, which form a big part of the television landscape all over the world. These shows construct the body as a personal responsibility, and transmit and reinforce messages regarding body norms, gender, power, and class, and have been identified as important in categorising fatness as unwanted and the fat individual as in need of change (e.g., Cameron, 2022).
Makeover shows are often dismissed as ‘trivial’ content that does not convey ‘real’ meaning and is thus not worth critical examination at a deeper level (e.g., Skeggs, 2010). Despite their reputation as a light form of popular culture, they may show the development of society and certain notions through time; as a “critical site of cultural production” (Weber, 2014a, p. 4), they reflect the historical and cultural norms and structures apparent in the society they stem from. However, due to their reputation as ‘cheap’ and ‘trash’, they are still considered relatively marginal in academia, and it has taken some time for them to even receive attention in academic discussion despite their importance (Raisborough, 2016). The assumed ‘triviality’ of makeover shows might explain why they are so intriguing and thus influential on a culture’s norms, notions, and beliefs. Dismissing reality television and makeover shows as a mere guilty pleasure may lead to disregarding the “power media have on guiding social understandings of identity, meaning, and belonging” (Cameron, 2022, p. 42).

My research focuses on the representation of female participants and discourses around women’s experience of fatness in makeover shows. This is for one due to the traditionally gendered nature of the makeover: makeovers used to be popular in magazines and commonly directed at women, and the makeover’s roots may be understood as lying in 19th-century advice manuals, which provided guidelines for an appropriate lifestyle and behaviour (Lewis, 2008). Possibly as a result of early makeover and guidance manuals being published in women’s magazines (Lewis, 2008), thus being directed primarily at women, contemporary makeover shows are often targeted at a female viewer, which is also reflected in the television channels that air these programmes. The Finnish makeover shows analysed for this research aired on the channel Liv, which brands itself as ‘the women’s channel’ and plans its programmes according to an assumed female viewer (Sanoma Media Finland, 2017). The gendering in the participants of early makeover shows used to be clear-cut, such as in The Swan (2004), in which only female participants received a surgical makeover in an ‘ugly-duckling-turned-swan’-themed process. Other shows such as Extreme Makeover (2002–2007) or The Biggest Loser (2004–present) feature(d) male and female participants, as do the shows I analysed for this dissertation. In the early 2000s, the makeover show Queer Eye for the Straight Guy (2003–2007) initially featured only straight men receiving guidance from gay men regarding their looks, clothes, lifestyle, and body (for an analysis of this show, see Kolehmainen, 2012). Queer Eye for the Straight Guy was renamed Queer Eye after its second season in 2005, and a revival series was released in 2018, which aims to improve individuals’ looks, grooming, and
home decor and increase their confidence. *Queer Eye*’s newer seasons feature diverse participants, varying genders, and sexual orientations, thereby moving away from the clear-cut gender divide that used to be more visible in makeover shows.

Especially women’s bodies and lives appear to be subject to intense control that aims to normalise their bodies, and by extension their lives, since the size of women’s bodies can be seen as being connected to their social acceptability (Harjunen, 2017). However, nowadays both men and women seem to be subject to beauty standards (e.g., Kolehmainen, 2019), which is reflected by the increasingly broad range of participants. Despite the seeming gender equality due to male and female participants, however, my research suggests that in the dieting makeover genre, the roots of the makeover format as a ‘feminine’ genre are still visible in ways that point towards a certain female orientedness, and the inclusion of male participants and the purported gender neutrality do little to negate that overall, women’s bodies are still subject to a distinctly gendered gaze. By focusing on the representations of female bodies, female participants, and, in the case of *Jutta and the Super Diet*, the female expert, I examine how gendering may happen even when the shows might appear ‘gender neutral’ or ‘ungendered’ on the surface. Through presenting certain bodies as the (female or male) ideal, makeover shows may indeed reproduce gendered norms, as well as related norms for behaving and acting, such as in the context of romantic relationships, as I detail in article II and III. The interactions in the shows point towards rather clear ideas about women and men and how they should be: one female participant in *Fat Chance* states that it is normal for her and her female friends to care about weight, since they are women, and “that’s just what they do” (*Fat Chance*, season 1, episode 4, 2016). It thus seems that in the makeover, fatness and gender are intertwined (e.g., Harjunen, 2017; Erdman Farrell, 2023; Gailey, 2023), and the experience of being a fat woman may be different from that of being a fat man. I do not aim to draw a comparison here, since my focus is not on fat men, but rather intend this dissertation as contributing to challenging normative beliefs and power relations, which is, as Raisborough (2016, p. 268) suggests, a “key feminist strategy”.

In the following subsections 1.1. and 1.2., I will present the research aim and research questions in more detail.
1.1 Aim of the Research

This research set out to examine how fat female bodies are constructed in weight-loss makeover shows and aims to uncover structures of control that are enacted on the fat body in general and the fat female body in particular. It analyses how they are expressed in the different shows and countries, investigates how they are legitimised, and reflects on these issues in the respective country’s context. Situated within the context of feminist media studies, it takes a critical perspective with the aim of revealing and challenging normative beliefs, inequalities, and oppressive structures (see, e.g., Raisborough, 2002; Lazar, 2018).

With this dissertation, I aim to broaden the field of fat studies by shifting the focus from a US-centric perspective onto Finnish makeover shows. Finland is interesting because of the Nordic discourse of (gender) equality; this, however, appears to be rather absent in the shows, which suggests that it might not apply in the context of body and gender norms. The choice of countries was influenced on the one hand by my own context – being immersed in the Finnish culture and media environment – and on the other hand by the US’ status as the biggest source of new makeover formats and programmes and their influence on other countries in general and Finland in particular (e.g., Aslama & Pantti, 2007). I will elaborate upon the two countries and the reasons for choosing them in subsection 2.4.

The field of fat studies has been dealing with fat bodies and societal implications in Finland since the early 2000s (Harjunen, 2009). Kyrölä and Harjunen (2007) discussed the problematic opinions towards fatness already in 2007, stating that it is important to reveal how and where these opinions and stigmatising norms and values are created and to what purpose. There has been little research on reality television in Finland overall, especially concerning weight-loss makeover television shows. Previous research on makeover shows and fatness in Finland has been done by Kyrölä (2014), who examined the representation and affective qualities of fat bodies in makeover shows such as the British and Finnish version of You Are What You Eat and The Biggest Loser. Furthermore, research has been conducted at a master’s thesis level, including Juntunen’s (2021) research on the portrayal of fat female bodies in the British show Got Talent. While conducted in Finland, their research does not focus on Finnish shows.
Rather than conducting an exhaustive comparison between the two countries, my research aims to show how societal norms concerning the body, relationships, and gender are expressed in different shows and different cultural contexts, thereby seeking to uncover both similarities and differences. By connecting the analysis of body regulation to its broader implications for an individual’s life, this research helps to grasp the all-encompassing imperative of change visible in the shows. This imperative appears to extend beyond simply needing to lose weight, including the regulation and normalisation of not only the body but also of appropriate behaviour regarding gender and lifestyles. The expressions of body norms, hierarchical structures, and acceptable lifestyles in the different shows may therefore potentially reflect the respective society’s understandings of these issues.

The uniqueness and novelty of my study lies in several aspects. Firstly, I focus on Finnish shows as a relatively underexplored topic in existing research, thereby contributing to the academic landscape. Secondly, my research goes beyond a singular dimension, encompassing several aspects and exploring their connections, such as control in relationships and how this connects to normalisation (and vice versa). I use different theories in order to facilitate a comprehensive, thorough analysis of the subject matter. By combining the theories of the liminality of fatness and singlehood, I offer a new perspective on the extent of control that is exerted over fat female bodies. This approach may help to illuminate how control over fat female bodies is intertwined with broader issues, ultimately unveiling how women’s lives are regulated through the regulation of their bodies.

In this subsection 1.2., I elaborated upon the research aim, and in the following, I will explain the structure of the dissertation and the research questions.

1.2 Research Questions, Articles, and Theoretical Context

This dissertation consists of three original articles (Ritter, 2021; 2023a; 2023b) and this summary chapter. In the upcoming subsection 1.2, I will delve into the research questions and articles, to then provide an overview of the dissertation’s structure in subsection 1.3.
My research set out to answer the overarching question “How are the representations of fat female bodies in makeover TV shows in Finland and the US connected to societal discourses of gender, power, and the body?”, which is reflected upon and discussed in this summary chapter. Guided by this question, I chose and analysed two makeover shows from the US and three shows from Finland in altogether three articles. Each article dealt with one to two shows and approached the shows through sub-questions, which enabled me to approach the topic and main research question from different angles.

My research was guided by one overarching research question and three sub-questions as follows:

Figure 1. Research Questions

| What is the function of surveillance and control in the context of the makeover? | In what ways are the female body and its size portrayed as important for love? | How can dieting, fatness, and singlehood be understood through the concept of liminality? | How are the representations of fat female bodies in makeover TV shows in Finland and the US connected to societal discourses of gender, power, and the body? |
Each of the sub-questions sheds light on different aspects of the topic, and each of them was examined in one article respectively as follows:

Figure 2. Research Questions, Shows, and Articles

- **What is the function of surveillance and control in the context of the makeover?**
  - Jutta ja superdieetit (Jutta and the Super Diet) (2012)

- **In what ways are the female body and its size portrayed as important for love?**
  - Rakas, sinusta on tullut pullukka (2013–2016) (Honey, You've Become Chubby)

- **How can dieting, fatness, and singlehood be understood through the concept of liminality?**
  - Fat Chance (2016)

Article I deals with the Finnish shows *Jutta ja superdieetit* and *Jutta ja puolen vuoden superdieetit* (*Jutta and the Super Diet* and *Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet*). Based on Foucault’s theories of surveillance, control, and power (Foucault, 1980; 1990; 1995), this article asks questions regarding structures of surveillance and control, looking at the relationship between the participants and the expert as well as the importance of the expert. Sub-question one thus deals with the function of surveillance and control...
in the context of the makeover. In article I, I argue that surveillance and control are legitimised as appropriate methods for achieving bodily change; this is achieved by constructing fat people as ‘failures’ in the sense of not having control over their lives, therefore needing someone else – the expert – to control them, which legitimises the potentially extreme measures of the makeover.

In article II, I focus on the Finnish show Rakas, sinusta on tullut pullukka (Honey, You’ve Become Chubby) and the show Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian from the US. Honey, You’ve Become Chubby is a show about coupled individuals trying to lose weight to save their relationship; in Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian, individuals participate in a weight loss programme in order to take revenge on a former partner, lover, or friend, and potentially win them back. This article deals with the question of the importance of the female body for a (romantic) relationship and examines the underlying normalising structures and implications, leaning on Foucault’s theories of normalisation (Foucault, 1995). Sub-question two examines the relevance of the female body (size) for love and relationships. In article II, I argue that the size of the female body is portrayed as important for love and relationships in the sense that it is the thin body that is capable and deserving of loving and being loved. In these shows, fatness, as I suggest, is portrayed as an exclusionary characteristic that poses a threat to existing and new romantic relationships.

Article III deals with the show Fat Chance from the US. In this show, fat individuals try to lose weight to be able to confess their feelings to their crush. This article applies a slightly different theoretical approach, taking as its theoretical basis Van Gennep’s (1960) and Turner’s (1969) theories concerning rites of passage and liminality. In order to explore the fat body’s impermanence implied in the imperatives of weight loss, I furthermore apply theories of fatness as a liminal, impermanent state (e.g., LeBesco, 2004; Harjunen, 2009). The makeover shows analysed are not only about the regulation of the body but branch out into other areas of the participants’ lives. I therefore utilise theories about the impermanence of singlehood (Lahad, 2012) to highlight the makeover’s expression of both fatness and singlehood as non-permanent, changeable states. In this article, I examine the connection between singleness and fatness, and suggest that both these ‘states’ are constructed as temporary and unwanted and – in the logic of the makeover – should be transcended in order to start the real life. Sub-question three thus asks about the connection between dieting, fatness, and singlehood in the context of liminality. In article III, I propose that dieting, fatness, and singlehood are indeed connected and can be
understood in the context of liminality; the diet may be seen as a literal ‘right’ of passage from the states of fat and single to the more desirable states of thin and coupled.

In summary, the main theoretical concepts are firstly, control (over fat female individuals and their bodies – as detailed especially in article I), secondly, normalisation (of bodies and by extension lives, as detailed especially in article II), and thirdly, liminality (connected to fatness as well as singleness – as examined especially in article III; however, the liminality of fatness is visible in all three articles). The theoretical concepts will be discussed in more detail further on in this summary chapter. While each concept is highlighted in the respective article, my research has shown that they are all intertwined and visible throughout the shows and articles. In the following, I will outline the structure of the dissertation.

1.3 Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is made up of three articles and this summary chapter, which presents the background of the research, the central theories, concepts, and methods, as well as the research material. The summary chapter consists of seven sections and can be read together with, before, or after the articles – or as a summary of the study all by itself. The original publications are attached at the end of the summary chapter. In the previous subsections 1.1. and 1.2., I presented the research aim, research questions, and articles, and touched upon the main theoretical concepts. In section 2, I will detail the cultural and scholarly context, explaining the relevance of fat and fat studies and the connections to other issues such as relationships and (sexual) desire. In that subsection, I will also explain the importance of makeover shows as well as the cultural context of Finland and the US as neoliberal societies, taking into account postfeminist ideas. In section 3, I will describe the theoretical background of the research. Section 4 will delve into the description of the material and methodological considerations, explaining how discourse analysis was employed to analyse reality television and makeover shows. In section 5, I will provide a comprehensive overview of the articles and their central findings. Section 6 will be dedicated to a discussion of the results. Finally, in section 7, I will draw this summary chapter to a close with reflections on the findings and considerations for future research.
2 CULTURAL AND SCHOLARLY CONTEXT

In this section, I provide an overview of the cultural and scholarly context of the research and dissertation. I will first describe the use of the word fat, to then delve into the scholarly field of fat studies. Subsequently, I will direct attention towards the concept of the fat body as malleable, a notion which has been crucial in all the articles. Within this topic, a specific subsection is dedicated to the examination of the fat body in the context of relationships and (sexual) desire, a theme that passes through all three of my articles, albeit slightly differently: article I explores the dynamics of the relationship between the participants and the expert(s), article II examines the relevance of the fat body for pre-existing and past relationships, primarily of a romantic nature, and article III explores the fat body in connection with potential relationships. Following this, I will turn to the genre of makeover shows as they constitute an important site where the malleability of fat bodies becomes visible and serve as the main material for my research. To provide a broader context for this study, I will contextualise it within the cultural milieu of a neoliberal society and then turn to describing the US and Finland as the countries in which this research and material are located.

2.1 Fat

Language may influence our perception of the world, and it is thus important which terms are used. The word fat is preferred among fat activists as well as in research and literature that deal with fatness from a non-medical point of view, as Harjunen points out; ‘fat’ can be “considered to be more neutral, descriptive and non-judgemental than either ‘obese’ or ‘overweight’” (Harjunen, 2009, p. 22). Using ‘fat’ as a descriptive term – instead of as an expression to hurt and stigmatise individuals – aims to contest shame and expose the limitations of other linguistic constructions; reclaiming it may thus help to substitute its destructive power for a more descriptive and positive one (Cooper, 1998, 2016). Accordingly, in this dissertation, I use the word ‘fat’ instead of medicalised terms such as obese or overweight or other euphemisms such as large, big, curvy or ‘of size’. The medicalised terms obese or
overweight might evoke associations of a body that is either sick and therefore not ‘normal’, or that is ‘too much’ in terms of weight, which could lead to classifying the individual as abnormal and not fitting into a certain norm in terms of weight (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Lupton, 2018). By using these terms, the idea of fat as something abnormal may be reproduced (Harjunen, 2009). While it is potentially problematic to use the word fat because it risks reproducing the negative implications (since it is still so equated with something negative) (Kyrölä, 2014), I feel that it is important to use it in a descriptive way in order to challenge the negative connotations of the term.

The potentially negative connotations towards fatness, the fat body and by extension fat individuals are not a new phenomenon. By the 18th century, a controlled body became important for the bourgeoisie in defining one’s place and status in society together with all the privileges that belonged to that category. By the end of the 19th century, in Europe and its colonies, the only acceptable body was a thin, controlled and ‘neutral’ one, in the sense of not having any characteristics that would set it apart from the ‘standard’ body, which meant above all not having any non-white characteristics (Holliday & Sanchez Taylor, 2006; see also Harrison, 2023). In contemporary Western societies, as Cooper (2016) suggests, fat can be seen as one of the most unwanted bodily characteristics, stigmatising the individual and affecting their treatment in society. Fatness can be understood as symbolising a lack of desirable characteristics and the loss of control – mental, moral, and corporeal (Kyrölä, 2014); similarly, Palmer (2014) argues that fat may be constructed as a signifier for the failure to control the self. Due to the ‘ideal’ body being a fit, controlled body, fat bodies can be understood as being marked as insufficient; the (fat) body is examined and (re-)evaluated against a ‘normal’, ‘healthy’ body, whereby it is constructed as lacking, deficient, and uninhabitable until weight loss happens, which is facilitated through normalising techniques (Bahra, 2018). These normalising techniques may be observed in makeover shows, as my research suggests; scholarship has shown conflicting opinions, though, as I will detail in the following.

2.1.1 The Fat Body in Makeover Shows

Contemporary Western media have been speaking about an “obesity epidemic” (LeBesco, 2011; Harjunen, 2017), which frames fatness as a medical and health ‘problem’ that should be rectified, paving the way for procedures and products aimed at managing the fat body. In addition, fatness is constructed as an individual
problem, emphasising personal responsibility (e.g., Raisborough, 2016), which is also visible in the shows analysed for this dissertation. Popular media representations of fat individuals often link fat with wrong choices and negative attributes overall, such as bad health, laziness, and uncontrolled food consumption (e.g., Raisborough, 2016; Zimdars, 2019). Zimdars (2019) identifies common stereotypes connected to fat individuals in popular media – they are often represented as lazy and gluttonous, and makeover shows centred on fatness express a mostly dichotomous view on bodies, constructing thin bodies as healthy and beautiful, and fat bodies as unhealthy and ugly.

There have been contrasting opinions to the arguably rather bleak vision that Zimdars expresses. As Raisborough (2013) points out, although reality television reproduces discriminatory depictions of fat bodies to a certain extent, different portrayals and negotiations of the fat body may in fact be visible in the shows. The makeover narrative of before and after “has the potential to offer seemingly benign and even benevolent representations of fat” because it “depends on, and so works to produce, a certain audience sympathy with its participants” (Raisborough, 2016, p. 8). My research suggests that while this may be true, it might not necessarily be ‘genuine’ sympathy, but rather a sympathy as one would have for an unruly child or someone not in their right mind who needs help – sympathy that is aimed at helping someone who is incapable of helping themselves, which may potentially be seen as condescending instead of genuine. I explore this in article I in the context of the relationship between the expert and the participants: while this relationship is caring and sympathetic on the surface, I suggest that it contains a form of control that is aimed at disciplining the fat body, which is hidden underneath the idea of care, an expression of “affective domination” (Weber, 2009, p. 30). The sympathy expressed in makeover shows may thus not be genuine sympathy, care, or acceptance per se, but rather a reaction to the participants’ purported incapability.

My research suggests that in dieting makeover shows, fat bodies are for the most part constructed as unhealthy, unwanted, and inappropriate, and weight loss is presented as the solution to these problems. As Kyrölä (2014) has suggested, however, the negative views on fatness and fat bodies in makeover shows might not be uncritically accepted by the audience. The shame and humiliation enacted on the participants might evoke similar feelings in the viewers, which may turn them away from the shows. Furthermore, there have been attempts to diversify the representations of bodies. In the recent past, the body positivity movement has
gained traction (for body positivity in a Finnish context, see e.g., Hynnä-Granberg, 2022b; Puhakka, 2023). It has at its core the idea that also bodies that differ from the slim ideal should be seen and treated positively. Instead of fitting normative beauty standards, confidence and self-love are the new goals. While this movement is especially prominent on social media such as Instagram and TikTok, it is also visible on television, and there are a few reality television shows that take a more positive approach to fatness and the fat body. In the US, shows such as *Lizzo’s Watch Out for the Big Grrrls* (2022–2023), in which music icon Lizzo searches for fat dancers, or *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* (2015–2023), which shows the life of fat dancer Whitney Way Thore, take a more neutral to positive approach to fatness and the fat body without putting the focus on weight loss. In Finland, the latest season of *Huippumalli haussa* (*Finland’s Next Top Model*) (2022) features ‘diverse’ bodies, meaning bodies that not necessarily fit the slim beauty ideal, and the makeover show *Revenge Body with Martina Aitolehti* (2022) does not only focus on weight anymore, but the discussion has moved towards health and well-being rather than weight. This may be problematic since it may emphasise neoliberal and consumerist thoughts and shift the imperative of health onto the individual (e.g., Harjunen, 2023).

Instead of simply reproducing certain norms and standards, reality television and makeover shows have become more complex and complicated, intertwining a body positive message on the surface with underlying conservative and normative notions of bodies, relationships, gender, and sexuality, which is what I examine in this research. Classic makeover shows that focus on the alteration of the body to gain a new and better life, however, still highlight the need to change the body according to certain norms and standards. This becomes evident in more recent makeover shows such as *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian* or *Revenge Body with Martina Aitolehti*, which appear to be more body positive but in the end reproduce the same ideas as the earlier makeover shows – that it is necessary to lose weight to gain a better life (for research on *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian*, see Zimdars, 2019). While body positivity may be on the rise, it might only be extended to individuals whose bodies are not ‘too far away’ from the ideal (Cameron, 2022; see also Hynnä-Granberg, 2022a); individuals who are ‘too fat’ are still expected to lose weight, and body positivity appears to be reserved for certain types of bodies. In this context, it is worth pointing out shows like *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian* or *Revenge Body with Martina Aitolehti* which may be seen as posing as ‘body positive’, all the while connecting health and well-being to an ‘appropriate’ body size. My research suggests
that it may not be acceptable to just be and remain fat, but the acceptability of fat individuals is mostly tied to their willingness to work on themselves and lose weight.

While there are attempts to diversify the representation of bodies in the Western media – at least on the surface – my research suggests that there is, however, a limit to this diversification, and the ethos of a slimmer body equalling a better life continues to be noticeable. This may point to fat still having a status as a “stigmatized social identity” (Cameron, 2022, 39) despite recent body-positive rhetoric in the media. Fat shaming, too, has begun to be challenged through a shift in social media and digital culture because the negative effects of anti-fat bias and weight stigma have been brought forth. Fatness is still associated with poor health, however; in general, weight and health are often linked (Cameron, 2022) and fat people may thus be held responsible for their body size in the context of neoliberal values of individual agency and responsibility. Despite the emerging body positivity movement, the negative attitude towards fatness and fat individuals appears to remain deeply ingrained (Cameron, 2022). My research ponders whether this is the case in the shows I analysed, and I will present thoughts on this in the closing section.

2.1.2 Fat and Gender

The connection between fat and gender has been highlighted by scholars already in the early 2000s, accompanied by the observation that issues around fatness are especially important for and in women’s lives (e.g., Bordo, 2003; Rossi, 2003), which may still hold true nowadays (e.g., Erdman Farrell, 2023). Rossi (2003) suggests that especially women experience a bigger pressure to control their body and actively shape it in order to fit the norms, meaning that especially women are entangled in discourses and discussions around the body, outward appearance, weight, and the implications of (living in) a certain body (e.g., Cooper, 1998; Gill, 2019; Erdman Farrell, 2023).

Managing one’s appearance is connected to gender, with “greater scrutiny given to women’s bodies” (Featherstone, 2010, p. 202); fat(ness), too, is gendered and experienced in gendered ways. In modern Western society, thinness is one of the key requirements for women to be socially acceptable, and while fat people in general may be seen as being unattractive and repulsive regardless of their gender, “the stigmatization of fat and pressure to be thin is highly gendered and culturally specific” (Gailey & Harjunen, 2019, p. 3). The expectations regarding bodies may
also be understood as gendered: women typically feel more pressure to be thin (Zimdars, 2019). Furthermore, weight is “connected to the heteronormative system of meaning and value that constitutes what it means to be feminine or masculine” (Gailey, 2012, p. 116).

Fat and gender are not only related but may constitute each other, as Erdman Farrell (2023) suggests. White (2021) describes individuals as being seen as fat or not depending on what their perceived gender is: if one is perceived as male, one is not necessarily seen as fat, whereas if one is read as female, the same weight would classify the individual as being fat. Gender could thus contribute to producing fatness; on the other hand, also fat(ness) could contribute to producing gender, due to shaping the body in a way that makes it be perceived as more male or more female (White, 2021). Bodies may be gendered depending on where a body ‘has’ fat: fat in the ‘right’ (or ‘wrong’) places may mark a body as either female (e.g., fat in the hips or breasts), or male, and can affect the way others – and potentially people themselves – read and experience the body (White, 2020). Fat as something that changes the outwards appearance of the body can be seen as threatening the understanding of men’s and women’s bodies as different from each other (Kyrölä, 2014). Fat(ness) thus appears to be connected to normative notions about gender, and it may not only be about who experiences more pressure to be thin, but fat may be a gendering force as well (Erdman Farrell, 2023; Whitesel, 2023; see also Gailey, 2023). I expand on this topic in articles II and III, in which I explore what kind of body is constructed as ideal and acceptable, and how this may be connected to gendered stereotypes and expectations.

In the material that was analysed for this dissertation, it was interesting to see that the range of body weight and classifying bodies as fat was very broad. It is difficult to determine the exact weight at which individuals are seen as fat since fat is determined by context and experience, and individuals are socially classified and categorised as fat (Cooper, 2016). Women’s bodies are often seen as fat at a lower weight than men’s bodies (Kyrölä, 2014), which is reflected in popular media (Zimdars, 2019). This became visible in the material that I analysed for this dissertation: overall, the female participants had a lower starting weight, and experienced their bodies as ‘too fat’ at a lower weight than the male participants. Furthermore, the participants in the US shows generally had a higher body weight than the participants in the Finnish shows; what becomes visible here may be what Cooper (2016) suggests: that categorising individuals as fat depends not only on
gender, but also on a society’s body norms, and how much an individual’s weight deviates from this. This was also reflected in the amount of weight the participants wanted to lose: the numbers ranged from about 10 kg in some of the Finnish shows up to about 50 kg in the shows from the US. In terms of classifying bodies as fat, I went with what the participants in the shows said about their own bodies, or how they classified their own bodies. While it is potentially problematic to classify ‘straight-sized’ bodies (fitting into ‘standard’ clothing sizes) as fat – and potentially problematic to classify bodies in one way or the other in the first place – this is what happened in the shows, which I took as a starting point for the analysis of the material. This could potentially tell something about very strict norms concerning the ‘ideal’ body that are exceeded and must be corrected, even if the body weight is just barely outside of the ‘norm’.

2.1.3 The Fat Body as Malleable

Understanding the fat body as malleable is important for this research because makeover shows reflect the belief that bodies are transformable, which points to an understanding of the separation of the body – or bodily qualities – and the self. While bodies in general can be understood as capable of change, there may be an imperative of malleability for fat bodies in particular (e.g., Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017), which I discuss throughout this subsection. In the articles, I have examined how the shows legitimise the shaping of the body through constructing fat as a changeable characteristic.

Contemporary representations of and narratives about fat and fatness commonly understand fatness as a self-inflicted state, caused by the individuals themselves, and thus as their ‘problem’ to solve (e.g., Bahra, 2018; Monson, Donaghue & Gill, 2016; Zimdars, 2019). Cooper (1998) points out that fatness is commonly considered not only a personal choice but also reversible, which means that fat bodies may be experienced as ‘before’ bodies just waiting for their transformation, thus being in a permanent state of impermanence (Harjunen, 2009), which becomes especially clear in dieting makeover shows.

The separation of the body and the ‘true’, often meaning thin, self is commonly expressed by the phrase “inside this fat body there is a thin person who is trying to get out”, as Gailey and Harjunen (2019, p. 11) found out in their study about women’s experiences of being fat. This points to the construction of fat bodies as
‘shells’ that have to be rejected by those inside the shells in order for the human to emerge in the aftermath (Zimdars, 2015). Consequently, if bodies are required to change, fatness as a “valid and valuable corporeal position to exist in fades from view both culturally and personally” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 11), which potentially reflects negative views on fatness, since being fat is rarely seen as a body’s ‘natural’, acceptable state, but as something that has to be changed to – literally – fit in. This, then, may form part of the appeal of weight-loss narratives – in their logic, everyone is able to diet and lose weight and change their social- and self-image for the better, and in the process “become worthy of ‘more’ to oneself and to others” (Kyrölä, 2014, p. 66). This may point to fat individuals’ acceptance being based on the condition that they negate their fatness and are willing to change (Kyrölä, 2014). In my research, this has become visible in the treatment of the participants: after having lost weight, they were treated in a more respectful way than before their ‘transformation’, as I detail for example in article III.

While not being uncontested (Campos et al., 2006), the idea that the size of bodies and their health is a result of individual choices is nevertheless widespread (Cain, Donaghue & Ditchburn, 2021). Makeover shows use this to frame fatness as not only undesirable and unhealthy, but furthermore as a reflection of an individual’s character, marking them as either disciplined or undisciplined, as Zimdars (2019) suggests. Intensive diets, exercise, and fat shaming are often presented as appropriate methods for motivating weight loss, which on the other hand is often assumed to be the goal of or for the majority of fat individuals (Cain, Donaghue & Ditchburn, 2021). Being healthy is commonly seen as a marker of a successful self-management: if fat is classified as unhealthy, fat people thus resist the imperative of “responsible self-management”, which is embodied by a slender body, which has become the “aesthetic of responsible neoliberal selfhood” (Cain, Donaghue & Ditchburn, 2021, p. 27).

Since permanent weight loss is rather rare, the imperative of transformation and the requirement to change one’s body may lead to experiences of failure since achieving the required change might not even be possible (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017). These issues are negated in the shows analysed for this dissertation since the potential failure to permanently change the fat body is rarely discussed – rather the opposite: through pictures at the end of the show that explain how happy the participants are in their new lives in a thin body, Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian supports the
illusion of permanent change, a better life, and happiness that can be achieved after weight loss, as I discuss in detail in article II.

Understanding a high(er) body weight as people’s own fault and changeable might make size hierarchies seem less problematic than other axes of difference and discrimination because in this logic, the individuals could change their size and avoid discrimination. Understanding the body’s malleability as connected to different bodily qualities in addition to fat, such as gender, race, ability, and class (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017), helps to understand how different categories are linked. Gender can be understood as a malleable quality and at the same time as important for a personal sense of self as well as legal personhood. Changing bodily qualities in relation to race can be seen as questionable but nevertheless physically possible (Davis, 2003; Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017). While qualities connected to ability may be associated with outside influences rather than one’s own choice, they may nevertheless include “wanting to be able-bodied” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 12) even though the promise of a ‘normal’ body might not even exist. Fat might be closest to class in terms of understanding it as a personal responsibility and as a changeable characteristic (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017). Both losing weight and upward class mobility are constructed as possible in a neoliberal context of self-improvement and personal responsibility; consequently, not being able to change may be perceived as a personal failure and lack of effort (Harjunen, 2017). By shifting the responsibility of improving their body (and life) onto the individual, issues of discrimination and structures of inequality are potentially obscured, or at least simplified, because fatness is also connected to structural and societal determinants (e.g., Palmer, 2014). I touch upon this issue in article III, in which I suggest that in Fat Chance, the structural component of the struggles the participants face is downplayed, and their individual responsibility is highlighted – in terms of body and class.

