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NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND TAKING POLITICAL ACTION IN THE FAT
LIBERATION MOVEMENT

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation used an interdisciplinary approach to examine facilitators and barriers of the Fat Liberation Movement (FLM). Drawing on scholarship related to identity, organizational identification, social movements, and public policy, this study examined four research questions about how issues of discourse, identity, political action, and internal routines impact the progress of the FLM. Through content, thematic, and frame analysis, the researcher analyzed 3 viral Facebook posts; 27 episodes of *The Biggest Loser*, *My 600 lb. Life*, and *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*; and 27 blog posts from the blogs *The Militant Baker* and *Dances with Fat* as well as the online magazine *My Body is not an Apology*. In addition, the researcher conducted 25 in-depth interviews with active members of the FLM.

Findings from the study revealed three discursive tensions (unnatural/natural, fact/fiction, and acceptable/unacceptable) to illustrate the ways that fat rejection and fat acceptance discourse competed in interaction.

The primary facilitators of the movement were: the use of fat acceptance discourse; identity; identification processes through virtual communities; political action efforts; and internal practices and strategies through the use of social media and blogs.

The primary barriers of the movement were: the use of fat rejection discourse; the acceptance of intersectional identities; a lack of collective organization, and a decentralized leadership hierarchy.

Through the examination of the FLM, rich data emerged to explain several actions movement members participate in through verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors including language (reclaiming the word “fat”), and physical activity (uninstitutionalized institutionalized political actions), adding to or taking away from movement’s progress. Additionally, frameworks around discourse, organization identification and political action have been extended to the context of a marginalized grassroots movement operating primarily online.

Future directions for research seek to build on matters of identity and identification within the discipline of communication around organizational identification, membership negotiation, and discourse. Practical implications have also been given as recommendations to improve the actions of the movement and its members regarding communication, inclusion, and social movement practices.

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INTRODUCTION

Used as a descriptor, the word fat is simply describing the size of something. However, when coupled with bodies, negative connotations emerge which dehumanize fat individuals and are often used as justification for ill treatment (Lyons, 2009). For example, in a lawsuit brought against the Texas airport bus company for discrimination against the hiring of a fat prospective employee, a doctor testified he made judgments about the plaintiff's health based on her body size before actually conducting an examination (Kirkland, 2008). Although the examination results showed the plaintiff to be in good health, she was denied a medical examination certificate because of frivolous claims that she waddled when she walked and took an extremely long time to make it into the doctor's office when called (Kirkland, 2008). In short, the plaintiff was stigmatized because of the size of her body under the social construct that fat on bodies is bad, and more so, that fat on bodies is not good for business. Unfortunately, instances such as these are not very common. It is the goal of this dissertation to unpack instances such as these highlighting weight stigma and fatphobic practices in modern day society.

In an interpretive study conducted by Tretheway (1999) with women from the chamber of commerce, it was revealed that women do not see fat bodies as professional. Furthermore, the employees also acknowledged that discrimination against fat people was spoken about openly amongst colleagues as bosses had commented that they would not hire an individual simply because they were fat (Tretheway, 1999). The perpetuation of weight stigma due to the social construction of fat is an ongoing instance in today's Western culture, often ridiculing, demeaning, and discriminating against fat bodies based on their size (Puhl & Brownell, 2003). Despite research findings that suggest treatment

such as this does not promote psychological or physical well-being in those that are subjected to it (McClure, Puhl, & Heuer, 2011; Puhl & Heuer, 2010), fat individuals still directly and indirectly experience stigma in macro and micro contexts.

Since the late 18th century, diets have emerged as a popular way for individuals to rid themselves of fat and improve their social status among their peers (Stearns, 2002). Despite a 95% failure rate, the acceptance of dieting still permeates throughout society due to weight loss discourse (Lyons, 2009; Stearns, 2002).

Fat rejection discourse can be defined as a bigger, more dominant frame of thinking that encompasses society and conversations about fat and weight. In short, it is what society accepts as normal, just like it is assumed men should be breadwinners in the family, we also assume weight loss is the best way to combat fat. Arroyo and Harwood (2014) highlight fat rejection discourse in the context of “fat talk,” reporting that women are more likely to experience dissatisfaction with their bodies when comparing body features to show compassion for their “imperfections.” Fat rejection discourse is also prevalent in the media through its focus on personal responsibility and willpower for achieving a certain body type or figure (Brochu, Pearl, Puhl, & Brownell, 2014; Kim & Willis, 2007).

Birthered out of the feminist, queer, and civil rights era (Cooper, 1998), the Fat Liberation Movement (FLM) was developed for fat individuals seeking freedom from societal norms and discrimination practices impressed upon people in their social spheres due to the size of their bodies. Since its inception, the FLM has continuously challenged dominant discourses and behavior that favor “normal” bodies, myths of acceptability, and weight bias (Aphramor, 2010; Cooper, 1998; Herndon, 2008; Heuer, McClure, & Puhl,

2011; McClure et al., 2011; Puhl & Brownell, 2003). Additionally, research utilizing feminist theory and perspectives has helped to draw attention to the explicit and implicit treatment fat women often experience which has been reported as erasing their identities as feminine, sexual beings.