As I have discussed, understanding the fat body as malleable is common in the makeover’s narrative of self-improvement. Dieting and consequently weight loss are not only connected to a lower body weight but might also signify possibilities for improvement in other spheres of life, such as romantic relationships, as I discuss in the next section.
2.1.4 Fatness, Romantic Relationships, and Sexual (Un)Desirability

The following part deals with fatness in connection with (romantic) relationships, which is important because fatness is not isolated but interacts with and should be understood in the context of different aspects of an individual’s life. It is connected to relationships and relationship status, which becomes visible in makeover shows that deal with weight loss and dating, such as the shows *Honey, You’ve Become Chubby*, *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian*, and *Fat Chance*. I examine this topic in articles II and III with a focus on romantic relationships, taking other relationships (such as platonic and familial) into account. My research suggests that while structures of control become visible in the expert-participant relationship, as I have explored in article I, normative ideas about bodies and lives are especially prominent in connection with romantic relationships. In the following I discuss the importance of romantic relationships, the – potentially problematic – assumptions about single individuals, and the implications of being single or coupled.

Despite the common saying ‘love is blind’, which would suggest the negligibility of the outward appearance in romantic encounters, Åberg (2020) points out that romantic relationships can be seen as one domain in which the significance of physical appearance is considered essential. Sexiness, sexual activity, desirability, and desire are usually ascribed almost exclusively to thin individuals (Kyrölä, 2014). Romantic relationships are often seen to happen as a result of sexual desire; this, in turn, may be connected to certain bodily ideals, which is why I explore this topic in connection with fatness. My research suggests that the connection between fatness and sexual (un)desirability plays a crucial role in the legitimisation of weight loss in makeover shows that focus on weight loss and dating, which is fuelled by the overall construction of romantic relationships as important. Shows such as the ones analysed for this dissertation aim to make individuals – especially women – ‘fit’ for relationships through the improvement of their bodies. Here, the standard to be coupled interacts with the requirement to be thin: both may be seen as connected to the idea of a ‘normal’/normative life and ‘normal’/normative body since in order to be an accepted, ‘normal’ member of society, one should be both thin and coupled. My research thus suggests that norms concerning both the body and relationships play a role in the normalisation of people’s lives.

Adults are generally expected to find a romantic partner and enter a romantic relationship at a certain point in their lives, and notions of the importance of
romantic relationships pervade mainstream media. The media may thus play a role in perpetuating the norm of having a relationship, reinforcing the idea that especially women need a romantic interest – male – to be complete (McClanahan, 2007). Langford (1996) proposes that in most popular contexts – from movies to literature to advertising – romance is a heterosexual narrative in which love relationships between men and women are constructed as the ‘natural’ way to find fulfilment, which constructs heterosexuality as the ‘compulsory’ way of life. Compulsory heterosexuality as conceptualised by Rich (1980) refers to the societal and cultural expectations that promote and enforce heterosexuality as the norm and as the only acceptable sexual orientation – especially for women. Rich argues that heterosexuality is not necessarily a natural or innate choice but is instead imposed and reinforced through various social institutions and cultural norms, which may make it difficult for individuals to express or explore orientations and desires that fall outside of this norm. Gupta (2015) expands on this, suggesting that there is an assumption of compulsory sexuality, which means a belief that everyone possesses inherent sexual desires. Gupta argues that there are societal expectations and practices that stigmatise different forms of non-sexuality – such as the absence of sexual interest or actions – and coerce people into perceiving themselves as subjects with desires, adopting sexual identities and participating in sexual activity.

These notions may be supported by the media that perpetuate the “heterosexual imaginary”, meaning the idea that to be fulfilled in life, individuals should be involved in an “opposite-sexed relationship” (McClanahan, 2007, p. 261). My research suggests that this becomes visible in dating-focused makeover shows due to their focus on relationships and sexual desire; however, I see a development in the sense that some of the shows, such as Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian and Fat Chance do not focus only on heterosexual relationships, but also include homosexual relationships. On the one hand, this could be understood as expressing a broader acceptance of different sexualities but on the other hand, it may indicate that it has now become compulsory for everyone, regardless of gender or sexuality, to adhere to certain relationship standards. As detailed in articles II and III, I suggest the persistence of traditional, possibly heterosexually coded norms of relationships such as monogamy and marriage, as well as of normative ideas about who is ‘allowed’ to be in a relationship, which is determined by the body (size), among other things.

Singles – meaning people who are not in a coupled relationship – are often stereotyped and discriminated against, in the media as well as in society as a whole;
DePaulo (2006, 4) calls the stigmatisation of singles “singlism”. Single individuals are often presented as lonely, and singleness, loneliness, and bitterness are often linked (DePaulo, 2006). Singles generally consider relationships desirable, as Kolehmainen proposes; singledom thus does not necessarily “challenge the idealization of couple relationships” (Kolehmainen, 2019, p. 66). In the 2010s, traditional marriage was in decline in Finland, and although the number of marriages rose slightly in 2022, the overall number of married couples is the lowest in 100 years (OSF, 2022). Non-married cohabitation, however, is rising in popularity, as are relationships that are maintained without living together; there are also more and more single parents, ‘rainbow’ as well as blended families, meaning that while traditional forms may be less popular, a “couple relationship still has a robust allure”, as Kolehmainen (2019, p. 66) suggests. While it may no longer be necessary to be in a heterosexual couple, and there are non-heterosexual participants in the shows, “coupledom remains the privileged and normative form of intimate life” (Roseneil et al., 2020), and finding a relationship is constructed as important regardless of sexual orientation.

DePaulo (2006) argues that there is rarely a possibility to be a good or worthy single person since marriage and serious coupling are glorified, and marriage constitutes the height of privilege. Furthermore, as Koropeckyj-Cox (2005) states, singles are often presented as problematic or deviant, and their single status may be constructed as being linked to an incompleteness or lack of personal development. DePaulo (2006) paints a rather bleak picture of being single, arguing that the negative implications of an individual’s status as single might go as far as to negate anything that the individual has accomplished; without a soulmate, other accomplishments may not matter. Furthermore, others might even wonder what is wrong with the single individual and judge them as deficient (DePaulo, 2006). There may be parallels here to fat individuals being stigmatised and their accomplishments being downplayed because they are fat, and fatness being understood as a failure. My research suggests that there may indeed be a connection here, which is expressed through the construction of individuals that are fat and single as a ‘double’ failure; this state of failure, as I have explored in article III in the context of the show Fat Chance, is constructed as being redeemable only through losing weight and finding a partner.

Similarly to fatness, singleness can be understood as gendered, and as functioning differently for men and women (Reynolds, 2008). Taylor (2012, p. 40) proposes that it can be stigmatising for women to be single, and single women may be seen as not
having achieved certain milestones in life, as not having reached “proper adulthood” (Taylor, 2012, p.40). Based on her analysis of, amongst others, popular reality television shows and movies such as Bridget Jones’s Diary (which describes the struggles of a single woman longing for a husband), as well as self-help literature directed at single women, Taylor proposes that being partnered is important for women to “become viable (and visible) subjects, and therefore viable citizens, in a way that it is not for men” (Taylor, 2012, p. 3). Taylor’s rather pessimistic assumptions may in part be influenced by the type of media analysed in her studies. My research, however, has shown similar tendencies – in Fat Chance, the participants equate being married with reaching a milestone in life, and this is expressed primarily by the female participants. A myriad of reality television dating shows such as Love is Blind (2020–), in which single men and women meet, talk, and get engaged, all before even meeting in person, or The Bachelor (2002–), in which one man is looking for a partner out of a group of women, support this idea. There are, however, conflicting opinions on this and contrary representations in the media: the popular drama/comedy TV series Sex and the City (1998–2004) for instance showed the lives of four single women in New York; here, being single was constructed as being fun, sexy, and empowering, as examined by Jermyn (2009). These attributes are rarely ascribed to single men in the media, and studies have shown that being single may be stigmatising for men, too (e.g., Byrne & Carr, 2005).

Especially in Western media, there may be an assumption of heterosexuality and heteronormativity, and the “damsel-in-distress/knight-in-shining-armor fairytale” perpetuates the notion that “all women desire a heterosexual relationship, and, by extension, will find happiness in one” (Graves & Kwan, 2012, p. 55; see also Peltier & Mizock, 2012). Social scripts – meaning socially defined patterns of interactions reflecting a society’s norms – teach us that women and men will meet, go out with each other, and marry in the end (Graves & Kwan, 2012). Norms concerning the appearance of men and women are embedded in gender scripts, and the “underlying cultural message is that individuals who follow normative gender, relationships and body scripts will achieve happiness” (Graves & Kwan, 2012, p. 48). In examining the reality show More to Love (2009) in which a fat single man is looking for a fat partner, Graves and Kwan (2012, p. 56) identify a narrative in which women wait for ‘the one’; however, the show makes it clear that “it is only within the confines of traditional femininity that fat women can be loved”. This implies that fat women can find love; however, they have to follow “unwritten rules of traditional femininity in terms of their behaviour and appearance” (Graves & Kwan, 2012, p. 56). The media
perpetuate this idea, and advertising for instance underlines the importance of coupling; as DePaulo (2006) argues, regardless of what the ads are for, they can be seen as promising the single woman a better chance at finding a partner. In reality television, as Taylor (2012) suggests, single women are often presented as not conforming to norms of femininity (which are still very much connected to standards of heterosexuality) and as such as in need of a makeover. These shows then aim to make the single woman into a more ‘desirable’ woman – meaning the kind of woman in whom men are interested – thus making her more ‘competitive’ on the dating market with the ultimate aim to make her ‘unsingle’, as proposed by Taylor (2012, p. 106). My research suggests that this is reflected in the dating-focused makeover shows that were analysed for this dissertation (Fat Chance, Honey, You’ve Become Chubby, and Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian). They may be seen as operating under the premise of preparing people for relationships by making their bodies more appealing, and emphasise the importance of sexual desirability, equating a thinner, more feminine, and thus ‘sexier’ body with a better chance at a relationship, as explored in detail in articles II and III.

Romantic relationships are commonly strongly connected to sexual relationships and sexual activity, which, as we are taught, happens due to sexual desire, which, in turn, is the product of beauty, sexiness, sex appeal, and love (Blank, 2000; Gailey, 2012). The fat female body may not fulfil the societal and sexual criteria of being sexy and desirable (Harjunen, 2007) and may consequently not be seen as acceptable; fat women are also often seen as either asexual or hypersexual (Lupton, 2018). Fatness is thus commonly not presented as sexy, and fat women are often seen as sexually undesirable (Murray, 2004). While fat women may be less likely to be represented as attractive and active in romantic or positive interactions (Domoff et al., 2012), there is one show, Hot & Heavy (2020), which is one of the rare reality programmes that shows fat women being partnered with or married to thin men (see Zimdars, 2019). Hot & Heavy constructs these relationships as a spectacle and something out of the ordinary, which may further stigmatise the individuals – fat women, as well as thin men by constructing their preferences as ‘abnormal’. This show is interesting because it does show fat women in relationships – albeit as a deviant example – hereby potentially challenging the norm of having to be thin to achieve a relationship. While this may sound positive, it potentially reinforces the idea of fat women being in relationships as something out of the ordinary. One of the shows I analysed for this dissertation – Honey, You’ve Become Chubby – also shows fat individuals in relationships. In the constructions of popular media, a fat body may thus not
completely ‘disqualify’ individuals from being suitable for relationships; the premise of Honey, You’ve Become Chubby – that one of the partners should lose weight in order to ‘save’ the relationship – may, however, reinforce the importance of a thin body for a romantic relationship. In article II, I explore this in more depth.

Hot & Heavy may furthermore be seen as an example of what Rossi (2003) calls normative heterosexuality, which implies that there are certain norms in relationships that define hetero ways of being, acting, and behaving. This includes for instance relationships between an older woman and a younger man (since the ‘accepted’ relationship is normally the other way around) and also the relationship between a fat, ‘bigger’, woman, and a thin, ‘smaller’ man (Rossi, 2003). This potentially shows stereotypical gender norms, because it classifies ‘big’ women and ‘small’ men as non-gender-conforming and deviant, and thus unacceptable. This points to what Gailey (2012) proposes: the fat female body is commonly not considered to be in line with the feminine ideal, because it can be seen as symbolising domination or resisting idealised femininity through its size.

As I have elaborated upon in this subsection, fatness, gender, relationships, and sexual desirability are intertwined and interact in complex ways, which becomes visible in dating and dieting makeover shows that present dieting as the solution to issues surrounding the body, love, and romantic relationships. Dieting narratives often construct a journey from shameful existence without love towards being proud of oneself and finding love – self-love as well as love in general. This may point towards only the ‘made over’ body being seen as desirable, acceptable, and sexy (Kyrölä, 2014). In Fat Chance, as explored in article III, this is expressed by participants who state that they have gained the possibility to love themselves after having changed their body. In the next subsection, I will discuss the specifics of reality television and makeover shows and explain their importance for this research.

2.2 Reality Television and Makeover Shows

In the following, I will introduce reality television, reflect on its appeal, and present the genre of makeover shows. All of the shows that were analysed for this dissertation are examples of makeover shows; however, due to their focus on more than mere weight loss, they can be understood as representations of a hybrid form
of makeover shows that has emerged in the recent past, as I will detail later on in this subsection.

Reality television became popular in the late 1990s, and makeover programmes have been presenting ways of improving people’s lives ever since. Shows that employ lifestyle experts (such as financial advisors or life coaches) can be described as life intervention programmes, as Ouellette and Hay (2008) propose, staging an intervention in order to improve individuals’ lives. This intervention may focus on different parts of people’s lives, such as finances, health, work, or the relationship to oneself as well as to others.

Reality television can be seen as emphasising the importance of disciplinary practices, transmitting imperatives regarding how to act, look, and exist – in other words, how to live according to society’s norms and values, which include mental as well as physical norms (Cameron, 2022). It can be understood as a form of panoptic surveillance (e.g., Weber, 2014a) because the individuals are not only visible, but they are aware that they are constantly visible, which is expressed through techniques of surveillance – they are observed by the audience, experts, and technology such as home cameras – and in the relationship between the expert and the participants, as I detail in article I. Adhering to the standards and changing their body according to the experts’ rules may help the participants gain a more favourable position in the eyes of the experts, and they learn that the more they internalise the gaze, the more successful they are (Weber, 2014a). Internalising the gaze might then lead to the participants not even needing surveillance from the outside anymore, since they are enacting the surveillance upon themselves. Interestingly, as Ouellette and Hay (2008) propose, the participants usually engage with the coaches voluntarily, thus choosing to participate in a strictly regulated programme. The voluntary submission to rules and guidance is emphasised in makeover programmes, as is the idea that submission is necessary to achieve a positive outcome in the end. I suggest that this is visible in *Jutta and the Super Diet* and *Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet* in particular, but is always in the background, also in the other shows. The ‘freely chosen’ benefits that await the participants after submitting to the rules and guidance may not be completely ‘freely chosen’ since the choices they make may be understood as ultimately upholding the authority’s goals, as Ouellette and Hay (2008) propose. My research suggests that this may be the case in the shows I analysed: submitting to the ‘freely chosen’ journey of transformation and ‘choosing’ to lose weight may in the end not be completely voluntary but influenced by norms concerning the body on the one
hand and neoliberal norms of productivity and health on the other hand. I will go into depth on the topic of neoliberalism further on in this summary chapter.

Reality television programmes that specifically dealt with and were directed at fat people emerged in the 1990s. Makeover shows that focus on weight loss are often based on the construction of the participants as in need of transformation (Skeggs & Wood, 2014). They express the ideological idea of individualism that had started to develop in the 1980s and at the same time reflect the idea of the body as a site of performance and self-management, as Palmer (2014) suggests. In line with the common sentiment that being fat is a person’s own fault (and consequently losing weight is their responsibility), these shows often construct weight loss as a question of willpower (Karsay & Schmuck, 2017). The emphasis on technologies of the self and individual responsibility points to a possible erasing and concealing of “structural determinants of health” (Cameron, 2022, p. 42).

Makeover shows can be understood as a blend of different television genres, incorporating structures and contents from both lifestyle advice and reality television, with the “transformational ‘before and after’ narrative” being of crucial importance (Lewis, 2013, p. 7). Especially weight-loss reality programmes intend to shape individuals’ weight in a more ‘acceptable’ direction. The narrative of the makeover generally diagnoses the participant’s problems in the beginning, to then start an intervention which is supposed to help transform the participant into an acceptable, functioning citizen (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). In these shows, being thin is constructed as the ideal and the goal; fat is constructed as something that must be removed in order to reveal the true (=thin) self underneath (Kyrölä, 2021). Kent (2001, p. 134) suggests that the fat body is represented as something from which the individual must escape, which entangles the fat body in a “narrative of erasure”. Individuals who do not conform to these standards may be constructed as inappropriate citizens that are denied certain privileges – societal as well as economical – which would be extended to those who conform to the norms (Cameron, 2022).

Makeover shows rely on a narrative of self-responsibility, self-improvement, and achievement (Weber, 2009; 2014b). They are defined by a rather strict narrative form, containing a ‘before’ and ‘after’ scene presenting the individual that is to be transformed, with a strong emphasis on the ‘after’ being better than the ‘before’. Kavka (2006) proposes that the change is mostly presented as being for the better;
however, this is not necessarily the case, as the change may not be finalised if the participants do not ‘succeed’ in losing weight. In the shows analysed for this dissertation, the change is constructed as unidirectional and from ‘bad’ to ‘good’; even if the participants do not succeed in losing the weight they were supposed to, the attempt at losing weight alone appears to represent a positive outcome, and the thin(ner) ‘after body’ is constructed as being preferable to the fat ‘before body’. The idea of promise, as discussed above, may be dependent on exclusions, which may then leave little – or no – space for deviations or lack of change, as Kyrölä (2014) proposes. Lack of change is, unsurprisingly, a potential part (or outcome) of the makeover and diet; this potential is, however, not widely addressed in the shows, as my research suggests.

The question then is: if reality television is mostly about control, what makes the shows so intriguing? For one, as Jones (2013) proposes, reality television does not only provide a platform for surveillance and the transmission of disciplinary and normalising structures, but it is also pleasurable, which may explain its popularity. It addresses our fantasies – such as fantasies of the ‘perfect’ body and life – and at the same time our fears regarding our bodies, lives, and relationships (Dovey, 2000). By including the “imperative of personal responsibility” (Dovey, 2000, p. 98), it can also offer a means of survival in the face of these exact fears. Furthermore, it may include a promise of self-fulfilment and present the techniques to reach this goal (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Kyrölä (2014) suggests that a promise (of a better life) may be present in dieting narratives, which potentially constructs them as empowering, and also my research suggests that the promise of self-fulfilment and a better life through weight loss is strong in the shows analysed for this dissertation. This is expressed in Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian, in which host Khloé makes it clear that taking care of her body – in this case meaning weight loss – has helped her turn her life around and reach the goals she was dreaming of, thus implying the potential of the same promise for the participants. I have examined these issues in depth in article II.

The following are examples of a myriad of different shows, airing all over the world: The Biggest Loser may be one of the most popular ones, originating in the US in 2004 (for research on the Biggest Loser, see, e.g., Hass, 2017; Lupton, 2018). In The Biggest Loser, fat individuals participate in a dieting programme and compete to lose as much weight as possible in order to win a cash prize of 100,000 US dollars. It has been adapted to altogether 40 different countries, being aired as Suurin pudottaja in Finland from 2006 onwards. Extreme Weight Loss (2011–2015) from the US showed
participants trying to lose as much weight as possible during a six-month diet; the Canadian show Bulging Brides (2008) focused on soon-to-be brides attempting to lose weight to fit into their wedding dresses; and Shedding for the Wedding (2011) from the US featured couples trying to lose weight before their wedding day. The British weight-loss show You Are What You Eat (2004–2006; 2022–) used extreme tactics such as analysing the participants’ faeces in order to showcase their ‘wrong’ diets; the fifth season of its Finnish adaptation Olet mitä syöt (2005) started in 2022, pointing towards the continuous popularity of this kind of content (for research on Olet mitä syöt, see Kyrölä, 2014).

A hybrid form of makeover shows has emerged in the form of dating makeover shows; the makeovers in these shows are often ‘disguised’ as concentrating on the body alone, but actually contain instructions on how to makeover other parts of life through the makeover of the body. These hybrid formats — “lifestyle TV” as Raisborough (2011, p. 3) suggests — are concerned with changing, improving, and managing ordinary peoples’ ordinary lives. Raisborough (2011, p. 4) points out that lifestyle television’s focus lies on the “need, process and result” of the “journey of transformation”. It is important to research lifestyle media because it is where dominant ideals concerning life-management strategies may be circulated, often in a seemingly harmless and popular manner (Raisborough, 2011). Lifestyle media is a site where the process of self-improvement and its positive outcome are reproduced and narrated, and it may tie the process of improving the self to other aspects of an individual’s life (Raisborough, 2011). The shows analysed for this dissertation may be seen as hybrid formats since they incorporate characteristics of reality, makeover, and lifestyle television shows, and are concerned with more than the ‘mere’ transformation of a body but also explicitly focus on the improvement of relationships (to one’s partner, but also to the self), as is the case in Honey, You’ve Become Chubby, Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian, and Fat Chance. Jutta and the Super Diet incorporates structures of reality television — documenting Jutta’s journey — as well as being a makeover show in the more traditional sense and may thus be seen as an example of this genre.

Taylor (2012) identifies relationship reality television as a subgenre of makeover shows that focuses on the improvement of people’s relationships in particular. In these programmes, as Taylor (2012) suggests, single women are constructed as in need of intervention regarding their relationship status, which may be seen as a parallel to fat individuals being portrayed as in need of intervention due to their
weight. Especially reality dating television promotes heterosexual relationships and transmits messages regarding gender, power, class, and marriage, as Peltier and Mizock (2012, p. 96) suggest. My research has revealed conflicting results concerning heteronormativity and the focus on heterosexual relationships: in most of the relationship-focused shows, there were in fact non-heterosexual relationships. This might point towards a more tolerant, open view on relationships, but might also indicate the universal importance of relationships on the whole: even if it is not a heterosexual relationship, being partnered remains crucial after all.

In line with the makeover logic, also relationship makeover programmes include the promise of a new self, as Taylor (2012) proposes. Since the participants are constructed as being responsible for their single status, they are consequently also responsible for changing it or risk remaining single (Taylor, 2012). This becomes clear in all of the relationship-related shows I analysed; especially in Fat Chance, the participants are shown as being responsible for their singleness because they do not dare to confess their feelings to their crushes due to their weight, and losing weight then becomes the precondition for starting to remedy their singleness. If they were to fail in this, they would risk being alone. This may point towards the construction of a thin body as important for desirability and consequently relationships, and may furthermore support the narrative of personal responsibility. This consistent narrative of personal responsibility suggests that makeover shows transmit neoliberal norms, as I will discuss in the following subsection.

2.3 Neoliberalism and Postfeminism in the Context of the Makeover

As discussed earlier, scholars have identified the focus on self-improvement in reality television and makeover shows, which may point to neoliberal values that are disseminated in and through the makeover narrative (e.g., Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Furthermore, notions of personal responsibility have been proposed as important in connection with the fat body (e.g., LeBesco, 2011; Harjunen, 2017), which may also be understood in the context of a neoliberal society, in which individuals are seen as being responsible for their own lives. Neoliberalism is important as an explanatory framework in this dissertation because it helps to examine the imperatives of self-regulation and self-improvement that are circulated in the shows in relation to fatness as well as singleness. In the following, I will explain neoliberalism as a political
and economic concept in the context of the makeover and in connection with the (fat) body. Makeover narratives imply a freedom of choice – especially in relation to fatness and gender in the sense of ‘choosing’ to conform to certain standards – which makes it interesting to examine the shows in the context of postfeminism as a core feature of the modern neoliberal society (e.g., Gill, 2017), as I will detail further on in this subsection.

Ventura (2012) observes a ‘neoliberal culture’ in many Western cultures nowadays, meaning that society’s norms and values are shaped by a neoliberal logic. Neoliberalism as a form of economic liberalism underlines productivity, profit, and privatisation (Harjunen, 2021); in the neoliberal logic, individuals are “constituted as self-managing, autonomous, and ‘responsibilised’”, as Gill (2019, p. 150) suggests. Neoliberalism can be understood as being based on productive citizens who are (supposed to be) ready to work and fit for the marketplace; individuals must furthermore take responsibility for their own bodies (Cooper, 2016). In the neoliberal logic, it is therefore upon the individual to make a life for themselves, and the responsibility for one’s success in life – including success in relationships and love – falls on the individual themselves under the premise and promise of freedom and individuality (e.g., Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). Ventura (2012) similarly points out that since neoliberal rhetoric emphasises individuals’ responsibility for their own lives and actions, limiting structures and systems in society are rarely acknowledged (see also Brunila & Ylöstalo, 2020). My research suggests that this becomes visible in most of the shows analysed for this dissertation: societal structures that may play a role in the participants’ lives are rarely discussed as influential on their situations.

In Western societies, the body is often understood as a project, as something that should be worked on, as Ekman (2017) suggests. As Harjunen (2021) proposes, not all choices, nor all bodies are seen as acceptable, and the ideal neoliberal subject should conform to neoliberal values such as self-control and productivity. Achieving this requires the monitoring of the self as well as self-disciplinary behaviour; failing in doing so may be interpreted as failing socially and morally, which may result in sanctions. Fatness and fat bodies have become especially unacceptable in neoliberal culture because they represent the failure to embody control and responsibility; a fat body may mark the individual as an undeserving, unproductive citizen (Harjunen, 2021). The fat body may even be constructed as an “anti-neoliberal” body (Harjunen, 2021, p. 69).
Makeover shows circulate imperatives of personal improvement and animate individuals to care for themselves in the name of health, happiness, and success, which may be connected to neoliberal values in society (Ouellette & Hay, 2013; Weber, 2009). By emphasising and disseminating self-management techniques, they may provide guidance on how to help oneself overcome personal problems through hard work and act as a form of social control. The interventions are often supported by governing techniques such as hidden cameras and close supervisory relationships which may include home visits (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). I explored this in article I in the context of *Jutta and the Super-Diet* and *Jutta and the Half-Year Super-Diet* and the relationship between the expert and the participants.

The intense requirements especially for women to have an acceptable, attractive body can be seen as being tied to neoliberal consumer culture (e.g., Åberg, 2020; Gill, 2007). Gill (2007) suggests that women in particular are required to work on their body: in order to perform femininity, women need to work on themselves, and it is therefore especially women who are addressed in makeover shows. However, this may have changed in the recent past, as I discussed earlier. Due to the connection between the imperative of self-improvement and the articulation of this work as a choice individuals make for themselves, structural determinants and potential inequalities may be erased. The interpretative frame of postfeminism may help to analyse and understand these issues, which is why it is important for this research.

Postfeminism can be understood as a gendered version of neoliberalism, as proposed by Gill (2017), and as such may help to understand gendered power relations in the aftermath of second-wave feminism. Especially in Western societies, it may be implied that gender equality has already been achieved (e.g., Kolehmainen, 2019), a thought which is echoed in postfeminist culture, which has at its core the idea that structural factors which might have influenced society to the disadvantage of women have now been overcome for the most part. This may then point to an understanding that any disadvantages that remain are due to women’s own (wrong) choices and can also be overcome by their own (correct) choices (e.g., Budgeon, 2015). The implication might then be that women are only held back by their own choices and actions – not by structural differences or unequal power relations (e.g., Gill, 2019).

Postfeminism aims to question this and offers a critique of how and why many ideological characteristics of femininity and ‘proper female behaviour’ that had been
rejected by feminist movements earlier have been embraced once again. One important part of this is the fascination with outward appearance and its centrality for the individual value of women (e.g., Weber, 2014a). In the postfeminist culture, the body may be constructed as an important part of womanhood as well as a source of power for women; however, it requires monitoring and discipline in order to conform to standards of attractiveness, as Gill (2017) proposes. This becomes visible in the makeover, which is important in the context of postfeminism since the makeover encourages women to embrace the strict bodily standards in the name of empowerment. In the context of makeover shows, the idea of choice may be expressed through the emphasis on the participants’ voluntary participation by choosing to be part of the makeover, and subjecting themselves to the strict diets, exercise, and disciplinary structures voluntarily.

Working on the body may be constructed as not only a voluntary action but also a source of empowerment for women – especially a stereotypically beautiful body, a body that fits the norms, seemingly enables empowerment (e.g., Gill, 2017). This has become visible in my research: the female participants mentioned feeling empowered after losing weight and acquiring a body that conforms to the ideal, as I have examined in article II and III. However, Gill suggests that choice is never unproblematic or neutral, but should be seen in the context of societal norms, values, and power relations (Gill, 2007; 2008; Raisborough, 2016).

Neoliberal thoughts as discussed above are not specific to the US, but can be witnessed around the world (Ventura, 2012); Harjunen (2017) for instance discusses neoliberalism in a Finnish context in connection with fatness. In the following, I will present Finland and the US as the countries that this study is located in and, among other topics, discuss neoliberal structures in these societies.

### 2.4 Finland and the US

Since contents and representations do not exist in a vacuum, stories expressed in makeover shows may contain information about the historical and cultural contexts they stem from and are expressed in (Weber, 2009). Makeover shows are especially interesting because they are often the same format that is adapted to different countries, which poses the question of how cultural contexts are preserved and which cultural specificities potentially disappear when one format is adapted from
one country to another. Makeover shows as rather inconspicuous forms of popular culture may be especially suitable and powerful in transmitting norms, values, and messages regarding self-improvement (Edwards & Esposito, 2020).

Television is important for cultural discussions and practices, as Aslama and Pantti (2007) propose, and this is especially true for a small country such as Finland with a unique language. There has been research on how nationality is constructed in the Finnish reality show *Extreme Escapades* (Aslama & Pantti, 2007); however, research on makeover shows and the specific norms and values transmitted by dieting shows in particular has been rather scarce (see Kyrölä, 2014). Aslama and Pantti identify discussions on the perceived high influence that global popular culture – especially American popular culture – may have on national culture and identity in general and on Finnish identity in particular (Aslama & Pantti, 2007). While their research deals with classic reality television, this could potentially be true for makeover shows too, and my research asks about this potential in dieting shows too: can the same (or different) norms be observed in dieting shows from two different countries? My research thus focuses on two countries and examines the chosen shows in their specific cultural environment, discussing certain aspects more closely in the respective society’s context. In the following, I will describe the United States and Finland as the countries that the studied shows originate from and elaborate upon certain cultural specificities.

This dissertation set out to explore the topic from a non-US-centric point of view for several reasons. For one, as research on makeover shows has focused primarily on the US so far, this dissertation aims to expand research on this topic in the context of Finland. Secondly, it is important to turn to Finland due to the rise of neoliberal structures in Finnish society in the past decades. Neoliberalism emphasises privatisation and deregulation, and as Harjunen (2017) describes, Finland and the Nordic countries have been going through a period of restructuring through neoliberal policies (see Oksala, 2013), and neoliberalism has inserted itself into every area of everyday life in the recent past. It has become the central organising principle in society, which is also visible in Finnish society, as the responsibility for one’s success in life is increasingly shifted onto the individual.

The US and Finland differ greatly in size alone (the US has about 332 million inhabitants in 2022 (estimation based on the 2020 census (Moore, 2021)) versus about 5.5 million in Finland in 2023 (Statistics Finland, 2023). The demographics of
Finland and the US differ greatly for instance in terms of race (in the US: White alone, not Hispanic or Latino making up 57.8% of the population; Hispanic or Latino people making up 18.7% percent and black or African American alone (not Hispanic or Latino) making up 12.1% of the population in 2020 (United States Census Bureau, 2021)). In Finland, these statistics are difficult to find: while there is a statistic about people with a foreign background, meaning people whose parents were not born in Finland (about 0.5 million people in Finland) (Statistics Finland, 2023), statistics about race and ethnicity are rather sparse, which makes research complicated when it comes to unpacking intersecting axes of discrimination (such as fatness in connection with race).

Even though Finland and the US may appear rather different on the first glance in terms of location, size, and population as Uschanov (2012) states, they are interesting to consider in relation to each other, because despite their obvious differences they are quite similar in terms of gender equality and overall values as developed Western countries. Contrasting countries that are rather similar in terms of values, norms and standards concerning gender and the body provides the opportunity to highlight the subtle (or obvious) differences even more – the differences that might be less obvious if the countries differed more from each other from the get-go, as Uschanov (2012) argues. Furthermore, media from the United States play a big role on Finnish television, which means that norms and values are transported.

Examining Finland and the United States is also interesting in terms of the visibility of neoliberal structures in society that might be influencing the contents and structures of the shows. Neoliberalism emphasises individualism instead of collectivity and highlights a mentality of “survival of the fittest”, the belief that everyone fights for themselves (Cooper 2016, p. 169), which is expressed through the makeover narrative. Neoliberalism has been important especially in the United States because the US as a capitalist democracy emphasise consumerism, materialism, and individualism. Finland, on the other hand, has made a turn towards a capitalist culture in the 1980s, while remaining focused on equality in the tradition of a Nordic social democracy. There has, however, been a turn towards neoliberalism also in Finland (Gailey & Harjunen, 2019) and the social welfare state is increasingly individualised (Brunila & Ylöstalo, 2020).

While there is little comparative research on fatness in the US and Finland, Gailey from the US and Harjunen from Finland (Gailey & Harjunen, 2019) have studied
women’s experiences of fatness from a cross-cultural perspective, focusing on Finland and the US. In these accounts, they identified the same feelings of shame and embarrassment concerning the fat female body (Gailey & Harjunen, 2019), which suggests that fatness and being fat are perceived and experienced rather negatively in both countries. Gailey and Harjunen identified two key concepts in their participants’ expressions: hyper(in)visibility (Gailey, 2014), meaning that fat women are at the same time highly visible and invisible due to their fat body (see also Gailey, 2023), and liminality (Harjunen, 2009), meaning that the fat body is seen as a temporary state that will be overcome at some point in the future. These specific concepts appeared in accounts from both Finland and the US, which is interesting, seeing as Finland and the US are distant countries in a geographical, linguistic, and cultural sense (Gailey & Harjunen, 2019). This may indicate that the “hegemonic fat discourse travels internationally and fat as a phenomenon and gendered experience seems to transcend borders in this sense, too” (Gailey & Harjunen, 2019, p. 14). My research set out to explore these topics in the context of makeover shows – instead of direct interviews with fat participants – and similarly suggests that fatness and the fat body are presented and constructed quite consistently throughout the shows and countries, albeit with slight differences concerning notions of individuality, teamwork, and hierarchy. I will delve into this in the description of the articles, as well as the results and discussion sections later on in this summary chapter.

In the following, I will explain certain characteristics of US society, focusing especially on the idea of the ‘American Dream’ because it corresponds to the makeover shows’ idea of personal improvement and making your own life (e.g., Weber, 2009). After that, I will highlight certain features of Finnish society which are important in the context of this study. Here, it is important to note that rather than attempting a comprehensive comparison, this research aims to examine shared features and differences observed in the context of makeover shows, and how these are potentially connected to or reflect certain aspects of society. I will discuss this further in the discussion part in section 6.

2.4.1 The Makeover as the American Dream

In my research, I analysed two makeover shows from the US: Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian and Fat Chance. They exemplify several ideologies and discourses that are rather specific to the United States; especially Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian has at its premise the idea of a ‘self-made-life’, the idea that anybody can achieve
anything, and there is a narrative of working your way up from the bottom to the
top, which is expressed in the introduction to the shows, in which host Khloé
describes her path from being shamed for her body to working hard to then being
the ‘best’ version of herself. While my research suggests that these ideologies are
present in the analysed shows as a whole, in these two shows they are explicitly linked
to other areas of life – such as love and relationships.

The transformational narratives in makeover shows can be seen as corresponding to
a fundamentally American mythos of upward mobility. Not only do makeover shows
have personal transformations as their premise, but these transformations are also
often competitive, which may be connected to entrepreneurialism in the US, as
Lewis (2013) proposes. The premise of makeover shows, that people are
transformed into their best, happy selves, is potentially connected to the cultural
atmosphere in the United States: because the constitution of the US guarantees the
right to the pursuit of happiness, if beauty is synonymous with happiness, everyone
has the right to be beautiful (=happy) (Kavka, 2006, p. 225). Weber (2009, p. 72)
suggests that the “can-do attitude”, which is central to Americanness, turns into a
“must-do imperative” in makeover shows. The values of a democratic culture, such
as achievement and freedom, may be dependent on the appropriateness of an
individual’s appearance (Weber, 2009) – this may be the case for weight as well, and
the ‘possibility’ to lose weight may turn into a ‘need’ to lose weight in order to be
granted certain rights and liberties in an appearance-focused society.

The makeover as a format is linked to a distinctive national historical myth in the
United States, seeing as reinvention is an important concept in the history of the US,
as Heller (2006) points out. Featherstone (2010, p. 200) suggests that transformation
is central to consumer culture and an important feature of modern Western societies,
which is especially visible in the “rags to riches” stories in the United States. The
cultural context in the US enables a positive attitude towards positive transformation
and the format of the makeover may thus correspond to the historical values of the
United States, where the idea of self-invention has been prominent since the 17th
century (Kavka, 2006).

The American Dream as a narrative promises prosperity as a result of hard work
(e.g., Becker, 2018). It is not necessarily contained to the geographical location of
the US but can be understood as a “universal signifier” that can be recognised in a
global context (Weber, 2009, p. 46). Discourses of the American Dream may thus
be present and circulate around the world, which makes it possible for individuals to be part of and (re)produce the “rhetorics of Americanness” (Weber, 2009, pp. 46-47) without being in the US or holding a US citizenship. Springer (2014) similarly proposes that while American norms and beliefs are applied through reality television, they are not geographically bound to the United States but are rather symbolic representations of goals marked by the American Dream, such as democracy and individualism. Confidence, freedom of choice and individualism are constructed as key elements of selfhood in makeover shows; these narratives are narratives of “Americanness rather than American”, as Weber (2009, p. 28) suggests, which removes them from a specific place and may lift the makeover narratives into a more cultural, dislocated space. The common narratives in makeover shows, such as winning and self-making, are then often depicted as distinctly American, and especially the idea that people’s success, status, and happiness are dependent on their own effort is crucial in the “mythology of a class-free meritocracy that underscores Americanness” (Weber, 2009, p. 29). My research similarly suggests that the rhetoric of the American Dream – making it to the top through hard work – is visible in the shows analysed for this dissertation, regardless of their geographical location, but it is more pronounced in the shows from the US. Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian is especially interesting because of host Khloé’s status as a ‘self-made woman’; in this show, success is constructed as being achievable by hard work – be it about the body, or about economic success, if you work hard for it, you will reach the top. Khloé’s background (having become famous due to her family’s participation in the reality show Keeping up with the Kardashians) as well as the support she has received, is not mentioned, which may reflect a dismissal of structural inequalities.

The myth of transformation can be understood as being culturally bound to the US, since the “transformative promise of the ‘makeover’ fits comfortably into the tradition of the American Dream” (Kavka, 2006, p. 219) in a country where already children learn that they can be anything when they grow up if they just work hard enough for it. Although this may sound promising, the idea of the American Dream may reward individuals for their hard work while disregarding the impact that factors such as race and class can have on their lives (Weber, 2014b). Especially in the US, positive thinking is highlighted as a way of achieving success, as Halberstam (2011) suggests, and “believing that success depends upon one’s attitude is far preferable to Americans than recognizing that their success is the outcome of the tilted scales of race, class and gender” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3). Especially in Fat Chance, this is visible in relation to class and economic situation: one participant’s financial
difficulties and living situation are constructed as being connected to her fatness, and thus her own responsibility; the idea that there might be other structural determinants influencing her life is not discussed. This feeds into the idea of being able to make it no matter one’s initial starting point.

2.4.2 Finland as a Model Welfare State of Equality

This research examined the Finnish shows *Jutta and the Super Diet; Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet*, and *Honey, You’ve Become Chubby*. Seeing as the pressure to be beautiful appears to be especially high for women – even nowadays, as I have described earlier – Finland is an interesting country to examine in terms of appearance- and weight-related phenomena because of its relatively high levels of gender equality in education, politics, health, work, power, and decision-making (e.g., Åberg, 2020).

Well known for its reputation as a Nordic welfare state (e.g., Brunila & Ylöstalo, 2020), Finland is interesting to study because of the sentiments of Finland as a ‘special’, extraordinary country (Uschanov, 2012), not only on a European or global scale, but also amongst the other Nordic countries. Scholars have suggested sentiments of “Finnish exceptionalism” (Keskinen, 2012) that describes the feeling that Finland and Finnish society is ‘exceptional’ in a sense that certain difficulties, problems, or issues do not exist. While this is usually connected to racism, there may be a similar sentiment in terms of bodies, gender, fat, the discrimination of fat people, and beauty standards. Finland claims to be a society in which men and women are equal, and scholars have identified discourses in the Finnish political arena suggesting that gender equality already exists in Finland (see, e.g., Elomäki et. al, 2019). This may partly be true, seeing as the country consistently ranks high on the gender equality index, scoring more than 75 points on a scale of 1 to 100 in 2022 (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023); however, Finnish society is not free from discriminatory structures, and, similarly to other European countries, anti-feminist discourses have been observed for instance in political contexts (Elomäki & Kantola 2018).

In Finnish society, and media, fat is commonly constructed as unacceptable, as scholars have suggested (e.g., Harjunen, 2009; Puhakka, 2019), and it is mostly represented as something negative to get rid of (Puhakka, 2019). In this regard, then, the norms do not differ too much between the US and Finland. In the context of appearance-related consumption, practicality, frugality, and rationality had been
traditional virtues in Finland until these virtues started to give way to more hedonistic views in the recent past (Sarpila, 2013). Furthermore, especially in the Finnish countryside, it was not appreciated if someone paid too much attention to their looks (Sarpila, 2013), and ‘natural’ beauty was valued. This is interesting to see in the case of the ‘after body’ reveal scenes in the Finnish makeover shows, in which the participants are commonly much less ‘made up’ than their American counterparts.

Interestingly, the Finnish self-perception is different than that in the US, as are the core values. As described earlier, US society is based on the idea of the American Dream, the idea of the self-made life, and everyone being able to make it to the top no matter their situation or background. In Finland, on the other hand, what counts is equality right from the start – everyone should be provided with equal opportunities, and teamwork, equality, and solidarity are appreciated. This is expressed in the idea of the Finnish welfare state, which aims to create equal opportunities for everyone (whether or not this is true is a different question). Furthermore, as Sahlberg (2011) states, in contrast to Finland, in many Anglo-American societies (including the US), society is obsessed with being better, stronger, and fitter; the constant upward development is thus important, as he suggests.

Sahlberg understands Finland as a unique nation in terms of its values and “social cohesion within society” (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 10). He furthermore suggests that fairness, honesty, and social justice are firmly embedded in Finnish society and the Finnish way of life; people feel responsible not only for their own success but also for the lives of others. This contrasts with the sentiments of individual success and improvement that is visible in the US shows. Nowadays, however, this may have shifted, and discourses of personal improvement, freedom of choice, and hard work to reach one’s goals have gained importance in Finland as the values of the welfare state have shifted towards more neoliberal values such as competitiveness and efficiency (Brunila & Ylöstalo, 2020). This is not only the case in the societal and political context, but can also be observed in makeover shows, as Kolehmainen (2012) proposes in the analysis of Queer Eye for the Straight Guy. The importance of achievement and resilience is visible in my research too: while Jutta and the Super-Diet and Honey, You've Become Chubby emphasise teamwork and community, they nevertheless include aspects of self-responsibility, efficiency, and personal improvement.
As I have discussed in this section, there are both similarities and differences in the societal structures and cultural values of Finland and the US. The relative similarity of the countries makes it possible to examine the construction of body norms and related discourses in the context of the respective show and society. I will discuss similarities and differences in relation to control, normalisation, and liminality in detail in the conclusion of this summary chapter. In the following, I will describe the theoretical concepts that form the background of this study.
3 THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

In the following section, I will explain the main theoretical concepts that I used in my research. These are, firstly, Foucault’s theories of power, control, surveillance, and normalisation (Foucault, 1980; 1990; 1995), which have been used in research concerning the fat body (e.g., Harjunen, 2009; Heyes, 2006; 2007). Secondly, I have utilised theories and theorisations of liminality, originally conceptualised by anthropologists Turner (1969) and Van Gennep (1960) and applied to the field of fat studies by scholars such as LeBesco (2004) and Harjunen (e.g., 2007; 2009). Theorisations of liminality are important because they help to understand how and why the fat body is constructed and understood as a temporary state that needs to be left behind in order for the real life to start, which can be seen as the premise of the makeover shows I analysed. The concept of liminality has also been applied to singlehood studies (Lahad, 2012), which has been useful for my research in the context of dating makeover shows.

Foucault’s theories are important especially in article I, in which I explain the legitimisations of surveillance and control in Jutta and the Super Diet and Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet, and article II, in which I examine the normalising structures concerning body size, relationships and lives in Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian and Honey, You’ve Become Chubby. The concepts of liminality and rites of passage (Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, 1960) are important for article III, where I draw a connection between fatness and singlehood in the context of liminality and rites of passage in Fat Chance. Foucault’s theories are important for all three articles, since the process of dieting and the imperative of change are not only expressed through disciplinary structures, but in the end, they aim to normalise fat women’s bodies and lives.

In the following, I will first explain Foucault’s theories concerning power, surveillance, control, and normalisation (Foucault, 1980; 1990; 1995) to then turn to the concept of liminality, which I will elaborate on in the context of fatness as well as in the context of singleness.
3.1 Foucault’s Power, Control, and Normalisation

In this section, I elaborate upon Foucault’s theories concerning power, surveillance, control, and normalisation (Foucault, 1980; 1990; 1995), briefly touching upon governmentality (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). I have utilised Foucault’s theories primarily to examine the relationships of power between the expert and the participants, as well as the elements of control that became visible in the show in relation to surveillance. In makeover shows, only certain bodies and relationships are presented as ‘normal’, and the makeover aims at transforming both fat bodies and (romantic) relationships into a more ‘acceptable’ version. Approaching the analysis of the shows through the theoretical concept of normalisation helped to uncover what kind of bodies are presented as the ‘norm’ and examine how the imperative of transformation is constructed, enacted, and legitimised.

The processes in which individuals modify and manage their own as well as others’ behaviour according to an expected (and desired) outcome have been described with the term governmentality (Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Similarly to Foucault’s theorisations of lateral power, the techniques through which individuals are required to organise themselves do not come from one singular source of power, but they are “circulated in a highly dispersed fashion by social and cultural intermediaries and the institutions … that authorize their expertise” (Ouellette & Hay, 2013, p. 33). The techniques may be circulated through (reality) television, which hereby helps to govern individuals. (Weber 2014a, pp. 26-27)

Disciplinary institutions – in the context of this dissertation, televised makeover shows and their experts – employ techniques of control over the bodies and manipulate them into being docile. Practices of micro-control such as self-control and self-development (which are often labelled as positive and good for oneself), are crucial to governmentality. I have examined this in article I, in which I show that the relationship between expert Jutta and the participants is controlling and disciplinary on the one hand but presented as caring on the other; I suggest that what becomes visible here is what Weber suggests – a relationship that is labelled as care and therefore rarely questioned (Weber, 2014a) and that works to govern individuals according to neoliberal body standards.

The term biopower (Foucault, 1980) refers to a system of social control in the modern Western society (Pylypa, 1998). Biopower is a useful concept in studying the
in the body because it sees the body as a site of subjugation and may explain how individuals take part in their own oppression through their own habits and routines concerning their bodies (Pylypa, 1998). As Pylypa (1998) argues, however, this should not be understood as a substitute for understandings of power that highlight the domination of powerful groups over groups that are subordinated as this would obscure very real power dynamics. Subjugation may function through dynamics of enablement, too, as is visible in the makeover (e.g., Weber, 2014a).

In his theorisations of the body and structures of control surrounding it, Foucault understands the body as something in the “grip of very strict powers” that can be “manipulated, shaped, trained” (Foucault, 1995, p. 136). A body that is “subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (Foucault, 1995, p. 136), has turned into a docile body through structures of discipline, methods that serve to control the body and assure its subjecting. A docile body, a body that has changed according to certain norms and standards, has then become obedient (Foucault, 1995). Disciplinary power, as Foucault proposes, is effective because it makes use of simple instruments: “hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement,” (Foucault, 1995, p. 170). Power and observation do not only work from the top down but also laterally and from within (Oksala, 2007). While surveillance rests on individuals, as Foucault (1995, pp. 176–77) proposes, it furthermore functions as a “network of relations”, from top to bottom, from bottom to top, and laterally. This network is omnipresent in social relations, and the effects of power depend on and derive from one another; “supervisors, perpetually supervised” (1995, p. 177), which makes disciplinary power rather discreet – but so effective due to its invisibility. In my research, this became visible in Jutta and the Super Diet: Jutta is the supervisor, in the first season, but also the supervisee; her power extends laterally, and may thus be obscured, as I detail in article I.

Whereas in the past, power was enacted through coercive mechanisms such as the military force, there may be an increase in “social control through individual self-discipline” in modern societies (Foucault, 1980; Pylypa, 1998, p. 21). Power works on the body, which then regulates itself through self-disciplinary practices; the individual adopts these practices, thereby subjugating themselves (see also Oksala, 2013). The individual wants to conform to norms and ideas of normality in society (because they know that they will derive advantages from this), and they will thus “voluntarily control themselves by self-imposing conformity to cultural norms through self-surveillance and self-disciplinary practices” (Pylypa, 1998, p. 22) such
as weight loss. Technologies of surveillance, such as bathroom scales and nowadays of course also apps, websites and calorie trackers that are becoming more and more popular, foster self-monitoring and control over one’s own body (Pylypa, 1998). I suggest that makeover shows employ these techniques, but they themselves also serve as technologies to support and create opportunities for self-monitoring and self-surveillance. In the show *Jutta and the Super Diet* and *Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet*, as I discuss in article I, the expert Jutta may be seen as the one employing these techniques, such as when she comes to check on the participants, often bringing a scale with here. Furthermore, several of the shows I analysed employ the technologies of self-surveillance through the use of a home camera (*Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet*, and *Honey, You’ve Become Chubby*), which the participants use to document their life, thus taking their surveillance into their own hands, instead of leaving it to a professional camera team. The shows therefore create opportunities for being on display, making it possible – or even necessary – to internalise surveillance.

Disciplinary power serves to normalise, as Foucault (1995) proposes, and normality can be understood as indicating “membership of a homogenous social body” (Foucault, 1995, p. 184). In article II, I describe how the concept of normalisation (Foucault, 1995) is useful in this research because it helps to understand how the body – and with it, life – is shaped according to a norm. This may be visible in connection with fat individuals since the fat body excludes them from the acceptable bounds of bodily norms; after disciplinary power in the form of the diet has been enacted on the fat body, fat individuals may gain access to the ‘acceptable’ group. In this research, this was manifested in the shows that were dealing with dieting in particular, since the thin(ner), normalised body gained potential access to the group of coupled individuals. I suggest that this is visible in *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian* and *Fat Chance*, seeing as the more normative the participants’ bodies become, the more likely they are to gain symbolic access to the more privileged group of couples. Through the process of normalisation, as Haber (1996) states, bodies are shaped and divided into those that are acceptable or unacceptable, and thus to be sought out or avoided. Interestingly, even bodies that do not conform to the norm yet may be constructed as acceptable: bodies in the process of becoming more acceptable might already be acceptable due to the effort. Normalisation (Foucault, 1995) may here be understood as a technique of power that is enacted on the fat body.
I suggest that especially in dieting makeover shows that have a dating component, what is at play is not only the shaping of bodies, but also of other aspects of life that are connected to bodies. Bodies gain meaning in relation to “normative notions of time”, and fat bodies may be seen as failing to keep up with “normative tempos” (McFarland, Slothouber & Taylor, 2018, p. 135). Fat bodies thus potentially “challenge and disrupt normativity” (McFarland, Slothouber & Taylor, 2018, p. 135) because they are positioned outside of the “(hetero)normative timelines”, at least when analysing the markers of success and progress in a heteronormative timeline such as marriage and having children. Managing fat can function as a stand-in for managing something else, such as “normal’ sexuality, or class and race antagonisms” (Kyrölä, 2021, p. 114). Individuals can only have success in the “framework of straight time if they are (working toward becoming) thin” (McFarland, Slothouber & Taylor, 2018, p. 136). In article III, I suggest that through the positioning of the diet as a rite of passage to a normative life, dieting can also be seen as an expression of the process of normalisation in terms of time. Furthermore, the impermanence of fatness becomes visible here. I will explain the concept of liminality in the following subsection since it is important in this context.

3.2 Liminality

The concept of liminality has been important throughout this dissertation since the premise of dieting makeover shows – that being fat is not an acceptable, permanent state, and that the fat body should thus be changed – points towards an understanding of fatness as a temporary, liminal state. Furthermore, liminality is visible in the shows that deal with dieting and weight loss in connection with (romantic) relationships because being single is depicted as similarly non-permanent as fatness, as I suggest in article III. Therefore, approaching the shows that deal with both dieting and dating through the theoretical concept of liminality helps to understand how both fatness and singleness are constructed and what this means in terms of an (un)acceptable body, self, and life. The concept has been used to explore “marginalised experiences, social statuses and subjectivities that fall between classifications or are otherwise difficult to grasp” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 5), which makes it a useful concept to explore experiences of fatness as well as being single.
Based on Van Gennep’s (1960) study of the three rites of passage, the second stage – liminality – was conceptualised by Turner (1969) as a state of inbetweenness, “a transitory position” (Lahad, 2012, p. 177) between social statuses or positions. Liminal “entities”, as Turner calls them, may be presented as unpositioned in the “kinship system” due to missing identifiers of rank or role (Turner, 1969, p. 95), and they find themselves between positions, belonging neither here nor there, which makes their position a temporary state of transition. While it is potentially unusual to utilise anthropological concepts, such as those of liminality and rites of passage, in the context of media studies and in connection with Foucault’s theories of discipline and docile bodies, I suggest that they are connected to control because they either make it possible or impossible for people to gain access to a certain part of society, or to gain their place in society as an acceptable member of society. In addition, they express makeover shows’ self-evident idea of change and transitions. In Fat Chance, there is a definite element of excluding people from certain ‘sections’ of society, which they then have earnt access to through their thinner bodies, as I detail in article III. In the following, I will first explain liminality in relation to fatness, and then turn to liminality in connection with being single.

3.2.1 Fatness and Liminality

Liminality has been applied to the field of fat studies (e.g., LeBesco, 2004; Harjunen, 2007, 2009; Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017; Gailey & Harjunen, 2019,) through the concept of ‘liminal fat’. In a study of Finnish women’s experiences of being fat, participants described experiencing their fatness and fat body as a liminal – meaning temporary, impermanent – state, as something that has to be transcended in order to reach their ‘real’ body and self (Harjunen, 2007, 2009; see also Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017). Fatness was thus experienced as “temporary and unstable” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 2) – even by those for whom fatness rather than thinness was the ‘usual’ state. The participants considered their ‘real’ bodies and ‘real’ body size to be thin, and in addition, thinness was seen as the apparent and unquestionable goal (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017). This may point to an experience of temporality, since fatness was experienced as an “undesirable and temporally limited state, or a state in-between” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 5); fatness is thus rarely considered part of a person’s true self (LeBesco, 2004). The separation between the body and the ‘true’ (thin) self is a crucial element of liminality, which is especially evident and common in weight-loss discourse. This is often expressed through the phrase “inside
this fat body there is a thin person who is trying to get out” (Gailey & Harjunen, 2019, p. 11). Understanding fatness as an ‘in-between’ and non-permanent state means that fat may rarely be seen as a positive, or at least neutral, characteristic of a body (Harjunen, 2007), which makes individuals’ experiences and identities invisible, as it is not taken seriously. Dieting and losing weight may thus be understood as an imperative for fat people: since being thin is seen as their ‘natural’ goal, there is rarely an option to permanently live in and with a fat body.

Bodily transformations may include a temporal dimension; even when the body has not undergone a physical transformation yet, the prospect of attaining “full selfhood” in the future “already moves the fat self towards the slim image that lingers ahead”; the body is “suspended in the ‘before’ of undoing itself, even if that ‘before’ is now” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 13). The concept of liminal fat is thus also concerned with the problematic orientation towards a body’s future that “obscures the vast varieties of fully liveable corporeality and the potential pleasure of the now” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 14). Many fat individuals live in a permanent state of ‘when I am thin’ (Harjunen, 2007, p. 206), a state that needs to be achieved before their lives can begin. This reflects not only the aforementioned state of liminality, but also a state of waiting; the fat body (waiting to be thin) is in a state of (sometimes imagined) transformation, waiting ‘to be thin’; only after this transformation has been achieved and the state of liminality has been exited, can the body be treated according to its ‘new’ status (Harjunen, 2007).

Examining the liminalisation of fatness is important to understand how fatness is constructed and maintained as an experience, phenomenon, and “marginalized and marginalising condition” (Harjunen, 2009, p. 63; see also Harjunen, 2007). Paradoxically, as Harjunen (2009) proposes, denying the permanence of fatness may lead to a permanent state of liminality – the fat body is constructed as temporary and is thus in a constant state of in-between. The change is not limited to the body but may extend onto the individual’s character, which ostensibly changes when a person loses weight; the negative characteristics disappear and make way for more positive, acceptable ones. This may illustrate the influence of negative stereotypes and stigma associated with the fat body (Harjunen, 2009). The concept of liminality is not only important in connection with body size, but also an individual’s relationship status can be understood in the context of liminality (e.g., Lahad, 2012), as I explain in the following.
3.2.2 Singleness and Liminality

In the following section, I will describe singleness and draw a connection to the concept of liminality, since being single is often understood as a temporary phase. Being single may be acceptable for short amounts of time, and instead of being seen as a permanent or ‘regular’ state, it is commonly understood as a “transitory state” (Taylor, 2012, p. 21). Marriage and couplehood may be marked as an accomplishment (Koropeckyj-Cox, 2005), as a sign of maturity (Taylor, 2012), and as a valued status; singleness, then, may be constructed as the status for those who are not able to find a partner for a couple-relationship.

In the public sphere such as in the media, being single is often presented as a problem that needs to be solved, and certain media contents instruct women on how to “‘become’ and indeed ‘unbecome’ single women” (Taylor, 2012, p. 7). Single women who are trying to change their single status are ones that are accepted – this may be understood as a parallel to fat women constructed as more acceptable if they try to lose weight.

Marriage can be seen as a means of transforming the immature single individual into a mature spouse, as DePaulo (2006) argues. The term ‘unmarried’ alone, in contrast to the ‘normal’ state of married, may express the idea that being coupled or married is the ‘normal’ state in contrast to being ‘unmarried’, ‘uncoupled’, or single (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). ‘Becoming unsingle’, such as marrying, is “culturally constructed as an achievement that can be attained by just about anyone” (DePaulo & Morris, 2005, 61); my research suggests that this can be compared to the commonly expressed idea that ‘everyone can be thin’, which puts the blame of ‘failed coupling’ or ‘failed weight loss’ entirely on the individual (see also Ekman, 2018). The idea that prolonged singlehood is not a desired state of being corresponds to the idea that living in a fat body is not what people (should) want.

Furthermore, as DePaulo (2006) suggests, marriage is constructed as leading to happiness, which is a central goal in American culture. This particular type of happiness cannot be experienced as a single and is thus constructed as a consequence of being coupled/married, which is why, as DePaulo (2006) argues, most (single) Americans will try to find their soulmate in the hopes (and belief) that they will feel better and live happily ever after once they have found them. Marriage is thus constructed as the precondition for long-lasting happiness (DePaulo, 2006). My research suggests that this is visible especially in Fat Chance and Honey, You’ve Become
Chubby since finding someone to enter into marriage with (as in Fat Chance), or keeping a marriage going, as in Honey, You’ve Become Chubby, is constructed as important for a happy life.

In his studies on the psychology of love, Peele proposed that love can be an experience of transcendence and symbolise a rite of passage into adulthood (Peele, 1988); being in a couple can consequently be understood as marking the end of a successful “journey into adulthood” (DePaulo & Morris, 2005, p. 60). This may point to the single status being constructed as a temporary state instead of a permanent choice (Sandfield & Percy, 2003). Singlehood may then be framed as a “liminal, temporary state; a transitory stage on the way to couplehood”; the single woman especially is depicted as “waiting, hoping, speculating as to when the liminal period will come to an end.” (Lahad, 2012, p. 177). The concept of liminality as well as the idea of ‘waiting for the real life to begin’ can thus be applied to the status of being single, since temporality can be seen as important in the construction of singlehood (Lahad, 2012). There may be a parallel here to fat people wanting – or being supposed to – lose weight and waiting for their ‘real life’ to begin once they are thin. Singlehood can thus be understood as something that needs to be transcended in order to reach one’s final, ‘true’ form of life. This passage is commonly regarded as planned and wanted, whereas prolonged singlehood is viewed rather as an “emergent, unplanned life trajectory”, as Lahad (2012, p. 177) proposes. In article III, I explored the temporality of singleness in relation to fatness; my research exposed the parallels of both fatness and singlehood as liminal states that need to be transcended in order for the ‘real’ life to start.

In the following section, I will describe the shows that were analysed for this dissertation, and why they were especially suitable to examine in light of the research question(s).
In this section, I will first briefly elaborate on how I came to choose the shows, touching upon certain limitations I faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I will then reflect on the methodological approach and methodological choices as crucial aspects of this research. Following this, I will give an overview of the analysis of reality television, as well as the particularities of reality programming and touch upon makeover television’s relevance for this research. After describing the shows and how I analysed them, I will reflect on my positionality and ethical considerations.

In early 2020, I had already submitted my first article and had been able to visit the National Audiovisual Institute (Kansallinen audiovisuaalinen instituutti, KAVI) to watch *Jutta and the Super Diet*. I had received *Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet* on DVD from the production company, but this was not possible for *Jutta and the Super Diet* since I could not find anyone who had it on DVD. While the first part of my research was spent at the archive, shortly afterwards the pandemic hit, and the internet became my only source of data. There are several Finnish shows such as *Hurjat rakkauskilot (Crazy Love Kilos)* (2017), in which couples lose weight together; *Jutan ja Vertin sinkkudieetit (Jutta’s and Vertti’s Diet for Singles)* (2015), in which singles lose weight before going on a date, and *Akin ja Ritan rakkausdieetit (Aki’s and Rita’s Love Diet)* (2016), in which couples lose weight to gain their passion back. All of these would have been interesting to analyse; however, these shows were not accessible online, and neither was it possible to receive them on DVD. The only way to access them would have been through KAVI, but it was closed due to the pandemic. The choice of shows has thus partly been influenced not only by the research interest and research question(s) but unfortunately also by accessibility (or lack thereof). Similar challenges arise in regard to shows from the US. I concentrated on those that I was able to access – and in terms of constraints, it nevertheless offered a chance to analyse certain structures and representations since the shows are so similar. While

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2 “The National Audiovisual Institute is a central governmental agency under the Ministry of Education and Culture and was formed in January 2014. Its tasks include the preservation of films and television and radio programmes as well as research related to them, and the promotion of audiovisual culture” (KAVI, 2023).
choosing the shows from the US, however, I attempted to pick shows that had not been analysed before in contrast to shows such as *The Biggest Loser* or *Extreme Makeover* which had been researched before (e.g., Franco, 2008; Hass, 2017; Kyrölä, 2021; Zimdars, 2019).

By choosing to focus on makeover shows in general and on dieting and weight-loss shows in particular I chose to put an emphasis on issues surrounding bodies, constructions of normativity, and relationships of power in the makeover narrative, focusing on fat individuals. I attempted to pick shows that would paint as complete a picture as possible while focusing on different aspects of the research issue/questions. I therefore chose shows that focus on different subtopics, while having the imperative of weight-loss as their unifying theme. While *Jutta ja superdieetit* (*Jutta and the Super Diet*) and *Jutta ja puolen vuoden superdieetit* (*Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet*) have at its core a rather straightforward weight-loss narrative – from fat to thin, from bad to good – the complex relationship between the expert Jutta and the participants made them an especially interesting choice. *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian* and *Rakas, sinusta on tullut pullukka* (*Honey, You’ve Become Chubby*) on the other hand, put their focus on losing weight to find a partner or keep the existing relationship alive, which showed complex relationship dynamics from another point of view than the first two series. *Fat Chance*, then, was especially interesting because it incorporated normative views on not only the appropriate body but also on the appropriate (coupled) life, which, in a way, echoes the sentiments of *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian* and *Honey, You’ve Become Chubby*. The rather straightforward premise of *Fat Chance*, that in order to find love, one needs to achieve an appropriate body, made it a valuable object of analysis. I realise that my choice of material has made this dissertation into what it is now and shaped the contents of my research and the contribution to existing scholarship.

In times of on-demand services online and the overall decline of ‘regular’ broadcasting, with many people relying on the internet to watch television content, it might seem less relevant to concentrate on ‘regular’ television programmes. However, television continues to be relevant, and even if it is possible nowadays to access all kinds of content wherever and whenever we wish, ‘traditional’ broadcasting still plays an important role, especially in the background – be it in gyms, at home, or wherever the TV is just ‘on’, without anyone actively choosing to watch the programme that is on. Furthermore, the genre of shows this research deals with – weight-loss makeover shows – are available on demand on streaming sites or through
the television channels’ own streaming services, which makes them even more accessible and thus potentially influential.

In the following, I will describe the methodological approaches and intellectual influences in my research to then discuss the method of discourse analysis and why it has been useful and important in this dissertation. Finally, I will explain the process of analysis in more detail.

4.1 Methodological Approaches

My research has been influenced by various intellectual strands and draws from a range of scholarly traditions. My research is situated in gender studies and embedded in the context of feminist media studies and feminist fat studies. I thus approach the study of fat bodies, power relations, and gender from a feminist perspective, which affects the way I deal with and unravel the material. I aim to engage with engendered power relations and inequalities and highlight how they are reproduced (e.g., Raisborough, 2002).

My research is feminist in the sense that it sees the ‘normative’ framework of gendered hierarchy and gendered injustice regarding outward appearance as a status quo that it seeks to challenge. It aims to impact society in a way that will ultimately lead to more equality, reducing or disabling gendered hierarchies and oppressive power structures. Harjunen (2009, pp. 43–44) states that “the goal of feminist research has often been openly political”, and that it has a “strong emancipatory tendency”, which I see as the overarching goal of my research since it aims to critique potentially limiting structures in society (see also Lazar, 2005).

My approach to the research topic has been influenced by the theoretical framework I have used to analyse the research material. Foucault’s theories of surveillance, control, and normalisation (Foucault, 1980; 1990; 1995) have been influential in feminist thought in relation to the control that is enacted on women’s bodies, and they have been important in this research as well. Theorisations of liminality have been important in order to grasp the construction of fatness as an impermanent state; connecting these theories with Foucault’s theories has enabled a comprehensive analysis of the controlling structures that are visible in makeover shows, the control that is enacted on fat bodies and the construction of fatness as a
liminal, changeable state. The decision about which theoretical framework to use and which theories to embed the research in is likely one of the most important decisions in the research process (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002); it influences not only the approach, but, in my opinion, the outcome of the research as well – and, as Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002, p. 145) state, the “feminist research project is where the methodological action starts”. Choosing these theories has affected the outcome of the research because it has enabled me to examine and point out certain constructions (such as how control and surveillance are legitimised, as I detail in article I); this might have been different had I chosen a different theoretical framework.

In reference to Mieke Bal (2002, p. 4), I, too, see methods not as something that is “sitting in a toolbox, waiting to be applied”, but rather understand them as being part of the process; in my research, I have applied different methods that together work to approach my data. Bal states that “interdisciplinarity in the humanities… must seek its heuristic and methodological basis in concepts rather than methods” (2002, p. 5). This is especially important if research cannot be placed in one discipline alone, such as the one I have conducted here. Bal furthermore proposes that it is important to deal with issues of self-reflection, moralism, and cultural critique because this enables a different approach to the relationship between researcher, concept, and object of study. Bal proposes a different approach to the traditional “close reading, where the text is alleged to speak for itself” and “cultural studies, where, in contrast, critique is more important than the object” through a “new close reading, which is informed by both”, and which I follow in this research (Bal, 2002, p. 18); this has allowed me to examine the topic from different angles and make connections that would have otherwise been possibly missed.

In addition to the key theoretical concepts introduced above, my research has been influenced by the concept of intersectionality because it makes several different axes of discrimination visible. In the context of feminist research, the concept of intersectionality means that gender as a category should be understood and considered in the context of other sociocultural categories such as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, nationality and (dis)ability (Lykke, 2010). Intersectionality as a term was first coined by Crenshaw in the 1980s, and was further developed by Hill Collins (see Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). It is concerned with questions of identity, experiences of discrimination, and power relations concerning bodies and can be used as a theoretical and methodological tool to theorise dominance and
subordination, inclusion and exclusion, empowerment and disempowerment, and privilege or lack of privilege (Lykke, 2010). Intersectionality deals with processes of gendering, racialising and sexualising (Lykke, 2010).

Fat should not be considered in isolation but instead in the context of a culture’s notions concerning normalcy – especially the normative views on health can be understood as being “entwined with the anxieties of neoliberalism” (Rinaldi, Rice & Friedman, 2020, p. 1). Fat studies, as a field, should engage with fat(ness) in connection to body size, shape, race, abilities, genders, and sexualities, and pay attention to historical and socioeconomic structures such as colonialism and neoliberalism (Rinaldi, Rice & Friedman, 2020). Intersectional theory may help to understand how control is enacted on differently marked, sized, and shaped bodies; fat black women, for instance, may experience structures of control in a different, often more extreme, form than white women (Morris, 2019). Combining fat studies and intersectionality studies may then help to further critical scholarship on how fat is entangled with other markers of identity and to highlight power structures that shape individuals’ lives in different ways. Through an intersectional approach, it may thus be possible to understand the fat body as not simply culturally constructed or determined by biology but also understand fat’s agency and different experiences of fatness – the different realities of fat people (Rinaldi, Rice & Friedman, 2020).

Fat can be seen as a social category that is bound to other social categories and thereby affects individuals’ experiences and treatment (Harjunen, 2009). It cannot be understood without taking other categories into account, because it is experienced very differently depending on the other social categories one belongs to – being a fat woman for instance is a different experience from being a fat man, and being a fat black woman is being different from being a fat white woman (Harjunen, 2009). Fat hatred is congruent with other oppressive structures, a “part of a complex web of social power relations and hierarchies where particular social groups are marginalized, stigmatized and discredited” (Cooper, 1998, pp. 32–33). Weight loss is often presented as a means of blending in with the dominant culture for minorities (Cooper, 1998). Fat can be understood as racialised (e.g., Rinaldi, Rice & Friedman, 2020) and technologies that were designed to monitor fat may thus be connected to racist ideologies and racial discrimination. Furthermore, fat and class may intersect. Especially in the third article of this dissertation, I have analysed the interactions of fatness with gender, social class, and economic status, which reflect a complex
relationship between these categories in terms of discrimination and personal responsibility.

The theoretical context of postfeminist theories (see, e.g., Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004; 2009) and theories of control, surveillance, and normalisation (Foucault, 1980; 1990; 1995) led to my research focusing on aspects of the importance of outward appearance in different contexts and the analysis of power structures that are often hidden below the empowering message of the makeover and are thus difficult to observe in the shows unless specifically made visible by careful interrogation of the prevailing constructions. Seeing ‘beyond’ what is constructed as obvious in the shows has thus been crucial, which is why a critical Foucauldian framework and postfeminist theories were useful. However, Foucault’s theories cannot be adopted in feminist research without critical thought. Foucault’s theories and analysis have been criticised: McNay notes a disregard of the “gendered nature of disciplinary techniques on the body”, which may ultimately uphold a “gender blindness” that has always predominated in social theory” (McNay, 1992, p. 33). Furthermore, as McNay (1992, p. 47) argues, understanding individuals as docile bodies may confine women into a “position of passivity and silence”. Bartky (1990) similarly criticises Foucault’s dismissal of gender, stating that he may have overlooked structures of power and discipline that act on the female body specifically. Bartky offers a critique of Foucault’s theorisations on disciplinary structures in society; while these may be visible in institutions, they are also visible outside of institutional structures (Bartky, 1990). Understanding the potential anonymity of disciplinary power is important in analysing the subordinating forces on women’s bodies. Not taking this into account would mean to construct the production of femininity as either completely natural or totally voluntary, which may not be the case, however (Bartky, 1990). I suggest that adding a postfeminist point of view – which aims at interrogating the construction of the freedom by which women enact disciplinary practices on their own body seemingly voluntarily – may help to add to Foucault’s theories in this regard. Foucault’s theories are nevertheless important for feminist research (see Oksala, 2013) and have been useful for my own research to examine structures of surveillance and control as well as legitimisations of power. The theories have been adapted to this research through combining them with other theoretical concepts such as the aforementioned ideas of postfeminism, which points towards the potential that lies in combining different theories for the theoretical background of a study. In the end, this may serve to achieve a comprehensive analysis of the research material on different levels.
In the following, I describe the analysis of reality television and the makeover in more detail, explain discourse analysis, and describe how it has been useful for this research.

4.2 Analysing Discourse in Reality TV

Due to my research design, the research problem and interest, and the material being situated both in gender studies and media studies, deciding how to analyse the material has been complex. My analysis is inspired by feminist critical discourse analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis (e.g., Raisborough, 2013). Discourse analysis helps to analyse how subjectivity and social power relations are produced and gendered (Ussher & Perz, 2014).

Discourse analysis became an important approach in media studies from the 1990s onwards when a “turn to language” occurred across the humanities and social sciences (Gill, 2018, p. 23). Lazar (2005, p. 4) understands discourses as sites of struggle where “forces of social (re)production and contestation are played out”. Ideological assumptions are reproduced through discourses, which makes them appear as natural and as common sense, which may then obscure inequalities and uneven relations of power (Lazar, 2005). Representations and language play an important role in the construction of social life and thus society in general; as Gill (2018) argues, language is not a neutral means of describing or reflecting the world – this has been an important starting point for my analysis. I touched upon the importance of language at the beginning of subsection 2.1 in relation to the use of the term ‘fat’.

Discourse analysis as an approach takes social relations and language as the object of study, in all forms of talk and text – here, I understand television shows and their transcripts as texts. Discourse analysis is useful when theorising the relationship between social practices and discourse structures, and it offers possibilities and strategies for “close analysis of actual, contextualized uses of language” (Lazar, 2005, p. 5), which may then help to analyse broader processes and relations of power in society (Ussher & Perz, 2014). The task of feminist critical discourse analysis is to examine how power and dominance are produced in and through discourses (Lazar, 2005) in order to radically transform society towards a more equal and just one in the end.
Foucauldian discourse analysis originated within poststructuralist theories, which have been influenced by Foucault’s (1980) work. Discourses may be understood as interactions that reflect and construct power and processes instead of individual ideas (Foucault, 1980; Ussher & Perz, 2014). Foucauldian discourse analysis is not only concerned with language or statements, but furthermore the analysis of “broader cultural representations” (Ussher & Perz, 2014, p. 221), which is why it is useful for this dissertation as it adds a layer of analysis that goes beyond the mere statements and texts.

Foucauldian discourse analysis is helpful in feminist research, and thus also in this dissertation, because Foucauldian theories of power (and how it is connected to the body) have been used to analyse the oppression of women, as McNay (1992) suggests. The body is here understood as “both the principal instrument and effect of modern disciplinary power” (McNay, 1992, p. 31). Through this understanding, feminist research has analysed and shown how structures of oppression surrounding the female body have been utilised in order to maintain hierarchical structures in society. These structures of oppression may refer to ideological representations of an ideal body as well as concrete bodily control (McNay, 1992). The structures of power, however, may be obscured for the most part, since they are set in and enacted through “networks of relationships” (Lazar, 2005, p. 9; Foucault, 1995), such as everyday interactions.

Foucauldian discourse analysis has been used to examine what it means to be an “un/healthy” fat woman (Tischner & Malson, 2012). It has been important for the biomedical discourse that positions doctors and other health professionals as powerful and all-knowing and constructs health problems as abnormalities that need to be solved through the intervention of experts (Ussher & Perz, 2014). I suggest that there may be a parallel here to how the experts in makeover shows are positioned as all-knowing and powerful, and how fatness is positioned as something that should be changed, as I discuss in article I. The positioning of certain health problems as issues to be changed – in the case of this dissertation, this is relevant because fatness is positioned as a (health) problem that should be changed – serves to “maintain the boundaries of normality, leading to self-policing on the part of the individual” (Ussher & Perz, 2014, p. 221), to be able to return to a ‘normal’ state in the end. This becomes evident in my research in all of the shows that first position fatness as a problem, offer dieting as a way to remedy it, and eventually present dieting as a way to (self-)police the body to make it return to the boundaries of
normality – meaning the thin body. This is what makes this approach relevant for this analysis.

When considering the applicability of discourse analysis to the analysis of reality television and makeover shows, it should be noted that analysis can – and does – take place at different levels due to the complex interrelations between gender, representations, and the body in this context. This, then, makes it worthwhile to think through and clarify the levels of analysis. Television shows can be analysed at a number of different levels: visual, production, audience, reception, to name just a few. The level of content is what I am interested in, and in this, I also relate to the analysis of language, because I deal with the analysis of “ideas, beliefs, norms, discourses, the reproduction of culture, and their effects” (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 153). In the case of reality television, however, content is not completely clear-cut, since the participants are also likely to be members of the audience, and the content is (to a certain extent) about their ‘real’ lives (albeit at least partly scripted). Reality television thus in a sense does speak about (fat) experience, even if in quite a controlled and directed way. Furthermore, my research is interested in investigating the role that bodies play in systems of oppression and networks of power. It is therefore important to analyse the “interconnections between language, relationships and the material grounding of power” (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 154) to examine inequality and power structures.

The process of discourse analysis is not strictly defined, although Ussher and Perz (2014), for example, propose a summary of general steps to conduct discourse analysis. I have taken inspiration from their suggestion, adapting it to the specificity of my material since my research deals with images, shows, and media, instead of only texts, language, or transcripts.

Makeover shows follow strict narrative scripts and are strictly formulaic, which means each episode follows the same structure. I first watched the shows and then picked a few episodes of each show for closer analysis. Due to the formulaic structure of the episodes, these could be picked at random. I made notes while watching the shows, using the research questions as a guideline. I transcribed the chosen episodes in order to gain clarity about what exactly was said in the episode, and who said what, when and how. This produced a text, which I was then able to analyse using the guidelines of discourse analysis. I thus followed Ussher and Perz’s
(2014) guidelines since they propose to first read the transcripts, and then select relevant parts using the research questions as a basis for the selection.

I concentrated on the following questions to guide my choice of material to be analysed (for the importance of this see Keller, 2011): Can this particular part help me find answers or results in relation to my research questions? Are the parts (or do they contain) key comments, expressions, or events? During my research and selection of the material, I narrowed the research questions from a broader approach to a more detailed question. Furthermore, the nature of the first article’s research question changed on the whole; while at first, I had wished to take a more traditional media studies-oriented approach and analyse the technical and visual characteristics of the show, in the end, I decided to concentrate on what was said in order to highlight the power structures in the particular shows.

After having transcribed and assessed the material, I turned to analysing the discourses that I found in the transcripts as well as in the shows overall. It is important to examine patterns, contents, and repertoires in texts and media, and thereby highlight how they “connect back to larger social contexts and cultural shifts and sensibilities” (Gill, 2018, p. 30). I explored what the texts and discourses implied in terms of power relations, what the subject positions were, and how certain contents were constructed – focusing on the fat female body. I then turned to a discussion of the research questions, paying attention to the discursive construction of objects (such as fatness), and subject positions (the fat participants). Finally, I considered the wider implications and placed my findings in the context of broader cultural discourse. In the following subsection, I will describe the shows in more detail.

4.3 Material

The shows that were analysed for this dissertation belong to the genre of reality makeover shows. Reality television is important for questions of power structures and discipline because it may be understood as disseminating instructions on how to be “self-disciplined and self-dependent” (Zimdars, 2015, p. 220), hereby governing from a distance (Miller & Rose, 2008), as I discussed earlier. Reality television is especially interesting because it is constructed and presents itself as ‘real’, as showing real people, real stories, and real contents. It is far from it, however. Stories are
scripted, participants are carefully casted for maximum drama and entertainment, and stories are fabricated in order to reflect the producers’ wishes, aims, and opinions. Reality TV thus not only tells us about the participants and their individual lives and stories, but also incorporates society’s norms, values, meanings, and opinions on the whole. This is what makes it so relevant for sociological and gender research: while the stories are scripted, they may nevertheless reflect society’s overall opinions and can therefore be used to infer on a society’s characteristics and standards. In the following, I will describe the shows that I have analysed and touch upon their specifics that made them particularly suitable for this research.

4.3.1  Jutta and the Super Diet / Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet

The shows Jutta ja superdieetit (Jutta and the Super Diet) and Jutta ja puolen vuoden superdieetit (Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet) aired in Finland in 2012 and in 2013–2015, respectively. Both were hosted by Jutta Larm (formerly Gustafsberg), a Finnish wellness entrepreneur, personal trainer, and former bodybuilder. She participated in the Finnish reality TV show Suuri seikkailu (Great Adventure) in 2002, which made her a television personality and ostensibly granted her the expertise to help others lose weight. She was the host of the single season of the show Jutta and the Super Diet in 2012 and of three seasons of Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet in 2013–2015. The two shows feature a slightly different setup in terms of diet, schedule of the programme, and overall approach, as I will detail in the following.

Jutta and the Super Diet aired on the Finnish TV channel Liv from 11/01/2012-14/03/2012. The show’s only season consists of 10 episodes that are 40 minutes long each. The show presents Jutta’s six-month preparation for the Body Fitness World Championship. The description of the show asks “how does a famous entrepreneur and mother become a fat-free woman of steel in half a year?” and promises that “there is no lack of drama or touching stories” in the show (Ruutu, n.d.). “In the show, we see how, through Jutta’s coaching, ‘completely normal, regular’ people change the direction of their whole life without forgetting their old desires by training their body into shape” (Ruutu, n.d.). Furthermore, the voice-over in the beginning of each episode states that Jutta coaches six “regular women and men” to achieve a “tighter body and lighter life” (Jutta ja Superdieetit, episode 1, voice-over, 2012). The show also follows personal trainer Satu Tuomisto’s fitness journey as part of a challenging beauty business.
The programme thus shows Jutta’s fitness journey to the body fitness World Championship in 2011, the fitness journey of Satu Tuomisto, a Finnish model and Miss Finland 2008, as well as the weight-loss journeys of the six participants who Jutta coaches towards a ‘healthier lifestyle’ – the motto is ‘you can do it’ (Paloniemi, 2012). The show’s episodes form a whole and tell a story instead of standing alone, which is uncommon for makeover television shows nowadays. This changed in the following show, Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet. In this show, Jutta is both a participant and at the same time a coach; she and the other participants are coached by professional bodybuilder Jari ‘Bull’ Mentula, and bodybuilder Ari Kokkonen (who Jutta later married).

Overall, Jutta and the Super Diet has a very cheerful and positive tone, stating that while the ‘battle against the fat’ is never easy, in Jutta’s supportive company, it is ‘at least more fun’ (Jutta ja Superdieetit, episode 1, voice-over, 2012). The episodes focus primarily on Jutta, her daily life, and the challenges in her fitness journey, while one participant is featured more extensively in each episode. The participants’ main motivation for weight loss is stated as health, whereas for Jutta and Satu, the goal is to lose weight and build muscle in order to participate in the body fitness championship and bikini fitness competition respectively. The show’s overall narrative differs from the typical makeover narrative not only in that it forms a continuous story, but also in that it includes a reveal of the ‘after’-bodies that is stretched out over several episodes.

Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet aired on the Finnish channel Liv from 02/01/2013-18/03/2015 for three seasons that consisted of 10 episodes each. The show was marketed as a continuation to Jutta and the Super Diet but had a different approach and setup than the previous show. Each episode presents half a year in the life of a ‘regular Finnish person who battles with serious overweight’, as the voice-over in the introduction states (Jutta ja Puolen Vuoden Superdieetit, voice-over, 2013). There are eight men and 22 women, and in contrast to Jutta and the Super Diet, the episodes are stand-alone; each episode tells the story of one participant, and they are not connected.

In the beginning of each episode, the participants are introduced, they state why they are overweight and then meet Jutta, after which they set a goal for the next six months, and the programme begins. Jutta visits them a few times during the six months, but the participants are coached by other personal trainers, and the episodes
end with the reveal of the ‘new’ body. This reveal is typical for makeover shows (e.g., Weber, 2009), since it includes the weighing of the participant, a new outfit, and the praise of family and friends, and it is important for the construction of the new body as ‘better’ (e.g., Kyrölä, 2014; Hass, 2017; Zimdars, 2019). Overall, this show is closer to the regular narrative of the makeover as seen in countless other weight-loss makeover shows. It is stated the participants are stuck on the sofa because of their excess kilos (after eating too many treats,) and it is difficult for them to start the process to change. Together with her team, Jutta coaches and motivates the dieters towards a new active and sporty lifestyle and a healthy, regular diet. Every episode shows one participant’s story from the first weigh-in to the grand finale of stepping onto the scale for the last time (Ruutu, n.d.).

Jutta’s dieting shows are different from other makeover shows because in Jutta and the Super Diet, Jutta is the coach as well as the coachee, and her struggles are shown to be the same as those of the ‘normal’ participants, which breaks up the myth of the flawless expert to a certain extent. While this may be understood as creating more equality on the surface, on a closer look, it may obscure structures of power, which makes it an especially interesting show to analyse. In Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet, Jutta is the participants’ mentor, checking in on them and motivating them during difficult phases; she has now gained full authority over the participants after having lost weight herself in the previous show. The construction of Jutta as a benevolent, empathetic expert and the dynamics of Jutta’s and the participants’ relationship makes this show particularly interesting to analyse in terms of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1980; 1990; 1995), as I show in article I.

4.3.2 Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian

Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian is hosted by Khloé Kardashian, who earned her expertise by being the sister of the famous Kim Kardashian, and having lost weight herself, as she explains in the introduction to the show. Both Khloé and Kim became famous through their family’s participation in the reality television show Keeping up with the Kardashians, which aired from 2007 to 2021 with a total of 20 seasons. The family’s life is still popular with viewers: the follow-up show, The Kardashians, premiered in April 2022 and is on its third season in May 2023. Khloe’s own show Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian aired on the channel E! starting 12/01/2017; the third season premiered on 07/07/2019. Each season consists of eight episodes, which feature two participants each – mostly women and mostly white. In the
episodes, the participants want to lose weight to show their ex-partner, -lover, or -friend – or rarely, a family member – that they are worth fighting for; they aim to enact revenge by presenting a body that the ex-person is now missing out on. The dynamic is mostly female participant who wants to lose weight, and male ex-partner, -lover, or -friend.

The press release states that “Khloé will help motivate them to seek the ultimate revenge by receiving a true and total makeover. Because, as Khloé can attest, the best revenge is looking and feeling your best!” (McLennan, 2015). The participants take part in a three-month weight-loss programme and are coached by a team “of Hollywood’s most elite trainers, stylists and glam squads assembled by Khloé Kardashian” (McLennan, 2015). Khloé is part of the transformation in a very removed way: she talks to the participants in the beginning, in the middle of the programme, and at the end; she serves as a supervising figure from afar but is not particularly close to the participants. This is a contrast to the expert Jutta, who is shown as being close to the participants and struggling with the same issues.

The introduction to each episode features Khloé introducing herself, and stating that

Growing up, people called me the fat funny sister. Until one day I started working out, eating right, and putting myself first, and you know what, I’ve never felt better. Now I’m helping others transform by hooking them up with my favourite Hollywood trainers and glam experts to turn their lives around and shut down the shamers. Because a great body is the best revenge. (Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian, introduction, 2017–2019)

This statement can be seen to sum up the very essence of makeover shows – if you just work hard enough, you can turn your life around and make it better. Furthermore, this summarises the whole makeover as well as the premise of Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian: Khloé was fat, then put herself first (which reflects the common idea that being fat means having let oneself go) so that she lost weight, and now feels better. This is then also what she does with the participants: she helps them ‘transform’ to turn their lives around and shut down the shamers – this very clearly points to a bodily transformation being necessary for a transformation one’s interaction with others. In this logic, people who have transformed have earned the right to be treated better. The last sentence, arguing that a great body is the best revenge, reinforces the premise of the makeover shows: a ‘great’ (=thin, lean, and trained) body is constructed as the be-all and end-all in life, and means much more than a mere physical vessel people live in. The explicit connection between putting
in a lot of work and gaining a better life makes this show especially interesting for analysis in the context of a neoliberal society in which working hard for one’s success is crucial.

The emphasis on the importance of the body for relationships makes this show especially interesting to analyse; in the show’s logic, it is not possible to take revenge in a fat body. Without even explicitly stating it, the premise of the show suggests that one needs a normal (=thin) body to feel good, to gain good relationships, and overall have a better life. While this show is a version of a makeover show focusing on ‘just’ the diet (instead of showing participants go on dates, such as in *Fat Chance*), the emphasis on the importance of a thin body for other areas of life might indicate that simply dieting for the sake of losing weight is no longer enough. Instead, it may express the importance of the diet as a precondition or means for other achievements in different areas of life. In addition, while seemingly positive on the surface (e.g., Zimdars, 2019) due to the emphasis on the improvement of the participants’ lives after the diet, the show may nevertheless be understood as aiming at normalising people’s bodies as a precondition for the improvement of their lives, as I argue in article II, utilising Foucault’s (1995) theories of normalisation as a framework.

**4.3.3 Honey, You’ve Become Chubby**

*Rakas, sinusta on tullut pullukka* (*Honey, You’ve Become Chubby*) aired on the Finnish television channel Sub from 27/03/2013-30/11/2016. It is hosted by Jenni Levävaara, a fitness coach and Bikini Fitness Championship participant. The first season consists of 10 episodes, and the second and third of 12 episodes each. Each episode features one ‘traditional’ (i.e., monogamous, cohabitating) heterosexual couple; many of them have children, and in most cases, it is the female partner who wants to lose weight. Of the 34 couples, there are 14 men trying to lose weight vs. 20 women. The couples participate in the show and seek Jenni’s help because one partner’s weight gain is “putting the relationship in danger”, as the voiceover tells the viewer (*Rakas, sinusta on tullut pullukka*, season 1, episode 1, 2013).

Each episode starts with a voice-over stating that in this show, the excess kilos fall off, and the joy of exercising will fill their place. The introduction states quite obviously what this show is about: in a comic style, a couple is shown on a sofa, one of them eating too much and growing a belly. Superhero-style coach Jenni flies into
the living room and saves them, promising money; after the fat partner has started lifting weights, in the animated introduction, the slim partner has hearts in their eyes and falls in love again. The premise is thus quite clear: not only is losing weight the precondition for falling in love (again) and saving the relationship, but also the expert is there as a saviour to provide help to the fat individuals who could not manage it on their own.

After Jenni’s initial assessment and the first weigh-in, in which the fat partner announces their goals and Jenni explains the rules, the thin partner (usually the man) acts as the personal trainer for the fat partner (usually the woman). The fat partner tries to lose as much weight as possible during a seven-week programme. The couples can win up to 10,000 euros for a weight loss of 15 kilogrammes or more. Winning the complete sum is rare, however, since the time frame is rather short, and 15 kilogrammes is quite a lot of weight to lose.

This show was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, the premise is very clear and does not even try to obscure the importance of weight loss to save a relationship. Secondly, the show was available online, which was important due to the audio-visual archive being closed because of the pandemic, as explained above. Furthermore, the idea of having to normalise the body in order to be ‘fit’ for a relationship is strong in this show too, which is similar to the premise of Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian. Here, too, theories of normalisation (Foucault, 1995) were used as a tool to examine issues surrounding the importance of weight loss for a ‘normal’ life, and acceptable relationship, as I have detailed in article II.

4.3.4 Fat Chance

Fat Chance premiered on the American television channel TLC on 17/02/2016 and aired for one season. The first and only season consists of eight episodes that feature one participant each; there are five female and three male participants. All the female participants are heterosexual, and one of the male participants is homosexual. In the show, the participants take part in a three-month weight-loss programme that consists of exercise and dieting. They try to lose as much weight as possible during these three months (between 22 and 45 kg) in order to feel confident enough to confess their feelings to their crush at the end of the three months. Each participant is coached by one personal trainer each, one male and one female, who alternate
between episodes; there is no host, which sets this show apart from the other shows in which the hosting coach plays a (sometimes crucial) role.

The press release tells us that the participants are “on a quest to lose a significant amount of weight and overcome their lack of confidence, in order to find love” (Pena, 2016). Through the diet and subsequent weight loss, they hope to gain “the confidence that propels them to finally confess hidden feelings to a special someone they’ve never had the courage to approach” (Pena, 2016). The trainers help them to “confront the scale – and some emotional roadblocks – while they learn to love themselves again, and find the courage to put their hearts on the line for a chance at love” (Pena, 2016).

In contrast to the other shows, this show combines weight loss and dating quite explicitly by actually stating it in the text on screen and is thus not very subtle at all regarding the connection between (self-)love and thinness. The fat body is openly constructed as not being loveable, neither for others, nor for the participants themselves. While Honey, You’ve Become Chubby and Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian similarly imply the importance of a thin body for a successful relationship through their premise, Fat Chance expresses it quite openly through snippets of text on screen. After expressing that a participant lacks the courage to ask out her crush due to her high weight, the text then asks, “will a new body help her win over the man of her dreams?” (Fat Chance, 2016). This points to a connection between a thin body and love and also implies that one needs to achieve a thin body to even be ‘ready’ for a relationship (or to even confess one’s feelings to a crush). These implications made this show very worthwhile to analyse in connection with rites of passage (Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, 1960), as I have done in article III.

4.4 Researcher Positionality, Ethical Considerations, and Limitations

In the following, I reflect on ethical considerations on how to treat, ‘meet’, and represent the participants of the shows – these are relevant although this research does not interact with the participants directly or in person. My research concerns fat women, body politics, and aspects of gender in makeover – weight-loss – reality television shows, which situates my research in the field of media studies and gender studies at the same time.
Gender studies and feminist research may be treated as “marginal” (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 3), and Bal (2002) points out that in our culture, sciences are taken more seriously than humanities, and especially the field of pop culture such as television brings with it the notion of ‘trivial’ contents that do not convey ‘real’ meaning and are thus not worth critical examination at a deeper level. It has thus been challenging to defend the topic of makeover shows as academically relevant and important since they are often dismissed as ‘trivial’ (e.g., Skeggs, 2010). However, it may be exactly the assumed triviality that makes them so persuasive and potentially influential on and reflective of a culture’s norms, notions, and beliefs (e.g., Cameron, 2022). Nevertheless, the ideological implications are often dismissed in critical scholarship – this means that researching makeover shows from a feminist standpoint is often seen as rather unnecessary, similarly to feminist thought which is often seen as “intellectually inferior” (Ramazanoğlu & Holland 2002, p. 3). This is a thought that I challenge in my research: I believe that examining ‘mindless’ media should be expanded in the future to uncover and challenge unequal structures of power. This may also help to account for the agency of those who participate (in weight-loss practices in general, and weight-loss shows in particular), and highlight their struggles (that may be understandable, but possibly self-defeating) in the context of a culture that highly values thinness.

Interestingly, this research is different from other social research (making visible its connection to media studies) in that I do not actually personally interact with the people in my research; rather, I engage with the greater structures they are enmeshed in. This is intriguing for two reasons: first, I cannot situate myself in relation to them as I could, would, or should do if I interviewed them personally, for example, and second, my own situatedness does not necessarily affect the power relations in my own research in the way it would if I interacted with individual research subjects. There are thus completely different ethical considerations to be thought of than in research that interacts with individuals directly; however, I do still consider it an ethical question how to conduct research and report results on the participants in the shows.

My research deals with television shows, meaning publicly aired and thus accessible material and data, which has already been produced and cannot be influenced by me. I argue that makeover shows that focus on weight loss can be seen as inherently unethical because they are based on the humiliation and shaming of the participants. However, this makes them interesting as a research object, as it is crucial to uncover
the strategies and techniques through which humiliation and shaming are carried out, as well as the values and norms they convey. Furthermore, although weight-loss shows are part of reality television and therefore meant to portray ‘real’ life, they are nevertheless scripted, and these scripts (more or less) influence the participants’ behaviour – it is questionable whether or not they act out of their free will or in accordance with the producers’ ideas. On the other hand, without knowing what exactly was scripted, edited, or cut, and how it was done, viewers are made to take what they see at face value since they never get to see what happened outside of the final cut.

Makeover shows feature participants who have already agreed to be portrayed in the shows, and the question of informed consent is therefore supposedly clear. However, although having (supposedly) willingly signed up for the shows and public portrayal, the participants might not be able to anticipate the full consequences of their actions until they are confronted with the tasks and events in the shows and possibly the aftermath – informed consent can thus be a problem. The question remains whether or not the participants knew what they were getting themselves into by signing up for the shows, and whether or not their decision was truly voluntarily – or whether they could have been driven to this decision by the extremely desperate circumstances in their lives. Statements by participants of The Biggest Loser for instance suggest that the participants were not necessarily aware of what was going to happen and struggled with the consequences (mentally and physically) after the show had ended (see Callahan, 2016). Furthermore, participants reported extreme measures, such as secret surveillance, strict diets, and exercise. This implies a lack of consent, or at least a lack of receiving adequate information, which in any case constitutes a very questionable and problematic situation.

This research project deals with very personal accounts of people’s struggles with their bodies. While the material is publicly accessible, and the participants have agreed to be featured on the shows and lay bare their emotions, thoughts, and feelings before the television audience, another question is whether or not they agreed to or were prepared for their struggles being examined and externalised in research papers or dissertations. These questions address ethical considerations and difficulties that concern my research only to a certain extent, and that I am not able to answer, but that would provide opportunities for further research. In any case, I have tried to be mindful to understand the controlling forces as well as appeal of the makeover and be empathetic towards the participants as far as possible. The
participants are real people whose real bodies are scrutinised and made into spectacles; ethical considerations should therefore address the participants and this particularity of makeover shows.

One of the challenges I have faced as a critical researcher is that I have had to be careful not to reproduce and reinforce stereotypes or ‘victimise’ the participants in any way by taking away their role as a responsible actor through the language I use(d). I try to avoid this by explaining why I use certain terms and by being aware of how I word certain topics. I believe that as a critical researcher, I have the responsibility to contribute to a fair and equal society – this includes being careful and considerate about the language I use. In relation to the concept of fat(ness) in general, one question is how to define ‘fat’ – not only in terms of body size, but also considering negative or positive connotations. This leads to considerations about using the term ‘fat’. While I stated above that I, in line with other fat studies scholars, aim to use the word in a ‘neutral’ sense (as far as possible, but can language ever be truly neutral?), some participants might reject the use of the word in relation to their own body. Some might still use it in the beginning of their weight loss, as a negatively connotated term referring to the body they reject but might not use it in a neutral or positive sense at all. This is a consideration that cannot easily be resolved, because the participants cannot be asked directly what term they would prefer to be used to describe their bodies before or after their weight loss. Consequently, I aim to use the most neutral language in order to take the participants’ agency into account, respect it, and try to refer to them in an empathetic, respectful way, rather than reproducing the discriminating structures present in the shows and in society as a whole.

In the following subsection 5, I will present summaries of the research articles as well as an overview of the main findings of my analysis.
5 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH ARTICLES AND RESULTS

In the following, I will shortly sum up the research articles and then present the main findings of the analysis in a comprehensive form.

5.1 Control through Compassion: Legitimizations of Surveillance, Dynamics of Power, and the Role of the Expert in the Finnish Makeover TV Shows Jutta and the Super Diet and Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet

The first article, “Control through Compassion: Legitimizations of Surveillance, Dynamics of Power, and the Role of the Expert in the Finnish Makeover TV Shows Jutta ja superdieetit (Jutta and the Super Diet) and Jutta ja puolen vuoden superdieeti (Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet)”, explored the role of the expert in the Finnish makeover shows Jutta ja superdieetit (Jutta and the Super Diet) and Jutta ja puolen vuoden superdieeti (Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet). In these shows, host Jutta and her team of personal trainers coach fat Finnish participants to a ‘healthier’ lifestyle. This article deals with the research questions “What is the function of surveillance and control in the context of the makeover?” and “What is the role of the experts?”.

I examined the shows with the help of Foucault’s theories of docile bodies and disciplinary power (Foucault, 1980; 1990; 1995) and identified structures of surveillance and postfeminism (Gill, 2007; 2008; Mc Robbie, 2004). The participants are under constant surveillance, both by the cameras as well as the expert, who comes to check on them and their progress. The experts are given control over the participants’ fat bodies, and the participants regain control at the end of the makeover, when they earn back their bodily integrity through their thin body.

In a fashion that is rather uncommon for makeover shows, Jutta is constructed as being similar to the participants and facing the same struggles they do, instead of
being portrayed as an all-knowing, ‘perfect’ expert, as is the case in other makeover shows. This encourages a more equal relation on the surface but in the end serves to perpetuate the idea that everyone can achieve the perfect body – if it is possible for ‘regular’ Jutta, it is possible for the ‘regular’ participant. There is thus no excuse for their fatness and shortcomings in terms of appearance, diet, or discipline.

There is a strong element of postfeminism in this show, since the weight-loss programme is constructed as the participants’ own choice, a choice they make in order to feel more like themselves, an empowering choice on their way to their ‘true’ inner self that can emerge once they are thin. Here, however, choice is not only empowering, but rather restricting and constraining because the participants are working towards an ‘acceptable’ body and the ‘right’ choices. They are thus giving up freedom to become free, which corresponds to the idea of giving up power to become empowered (Weber, 2009). Surveillance and control are legitimised as means to make individuals lose weight – and as precondition for freedom. All is fair to achieve the ‘perfect’ body, and by extension, the life that the participants want; through this, they also unveil their true self that had been hidden underneath the fat.

5.2 Fat Bodies, Intimate Relationships and the Self in Finnish and American Weight-Loss TV Shows

The article “Fat Bodies, Intimate Relationships and the Self in Finnish and American Weight-Loss TV Shows” deals with the relationship-focused makeover shows Rakas, sinusta on tullut pullukka (Honey, You've Become Chubby) from Finland, and Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian from the US. In both shows, the participants try to lose weight in order to keep, or gain back, a romantic relationship, either with a current or ex-partner. In this article, I investigated the research question “In what ways are the female body and its size portrayed as important for love?”, also asking what kinds of (intimate) relationships are presented as the goal. Relationship and body norms, gender, and the self are connected in these shows that are situated between weight-loss shows and relationship advice shows. I pay special attention to the shows’ constructions of a ‘normal’ body, success in relationships, and the achievement of a valid self.

Foucault’s (1995) concept of normalisation plays a role in the analysis of the research questions due to the shows’ way of constructing a woman’s appropriate body, the
way they emphasise the body’s importance for a ‘successful’ relationship, and the importance that is placed on a relationship for situating the self. The concept of normalisation (Foucault, 1995) constitutes a framework for analysing how bodies, and lives, are shaped according to a norm. Normalisation is a powerful tool to categorise bodies and desires (Haber, 1996), and to divide them into normal/abnormal or good/bad, and shaping of the bodies that are considered abnormal/bad is the premise of makeover shows.

Both shows reinforce, on the one hand, the importance of a romantic relationship, which brings with it a certain status and place in society, and on the other hand the importance of losing weight to achieve these privileges. The premise of the shows reinforces the myth and dream of transformation and upwards mobility, which are values characteristic of US society.

As I suggested in this article, the diet and the imperative of transformation constitute a tool of normalisation – not only normalisation of the body (through weight loss), but also of relationships. Through this, by extension, the individual can achieve an ‘appropriate’ position in society and ultimately a valuable and valid self. In the end, what is reinforced is that a thin body is necessary to achieve an appropriate, fulfilling life.

5.3 ‘When I lose the weight, we’ll go on a date’ – Fatness, Singleness and Liminality in Fat Chance

The article “When I lose the weight, we’ll go on a date – Fatness, Singleness and Liminality in Fat Chance” deals with the makeover show Fat Chance from the US. In this show, five female and three male participants go on a weight-loss journey, trying to lose as much weight as possible in order to gain the confidence to confess their feelings to a crush. The article explores the connection between fatness and singlehood as well as their joint articulations as temporary, undesirable states. I asked: “How can dieting, fatness, and singlehood be understood through the concept of liminality”, and “How are fatness and singlehood connected in terms of impermanence?”. I also investigated which themes emerged in connection with fatness, thinness, love, and relationships.
Makeover shows are based on the construction of fat bodies as impermanent, as existing in a liminal state of transformation; similarly, singleness is portrayed as a liminal state before the permanent state of being coupled. Therefore, I approached the show and the research question in the theoretical context of rites of passage, specifically liminality, as theorised by anthropologists Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969). In order to gain insights into the connection to fatness, I drew upon theories of fatness and weight loss in connection with liminality (e.g., LeBesco, 2004; Hass, 2018), as well as the concepts of liminal fat (Harjunen, 2007; 2009) and singlehood as a liminal state (Lahad, 2012).

In *Fat Chance*, all three stages of a rite of passage – separation, transition, and incorporation (Van Gennep, 1960) – become visible. I argue that the diet is constructed as a rite of passage, a rite of transition; a liminal rite that enables the transition from one state to another. It is presented as the way not only to a thin body but furthermore as a precondition for other ‘milestones’ in life, such as marriage or having children. The premise of the show is clear: the diet is a necessary rite in the pursuit of love, marriage, and, by extension, a happy and fulfilling life.

In the following, I will sum up the main findings of the articles in a table, which is presented on the next page.
## 5.4 Findings of the Articles

Table 1. Overview of Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Shows</th>
<th>Research Question(s)</th>
<th>Main Finding(s)</th>
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<td>Control through Compassion: Legitimizations of Surveillance, Dynamics of Power, and the Role of the Expert in the Finnish Makeover TV Shows Jutta and the Super Diet and Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet</td>
<td>Jutta and the Super Diet (Finland)</td>
<td>What is the function of surveillance and control in the context of the makeover?</td>
<td>Surveillance and control are legitimised through the construction of the fat body as unacceptable, fatness as a self-inflicted 'problem', and the construction of the experts as all-knowing and benevolent.</td>
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<td>Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet (Finland)</td>
<td>What is the role of the experts?</td>
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<td>Fat Bodies, Intimate Relationships and the Self in Finnish and American Weight-Loss TV Shows</td>
<td>Honey, You've Become Chubby (Finland)</td>
<td>In what ways are the female body and its size portrayed as important for love?</td>
<td>Long-term couple relationships are presented as the goal, which can only be achieved by achieving a thin body first. Both the thin body and a romantic relationship are constructed as the norm, which can be achieved through subjecting the body to the normalising practice of the diet.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Revenge Body with Khloe Kardashian (US)</td>
<td>What kinds of relationships are presented as the goal?</td>
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<tr>
<td>'When I lose the weight, we'll go on a date’ – Fatness, Singleness and Liminality in Fat Chance</td>
<td>Fat Chance (US)</td>
<td>How can dieting, fatness, and singlehood be understood through the concept of liminality?</td>
<td>The diet is constructed as a rite of passage that enables the transition from fat to thin. It is the precondition not only for a thin body, but for other normative milestones in life, such as marriage and having children. It is necessary in order to achieve an acceptable life.</td>
</tr>
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6 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

In the following, I will discuss the results of the research. In the analysis of the shows, three major themes concerning the fat body emerged. The first theme concerns structures of surveillance and control, which are enacted on the fat body and are strongly connected to the figure of the expert; the second theme is about the normalisation of fat bodies, which draws a connection between relationship normativity and body normativity; and the third one concerns the construction of the diet as a rite/'right' of passage, which shows the liminal component of fat(ness) that is expressed in parallel with singleness as liminal. The first article and research question shed light on the topic of power and surveillance; the second article and research question concern the topic of fat bodies, love, and normalisation, and the third article and research question deal with fat bodies and singleness in the context of liminality. While each article deals with one specific research question, they all examined similar issues from different angles and with the help of different theories.

In the following, I will elaborate on these issues in the context of the shows and finally draw a comparison between Finland and the United States in this context, reflecting on the main research question.

6.1 Structures of Power and Surveillance – Controlling the Fat Body

I suggest that in Jutta and the Super Diet and Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet, surveillance and control are legitimised as appropriate methods for achieving bodily change in several ways. Firstly, one of the reasonings is that the participants subordinated themselves willingly – they chose to participate in the show, and they surrendered their then-fat body to the experts. Throughout the reveal of the show, when they watch footage of themselves before the weight loss, it becomes clear that their ‘before’ body was neither likeable nor acceptable – not even (or especially not) for themselves. I argue that this serves as a legitimisation for the extreme treatments they are then subjected to – the state (size) of their body was reason enough for the extreme treatment, which constructs the fat body as not being deserving of good
treatment. The surveillance of the participants – through home cameras, the experts, and coaches in the gym – is legitimated through the implication that the participants cannot take care of themselves – otherwise, they would not even have become fat in the first place. Their inability to ‘control themselves’ is highlighted, which serves as enough reason for the control and surveillance the experts exercise. The experts reinforce unequal power structures by having control over the participants, deciding what they get to eat and when, and deciding on their exercise and gym schedules. In this particular show, however, the main expert Jutta is presented as a down-to-earth, ‘regular’ person who struggles with problems similar to those of the participants. Instead of decreasing the pressure, this increases and reinforces it, because if it is possible for ‘regular’ Jutta to achieve a perfect body, it should be possible for the ‘regular’ participants. This may further reinforce the idea that fat people should just try harder, and that weight loss is possible for anyone if one just sets their mind to it.

In *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian*, control is similarly enacted by the coaches, who also embody the ‘perfect’ individual: slim, fit, and controlled. I suggest that here, too, control is associated with wanting the best for the participant, which legitimises it, and makes visible what Brenda Weber calls “affective domination” (Weber, 2009, p. 30): the coaches and experts are constructed as acting in the participant’s best interest, which legitimises control and surveillance and at the same time obscures the power dynamics. In this show, too, the participants submit themselves willingly to the control and surveillance; they take part in their own submission in order to become empowered (through their new body) – what Weber calls “salvation through submission” (Weber, 2009, pp. 2, 6).

In *Honey, You’ve Become Chubby*, control and surveillance are enacted in even closer proximity to the participants since they submit themselves to their romantic partner’s control; the thin partner acts as the participant’s ‘accountability partner’. The expert and host Jenni is rather removed from the participants, she delegates the act and power of coaching to the thin partner, which creates an imbalance in terms of power relationships and creates hierarchies that are based on body weight and size. Seeing as romantic partners are or should be (at least, or especially, in Finland), seen as equal, this is an interesting example for power structures that are interwoven in a lateral way instead of being established from the top down as they do in *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian* since there, expert Khloé is removed from the participants and ‘at a different level’.
Fat Chance offers yet another source of control: the participants’ families. In a scene at the beginning, the participants state their intentions of losing weight in front of family and friends; also here, structures of power are embedded in the participants’ close relationships. Similarly to the thin romantic partner in Honey, You’ve Become Chubby, the family acts as a source of accountability, surveillance, and control throughout the shows. Furthermore, the participants’ act of confessing their wrongdoings and their will to change at the very beginning is typical for makeover shows – it is only through the confession and willingness to change that the fat participants have a chance at redemption. In Fat Chance, too, there are coaches that are highly involved in the participants’ ‘weight loss journey’, furthermore reinforcing the importance of an expert figure. What is different in this show, though, is that there is no host, the show is completely self-directed in a sense that there is no figure of authority (such as Jutta (and her team), Jenni, or Khloé). This shifts the responsibility onto the participants alone to an even greater extent, which I suggest might tell us about the internalisation of power structures and discipline and the individualistic aspects in US society.

It becomes apparent, thus, that control constitutes a central aspect of makeover shows and is constructed as not only important, but acceptable in the process of losing weight. It is strongly implied that fat people cannot take care of themselves and need a higher instance to take control over their lives; only when they are thin, they are seen as being able to steer themselves. Interestingly, power and influence come from different sources, which obscures them to a certain extent. Furthermore, since it often comes from close people, it is constructed as being in the participant’s best interest, which further obscures the humiliation, shame, and surveillance the participants are subjected to during the diet – since it is constructed as being for their own benefit.

In the context of relations of power and control, thinking about the (absence of) resistance is interesting. In Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet, one participant comes to mind who did not follow Jutta’s strict rules, ‘cheating’ on the diet and not completing her exercise routine. In consequence, Jutta, putting on her police sirens, as the show’s voice-over states, visits the participant at home, bringing a scale. This suggests negative consequences and even closer surveillance when deviating from the rules, and in the end, the participant does join the diet and exercise plan once again. In the other shows, resistance or failure is rather rare; this might point towards an emphasis on the construction of the participants as participating in the show and programme.
voluntarily – and thus not wanting to drop out – and in addition might express that neither failure, nor resistance are an option in the narrative of the makeover. It is important, however, to remember that since the shows are highly scripted, it is possible that the ‘failed’ diets were not aired, in order to preserve the positive, optimistic narrative of a happy ending.

6.2 Fat Bodies and Love – Normalising Bodies and Relationships

In Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian and Honey, You’ve Become Chubby, I concentrated on the female body, because, for one, it is especially women who are under pressure to adhere to certain standards of thinness (e.g., Gailey, 2023) and secondly, gender and fatness are intertwined, as mentioned earlier. As discussed previously, romantic relationships, especially heterosexual ones, are often constructed as the natural way to find fulfilment, which constructs coupledom as the ‘normal’ way of life. Being in a couple is presented as essential to especially women’s experience of selfhood and as important for finding their place in society. In both shows, people work on their bodies in order to be able to keep (Honey, You’ve Become Chubby) or gain back (Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian) a relationship.

My research suggests that Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian and Honey, You’ve Become Chubby construct romantic relationships as the central part of an individual’s life; without a partner, one would not be complete. This is reinforced through emphasising how important it is to keep the existing relationship, but also in terms of finding a new partner after one relationship has ended – otherwise, something would be lacking. Finding a relationship is also equated with success; if one were not to find a new relationship, one would not have succeeded in neither weight loss nor life. Furthermore, marriage is presented as the final goal. In both shows, the thin body is portrayed as extremely important for love. The thin body is constructed as a precondition for sexual desires – desiring as well as being desired – and fat bodies are not seen as sexual, which is reinforced by the female participants stating how unsexy they feel in their fat bodies; this is especially prominent in Honey, You’ve Become Chubby. Being thin, thus, is constructed as the precondition for (self)love. There are several things to consider here that contrast with these implications. For one, Honey, You’ve Become Chubby in particular does grant fat people the possibility to be in a relationship – the fat body thus is not constructed as a complete obstacle to love. The premise of the show, evident in the title, however, implies that the fat partner
was thin once – they became ‘chubby’ during the relationship – which may point towards the idea that it is indeed important to be thin, and the relationships might not have happened had the partner been ‘chubby’ all along. Secondly, while I discuss the importance of a thin body especially for women, it is interestingly not the male partners who comment on the undesirability of the female partner’s fat body – but the women themselves. This could potentially point to highly internalised stereotypical body norms and beliefs about fat, which affect the participants’ feelings about themselves, their own bodies and desirability, and in consequence their relationship.

The show *Honey, You’ve Become Chubby* follows a traditional approach to the makeover format, seeing as it features one couple per episode. It does add the feature of the prize money, which serves as an additional motivator for the weight loss, and also points out that weight loss can lead to not only personal happiness, but furthermore wealth. There may be a connection here to the idea of body size and class being connected to each other; a thin body may signify the possibility of upwards mobility. The show does not talk about this but proposes the approach of ‘healthy’ dieting, with the participants stating that they do it for health and for the health of their relationship, not necessarily for looks or for the potential prize.

Although none of the shows is subtle in its implications, *Fat Chance* does not make a secret out of the importance of thinness at all; it very obviously connects being thin with having a chance at love. The whole premise of the show – losing weight in order to be able to confess feelings to a crush – makes it clear that in a fat body, the participants would not have any chance to be desirable or to be even considered as potential partners. In this show, a very traditional progression of relationships is presented, from confessing the crush, to becoming a couple. Similarly to the other shows, marriage (and potentially having children) is presented as the ultimate goal of any relationship. The potential of marriage is discussed in *Honey, You’ve Become Chubby*, too, and also here a connection is made between losing weight and being ‘fit’ for marriage, with marriage being the end goal. This implies that without these milestones, the relationship would have failed, and in order to achieve these, it is necessary to be thin.

Traditional romantic relationships are presented as the ‘normal’ way of living as an adult in the shows, and as discussed earlier, a thin body is presented as the precondition for this. Through dieting and weight loss, thus, a ‘normal’, ‘normative’
life can be achieved. I thus suggest that through the normalising techniques of dieting, the body is shaped in order to fit not only normative ideas about body size, but also to be ready for an acceptable lifestyle as a coupled individual. These shows thus make normalising techniques visible that not only affect the body, but also romantic relationships. The methods employed in the shows and their implications can thus be understood as a tool to normalise individuals’ bodies (and lives) according to Foucault’s understanding of normalisation, normative practices, and procedures to discipline the body (Foucault, 1980; 1995).

In *Jutta and the Super Diet* and *Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet* the normalising techniques of dieting and weight loss are employed, in order to make the body fit into society – quite literally. Interestingly, while love and relationships are not explicitly the focus in these shows, there is an important relationship that runs through all of the shows: the relationship between coach and host Jutta and the participants, which can be seen as the key relationship in these shows. It is interesting that although the shows do not explicitly mention relationships, the makeover and weight loss do affect the relationship between Jutta and the participants. One of the participants in *Jutta and the Super Diet* appears as a coach in *Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet*, which may point towards a transition to the next level of the relationship: while Jutta was her superior in the previous show, after having lost weight and gained experience in the body building scene, the participant enters a new stage of relationship with Jutta, and she is now Jutta’s equal as a coach.

My research thus suggests that weight loss is constructed as crucial for all kinds of relationships – romantic, platonic, expert-participant – in all of the shows. In the case of romantic relationships, it is possibly not simply about relationships, however, but a successful ‘coupling’ may carry additional meanings and implications, as I will discuss in the following.

### 6.3 Fatness, Singlehood, and Liminality – The Diet as a ‘Right’ of Passage

In accordance with the typical makeover narrative, fat is presented as non-permanent, and fatness is constructed as a changeable state in all of the shows; the malleability of the body is the premise of makeover shows, after all. However, the shows imply not just the possibility, but rather the necessity to change the body in
order to gain a happier life. The liminality of fat is thus omnipresent in all of the analysed shows, which points towards the construction of fat(ness) as a state of non-permanence, a phase that has to and will be left behind at some point (e.g., LeBesco, 2004; Harjunen, 2009; 2017; Weber, 2009). Even though several participants in all of the shows state that they have always been fat, or have always had a non-normative body, they still consider their ‘real’ body size to be thin, which is a common sentiment among fat women in particular (see Gailey & Harjunen, 2019).

The participants in *Fat Chance* become symbolic passengers on the transitional journey from one state (fat/single) to the other (thin/coupled). In their transitional state, they are free from characteristics of both body and status. Dieting and weight loss are constructed as a precondition for, as well as a journey towards, the confession and confrontation. Weight loss is furthermore associated with an improvement of social class and status, as implied by one of the participant’s improvements in employment and living circumstances after the weight loss. This echoes the narrative of the American Dream: it is possible to improve one’s life through hard work, and through an improvement of the body. In this show, then, dieting does not only serve to change the body, but also potentially an individual’s position in society.

My research suggests that in both *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian* and *Fat Chance*, dieting, fatness, and singlehood are all constructed and understood as liminal states, states that can never be permanent, and in the case of dieting, they need to be transcended in order to reach the ‘next’ stage and state. In *Fat Chance*, fatness and singleness are jointly articulated in a way that proposes that both are liminal states that have to be left behind at the same time in order for the real life to start. While the other shows touch upon this through their construction of the fat body in need of change in order to be fit for a relationship, in those shows, the focus lies more on the transformation of the fat body in the context of an already existing relationship. The premise of *Fat Chance* focuses on the time and process before a relationship and makes the connection very clear: the participants are too fat to be able to even confess their feelings to their crush; in order to even have a chance at a relationship, they must lose weight. Both fatness and singlehood are constructed as unwanted, inappropriate ways of living, and may thus not be understood as ‘the end’ goal, or the permanent state, but are rather constructed as something that the participants should (want to) get out of. Fatness and singlehood are thus similar in terms of unwantedness and the need to change.
In *Fat Chance*, the fat dieting body is constructed as a liminal body in the transitory state before earning the right to membership in the thin-and-couple club. My analysis suggests that while all of the shows have the non-permanence of fat(ness) as one of their key implications – it is, in the end, embedded in the premise of a weight-loss show itself – in *Fat Chance*, dieting and weight loss are furthermore constructed as connected to a progression in life that is not as visible in the other shows. My research implies that here, the diet can be understood as a rite of passage that enables the individual’s transition from one state to the other. It is constructed as a process on the way to a thin body, which, in turn, is the precondition for milestones such as marriage or children. Weight loss, then, is constructed as the proof of the successful completion of the rite of passage – the passage between fat and thin, and single and coupled. Furthermore, it is constructed as the precondition for a ‘real’ and acceptable self.

Returning to the potential of ‘failure’, neither *Fat Chance* nor *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian* address this properly. Even if the participants do not end up in a relationship during the show, there is a promise of a thin, happy, coupled future which is expressed in the participants’ discussions of their future and potential for future relationships. The option of not having a relationship and being happy alone is not really discussed – which makes sense in a narrative of a happily-ever-after that rests on being coupled.

### 6.4 Fatness, Structures of Power and Society – Finland and the US

I set out to explore the topic in light of the main research question “How are the representations of fat female bodies in makeover TV shows in Finland and the US connected to societal discourses of gender, power, and the body?” which I will elaborate upon in the following.

As discussed earlier, Finland and the US are vastly different in terms of population, size, and demographics. However, makeover shows from both countries feature the same topics and themes, albeit in slightly different ways, as this research suggests. In terms of the importance of a thin body for an acceptable life, the importance of relationships and the overall imperative of thinness, the results point towards the shows not differing too much from each other, regardless of the country or societal
background. Nevertheless, differences in the construction and execution of power and control became visible, which I will detail in the following.

It is interesting to examine the portrayals of teamwork and hierarchies. The hierarchies in the Finnish shows seem very low, with the expert Jutta being in close contact to the participants, being ‘one of the group’, whereas Khloé comes to visit the participants once or twice during their weight-loss journey but remains at a distance otherwise. Jutta’s down-to-earth character is emphasised by her having lunch with the participants and by framing her as ‘one of them’; this, on the other hand, may work to obscure the hierarchies that nevertheless clearly exist.

My research suggests that in the shows, the idea of teamwork differs. In the US shows, the participants are commonly framed as independent: in Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian, the participants go through their weight loss alone, as they do in Fat Chance. In Honey, You've Become Chubby, in contrast, it is a joint effort by the partners in the couple. This may partly be a result of the premise, concept, and format of the shows, but it may also suggest a difference in societal ideas. In the first season of Jutta and the Super Diet, the diet is presented as teamwork, as a team effort to slim down, and the team of participants as well as the team of coaches are constructed as being there to ‘help’ the participants. From the second season onwards, however, this changed, and the participants and the expert(s) are separated. This might point to a general shift in society, seeing as the newer seasons were aired at the same time as a shift towards neoliberalism was happening also in Finland, as has been discussed by scholars (e.g., Harjunen, 2017; Brunila & Ylöstalo, 2020). What we see here may suggest a growing similarity in ideas concerning individuality and teamwork in the US and Finland.

The teamwork in Honey, You've Become Chubby, however, may not necessarily be teamwork between equal teammates, because it is in the end one of the partners who keeps the other one in check. This can be seen as an example of a not top-down but rather lateral flow of power and in extension surveillance and control. My research suggests that this is visible also in Fat Chance, where the participants confess to their friends, after which the participants are shown to have a certain accountability towards them, tell them how the diet is working, and how their weight loss is coming along. In the shows, power might thus work from the top-down – mostly in the US shows – as well as laterally. The lateral structure of power once again may obscure power structures and make it harder to criticise and resist them. It is very interesting
that the lateral structure of power is widespread in the shows from Finland. It is not only the expert Jutta, who is coaching from within the group, but also in *Honey, You've Become Chubby*, expert Jenni delegates the power of coaching to the fat individual’s partner. This could tell us something about how Finnish society works in regard to power, hierarchies, and the division and delegation of power – however, it is important to remember that the shows are scripted and may thus reflect the producer’s ideas in addition to potentially reflecting certain societal aspects.

The whole premise of *Honey, You've Become Chubby* possibly implies that one partner is responsible for the happiness of the other one – and it is notably mostly the woman. This suggests a stereotypically gendered point of view since women are commonly expected to provide the bulk of emotional labour in relationships. Furthermore, the idea that a woman should lose weight to keep her partner and save the relationship might imply that a woman’s role is to be desirable, and her worth is based on being sexy and appealing to men.

In his studies about leadership in different countries, Lewis (2006) states that visible achievement is the most important reason to grant social status to individuals in the United States. Visible achievement could mean physical changes, too, and in this case, visible achievements in terms of weight loss grant the participants better treatment, chances at relationships and potentially economic success, as can be seen in the shows from the US.

While teamwork is important in the US, people’s first interest is their own success, as Lewis suggests. In contrast, Finnish leaders, according to Lewis (2006, p. 118) “exercise control from a position just outside and above the ring of middle managers”; they furthermore “do not hesitate to stand shoulder to shoulder with staff and help out in crises”. This is very interesting in regard to the relationship between the coaches and participants in Jutta and the Super Diet and *Jutta and the Half Year Super Diet*. As discussed earlier, the expert Jutta leads from within the group in the first show (being part of the ‘staff’ but one of the participants at the same time), and in the next season, then, delegates leadership to the group of ‘middle managers’, so to speak (the other coaches). Despite not being one of the participants anymore, she is nevertheless not as out of the picture as is case with *Khloé in Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian*. This may potentially reflect leadership structures in Finland, as Lewis (2006) has identified them. In the shows from the US, the coaches have a definite position of authority, but the participants’ weight loss is a rather
individual, lonely procedure. This might reflect more communal structures in Finland, which, however, do not make the imperative of transformation and strict structures of surveillance and control less oppressive – but potentially more pervasive and obscure.

As discussed before, the shows are embedded in the societal context of neoliberalism, which emphasises individuals’ responsibility for themselves and their (success in) life (e.g., Brunila & Ylöstalo, 2020). In the logic of the makeover, everyone has the potential to be thin, and thus the potential to be happy. If individuals choose to remain fat, (and thus choose to remain unhappy), it may be constructed as being their own fault. It was interesting to examine the concept of ‘near success’ or trying in this context. In the Finnish shows, trying one’s best seemed to be enough (even if the participants did not lose enough weight, the hard work and the attempt was honoured), whereas the shows from the US implied more strictly that it is mostly the result that counts. In any case, the notions in the shows strongly point towards the idea of individual responsibility being a crucial factor in weight loss and the improvement of one’s life, which may point towards a neoliberal orientation.

While scholars (e.g., Harjunen, 2009; Puhakka, 2023) have pointed out that being fat is seen negatively in Finnish society and media, Åberg (2020) has suggested that outward appearance may have traditionally played a smaller role in Finnish society (Åberg, 2020), and “ordinariness – or not standing out from the crowd and ‘not making a scene’ – can be considered the main normative goal of attending to one’s appearance” (Autio, 2006; Sarpila, 2013; Wilska, 2002 in Åberg, 2020, p. 38). A reflection of this may be reflected in the reveal part of the shows analysed for this dissertation: the female participants in the Finnish shows are much less made over, wearing less makeup and more casual clothes than their US counterparts who appear in full makeup, high heels, and dresses. This may reflect ‘not wanting to stand out of the crowd’ as well as not attracting too much attention, which could possibly point towards these preferences in Finnish society. Through the influence of US culture on Finnish culture (for example through television, as discussed earlier) this might change in the future, however.

In conclusion, my research suggests that shows from both countries express the same, rather negative, sentiments about fat and construct fatness as a liminal state, valuing the thin body and proposing weight loss to achieve this. Furthermore, norms
and standards regarding the female body, as well as similar notions about relationships, appropriate lifestyles, and self-responsibility are visible. While neoliberal sentiments become apparent in all shows from both countries, the notion of self-responsibility seems to differ – however, even in the more teamwork-oriented shows from Finland, being responsible for yourself, your body, and life, appears to be central.

In this section, I have described and discussed the main results of the analysis and pointed out similarities and differences between the shows as well as discussed how they may be related to structures of power, norms, and values in the respective society. In the following, I will touch upon the implications of the study and reflect on possibilities for further research.
This summary chapter provided an overview of the research problems, cultural context, theoretical background, and main findings of my research. In this conclusion, I draw the chapter to a close, briefly summarising the main findings and reflecting on potentially interesting future research.

My research has shown that makeover shows in both countries share certain similarities, more so than they are different from each other. This has expanded existing knowledge in terms of global research and comparison of makeover television shows. This dissertation set out to shed light on societal issues concerning the fat female body. Rather than providing an overview of the entirety of makeover shows, it facilitated a close look at the research problem through selected shows. Weight-loss makeover shows from Finland have not been extensively studied before, and there has been even less research on the contents of makeover shows from a cross-cultural perspective, analysing similarities and differences between the show’s representations. This dissertation therefore contributes to and strengthens previous research due to its cross-cultural nature. Furthermore, research on reality television and makeover shows has been a rather US-centred field until now, which I aimed to change with this dissertation. My research adds new knowledge about structures of control and surveillance in makeover shows, and how these are enacted on the fat body in order to change and normalise it. Furthermore, it expands on existing research by analysing how fat is constructed as an impermanent state, and how liminality works in connection to both fatness and singleness. This research suggests that these issues are intertwined, and that the oppression of fat bodies may become evident through complex constructions and concern different areas in life.

As discussed earlier, all of the shows presented the enacting of control over the fat body, albeit executed through different relationships of power, articulated in different ways, and related to different issues. This research suggests, then, that in the end, controlling the fat female body and aiming at normalising it remains an important feature of dieting shows. It appears to be, however, not only about the
body, but controlling the body may aim at enacting control over other aspects of life as well. The makeover’s imperative of needing to change your body in order to be acceptable and its emphasis on personal responsibility imply neoliberal sentiments in the shows – even if they are not explicitly mentioned. Interestingly, the imperative of change and ‘fitting in’ appears to extend beyond the body to even more areas of life such as relationships, potentially pointing towards an even greater need to conform to standards in order to live an acceptable life and be an acceptable member of society.

The notion of the fat female participants’ voluntary participation and losing weight for themselves may point towards postfeminist ideas that are expressed through the shows. The implied voluntariness of submission may also serve to legitimise the extreme treatment the participants are subjected to – since they chose it themselves – which may further obscure power structures. The premise of some of the shows – having a chance at love or wanting to lose weight to impress someone – imply that the transformations are not necessarily for oneself but for someone else. This is not gendered, however, but true for all the participants in these shows, male and female, which may indicate the general importance of a thin body as well as a universal importance of self-responsibility and working hard to improve yourself and your life. The disregard for potentially limiting social structures in society furthermore emphasises individual failure and personal responsibility if one does not achieve the ideal body. Interestingly, this was the case regardless of show or country.

The similarities in the shows’ structures and contents regardless of the country of origin point to rather uniform, strict norms regarding the ideal body. Furthermore, structures aimed at controlling fat individuals by controlling their bodies appear to exist in both countries. Control is exercised through the processes of normalisation; on the one hand by the experts, but on the other hand by an invisible power that penetrates the whole fabric of society, which becomes evident through careful interrogation of the shows. The shows point towards thinness as an important precondition for an appropriate life and self, in line with common beliefs. There are alternatives to these sentiments as well as interesting possibilities for further research on this topic, as I will detail in the following.
7.1 Reflections on Further Research

In this dissertation, I have examined the topic in certain theoretical and societal contexts. While I focused on the representation of the female participants and the representations of female experiences of fatness, it would certainly be interesting to conduct research that includes transgender and non-binary participants as well. While there were non-heterosexual participants in the shows, issues around queerness or gender identities were not especially mentioned. This might be seen as an attempt at diversity – including queer participants – but it might also point towards the requirement for a thin body being rather universal and expected of everyone. This would potentially be interesting to research further in the future in order to further understand the connections between gender and sexual identities and fat: for example, how fat is gendered or how fat may work to add on to or take away from gender.

I have briefly touched upon the importance of teamwork in the Finnish shows; this would certainly be an interesting topic to explore in light of the communal values on the one hand, but also in the context of a potential shift towards more individualistic neoliberal values in Finnish society that scholars have observed in the recent past (e.g., Brunila & Ylöstalo, 2020). This could be analysed by looking at for example Revenge Body with Martina Aitolehti, which is a relatively new show in Finland and aims to help participants take revenge on people who have done them wrong – the precondition, for this, is weight loss. This particular show was released when I had already written the articles and was in the process of finalising the dissertation, which is why it is not included in this dissertation but it would certainly be interesting for future research in this context.

While this research has focused on the contents of the shows, it could be interesting to expand the research onto the audience and production as well. Skeggs and Wood (2012) have examined this in their 2012 book Reacting to Reality Television, and Laura Grindstaff has looked at talk shows in The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows (2002); however, further research could be conducted specifically with a cultural comparison in mind, focusing on weight-loss shows’ audiences. Questions about why makeover shows are still so popular, and how the context of the production – the cultural and societal context, for instance – affects the contents, could be taken into consideration in further research. Furthermore, it would certainly be interesting to include shows that portray fat people in other contexts than a
makeover (such as Hot & Heavy, a show from the US which focuses on fat women dating thin men, without any makeover taking place; see Zimdars, 2019) in order to explore whether the same topics emerge in these shows. This could potentially shed more light on the idea of fat(ness) as a liminal state, and understand how it is constructed in a non-makeover narrative and context.

Social media may contribute to body norms and standards (e.g., Morris, 2019), and the idea of body positivity is strong on social media in particular. Bodies may even be allowed to be more ‘diverse’ nowadays, which is expressed in several diversity campaigns in the media, and the current season of Finland’s Next Top Model features ‘diverse’ bodies that do not necessarily fit the beauty and body standards. The sentiment that we might be moving on to a ‘post-body-negativity’ society is potentially valid but may not necessarily be completely true since there are still standards that must be adhered to – at the very least then, the idea that you must be positive towards your own body. This may be the case regardless of one’s body shape; even if the body does not conform to certain beauty standards, one should still feel good about it, which may be difficult, if not impossible, in a climate in which non-normative bodies are rarely praised (see, e.g., Hynnä-Granberg, 2022a; 2022b). There may be parallels here to the common idea that we think that we have reached a point of freedom in terms of feminism, that women are equal, and any beauty practices are purely voluntary (e.g., Gill, 2007; Budgeon, 2015). In the end, these requirements may point towards individuals being seen as responsible not only for their bodies but also for how they feel about themselves and their lives.

I suggest that it would be important to continue research on fat and body positivity in the media (social media as well as television) in a Finnish context in order to expand the field of fat studies and facilitate a more nuanced discussion (e.g., Hynnä-Granberg, 2022a; 2022b; Puhakka, 2023). Especially in Finland, the idea of ‘body peace’ is gaining traction, meaning the idea that everyone should be left in peace in their bodies (Puhakka, 2023). The concept of body positivity is on the rise, which can be problematic, however, since it may be extended only to those bodies who are healthy and ‘appropriate’ (e.g., Harjunen, 2023; Puhakka, 2023) and may feed into sentiments of neoliberalism and consumerism. It would be interesting to explore the potential limiting factors that are still in place, even though on the outside, negative sentiments towards fat bodies appear to have reduced, at least in Finnish media and society. This is expressed by makeover shows such as Revenge Body with Martina Aitolehti, which emphasises wellbeing instead of dieting – but this may on the other
hand be a weight-loss imperative in disguise since wellness, taking care of oneself, and well-being are still often connected to a body that is in shape – meaning thin. My research suggests that in the shows analysed for this dissertation, stereotypical beliefs, ideals, and norms concerning fat(ness) and fat bodies remain important – in both Finland and the United States. A more ‘body-neutral’ point of view, in which a person’s – especially a woman’s – value is not determined by their body (shape, size, and looks) might be a step in the right direction in the future.
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Control through Compassion: Legitimizations of Surveillance, Dynamics of Power, and the Role of the Expert in the Finnish Makeover TV Shows *Jutta and the Super Diet* and *Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet*

Susanne Ritter

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Control through Compassion: Legitimizations of Surveillance, Dynamics of Power, and the Role of the Expert in the Finnish Makeover TV Shows *Jutta and the Super Diet* and *Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet*

Susanne Ritter

Department of Gender Studies, Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland

**ABSTRACT**

Disciplinary practices on the gendered fat body are a central aspect of weight-loss makeover TV shows; however, they are subtle and hard to identify. I ask how surveillance and control are legitimized as appropriate methods for achieving bodily change in the Finnish makeover shows *Jutta ja Superdieetit* (*Jutta and the Super Diet*) and *Jutta ja Puolen Vuoden Superdieetit* (*Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet*) and how the experts reinforce unequal power structures. The ethos of equality is very strong in Finland, which is also apparent in the special construction of the expert as “one of the team”. The research material is examined in light of Michel Foucault’s theories of power and the concept of docile bodies, and as part of postfeminist media culture in which the ideas of “freedom of choice” and “submission as empowerment” are crucial. The choices for the participants of the makeover shows are, however, very limited, leaving just enough freedom so that they accept the power dynamics they are entangled in. I argue that control and surveillance are legitimized as means of helping participants achieve their ideal body and life. Instead of breaking existing power dynamics, the construction of the expert as attentive and caring works to reinforce these structures since discipline is enacted in the “best interest” of the participant. The dynamics of (disciplinary) power are thus subtle and work in a particularly hidden way.

**Introduction**

In modern Western societies and the globalized economy, our looks are essential for our understanding of ourselves and are increasingly used to define our character (Heyes, 2006). Especially fat women are subject to immense pressure and are pushed to weight loss through control, humiliation and shame (Cooper, 2016; Harjunen, 2017; Lupton, 2018). These structures become visible in makeover and dieting TV shows. Fat bodies in makeover shows are on public display and under the constant monitoring eye of the audience and the expert(s), who pressure the participants into losing weight no matter what, using questionable, sometimes extremely humiliating and boundary-breaking methods. However, it is always worth it in the end, when the participants rise from the ashes as their new and better selves—all the pain and pressure they submitted to are forgotten, because they gained a new body and a new life.

In this article I examine the Finnish makeover TV shows *Jutta ja Superdieetit* and *Jutta ja Puolen Vuoden Superdieetit* (*Jutta and the Super Diet/ Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet*). Both shows,
produced by Moskito Television, are hosted by Jutta Gustafsberg (now Larm), a Finnish wellness entrepreneur, personal trainer and bodybuilder, who gained her status as a reality TV celebrity by participating in the Finnish reality TV show *Suuri Seikkailu* (*Great Adventure*) in 2001. *Jutta ja Superdieetit* (*Jutta and the Super Diet*), in the following *JSD*, originally aired on the Finnish TV channel Liv in 2012. In ten episodes the show follows Jutta for about five months during her preparation for the body fitness World Championship in 2011. Furthermore, there are six, as Jutta calls them, “regular” people (two male, four female), who Jutta coaches towards a “healthier lifestyle”, the motto being “you can do it”. They are coached by Jari “Bull” Mentula and Ari Kokkonen, who also coach Jutta. *Jutta ja Puolen Vuoden Superdieetit* (*Jutta and the Half-Year Super Diet*), in the following *JHYSD*, originally aired on the Finnish TV channel Liv from 2013–2015. Each episode shows half a year in the life of a “normal” Finnish person who fights overweight (eight men, 22 women) and stands alone; in contrast to *JSD*, which has a continuous story line. The group of participants is rather homogenous—except for one person of colour, all participants are white; all are able-bodied, and, except for one participant, heterosexual. The age ranges from the youngest participant being 21 to the oldest being 50, with the majority in their late twenties and early thirties. All of their bodies are marked as fat through their weight, which is stated as being “too high” for their height. While approximately one third of the show’s participants are identified as male, and two thirds as female, the focus in this article is on women. While men’s experiences of fatness and dieting (Contois, 2019; Plotz, 2020) as well as men’s participation in dieting makeover shows (Zimdars, 2019) are under-researched themes, this article follows the shows’ emphasis on dieting as an activity that is still understood as a predominantly “feminine” one.

To examine the shows, I draw on Michel Foucault’s theories of docile bodies and disciplinary power (Foucault, 1980, 1990, 1995), identifying structures of surveillance (Gill, 2019) and elements of postfeminism (Gill, 2007, 2008; McRobbie, 2004). These shows are particularly interesting because of the special importance of the experts and their position in relation to the participants—disciplinary hierarchies and structures of power are hidden exceptionally well underneath the surface of the (seemingly) caring and approachable expert posing as “one of the team”. Foucault’s theories have been influential in fat studies scholarship, not least due to his notion of the body as a discursive category and construct (Heyes, 2006; Lupton, 2018; McNay, 1992). The fat body can be seen as the site where biopower, biopolitical action and disciplinary power as well as surveillance become visible, and, as Harjunen argues, especially the “fat (female) body is a site where the powers that are critical to the construction of fatness are played out” (Harjunen, 2017, p. 15). I take this suggestion as a starting point for my own research.

Scholarship on makeover TV has primarily focused on the narrative elements in makeover shows from the US (Franco, 2008; Hass, 2017; Heller, 2006; Lewis, 2013) and on the discriminatory aspects of dieting shows (Domoff et al., 2012; Karsay & Schmuck, 2017). Weber (2009) describes the makeover’s focus on continual improvement, which is depicted as the only way to obtain a “normal” self. There is a special relationship between the experts and the participants in makeover shows. Thus far, scholarship has addressed the experts’ role as “public pedagogues” (Rich, 2011, p. 12), identifying them as perfect model bodies for the participants, as winners-turned-leaders who act as educative authorities (Hass, 2017; Kyrölä, 2014; Weber, 2009, 2014). Weber (2009) highlights unequal power dynamics and thus a discrepancy between the power and worthiness of experts and participants in the makeover. The power enacted by the experts is often hierarchically organized, with the experts offering advice and control from the top down and functioning as lecturing, privileged figures in contrast to the ‘ordinary’ participants (Franco, 2008)—the “learner” is governed and surveilled by the “trainer” (Warin, 2010, p. 32). Both the Finnish shows *JSD* and *JHYSD* and the expert Jutta are unusual for the makeover genre: the expert, who is usually constructed as a “perfect” individual, possessing the flawless “after”-body the participants strive for (Weber, 2009), is here constructed as a “normal” (albeit fit and “healthy”) woman who struggles with the same challenges the participants face. Nevertheless, the shows perpetuate the “belief that weight is controllable” (Domoff et al., 2012, p. 997), which shifts the blame of being fat and the responsibility...
of “self-improvement” (Hass 2017, p. 137) to the fat individuals themselves. These are common narrative trajectories in the neoliberal rationality of the makeover, as can be seen in shows such as *The Biggest Loser* (2004–) that highlight the “value of discipline to make the self” (Palmer, 2014, p. 299) and promote surveillance as effective for weight-loss and ultimately happiness. Despite being constructed as “one of them” due to similar struggles, Jutta functions as an agent of control and surveillance from within the group. This is a new aspect to the research on makeover shows, highlighting not only their shared features, but cultural specificity. In Finland, the ethos of equality is so strong on the surface—even in makeover shows—that hidden structures of power can be hard to identify.

In the following, I will touch on the concepts of neoliberalism, the makeover and Foucault’s theories to then describe the shows in detail. By examining the shows in light of Foucault’s concepts of disciplinary power, governmentality and docile bodies I ask how surveillance and control are legitimized and the narrative structure, particularly the experts, work to reinforce unequal power structures. I explore how the disciplinary treatment of the participants by the expert(s) is rationalized, as well as what this means for the overall narrative structure. Along the lines of Foucault’s suggestion that power structures are dispersed throughout a group, I investigate how the expert works as a source of disciplinary power from inside the group. I conclude the article with thoughts on the importance of the expert for the promotion of surveillance as means of encouragement for weight-loss.

**Neoliberalism and the makeover**

Neoliberalism as a political and economic rationality emphasizes privatization and deregulation (Scharff & Gill, 2011, p. 28). It stresses individuality rather than collectivity (Cooper, 2016). McRobbie (2009) suggests that neoliberal values are produced in popular culture, and reality TV functions as a neoliberal technology of citizenship, because the programmes contain the imperative of the improvement of the self and are based on the narrative of self-making (Ouellette & Hay, 2013; Weber, 2014b). Neoliberal elements are expressed by the focus on for example efficiency, choice, and individual autonomy, all of which are shifted onto the individual and extend into personal and social relationships (Weber, 2014a). Weber (2014a, p. 4) understands reality TV as a “critical site of cultural production”, the site where processes of the construction of identity and selfhood, norms of citizenship, and structures of power become visible.

The narratives in makeover shows are not independent from the culture they exist in (Weber, 2009). While the idea of the connection between character and looks is especially prominent in the US where it has become crucial to be attractive (=thin) to be deemed a “good person” (Heyes, 2006, p. 18), makeover shows are a global phenomenon and have risen to popularity not only in the US, but also in the Nordic countries, Finland being one of them. The number of Finnish speakers is rather small, nationally as well as globally, and the population of Finland is overall highly fluent in English. English-language media has a great significance and imported TV shows from the US play a crucial role on Finnish TV. The significance of American media is reflected by the sheer amount of TV shows and programmes, but also on a societal level—Finland has been nicknamed “the most American of the European countries” (Pegley, 2008, p. 92), which shows the apparent influence of US-American culture on the Finnish society.

Harjunen (2017) states that Finland and the Nordic countries have been going through a period of restructuration through neoliberal policies, which aligns their notion of the individual’s responsibility for their success in life with the one present in capitalist countries like the US. There has been a shift from the collective to the individual in terms of being responsible for yourself and (not) relying on others. In Finland traditionally the focus has been on equality and the benefit of working together as a group in contrast to the rather individualist mentality of, for example, the US. The concept of “making your own life”, which is expressed in the myth of the American Dream and continues to be a big part of the US culture, has become important in the media in the Nordic countries as well; not
only through shows that originate in the US, but through productions that adapt concepts from the US—the Finnish shows *JSD* and *JHYSD* just being two examples amongst many.

I suggest that *JSD* and *JHYSD* are intriguing because they connect the traditionally social component of Finnish society and the strong ethos of equality with the idea of the “American Dream”—while the expert is constructed as part of the group and there is a low hierarchy on the surface, the participants are required to submit themselves to immense pressure, which is enacted by the expert who is ostensibly “one of them”. I argue thus that these shows are particularly suitable for an insight into the hidden workings of power in a society that rejects these exact structures on the outside.

**Foucault and the makeover: governmentality, disciplinary power and freedom of choice**

Governmentality relies on surveillance to control individuals and bodies (Foucault, 1995), which makes it a helpful concept to examine and understand the hidden workings of power. Techniques of governmentality through which individuals are required to organize themselves do not come from one singular source of power, but are dispersed throughout society by institutions—schools, the medical sector, social work, and the media—as well as cultural structures that authorize and legitimize them (Ouellette & Hay, 2013, p. 33). Structures of neoliberalism and governmentality are dispersed and supported by the media, in particular reality TV; they are often labelled as care, and rarely questioned (Rich, 2011; Weber, 2014a, pp. 26–27).

Disciplinary power is power that strives to shape the body through disciplinary practices—visibility and observation, amongst others. It may appear as a “benevolent and life-affirming form of power” (Harjunen, 2017, p. 15). In makeover shows, the experts and the whole makeover are constructed as being in the “best interest” of the participants and leading them to a new, happy life (Foucault, 1990; Harjunen, 2017). This connects to the expert being constructed as caring and helpful, but actually functioning as an agent of disciplinary power underneath the layer of compassion and care. The expert Jutta is a prime example as she is constructed as caring on the first glance, but nevertheless functions as the driving force that surveils, judges and disciplines the participants from within the group—compassionate control is a central element of their relationship.

Women’s size is highly connected to their social acceptability and their bodies are the prime targets of practices of disciplinary power such as “intensive normative control” (Harjunen, 2017, p. 12). Dieting constructs the “docile body” (Heyes, 2006, p. 127) and can be seen as a gendered practice. It has been associated with the “tyranny of slenderness” and the enforcement of a sought-after ideal body type that carries “a powerful symbolism of self-discipline, controlled appetites, and the circumscription of appropriate feminine behaviour and appearance” (Heyes, 2006, p. 126). Gender plays a role in defining who or what is fat; as Kyrölä (2010) states, female bodies are categorized as fat at a smaller size than male bodies, and it is especially unacceptable for women to be fat. This proves true also in *JSD* and *JHYSD*, seeing as there are significantly more female participants than male participants (26 female vs. ten male—36 altogether in all seasons of both shows)—acquiring a thin body is especially important for women since it serves as a signifier of “appropriate femininity” (Harjunen, 2017, p. 35). Jutta striving to keep her body “feminine” while competing in body building competitions points to Heyes’ suggestion that the norm for the ideal body is set by “heterosexual desirability” and is clearly gendered (Heyes, 2006, p. 21). Along the lines of neoliberal values, dieting is constructed as a voluntary act to better the body—women (should) “want” to diet because they (should) “want” to achieve a “better” life. Neoliberal ideas shape the way we deal with gendered bodies and support normative expectations towards female bodies (Harjunen, 2017).

The notion of choice makes what Gill (2007) calls postfeminist sensibility an important concept in the scholarship on neoliberalism, makeover shows and power. Not only have the requirements
for women’s bodies to be a certain way become more and more rigorous (regarding outward appearance but also sexualization), but, as Gill (2008) states, so have the requirements concerning self-surveillance and self-discipline—for the sake of a better, happier life. In the logic of the makeover, but also in a society based on neoliberal ideas of agency and consumerism, individuals have the choice to change their bodies (and, thus, their lives)—they go through hardship in the name of empowerment. The show’s emphasis on freedom of choice and submission as a way to empowerment highlights the power relations imposed upon fat (female) individuals on the one hand, and postfeminist notions on the other. These elements exist in JSD and JHYSD—the participants choose to subject themselves to surveillance and control in order to be rewarded with a more acceptable body and “better” life.

Jutta and the super diets

Both JSD and JHYSD are publicly accessible in the archive of the Finnish National Audiovisual Institute. Furthermore, they are still aired on cable TV, which makes them relevant even several years after their initial production. I approached the shows from a Foucauldian-inspired point of view. I systematically viewed the only season of JSD as well as three seasons of JHYSD, identifying a few key episodes which I chose for close reading, as they were representative of the shows as a whole. I selected several key scenes for the analysis, in which I concentrated on the elements of surveillance and control as well as the role of the expert. While other studies (Domoff et al., 2012) examined the shows’ effects on the audience, I focused on the contents—what was happening on screen as well as the voice over, commentary and possible graphics.

In the beginning of JSD, a cheerful voice-over states that Jutta coaches six “normal women and men” to a “tighter body and lighter life”; “taistelu lääkiä vastaan”, “the battle against the fat”, is never easy, but in Jutta’s “super supportive company” it is at least “more fun”. Work on the self should clearly always be a source of pleasure—especially for women, and especially if it leads to a “lighter” (=better) life (Gill, 2007). Women are not only required to self-manage, self-discipline and work on the self to a much greater extent than men, but they are furthermore encouraged to understand “self-governance and disciplining of the body” as contributing to their empowerment and pleasure (Harjunen, 2017, p. 89). This points to the internalization of the required normalization and use of normalizing practices to make their bodies acceptable. Work on the self has always been a requirement for the performance of femininity, as well as self-monitoring, vigilance and attention; however, it can never be disclosed but should always come naturally and be understood as “fun” (Gill, 2007). The episodes focus primarily on Jutta and her daily life, while featuring one participant more intensively in each episode. Jutta is a participant and is coached by two other (male) body-builders. In the end, Jutta states that although the process was long and hard, it was of course all worth it.

In JHYSD we “meet ten Finnish people who are struggling with serious over-weight”. The voice-over briefly introduces the participants who explain why they are “overweight” and for how long, then follows the first weigh-in which serves to make them face their wrongdoings and, through admitting these wrongdoings, take the first step to betterment. As Lupton (2018) argues, measuring bodies and quantifying bodily characteristics are integral for the regulation and disciplining of bodies since these practices constitute ideals against which individuals must assess themselves. Furthermore, measuring and assessing the body and its weight is an “established part of biopolitical government of the population in Finland today” (Harjunen, 2017, p. 37)—this becomes very clear in the show.

In the introductory sequences, the participants are exposed to humiliating evidence of their own failure, such as the contents of their cupboards and fridges. In the makeover that relies “both on shaming and love-power” for its transformations (Weber, 2009, p. 82), humiliation serves as means to an end and contains a narratological and ideological strategy: it ostensibly (in the premise of makeover shows) will inspire the participants to change. In season two, episode one, the
participant’s “candy-cupboard” is investigated and subsequently cleaned out; a tangible proof not only of the participant’s wrongdoings but also of change and new beginnings; as the participant states while throwing away the candy, “now it begins”. The participants become subject to practices of surveillance and shame, but also attentiveness; the experts treat the participants with a combination of humiliation and care, which is unique to the makeover narrative. The expert is constructed as caring, but nevertheless judging the participants: as Jutta states in JHYSD season three, episode one, she is “sorry” for making the participants “suffer”, but it is “all for their own best”.

Afterwards, the six months of the super diet begin—six months of surveillance and compliance-visits, in which Jutta demands explanations if the participant has not lost enough weight. The show continues with scenes from the participant’s home camera. The three-months weigh-in takes place about halfway into the show and serves to either reward or reprimand the participant depending on how close they got to their three-month goal. After six months, the participant’s fitness state is assessed, and they are weighed for the last time. If they have not reached their goal, they are required to explain why; if they have reached their goal, they are rewarded with a prize (for example a date night or a membership at Jutta’s gym). In the end, the camera shows their “before” and “after”-bodies in a split screen. I suggest that what we see here corresponds to what McRobbie (2004) identifies as a significant step in terms of individuals being judged based on their bodies: the participants are being divided into those who manage to live up to their personal responsibility and those who fail. The power relations work at the level of embodiment and are “productive of new realms of injury and injustice.” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 26).

The expert and elements of surveillance and control

Scholarship has shown that makeover shows follow certain scripts, which are similar—if not the same—throughout different formats, shows, and countries (Kavka, 2006; Weber, 2009). JSD and JHYSD feature several elements that are typical for the makeover narrative: the role of the expert and the elements of control and surveillance are particularly important for the dissemination of power structures and the narratives of control that are present in the shows. In terms of the neoliberal ideal of disciplined, efficient citizens, fat individuals are seen to have let themselves go (Lupton, 2018), which is why they need an authoritative figure in their lives: the expert. The experts are presented as authoritative educators; questioning or even rejecting these authoritative figures is punished with shaming and other sanctions (Kyrölä 2010, p. 68). In JHYSD, this most often means more rigorous training and a stricter diet—it is not an option to question the experts or the goals they have set.

While shame and humiliation mark the beginning of makeovers, the promise of equality and respect at the end of a successful makeover is constantly present; respect is possible when the participants have reached a valid selfhood and, through extensive work on themselves, have become a “real” worthy person. This is not an arbitrary point—the closer the participants get to the “ideal”, the better they are treated. As Kyrölä (2010) states, this ideal is seemingly effortlessly embodied by the experts, normatively appropriate agents that perpetuate structures of power in their relation to the participants. What the experts embody effortlessly, the participants have to work hard for, furthering the gap between them—how could something be so hard for them that is so “natural” for the experts? By this logic the participants can also achieve the perfect body and self—this highlights the very premise of the makeover shows (Kyrölä, 2014). Jutta is an unusual expert because she does not embody the ideals effortlessly—as she states in JHYSD, season two, episode nine, she “has to watch what she eats, otherwise she would also be fat”—this makes it much harder to argue against her, since if it is possible for her to withstand the temptations and eat “right”, it should be just as possible for the participants.

There is usually a clear separation between participants’ and experts’ lives and there are certain power dynamics and hierarchies at play, with the expert commonly being fit, flawless and all-
knowing, while the desperate participant is in dire need of their help (Kyrölä, 2014; Weber, 2009). The expert serves to “help” the participant by inflicting extreme pressure on them but is also constructed as being affectionate, attentive and caring, which obscures the power relations that are present in the shows. While it seems illogical that surrendering to an authority enables an individual’s empowerment, this exact notion is nevertheless the premise and central declaration of makeover shows (Weber, 2009, p. 74). The makeover logic strongly implies that subordination empowers, and individuals must surrender to experts to become empowered; “salvation through submission” appears as the central premise (Weber, 2009, p. 2, 6). Interestingly, because the participants are shown to be taking part in the makeover voluntarily, their decision to subordinate themselves is also viewed as volitional; however, they subordinate themselves under structurally oppressive and narrow choices, which are ultimately the outcome of a network of power that is hierarchically and authoritatively organized (Weber, 2009, p. 78).

Surveillance and observation are key methods of the ostensibly empowering subordination. As “a network of relations” (Foucault, 1995, p. 175), surveillance does not only work from top to bottom or bottom to top, but also laterally, which is the case here. This network keeps “the whole together and traverses it in its entirety with effects of power that derive from one another: supervisors, perpetually supervised.” (Foucault, 1995, p. 176). As both expert and participant, Jutta guides the transformation of the other participants from within the group; this an example of power coming from the inside. I argue that this is one of the most effective ways that power and oppression work. The power dynamics are effective because they are not easy to identify and thus not easy to challenge.

In JHYSD, Jutta has “graduated” from a participant to being a coach herself, which Hass identifies as a common occurrence in the “after” of a makeover show—“the student becomes the master” (Hass, 2017, p. 136). Jutta’s authority to guide the participants is granted by her having undergone a makeover herself, which illustrates the “exchange of roles that is made possible by reality television” (Hass, 2017, p. 143) and is an example of an individual having surrendered to an expert to become empowered (Weber, 2009). Jutta is constructed as an easily approachable, down-to-earth mentor, who is responsible for the support and supervision of the participants, but also visits them at home, motivates and consoles them. On the other hand, she is the one responsible for setting their goals, planning their diets, and in the end is the one rewarding or reprimanding the participants for reaching or not reaching their goals—she is the one the participants report to and whose validation they strive for. Jutta and her relationship to the participants is an example of the aforementioned concept of “affective domination” (Weber, 2009, p. 82)—the experts maintain a relationship of power over and care for the participants, which feeds into the unequal power dynamics.

It is important to keep in mind that although Jutta is seemingly “one of the participants” in both shows, she is still the supervisor, the initiator, the one who pulls the strings. By being both supervisor and supervised she has internalized the “disciplinary regime” (Harjunen, 2017, p. 97) and ultimately keeps the power structures up. Through internalizing the disciplinary gaze, she has found a way out of the group of defective, supervised participants; she has been rewarded with “normalcy” (Harjunen, 2017; Weber, 2009, 2014a).

**Control and surveillance**

In JSF the participants are shown in their homes, in nature, at work; these scenes are filmed by an official camera team. They are weighed and assessed when they come to the gym, but they are not shown weighing themselves at home. In the end of the show, when Jutta competes first in the body fitness finals in Finland, and then in the body fitness world championship, she gets most visibility when she is on stage, presenting her body in front of an audience. Her status as a competitor makes her a participant in the group of dieters in the show, which constitutes the basis for the implementation of her expertship from inside the group. Overall, there seems to be little observation from the
The participants are under observation when they come to exercise in the gym, and when Jutta goes grocery shopping with them (to ensure they know which choices to make), but apart from that, they are largely left to their own devices. This is atypical for the makeover narrative that relies heavily on supervision and surveillance (Springer, 2014; Weber, 2009).

After having been weighed and assessed for the first time, the participants in JHYSD receive a camcorder to take home, which they call the “kotikamera” (home camera) and use to document their daily life during the diet. They mostly disclose their shortcomings in terms of diet or exercise, such as one participant in season three who confesses that she “ate 10 cashews” that she was not supposed to eat. It furthermore serves as a psychotherapist to some, as the voice-over states in season one, episode one—meaning someone (or something, in this case) they can, and should, be totally honest with, implying the psychological imperative of working not only on the body, but the mind (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). Since they operate it themselves, they choose what and when to record—they choose to bring certain problems and topics forward and make them visible, which opens them up for the workings of power because they willingly let the disciplinary gaze in (Lupton, 2018, p. 21). They take part in the perpetual visibility of their lives which makes the surveillance and control even more efficient due to the (seemingly) voluntary aspect of it all. I argue that although it is not putting them on constant display because it can be turned off, it nevertheless serves as a proof of misdemeanour and powerful tool of observation. The participants enact the power upon themselves, they become accomplices in their subordination, which is an efficient way of maintaining discipline; the constant visibility “maintains the disciplined individual in [their] subjection” (Foucault, 1995, p. 187).

Surveillance is based on “a system of permanent registration” (Foucault, 1995, p. 196). In JHYSD, season three, episode nine, Jutta confirms this; her “watching eye is always present”, her observation is constant and omnipresent. Surveillance is constructed as a reasonable means to help the participants, as something they should be thankful for, as they can count on the “support” of the experts at all times. This shows the disciplinary intimacy that is typical for makeover shows—the participants are always on display and under oversight, thus under (the threat of) shame and humiliation. Jutta can clearly be identified as the “agent of love-power” (Weber, 2009, p. 114), who aims to “save” the suffering participants by employing strategies of “affective domination” (Weber, 2009, p. 97)—the docility which is established by the constant surveillance serves as a precondition for this. She comes to check in on and investigate the participants regularly, especially when she assumes that they are not sticking to the diet. In season one, episode one, the voice-over states that Jutta, who used to work as a police officer, “puts on her emergency lights and siren” and goes to investigate, which resembles an actor of disciplinary power checking in on the participants. The implication is clear: the fat person has (at least ostensibly) committed a crime which must be investigated by the source of power.

Control and surveillance are constructed as appropriate to help the participants, especially because the participant chooses to subordinate themselves under the control of the expert. It is important to take care of them and help them improve their lives because they, as fat people, cannot do it themselves (obviously, because otherwise they wouldn’t even have gotten fat)—this plays into the neoliberal idea of being responsible for one’s health (Norman, Rail, & Jette, 2016) and ‘fate’. The idea of submission being necessary for empowerment becomes very clear in JSD and JHYSD: in both shows, the participants are disciplined, controlled and educated—all in the name of a “better” life.

The participants find happiness in their transformed bodies, which are transformed to comply with certain normative standards. Agency and consumer freedom, key features of neoliberalism, are presented as first and foremost women’s empowerment—health is presented as a choice and women are free to make the choice of being healthy (Gailey & Harjunen, 2019). This makes the participants accomplices in their own oppression—they consent to the transformations voluntarily and take active roles (Palmer, 2014, p. 314). However, women’s ostensibly free choice is connected to practices of (self-) regulation and discipline that are aimed at maintaining a normative, thin body
(Gailey & Harjunen, 2019). The value of women and their empowerment is linked to the female body; a beautiful body and the consequential selfhood thus seemingly enable empowerment, which can only be achieved through previous submission (Weber, 2014a, pp. 25–26).

While the requirements concerning the normative female body are increasingly rigorous, they are treated as something that women want to conform to and they “work through the internalisation of discipline and so-called ‘free’-choice” (Harjunen, 2017, p. 95). Gill (2019, p. 148) argues that “surveillance is a feminist issue” and identifies a higher level of not only peer-, but also self-surveillance for women, which extends to new areas in life; there is a focus on the psychological aspect, and it is necessary to transform oneself not only physically, but also mentally (Gill, 2008, p. 441). All these suggestions are evident in JSD and JHYSD. Interestingly, there is an increase in (self-) surveillance from JSD to JHYSD, which points to the increasing requirements for women to participate in these actions. In JHYSD surveillance clearly extends to more areas in life than just the gym—the participants are observed and controlled at home, at work, in terms of diet and exercise. The psychological aspect plays an important role in JHYSD when the participants are required to work on their mental health, for example through sharing their most intimate thoughts with the home camera that doubles as a psychiatrist. Clearly, the goal is a mental transformation in addition to the physical one; in the end of season two, episode four, a participant states that the mental transformation has become more important to her than the physical change and the numbers on the scale. The physical transformation is openly presented as having been the precondition for the mental transformation, stressing the importance of a perfect body for a happy life—Jutta highlights this in season two, episode eight, when she tells a participant to get in the best shape physically, so that she can be able to be in a good shape mentally.

Conclusion

Both the show JSD and the expert Jutta are unusual for the makeover genre, because Jutta is constructed as being rather similar to the participants and facing the same struggles. While seemingly encouraging a more equal relation, this in fact perpetuates the notion that the slim, perfect body is obtainable for everyone (Kyrölä, 2014)—if it is possible for “regular” Jutta, it is also possible for the “regular” participant and there is no excuse for them not to be able to achieve it. Of course, the fact that Jutta has a background in bodybuilding, having worked on her body together with specialists while training for and competing in several competitions and championships, and is therefore not at all as “regular” as the participants when it comes to health and sports, is overlooked.

The (then still fat) participants surrender part of their self-determination in the beginning of the makeover. It becomes clear that the fat body is not deserving of integrity, it is not the participants’ body anymore, but in the fat “state” it is “handed over” to the experts. They are given control of the participants’ body—by setting the dieting and exercise schedules, measuring, weighing, observing and assessing, and by the surveillance that is prevalent. The participants “earn their body back” when it/they are thin, hereby earning their right to be accepted and respected.

In the end of JHYSD we see the participants in their “after”-state—thin, happy, satisfied—in the studio next to Jutta and the scale. Before being weighed for the last time, they watch themselves as they were before, seeing a video of themselves before the “transformation”, commonly the first scene in which they were facing their wrongdoings. We get to observe their reactions as well as past moments in a picture-in-picture, exemplifying at the same time a moment of self-surveillance as well as surveillance by the audience. The participants commonly cry or make disgusted faces—even (or especially?) for themselves, their own body was neither likeable nor acceptable before the transformation. This not only negates and rejects their “old” self, but furthermore legitimizes the strict methods that were employed by the coach(es)—after all, they were able to achieve their “after”-body, so it was all worth it in the end, no matter the means. This is confirmed in season two, episode nine, when the participant enthusiastically answers “yes” to Jutta’s question “was it all
worth it, the work, the hassle, the sweat, gritting your teeth?” and states that they never want to go back to their old habits.

The shows operate in a “neoliberal climate of individual empowerment, freedom and self-care (Warin, 2010, p. 34), and freedom of choice as an important part of the makeover is visible in these shows—the participants “choose” to lose weight to become healthy and change their life (for the better, of course). However, there is only one correct choice (losing weight) and, in the end, individuals are striving to be the one that makes the “right” choices (McRobbie, 2004, p. 261). It is therefore apparent that while choice can be empowering, it can also be restricting and constraining—following strict rules about nutrition and exercise and working hard towards a body that corresponds to the normative feminine ideal is hardly free (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). The precondition for the freedom of choice is thus giving up freedom (Heyes, 2006), which corresponds to the idea of giving up power to become empowered (Weber, 2009). What we can see here is thus not only the legitimization of surveillance and control as means to make individuals lose weight, but also surrendering to the rules and power of experts for the individual’s empowerment—it is all fair to achieve the “perfect” body and life.

The narrative legitimizes the surveillance and subordination of the participants to the experts—in the end it was all worth it, because they have a new body, a new self, a better life. It implies that a confession is necessary to start a better life, surveillance is acceptable to get the participant’s life under control and being thin makes the participant a worthy person. Fatness is constructed as being solely the participant’s own fault; being thin, on the other hand, is not their own achievement, but they emphasize the role of the expert in their success, which furthermore legitimizes the use of controlling techniques. Being thin leads to the participants finally being able to be their real, true, beautiful selves. The disciplinary practices of control and surveillance are disguised as care. In the logic of the makeover, weight loss leads to a “new” body, a “new” self, and an empowered, happy life—and any method is suitable to achieve that.

Finland has been seen by some to be unique in its consideration for social justice and the sense of shared responsibility (Sahlberg, 2011), which can be seen to a certain extent in JSD, and to a lesser extent in JHYSD. The shift in focus between JSD and JHYSD and the fact that Jutta supervises the participants from inside the group in the earlier show, to then function as the expert and “lead from the outside/top” in the second show, might indicate a general shift from the traditionally “equal” Finnish ideal of society to a more individualistic, neoliberal model (see Harjunen, 2017). This hints towards a certain restructuring in society—which, however, extends further than the scope of this article. These considerations might pose the danger of taking part in the “Finnish exceptionalism” (see for example Keskinen, 2012) that paints a picture of Finnish society as being inclusive, fair, and equal without fault—these issues have to be considered when further exploring the topic. In any case, it is worthwhile to take cultural specificities and overlaps into account when attempting to understand makeover TV shows and the elements of power they contain—not only on a national, but also global level.

Notes

1. All translations from Finnish to English by SR.
2. JHYSD, voice-over in the introduction to each episode.
3. JSD, voice-over in the introduction to each episode.
4. JHYSD, voice-over in the introduction to each episode.

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Notes on contributor

Susanne Ritter is a PhD student at the Department of Gender Studies at Åbo Akademi University in Turku, Finland. She has a background in Media Studies and her research concentrates on fat bodies, relationships of power, body politics, and makeover shows.

References


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Susanne Ritter

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Fat bodies, intimate relationships and the self in Finnish and American weight-loss TV shows

Susanne Ritter
Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere

ABSTRACT
As sites where the construction of identity and selfhood take place, relationship-focused weight-loss TV shows reproduce the notion of a correlation between a woman’s body size, her ‘success’ in romantic relationships, and the appropriate self. I analyze the weight-loss shows Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian from the US, and Rakas, Sinusta on Tullut Pullukka (Honey, You’ve Become Chubby) from Finland, investigating how relationship and body size norms, gender, and the self intertwine. I examine the shows in light of Foucault’s theory of normalization. Here, normalization not only refers to the normalization of the body but also of the relationship(s) required to achieve a valid self. I suggest that the shows express a parallel between being single and on the verge of society and being fat and being on the verge of society; through solving one of the deviations (in this case, becoming thin) the other deviation (being single) can be changed and thus a “normal” life can be achieved. People learn how to normalize their bodies and their relationships, which in the end paves the way for the idea that a good body/dieting is the precondition for a relationship and an acceptable self. The shows thus reinforce that a thin body is the basis for an appropriate self and fulfilling life.

KEYWORDS
Makeover; foucault; normalization; relationships; fat

Fat people are subject to intense social stigma (Harjunen 2017; Murray 2004; Zimdars 2019) and it is a common belief that there is a correlation between body size and “success” in romantic relationships (Gailey 2012; Oswald, Champion, and Pedersen 2020). This view is reproduced in popular culture and the media; weight-loss shows perpetuate notions of the “ideal” body and, increasingly, include normative ideas about the “ideal” self and life.

In this article, I examine the weight-loss makeover shows Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian (in the following, RBKK) from the US, and Rakas, Sinusta on Tullut Pullukka (Honey, You’ve Become Chubby,1 RSOTP in the following) from Finland. I investigate the ways in which relationship and body size norms, gender, and the self intertwine in this particular and rather peculiar TV show format that is situated between relationship advice show and weight-loss show. Focusing on the female participants, I ask: in what way is the female

CONTACT Susanne Ritter susanne.ritter@tuni.fi Faculty of Social Sciences (SOC) 33014 Tampere University, Finland © 2022 Taylor & Francis
body and its size portrayed as important for love and what kind of (intimate) relationships are presented as the goal? I analyze the shows with a special interest in their constructions of a “normal” body, relationship “success” and the achievement of a valid self. I propose that the shows can be examined with the help of Foucault’s concept of normalization due to their way of constructing a woman’s appropriate body and their emphasis on the importance of the body for a relationship.

*RBKK* is hosted by Khloé Kardashian, started airing in 2017 on the American cable network E!, and was renewed for a fourth season in 2020. *RSOTP* is hosted by fitness coach and Bikini-Fitness-Championship participant Jenni Levävaara. It aired first on the Finnish channel Sub in 2013, with seasons two and three airing in 2015 and 2016 respectively. While the shows differ in terms of duration of the weight-loss programme, their premise is the same: lose weight or you won’t be able to achieve a good relationship and happy life.

Although there are male and female candidates, the way fat is experienced and a fat body is constructed differs depending on an individual’s (perceived) gender. The shows reflect this through “different thresholds by which men and women are even considered to be fat” (Zimdars 2019, 7) – men are perceived as fat at a higher weight than women. Furthermore, women are required to display themselves and are often depicted as “spectacularized works in progress” on TV, as Kavka (2006, 58) states. Therefore, and because the pressure to be attractive and attain a thin body weighs higher on women (Oswald, Champion, and Pedersen 2020), my study focuses on the female participants.

I suggest that the relevance of the female body’s size for a relationship and the importance of relationships for situating the self can be theorized through the concept of normalization (Foucault 1995) because it constitutes a framework for the analysis of how bodies – and life – are shaped according to a norm. Foucault (1995, 184) understands normalization as one of the “great instruments of power.” The process of normalization intends homogeneity; degrees of normality indicate belonging to a social group and play a role for classifications, hierarchies, and ranks (Foucault 1995, 184). Haber (1996) states that we learn to “categorize bodies and desires” through the process of normalization; bodies and pleasures are shaped and divided into “those that are beautiful (good) and ugly (bad), pleasurable (to be sought) and distasteful (to be shunned).” Shaping bodies that are seen to be outside the norm is the premise of makeover shows like *RBKK* and *RSOTP*.

**Previous research**

Makeover shows have been studied in terms of neoliberal elements (Ouellette and Hay 2013; Weber 2009, 2014) and discriminatory aspects (Domoff et al. 2012; Karsay and Schmuck 2019). There is scholarship on the
importance of a thin body for relationships and to be seen as desirable (Alsop and Lennon 2018; Kyrölä 2014; Murray 2004; Zimdars 2019) as well as the idea that the value of a woman lies in her body (Gill 2019). The overall importance of relationships in society and for an individual’s wellbeing and the portrayal of this idea in the media has been researched – focusing on the US (Weber 2009) as well as from a Finnish perspective (Kolehmainen 2019).

While dating shows have a long history on television (Smith 2019), a new hybrid format has emerged that differs from the traditional game show format that dating shows used to follow. They have a stronger focus on the makeover than the traditional dating shows, taking the makeover of the body as well as the makeover of intimate relationships into account (Smith 2019). There has been little research on these shows in terms of gender, fatness and relationship normativity. Both RBKK and RSOTP can be placed in the same continuum together with shows like Thintervention (2010), Love Handles (2011), and Shedding for the Wedding (2011), which have been examined in terms of discourses about the “obesity epidemic” and the connection between fat and health (Kolehmainen 2019; Zimdars 2019, 81).

While most studies about fatness have focused on women in the US (Cooper 1998, 2016; Lupton 2018; for studies on fatness in Finland see Harjunen and Kyrölä 2007; Puhakka 2019), this does not mean that there is less discrimination against fat people in Finland. Puhakka (2019, 60–61) states that Finnish society, and with it the media, is “saturated with one-sided accounts of fat” that especially explain “how to get rid of it,” which makes it important to include Finland and Finnish media in the discussion on fatness, transformations, and relationships. Finnish media is underrepresented in the analysis of weight-loss shows on an international level. By looking at Finland and the US, my study therefore seeks to “geographically and culturally diversify fat studies” as proposed by Puhakka (2019, 62; Cooper 2016; Maor 2013). I take a novel approach to the study of fatness, relationships, and gender in dieting TV shows by conceptualizing the construction of the appropriate body as a precondition for relationships, which are in turn presented as “normal” and necessary for a good life.

**Fatness, makeover shows and relationships**

Fat individuals are rarely represented as “attractive, charming, or smart” (Domoff et al. 2012, 993; Oswald, Champion, and Pedersen 2020). Zimdars (2019, 6) identifies common stereotypes connected to fat people, who are often presented as “gluttonous, lazy, loud and sloppy” for example on TV. Murray (2004, 239) highlights negative views on fatness, stating that the fat body “stands as a symbol of gluttonous obsessions, unmanaged desires and the
failed self.” Representations of fatness through the lens of weight loss are ubiquitous and have become more and more central to makeover shows’ narratives (Zimdars 2019).

Weber (2014) sees reality TV as a site where processes of the construction of identity and selfhood, norms of citizenship, and structures of power become visible. Makeover shows teach us that “change is imperative” in order to become an acceptable (meaning thin) individual (Zimdars 2019, 83). They are effective because they represent a new form of power which is dispersed by the imperative of the makeover and whose operation “is not ensured by right but by technique, not by law but by normalization, not by punishment but by control” (Foucault 1995, 189). The shows are embedded in everyday life and constitute an example for the invisibility and normalization of power (Foucault 1980, 1995; Harjunen 2017). Through participating in the makeovers, participants are judged (by themselves and others) and condemn themselves to the “sentence” of the makeover that “bears within it an assessment of normality and a technical prescription for a possible normalization.” (Heyes 2007, 21).

Relationship advice and therapeutic practices are circulated through the media, for example through “televised relationship programming” (Kolehmainen 2019, 67). Reality TV shows about dieting increasingly include discourses about the enhancement of relationships and relationship advice (Kolehmainen 2019, 67). This “lifestyle TV” focuses more explicitly on the “journey of transformation” (Raisborough 2011, 3–4), and there is a clear romantic view on self-transformation that promises not only a slim body but success in love and a new, more positive relationship to oneself; through success stories, which are a frequent part of transformation narratives, these goals are reinforced (Pajala 2007, 90). Dieting can be seen as a “process of working on the self, marketed with particular resonance and sold to women, that cleverly deploys the discourse of self-care feminists have long encouraged” (italics in original, Heyes 2006, 126). Dieting programmes make us believe that losing weight is the only possibility for “true self-knowledge, self-development, self-mastery, and self-care” (Heyes 2006, 145), and, as I add, a fulfilling relationship, which becomes evident in both RBKK and RSOTP.

Material

The research material consists of season one to three of RBKK and RSOTP respectively that were accessed through the channels’ websites. I systematically watched the shows and identified a few key episodes which I chose for close reading, as they are representative of the shows as a whole due to their formulaic nature. I viewed these episodes with a focus on the representation of the participants, asking: what kind of relationships are constructed as desirable? What is the connection between fat, relationships, and the self?
I chose several key scenes for analysis in which I specifically paid attention to what is on screen: words, implications, and imagery, taking into account the participants’, coaches’ and voiceover’s statements. I viewed the shows with a focus on three aspects: the transformation of the body, the (alleged) transformation of the relationship to the self, and the transformation of the relationship to the (ex, current, or future) partner. I suggest that the portrayal of romantic relationships as essential, the emphasis on the importance of a thin body for heterosexual relationships, and the implied connection between coupledom and normalcy are central.

Each season of RBKK consists of eight 42-minute long episodes featuring one to two participants. Through losing weight on the 3-months programme, they hope to show their ex that they are worth fighting for. Most of the participants are women who want to lose weight to win back or take revenge on a male ex-partner. Host Khloé Kardashian’s status as a “successful dieter,” having lost about 40 pounds herself, gives her the expertise to help others lose weight and transform their lives, according to the show’s premise. Zimdars (2019, 81) states that RBKK positions itself as empowering and body positive, “emphasizing how participants feel emotionally and spiritually” – I suggest, however, that underneath the empowering surface normative imperatives prevail.

RSOTP is hosted by fitness coach Jenni Levävaara. Each season consists of ten approximately 45-minute long episodes featuring one couple each that seeks Jenni’s help; the reason being, as the voiceover states, that one of the partners has gained weight and “endangers” the relationship with their changed body. The thin partner (usually the man) acts as the personal trainer for the fat partner (usually the woman), who tries to lose weight during a seven-week-programme. The couple can win up to 10,000 euros for a weight loss of 15 kilogrammes or more during the seven-week programme. In three seasons, there are 30 heterosexual couples.

**The importance of being (in) a couple**

In most popular contexts, romance is a “heterosexual narrative” and heterosexual relationships are constructed as “the ‘natural’ way to find fulfilment,” which contributes to “the predominance of heterosexuality as a ‘compulsory’ way of life” (Langford 1996, 30–31). As (Roseneil et al. 2020, 4) state, living in and as a couple has “historically been valorized and conventionalized, so that it is the very essence of ‘normal’”; it is fundamental to a person’s “experience of social recognition and belonging.” Furthermore, being coupled is seen as “an achievement, a stabilizing status characteristic of adulthood, indicative of moral responsibility and bestowing full membership of the community” (Roseneil et al. 2020, 4), which means that to be perceived as “socially integrated, psychologically developed and
well-functioning,” an individual needs to be coupled (Roseneil et al. 2020, 4). Not being in a couple is consequently understood as being, if not outside of, at least on the margins of society (Roseneil et al. 2020, 4). We can see parallels here to fatness being understood as a temporary state (Harjunen 2009) as well as fat individuals not being seen as “well-functioning” individuals and not being granted full personhood until they are thin (see, for example, Weber 2009). Similarly, single people are not granted full citizenship until they are in a relationship. Both states of being are (constructed as) temporary, unwanted, and in the way of an appropriate self.

In both Finland and the US, most people commit to an intimate relationship at some point, and while forms may vary, in Finland, “a couple relationship still has a robust allure” (Kolehmainen 2019, 66). This becomes evident in RSOTP – not only is the whole premise of the show to keep the relationship one is in (or to take it to the next level through marriage), but relationships as a whole are constructed as safe spaces and the center of a person’s life. The participant in RBKK season three, episode one explains that she was at home while her husband was having an acting career; she was depressed because of all the attention he got, and that’s when her “serious weight gain” set in. This reinforces the importance of their connection – putting one’s own life on hold for the relationship – and draws a connection between depression and weight gain, i.e. not feeling well and being fat, a common connection in makeover shows (Lupton 2018). The participant states that she is still wearing the ring because if she were to take it off, she would feel an emptiness inside; this emphasizes the typical idea that one is not complete without a “better half” and a relationship.

The ending of each season, where we see “where are they now”-pictures and text on screen, reinforces this. In season one, episode five, we learn that the participant has moved on from her ex-husband and is “currently dating a new guy” – what we get here is closure; without a new relationship there would not be any closure, because being in a relationship is the ultimate moment of closure. If she were not dating someone new, her story would not be a success story; only through the approval of the “new guy” is her transformation made into something that is acknowledged and worthy. Being single would thus not only signify a failure to move on from her ex, but also a failure to move on with life. This is confirmed in the “where are they now”-text of the episode’s other candidate: “she is no longer interested in pursuing a relationship” with the man she was after, but “she’s single and ready to mingle” – the prospect of finding a new relationship is what makes this a success story. The pictures situate the candidates in the norm and where they are supposed to be – in a couple. Being single signifies an in-between-state that is never the final result. Instead, being with a man is the goal – what becomes visible here is “powerful
social and cultural mandating and promotion of the coupleform” (Roseneil et al. 2020, 4), which is furthermore heavily gendered as it is promoted as especially important for women.

The relevance of the thin body

In her study about fat women’s sexual and dating experiences, Gailey (2012) finds that typically, the fat female body is not considered “attractive or sexual” in the Western cultures. This becomes evident in RSOTP when the participant in season three, episode five states that she used to be self-confident, but now that she has gained weight she has become a wallflower, with wallflower being a word that is especially used for women who wait by the wall, wanting to be picked, and who are commonly not considered attractive. She states that she can’t wait to be slim so she can return to intimacy and experience closeness in a different way; this reinforces the idea that women have to be thin to be “(hetero)sexually desirable, aesthetically pleasing” to themselves and men, and “better able to build an image that is appropriately feminine” (Heyes 2006, 127).

The participant’s statement reflects the idea that sexual activity, as we are taught, happens “as a result of sexual desire,” which in turn “happens as a result of beauty, sexiness, sex appeal, love” (Blank 2000, 2, in Gailey 2012, 115). This becomes evident in RSOTP in season three, episode five, when the participant’s boyfriend explains that they haven’t been intimate as much now as they had been before she gained weight. Similarly, the participant in season three, episode eight states that there is less intimacy now that she is fat. Interestingly though, in both cases, the partners are not the ones bothered by the weight, but it is the women who are concerned that their partners might not find them attractive anymore. These scenes contradict Cooper’s (1998, 22) findings that fat people receive the message that something is wrong with their bodies even in their closest relationships, since the pressure does not come from the partners. However, this confirms Cooper’s (1998, 22) discovery that fat people attach feelings of “blame, guilt and failure” to their fat bodies. While in this particular example the intimate partners do not comment on the bodies negatively, the negative feelings are deeply ingrained, and the shows’ overall premise is clear: you need a thin body to be able to win (back) or keep a relationship. This is confirmed in season three, episode seven in RSOTP; the voiceover states that something has to be done against the participant’s overweight before the couple’s relationship turns “stale.” In RBKK this becomes apparent when the participant explains that as soon as she gets her body in order, she’ll go for the guy – she is convinced that he will only be interested in her once she has lost the weight.² Adapting Foucault, Haber (1996) argues that “when power works its way into knowledge, truth and desire, it is not just something forced on us; power is also something we
internalize and are complicitous in producing.” I suggest that the same happens with societal standards and norms; this becomes visible when the women say that they feel bad in their bodies, although the partners do not express dissatisfaction.

In terms of the acceptable progression of relationships, season three, episode five of *RSOTP* presents marriage as natural. The voiceover states that despite many years of being together, the couple has not “made it to marriage” yet – possibly due to the participant’s weight, as is implied later on. This repeats Roseneil et al.’s (2020, 28) findings that the expectations/injunctions concerning couples commonly include the idea that “the couple should be married (or en route to marriage) and life-long” and is an example for the importance of the thin body for not only a relationship, but also for marriage. Illouz (2012, 53) points out that being successful on the marriage market, sexual field, and dating game is beneficial for an individual and is a “way of establishing one’s general social value”; marriage as a cultural capital can be reached through conforming to bodily standards (Ingraham 2008).

*RBKK* starts with Khloé’s statement: “My name is Khloé Kardashian. Growing up, people called me the fat funny sister. Until one day I started working out, eating right, and putting myself first, and you know what, I’ve never felt better. Now I’m helping others transform by hooking them up with my favourite Hollywood trainers and glam experts to turn their lives around and shut down the shamers. Because a great body is the best revenge.” This sums up the very essence of makeover shows as well as *RBKK*’s premise: Khloe was fat, she lost weight, and now she feels better. She is helping others “transform,” “turn their lives around,” and “shut down the shamers” – this very clearly points to a bodily transformation being necessary to transform one’s interactions with others. The implication is clear: people who have transformed have earned the right to be treated better. This highlights the show’s normalizing elements: as Heyes argues, “taking charge of one’s destiny, becoming the person one always wanted to be, or gaining a body that better represents the moral virtues one has developed, are all forms of working on the self within a regime of normalization” (2007, 28). The last sentence of Kardashian’s speech, stating that a great body is the best revenge, reinforces the premise of the makeover shows: a “great” (meaning thin, lean and trained) body is the be-all-and-end-all in life, and means much more than just the physical vessel people live in.

While *RBKK* and *RSOTP* share certain characteristics, one interesting difference is the idea of teamwork. The set up alone makes *RBKK* a show in which the “individual” fights for her new body and new life, in contrast to *RSOTP* where not only is a couple portrayed, but they are supposed to work together so that one of them can lose weight. While one individual is responsible for winning back the relationship/changing their body to make the other person happy in *RBKK*, the Finnish show implies that both are
The set up alone might tell us something about the difference in Finnish and US culture; while US culture is traditionally an individualist culture in which everyone is responsible for their own happiness, Finnish culture is based on equality and community. The ‘doing it together’-aspect is emphasized in RSOTP, such as when the partners are shown exercising together and trying to find a new active hobby that both of them like; for example, in season three, episode seven, the participant and her boyfriend attend a dance class. The question remains, however, how much “teamwork” it actually is if one of the partners is responsible for keeping track of the other partner’s diet, exercise regime, and achievements – and if the other loses weight to ensure that the team (meaning couple) persists. In season three, episode five of RSOTP, the boyfriend expresses that it has been difficult to keep the participant in check regarding diet and exercise. Here, one of them becomes the monitoring “guard” figure responsible for the docility of the other’s body (see Foucault 1995); a hierarchy that could be interpreted as especially patriarchal when the “chubby” partner is female.

Conclusion

Both shows reinforce that “life is what waits at the other end of a body transformation, a complete overhaul of the current self, the loss of our fat selves” (Tovar 2012, 10) – and, as I suggest, a fulfilling love life and “good” place and status in society. Although transformation itself is not an American concept, the concept of personal transformation is more culturally bound to the US, as Kavka (2006) argues. The introduction thus resembles a historical value of the United States: the dream of transformation, “self-invention” (Kavka 2006, 211, 220), and upward mobility. Khloé’s statement reinforces the myth of transformation, a very American characteristic that links (transformable) properties of selfhood with transformable features of the body (Kavka 2006). Selfhood can only be achieved through and as the (transformed) after-body, because before-bodies are as a rule shown as lacking the valid quality of the self (Weber 2009). This constructs the idea that the overall aim is not a beautiful body itself, but the advantages and qualities that come with a beautiful body, such as success, and most importantly, selfhood (Weber 2009, 55). Kavka furthermore connects the premise of makeover shows, where people are transformed into their best, happy selves, to the cultural atmosphere in the United States. She argues that, because the constitution of the United States guarantees the right to the pursuit of happiness, if beauty is synonymous with happiness, all people have the right to pursue beauty (Kavka 2006, 225). Since the aspect of transformation and the “journey” toward a happier life in a more beautiful body is central in makeover shows, I argue
that the right to pursue happiness (and beauty) can be equated to the right to be happy (and, by extension, beautiful) here. All of this becomes visible in the shows, regardless of their country of origin, albeit with different nuances.

I suggest that the diets in these shows can be seen as not only a “technology that allows one to become more beautiful, or even achieve normalcy, but as a vehicle for self-transformation” (Heyes 2007, 17). The transformation of the self here does not stop at the individual’s body but is expanded onto the relationship. The individual is no longer only responsible for themselves but for the happiness of the other person too, and the former individual burden of weight-loss and transformation is in fact expanded onto the other person. Achieving the “normal” body and through this the “normal” relationship can be seen as an act of normalizing behavior, meaning the act of shaping the body and behavior to conform to societal standards. This behavior normalizes not only the individual’s relationship and body but also self, and their position in society.

Roseneil et al. (2020, 3) state that the couple “remains one of the most potent objects of normativity in contemporary European societies” which is no different in the US (Ingraham 2008), an idea that is perpetuated by these shows. I suggest that they express a parallel between being single and on the verge of society and being fat and on the verge of society; through solving one of the deviations (becoming thin) the other deviation (being single) can be changed and thus a “normal” life can be achieved. They are an example for the linking of “body type, citizenship and moral type”; properties of the body are used to “connote a ‘good’ citizen, while ‘ill’ and ‘ugly’ put one in the citizenship doghouse” (LeBesco 2004, 55). If the feminine body is important to be coupled and the couple is important for “citizenship,” the thin body then becomes a marker of personhood and citizenship in society (see Lupton 2018).

I propose that here, normalization not only includes the body, but also the relationship, to be able to achieve a valid self in the end. The shows posit an example not just of a way that people learn how to normalize their bodies, but also their relationships, which paves the way for the idea that a good body/dieting is the precondition for a relationship and an acceptable self. In fact, individuals not only learn that it is possible, but necessary to achieve the state of belonging to a couple, and, in extension, to a certain group in society. What becomes visible here is the societal idea that it is “normal” to have a relationship and be part of a couple, but in order to have the “normal” relationship, one has to have a “normal” (read: not fat) body; the shows thus perpetuate the belief that a thin body is the basis for a fulfilling life.

Notes

1. all translations from Finnish to English by author.
2. season one, episode five.
Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

Susanne Ritter is a PhD student at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Tampere University, Tampere, Finland. She has a background in Media Studies and her research deals with fat bodies, relationships, structures of power, body politics, and makeover shows.

References


‘When I lose the weight, we’ll go on a date’ – Fatness, Singleness and Liminality in *Fat Chance*.

Susanne Ritter

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Susanne Ritter

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‘When I lose the weight, we’ll go on a date’ – fatness, singleness and liminality in *Fat Chance*

Susanne Ritter

Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

**ABSTRACT**

In contemporary Western culture, fatness and singlehood are constructed as requiring change: from fat to thin, from single to coupled. Makeover shows with a dating theme that focus on both aspects in connection to each other have become increasingly widespread, aiming for the makeover of one’s life and relationship status through the makeover of one’s body. I analyze the makeover show *Fat Chance* in the theoretical context of rites of passage applying the concept of liminality to fatness and singlehood. Fatness and singlehood are constructed as undesirable temporary states, with the diet being presented as the rite of passage toward the acceptable states of thinness and being coupled. In *Fat Chance*, overcoming the liminal states of fatness and singlehood is constructed as proof of successful adulthood and appropriate progression and consequently the precondition for and key to an acceptable, fulfilling, and happy life.

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**Introduction**

A person’s outward appearance is extremely important in the modern Western society and fatness is despised and seen as unattractive (LeBesco, 2004). Makeover shows offer the solution, proposing weight loss as a means of improving the body, which in turn improves one’s life, status, and relationships. The makeover television show *Fat Chance* (Drollette, Pinvidic, & Riches, 2016) from the US reflects these sentiments. Here, five female and three male participants set out on a weight-loss journey, trying to lose as much weight as possible in three months, to be able to confess their feelings to their crush. Approaching the show in the theoretical context of rites of passage, specifically liminality (Turner, 1967; Van Gennep, 1960), I draw upon theories of fatness, weight loss and singlehood in connection to liminality (e.g., Harjunen, 2007, 2009; Hass, 2018; Lahad, 2012; LeBesco, 2004) to examine how fatness and singlehood are constructed in the context of impermanence and change. I subsequently argue that dieting is constructed as a rite of passage on the way from one stage of life (fat/single) to the other (thin/coupled), and, in extension, to a normative life.

The concepts of rites of passage and liminality (Turner, 1967; Van Gennep, 1960) help to explore “marginalized experiences, social statuses and subjectivities that fall between classifications” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 5). While there is previous research on the liminal aspects of fatness (Gailey & Harjunen, 2019; Harjunen, 2007, 2009; Kyrölä & Harjunen,
2017; LeBesco, 2004), and on the liminal aspects of singlehood (Lahad, 2012), there is little research on the intersection of fatness and singlehood. Hass (2018) has researched fat temporality in the makeover show *I Used to be Fat*, but there is a lack of research that explores specifically the representation of the diet as passage from not only one bodily state to the other, but at the same time from one relationship status to the other. I examine the importance of a thin body for both social and relationship status expressed in *Fat Chance*, which facilitates a broader discussion on how relationship normativity becomes entangled in body normativity in ways that enforce both at the same time.

**Fatness and singlehood in makeover shows**

As part of reality television, makeover shows play a role in dispersing cultural norms and imperatives (Weber, 2009). They follow strict narrative structures (Weber, 2009, 2014) and express the “imperative of individual responsibility” (Dovey, 2000). This translates to the imperative of working on the self (Skeggs & Wood, 2014) and emphasizes the importance of transforming the body (Frith, Raisborough, & Klein, 2010). Makeover shows construct certain bodies as desirable and “normal,” and certain bodies (e.g., fat bodies) as deviant, drawing on the “cultural appeal of both dieting and the makeover” (Kyrölä, 2021, p. 107); continuous improvement and weight loss are constructed as the way for the participants to be themselves and live life to the fullest (Kyrölä, 2014). Participants exist as before-bodies waiting to be changed and are thus in a state of liminality, which can be understood as an “interstructural situation” (Turner, 1967, p. 93) on the way to a more acceptable state.

In the modern Western society, the ideal of the heterosexual couple and marriage prevails (DePaulo & Morris, 2005); singles face difficulties and discrimination (DePaulo, 2006; Koropeckyj-Cox, 2005). It remains important for both women and men to be part of a couple and still constitutes the norm. This is echoed in dating shows, for example *Naked Dating* (Smith, 2019), that highlight the need to find a partner (Kavka, 2008; McClanahan, 2007). Heteronormativity is central, as Taylor (2012, p. 108) argues; dating shows such as *The Age of Love, Flavor of Love*, and *Rock of Love* revolve around heterosexuality and mediate romantic relationships. At the heart of these shows is the “heterosexual imaginary and its underlying premise – heteronormativity” (Tropiano, 2009, p. 61). Roseneil, Crowhurst, Hellesund, and Santos (2020, p. 22) on the other hand argue that while it is no longer necessary to be in a heterosexual couple, “coupledom remains the privileged and normative form of intimate life” – this is visible in *Fat Chance* since finding a relationship is constructed as important regardless of sexual orientation. Singles being portrayed as needing intervention to rectify their single status (Taylor, 2012) can be seen as a parallel to fat individuals being portrayed as in need of intervention due to their weight (see for example Kyrölä, 2014; Weber, 2009).

Dating makeover shows such as *Shedding for the Wedding* (2011) and *Love Handles* (2011) (Kolehmainen, 2019; Zimdars, 2019) focus on couples; weight loss is shown as a tool to keep love and take the relationship to the next level through marriage. While existing in the same niche, *Fat Chance* more strongly constructs weight loss as the precondition for even considering the possibility to achieve love in contrast to keeping or furthering it. Here, fatness and singlehood are connected, and are both constructed as temporary, undesirable states. This highlights discourses about fatness and (un)desirability as well as different axes
of discrimination that fat individuals face, which makes this show particularly interesting and important to analyze.

In *Fat Chance*, as in other makeover shows, the diet is constructed as a “journey” on the way to “betterment” and the happy (coupled) ending. What sets this show apart from other shows is that this journey does not only include the body or weight loss but is strongly connected to other spheres in the participants’ lives such as career and social class. I argue that this is what makes analyzing *Fat Chance* helpful for uncovering underlying beliefs and discriminatory structures concerning fatness, relationships, and the body. While some makeover shows target only women (*The Swan*) or men (*Rigtigte Mænd (Real Men)*) (Bruun Eriksen & Hvidtfeldt, 2021), *Fat Chance* features male as well as female participants, people of color as well as white participants, and hetero- as well as homosexual participants, implying that the assumption of “needing to be thin to be worthy of love” as well as the imperative of coupling are relevant for everyone, regardless of gender, sociocultural background, race, or sexual orientation.

Makeover shows would have the potential for a positive representation of fat, and the fat acceptance movement has recently gained traction (see for example Gordon, 2023; Williams, 2017). Fat acceptance aims at accepting the fat body as it is, instead of pushing ideas of weight loss and thinness, and fat activists have been fighting to end size-based discrimination (Cooper, 2016). There are shows that follow this premise, such as *Big Sexy* (2011), which resists the common narrative of having to be thin for the real life to start (Zimdars, 2015). However, the majority of body-focused makeover shows still reproduce the common narrative of the imperative of self-improvement through dieting – as does *Fat Chance*.

**Liminality – rites of passage**

Makeover shows such as *Fat Chance* are built around the construction of fat bodies as bodies in a liminal state of transformation; similarly, singleness is portrayed as a stage before the permanent state of being coupled. The makeover orchestrates a transition from one state to another, which corresponds to the idea that an individual must submit to ceremonies or rites to change their position in society (Van Gennep, 1960).

There are three types of rites (Van Gennep, 1960), all of which are also reproduced in makeover shows (Hass, 2018): rites of separation (preliminal rites), transition rites (liminal rites), and rites of incorporation (postliminal rights). Through these, the individual passes from one position to another – equally well defined (Van Gennep, 1960). States are stable conditions, social constancies like the condition of a person which is determined by their “culturally recognized degree of maturation,” such as a married or single state (Turner, 1967, p. 93) as well as the condition (physical, mental, or emotional) that an individual is in at a certain time (Turner, 1967, p. 94). This includes for example good or bad health, and, as I suggest, an individual’s body size and weight. In the case of *Fat Chance*, the states are defined through the participant’s weight: they go from the well-defined state of fat (and all that it entails – unlovability, singleness, negativity) to the well-defined state of thin(ner). There is a clear transition and passage from the liminal stage of fatness to the (assumedly permanent) thin body and the incorporation into society as the “new” thin person.

Transition as a process, as a transformation (Turner, 1967, p. 94) is different from a state. Turner (1967) describes three rites of transition: the phase of separation (the
detachment from the earlier state); the “intervening liminal period,” in which the individual is free from most attributes of the past or coming state, and finally the reintegration of the individual into a stable state (p. 94). This is expressed in the makeover through the before-body that signifies a state that should be left behind. The transitory state of dieting can then be understood as the intervening liminal period; in the end, the reveal and after-body express the successful completion of the process that integrates the participant into the new state as a thin person (Hass, 2018).

Liminality in fatness and singlehood studies

Based on anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep’s (1960) study of the three rites of passage, anthropologist Victor Turner (1967) conceptualized the second stage – liminality - as a state of in betweenness, a position of transition (Lahad, 2012) between social statuses. The concept of liminality has been applied to the field of fat studies (Gailey & Harjunen, 2019; Harjunen, 2007, 2009; Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017; LeBesco, 2004) through the concept of liminal fat, drawing from a study exploring Finnish women’s experiences of being fat (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017). The participants experienced fatness “as a liminal state that cannot be considered a permanent, valuable and identifiable part of or a base for subjectivity” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 2) and considered their “real” bodies and real body size to be thin; fatness was “experienced as a nonpermanent and transitional condition”, an “undesirable and temporally limited state, or a state in-between” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 5). This is echoed in Fat Chance, where many participants state that they are working toward their “real self” that will emerge once they are thin, which points to fatness not being considered part of an individuals’ “core-self” (LeBesco, 2004 as cited in Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 5). Many fat individuals live in a permanent state of “when I am thin” (Harjunen, 2007, p. 206); they wait for their lives to begin when they have achieved their ideal body. This is the basic premise of Fat Chance, with the participants waiting to be thin before they confess their feelings to their crush and start living the life they want.

The concept of liminality as well as the idea of waiting for the real life to begin can also be applied to the status of being single, with temporality playing a “crucial role in the formation of singlehood” (Lahad, 2012, p. 164). Singlehood is generally framed as a “liminal, temporary state; a transitory stage on the way to couplehood” (Lahad, 2012, p. 177) and single women are depicted as waiting for this liminal period to end (Lahad, 2012).

Especially in American culture love can be seen as a rite of passage (Peele, 1988 as cited in DePaulo & Morris, 2005, p. 60) and being in a couple marks the successful “journey into adulthood” and maturity (DePaulo, 2006, p. 60). Becoming “unsingle,” for example through marriage, is constructed as something that anyone can achieve (DePaulo, 2006). I suggest that this reiterates the idea that fat is controllable and “everyone can be thin” (Cain, Donaghue, & Ditchburn, 2021; Ekman, 2018), which puts the blame of failed coupling and failed weight loss entirely on the individual (see for example Ekman, 2018). This is echoed by coach Yari in Fat Chance, who states that participant Lucy has brought her fat body onto herself by eating too much; the fat body is Lucy’s own fault and consequently she is also responsible for any negative aspect that comes with it (Fat Chance, episode six). Overall, the idea that prolonged singlehood is not a desired state of being corresponds to the
idea that living in a fat body is not what people (should) want, and both states should be overcome to be able to start the real life.

Material and methods

One season of *Fat Chance* was aired, all of which I watched and transcribed in its entirety. I asked how dieting, fatness and singlehood can be understood in the context of liminality and how fatness and singlehood are connected in terms of impermanence. Furthermore, I explored which themes emerged in connection to fatness/thinness, love, and relationships. I watched each episode closely while paying attention to what was visible on screen and what was said by the participants, coaches, friends, and family. I analyzed the contents of the episodes with the help of critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2005), which is useful to theorize the relationship between social practices and discourse structures and helps to analyze systemic inequalities. I approached the analysis from a feminist point of view, enabling a critical view on discourse and social inequalities.

Each 43-minute-long episode of *Fat Chance* was aired on the American channel TLC in 2016 and features one participant each. All five female participants are heterosexual; one of the three male participants (Brian, episode two) confesses his crush to another man. Two of the female participants (Vanessa, episode four, and Ta’Tiana, episode eight) are women of color. Each participant sets out on a three-month “weight-loss journey,” during which they try to lose as much weight as possible, with the numbers ranging from about 50 to 100 pounds. They are coached by one personal trainer each (one male, Joey, one female, Yari, alternating from episode to episode). Joey introduces himself as a “transformation specialist” who deals with “people who are on the margins of health;” his goal is to “bring them back into a healthy, happy lifestyle” (*Fat Chance*, episode one). This strongly implies that fat people are neither healthy nor happy and are clearly on the margins (of health and society); they do not take care of themselves, and they need a specialist to help them “transform” their life. The idea of a “transformation” and the notion that the fat person turns into a completely different person once they are thin and only then can start their real lives are typical for weight-loss makeover shows (see for example Palmer, 2014; Zimdars, 2015).

The structure of the show is highly formulaic, and each episode follows the same narrative structure, which is typical for makeover shows (Weber, 2009). In the beginning of each episode, the sentiment of fat people being neither happy, nor healthy or attractive, is expressed through shots of the participants in their underwear, jiggling and pinching body parts, expressing how disappointed they are in themselves and their choices. The camera pans up and down, we see body parts in close-up; the audience is led to intensively observe the participant’s “inappropriate” body parts. These shots are typical for makeover shows (see for example Weber, 2009) and serve to highlight the participant’s desperation as well as their body’s deviance, and thus legitimate the extreme procedures they are about to go through. A text on screen then introduces the participant, stating their name, weight, and who their crush is, and why they have not been able to confess their feelings yet. The introductory scenes mark the participant’s body as the before-body that must be changed to achieve a better life (Kent, 2001; Weber, 2009), constructing the fat body and consequently the individual as unlovable; to overcome this unlovability, one must lose weight. In the end, the participants are presented in new clothes and full make-up, and their family gets to see them again after a long time. This typical reveal of the “new” thin body reinforces the
“before-body-bad” and “after-body-good” sentiments that are typical for makeover shows as well as for dieting as a whole; the slim after-body is always better than the fat before-body (Weber, 2009).

The diet as a rite of passage

The three stages of a rite of passage – separation, transition, and incorporation (Van Gennep, 1960) – become visible in *Fat Chance*. The separation happens in the beginning when the participant lets go of their old habits and old life; the transition is expressed through the transformation of the body; and the reveal in the end signifies the incorporation back into society, into the new stage of life (Hass, 2018).

In *Fat Chance*, there is more to the diet than merely altered eating habits; the transitional period of weight loss includes “processes of self-discovery and transformation” (Heyes, 2006, p. 142). The diet is thus constructed not only as the pursuit of the “ideal” body, but also as a procedure of working on the own self, which contributes to the understanding of the diet as a rite of passage on the way to a “better” self and “better” place in society (Heyes, 2006).

The first confession in front of friends and family before the beginning of the weight loss marks the initiation part of the transitory rite. While eating a “last meal” of fast food, the soon-to-be dieters inform their family of their decision, marking at the same time the end of their old life and the beginning of their transitory period. The family play an important role in makeover shows, representing the community at large and serving as a source of motivation and accountability (Palmer, 2012). They are also important for the reveal, which serves as a signifier for the end of the rite and the participant’s introduction back into society – incorporation. The participants earnt membership into a certain part of society (fit, sexually mature adults), which is signified by their bodies, as well as by them overcoming the hurdle of the confession of the crush. Together with their lower weight and slim body, this serves as proof of the successful transition they undertook. This becomes evident in episode two, when Brian travels to see his family for the first time after a year (after his weight loss). He was too ashamed to show himself in his fat body but is accepted back into the circle of family and friends in his new body.

The passage from one social position to another is often identified with a “territorial passage” (Van Gennep, 1960, p. 192). This is interesting in terms of the “weight-loss journey” the participants set out on: they become symbolic passengers in the transitional journey from one state to the other; in their transitional state they are free from the characteristics of either body (not as fat as before, not as thin as they want to be) until the goal has been reached and the passage comes to an end. Brian (episode two) states that the weight loss has been the “craziest journey” he has ever been on, culminating in the confession of his crush on his friend Mike. Regardless of gender or sexual orientation, weight loss is clearly positioned as a precondition for as well as a journey toward the confession and confrontation.

In some cases, the symbolical weight-loss journey is a literal journey. Meagan (episode one) and Ta’Tiana (episode eight) travel to different cities to see their crushes and confess their feelings; Brian (episode two) travels to present his new body to his family; his literal journey comes after the symbolic journey of the diet. Brian is elated that he finally fits into the seat on the airplane – here, weight loss is presented as the literal precondition to be able
to go on the journey. This is emphasized by the camera focusing on his seat belt closing easily.

In episode eight, Ta’Tiana goes through a territorial passage enabled by her diet and subsequent weight loss, when she moves to a new apartment; she lived on her sister’s sofa, but now has her own place. Here, a change of social category involves a change of residence (Van Gennep, 1960). Furthermore, weight loss is associated with an improvement of social class, which feeds into the American dream of being able to improve one’s life through hard work; weight loss thus constitutes the possibility of upwards mobility (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006, p. 267; see also Heyes, 2006). Dieting thus works not only to change the body but to transcend “one’s roots in an undesirable class and body” (Palmer, 2014, p. 306). Ta’Tiana is Black, and in the show, the diet and subsequent weight loss lead to an improvement of social class only for her. The fact that she was fat and poor (before) and then is thin(ner) and in a better place economically, and that she has achieved this through dieting and hard work is, in the narrative of the makeover, a reflection of the rhetoric of personal responsibility, which underlines the idea that transformation and thus a better life depend only on the will of a person, not on structural barriers or racism (Thompson, 2015). The other participant of color, Vanessa (episode four), is not constructed as undergoing a change in terms of place or sociocultural situation; for her, as for the other participants, weight loss is first and foremost important for achieving (self)love. This constructs weight loss as crucial no matter a person’s background, ethnicity, gender, race, or status.

(Un)worthy of Love – The Passage from Singlehood to Being Coupled

While being fat is stigmatizing to both men and women (for research on fat men, see Gilman, 2004), especially women need to adhere to “standards of physical attractiveness” (Dworkin, 1989, as cited in Rothblum, 2021, p. 264; see also Fahs, 2017), and fatness is excluded from normative femininity and feminine norms (Taylor, 2021, p. 2). Fat Chance-participant Vanessa’s female friend in episode four states: “I’ve struggled with my weight too . . . and we’re women, so you know, we’re constantly being told that we’re good or bad based on our weight”, which reflects the pressure for a thin body. In episode six, Lucy makes a clear connection between fatness and unworthiness of love. Standing in front of the mirror, there are close-ups of her pinching her belly, while she states that this version of her is not worthy of love. This reflects the construction of the thin body as a precondition for being desirable and coupled (Gailey, 2014; Gordon, 2023), and corresponds to the findings that fat women are often believed to be unworthy of heterosexual desire (Gailey, 2014; Gullage, 2014).

The diet is constructed as the rite of passage to self-love, which is equated with the capability of loving another person. Due to his weight, Brian (episode two) is not confident enough to confess his feelings to his friend Mike. Brian states that his weight is holding him back from love; because he only loves himself “50%” and is not attracted to himself, he does not have anything to give to the other person. After having lost 100 pounds, he loves himself more than ever and can finally “go out into the world and love more honestly, and more unconditionally.” Derik (episode seven), after having lost more than 100 pounds, states that he is more inclined to pursue dating now that he is happy with who he is. This equates thinness with happiness and constructs the slim body as proof of the true state of happiness (Bruun Eriksen & Hvithfeldt, 2021).

Love does not only mean romantic love; Lucy feels like she has never been loved by her family, who used to bully her due to her weight. The thin body is thus not only constructed
as a precondition for romantic love, but even for parental/family love; no matter the type of love, fat bodies do not deserve it and a fat body puts the individual on the margins of any kind of loving interaction. After the diet, Lucy has found the strength to confront her mother and family about her feelings, and they make up. Finally, she gets the validation she has craved all along, when her mother and family state that she looks great now and is the “skinniest” in the family. The mother asks what she wants more in life, since now she is beautiful and skinny, does she want a rich husband? After having completed the rite of passage into the thin and acceptable stage of life, not only has Lucy gained the validation of her family and the love she was desperately longing for, but there is also a new kind of love on the horizon – that of a (rich) husband – which emphasizes the importance of marriage as well as the subsequent potential for the improvement of one’s social status (Illouz, 2012; Ingraham, 2008).

The participants mention the topic of marriage frequently. Marriage as a stage comes after the transitional stage of adolescence (Van Gennep, 1960; see also McFarland, Slothouber, & Taylor, 2018), and in this example after the transitional stage of dieting; the rite of the diet is what makes marriage possible, since in a fat, unlovable body, this would not have been possible at all. Rites of passage include “entry into a new achieved status” (Turner, 1967, p. 95), admitting people into a specific group or qualifying them for a position or duty. In episode five, Cheyanne states that after having lost the weight, she is finally ready to be a wife, emphasizing the mutual exclusiveness of fatness and marriage (McFarland, Slothouber, & Taylor, 2018) and the idea that the weight loss qualifies her for the role of a wife.

In certain cases, the diet also serves as a rite of passage from sexual inactivity toward sexual maturity, which reflects rites of adolescence (Van Gennep, 1960). Cheyanne (episode five) states that she is a virgin and intends to wait for marriage, which is commented on by coach Joey as “being the most beautiful thing” about her. This statement is problematic since it positions a woman’s virginity as her most prized possession, which is a very restrictive view on female sexuality. Dieting is thus not only a process on the way to a relationship and marriage, but it is the rite of passage toward being a complete woman and reaching full womanhood, which is often seen as beginning with being sexually active. This emphasizes the lack of sexuality that fat bodies and individuals are often associated with; as LeBesco (2004) argues, fat bodies are rarely seen as sexy and fat individuals are often positioned as sexually inactive. This is implied also by Daniel (episode three) who speaks about being “friendzoned” due to his fat appearance, alluding to the sexual superiority of the thinner body.

**From fat to thin – the passage to a new body**

*Fat Chance* emphasizes the journey toward one’s true self – the thin body represents the true self that has been hidden beneath the layers of fat, and once they are shed, the true thin self can finally emerge (Jutel, 2005; Kyrölä, 2021). This is a common trope in connection with fatness and points to the fat body being a liminal state, a state of non-permanence that the participants want to leave behind (Harjunen, 2009). Furthermore, this highlights the idea of a thin person being hidden underneath the fat, which is common in connection with fat people (Jutel, 2005).
In episode five, Cheyanne states that the weight has held her back from living up to her potential. We see her pinching her stomach and thighs, stating that “this is not who I am supposed be . . . this isn’t the end-result, I want more.” Fatness is not considered the “normal,” permanent state of the body, and something must be done to overcome this state – literally overcome, not only to the “other side” in terms of being the same, but it must be surpassed to reach the “next level,” which is achieved by means of the rite of passage of the diet.

Before her diet, Cheyanne felt weak and defeated; “I felt like I was wearing a fat suit.” This positions fat as something separate from the real self; a layer around the real self that can be shed and taken off like a suit, as a characteristic that does not belong to the body but is separate from it, as well as an “undesirable form of embodiment” (Gullage, 2014, p. 186). Similarly, Brian in episode two states that he could be so much more if he didn’t have his fat – clearly, fat is not something that he is, but something that he has, something separated from his true being. This corresponds to the idea of fat as liminal, since it is not seen as the body’s usual state, not an inherent characteristic of the body or the individual, but as something that does not belong (Kent, 2001); “fat is only ‘surface,’ not an identity” (Kyrölä, 2021, p. 109). After the weight loss, Brian states that “I don’t know if I’ve ever felt more myself than I do today” and that he can finally be who he wants to be, a “real” person. Pointing to his thin body, Brian explains that he has always felt that this is who he was, but his exterior never showed it. Now, however, “this is the true me.” Similarly, Derik (episode seven) states “I feel like the person that I felt has been inside all along is finally coming out.” This supports the idea that the thin person is the “real” me, whereas the fat is just an obstacle to be overcome on the way to the real me (Kyrölä, 2021).

The passage from the wrong to right, false to true self, is often expressed in direct relation to love and relationships. The text on screen in episode five states that Cheyanne has had feelings for her friend for the last 12 years, but has never had the confidence to ask him out; now, she wants to lose 62 pounds in three months to be able to confront him; “can a new body help her get the man she always wanted?” This shows the importance of a thin body to “get the man” and implies that a thin body is a new body, that the old fat body can be exchanged for a new body, and that with a new body, everything will change. The idea of a new body is repeated by coach Joey (episode one) who states that Meagan will be “a whole new person” by the end, as well as by Derik in episode seven, who states that after the weight loss, he feels like he is “a new guy;” the complete change of the self is often presented as necessary for fat people to start their “real” lives (Tovar, 2012).

**Conclusion – the diet as the “right” of passage**

Fatness as a liminal state means that it is a state (usually) before a transition. While LeBesco (2004) suggests that “the experience of being fat” (p. 26) can be seen as a rite of passage, I suggest that in *Fat Chance*, it is specifically the diet that can be seen as a rite of passage, a rite of transition, a liminal rite that enables the individual’s transition from one state to the other. It is constructed as a process on the way to a thin body, which, in turn, is the precondition for milestones such as marriage or children (McFarland, Slothouber, & Taylor, 2018) and a happy, fulfilling life (Hass, 2017).

The diet and weight loss are furthermore constructed as the prerequisite for confidence and love; Derik (episode seven) states that “there are many reasons
why people choose to lose weight. But a lot of times it comes back to someone that you’re interested in. And someone that you want to ask out, but you just don’t have the courage to.” Weight loss overall is presented as proof of the successful completion of the journey of the rite of passage, a literal “right” of passage, that marks the individual as qualified for the next steps in life. Understanding the diet as a “right” of passage points to the notion that without the diet – and weight loss – is impossible to develop as a human being, which in turn strengthens the idea of the thin body as a precondition for a fulfilling life. The passage is not only from one bodily state to another, but at the same time between the stages of being single and being coupled, being unloved and loved, and in the end the precondition to achieving one’s “real” self.

While being fat has “profound and complex structural determinants” (Palmer, 2014, p. 301), the responsibility and fault are often put on the individual. In Fat Chance, the participant’s gender, race, background, and sexual orientation are glossed over, and potentially limiting socioeconomical and structural factors are not mentioned. This is visible with Vanessa and Ta’Tiana, whose potential struggles regarding racism and economic disadvantages are not addressed at all. In the case of Ta’Tiana, who lives on her sister’s couch and cannot afford a flat because she cannot get a job (due to her weight, according to her), the structural difficulties she faces as a fat, Black, poor woman are not addressed, but it is rather emphasized that she could get herself out of this bad situation if she just tried harder. The focus on personal responsibility and the rhetoric of choice implies that acknowledging structural struggles that individuals may face is no longer necessary (Banet-Weiser, 2007). This individualistic approach hides power structures – racialized, classed, and gendered – that in fact have a strong influence on individuals’ bodies and lives, such as the bodies and lives of poor or working-class Black women (Kyrölä, 2021; Thompson, 2015).

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Notes on contributor

Susanne Ritter is a PhD student in Gender Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Tampere University, Tampere, Finland. She has a background in Media Studies and her
research deals with fat bodies, relationships, structures of power, body politics, and makeover shows.

ORCID

Susanne Ritter http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5808-3097

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Regimenting Bodies, Regulating Lives

Fatness, gender, and relationships of power in makeover television shows from Finland and the United States

SUSANNE ALINE RITTER