A thorough investigation of the communication literature revealed that, despite boasting a history of interdisciplinary collaborations with fields such as sociology, psychology, and anthropology, fat liberation is still extremely understudied in the field of communication. Hence, there remains a prime interest in examining the FLM since weight stigma is a communication problem in today's Western culture, where individuals often ridicule, demean, and discriminate against fat bodies (Puhl & Brownell, 2003). Furthermore, fat individuals encounter other communicative dilemmas as they are often exploited in the media (e.g., news outlets, movies, TV shows, etc.) and have difficulty forging interpersonal and romantic relationships (Kim & Willis, 2007; Puhl & Brownell, 2003; Puhl & Heuer, 2010). Lastly, within the field of communication, scholars could find great heuristic value in the extension of theories regarding issues of identity and identification within the FLM, as both bodies of scholarship can be situated as vital components in understanding collective action through social movements and social change.

It is the goal of this study to examine the legacy of the FLM by assessing the factors that keep it hindered from public exposure, while highlighting the factors that facilitate its growth. While reviewing the evolution of the movement, its history is found to be intriguing but also disappointing due to the lack of initiative by entities in positions of power to change the perspective of the public about fat individuals and their plight in

society. Furthermore, with additional research of the movement's involvement in public policy endeavors, it became clear that although the FLM has been present over the past five decades working towards social change, the endeavors of fat activists have been marginalized due to larger societal discourses about weight from medical communities and weight loss industries, which speaks to external struggles inhibiting progress.

Moreover, questions are still left to ponder about the internal workings of the FLM since investigation has been lacking in this context. There is a need to explore the practices or strategies of the movement, feelings and productivity around membership, and the ever-changing landscape of media and the dissemination of ideas to those who are interested in hearing them the most. Hence, it is the goal of this dissertation to lessen the gap of knowledge in this area, addressing the previous questions through qualitative inquiry, amplifying the voices of those within the movement, while examining the discourse of their opponents.

The literature review will begin with a history of the FLM. Then, the movement will be considered in the context of current discourses about bodies, identity, and social acceptability. Topics of public policy and political action also will be reviewed in light of the progress of the movement. Research questions will be offered about each of these topics. Next, the study's methods will be discussed, and results presented. The dissertation will conclude with a discussion connecting the data with theoretical and practical implications, while also offering directions for future research and addressing limitations.

CHAPTER 1

MAPPING THE HISTORY OF THE FAT LIBERATION MOVEMENT

The FLM has three waves of emergence and establishment, marking its development throughout the past 40 years as a movement that advocates for fat individuals to be represented accurately in everyday life, research, academia, and fashion (Cooper, 1998; Sokol, 2015). The following map of the movement is not exhaustive but provides history and context for the dissertation's focus on the third wave of fat liberation by identifying significant gains the movement has made through the incorporation of Fat Studies as a discipline of study, the acceleration of fat acceptance and celebration through social media, and the interpersonal connections solidified through liberation communities.

The First Wave

The first wave of the movement occurred between 1967 and 1989 (Cooper, 2008) as individuals organized to bring awareness to the ill treatment fat people were experiencing in society. For example, the first documented organized protest against the maltreatment of fat individuals was orchestrated in 1967 as 500 demonstrators staged a "fat-in" in Central Park located in New York City. Those who attended staged the demonstration by showing up eating ice cream, burning diet books, and setting fire to portraits of the popular model, Twiggy (Fletcher, 2009; Sokol, 2015). Protests like this in the 1970s laid the foundation of social activism that would help to define the movement along with the work of many other individuals and organizations (Cooper, 1998).

National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA). In 1969, one of the most well-known organizations for fat rights, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), was created by William Fabrey as a response to the maltreatment and discrimination practices his wife received from others due to her body size (Cooper, 1998). Modeled after the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), NAAFA was the first professional organization dedicated to the advancement of fat rights, advocacy, and support services for its members and still functions up to this present time (Cooper, 1998). Subsequently, due to intergroup conflicts regarding NAAFA's commitment to the fat community and an adoption of a dating service in 1972, some members left NAAFA to pursue more radical types of activism, forming what was known as the Fat Underground (Cooper, 2008).

The Fat Underground. The Fat Underground took a feminist perspective in explaining why fat is problematic and used as a tool to oppress fat women's ability to express themselves sexually and sensually (Fishman, 1998). Founded by Sarah Golda Brachman Fishman and Judy Freespirit, the Fat Underground focused on distributing writings and books to help fight issues of fat discrimination (Fishman, 1998). In 1973, FreeSpirit and Fishman (also known as Aldebaran), drafted what is known today as the *Fat Liberation Manifesto*, stating that fat liberation was not just about human dignity and respect, but also committed to the removal of discrimination and practices that limit fat people from living their best lives (Cooper, 1998). An excerpt from the manifesto reads,

We demand equal rights for fat people in all aspects of life, as promised in the Constitution of the United States. We demand equal access to goods and services in the public domain, and an end to discrimination against us in the areas of employment, education, public facilities and health services (Laurenay, n.d., para. 1).

Many other works were released throughout the decade of the 70s helping to establish the work of fat liberation. A germinal piece of the movement, *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings on Women on Fat Oppression*, was published by Schoenfielder and Wieser (1983) showcasing writings of fat activists of different races, helping to solidify the claims of discrimination and stigma fat individuals endure. The importance of this book continues with those in fat liberation today as the original distribution by those affiliated with the Fat Underground helped to spread the message of fat activism far and wide (Fishman, 1998; Simic, 2016). Additionally, the Fat Underground was also widely acknowledged for the eulogy of Mama Cass Elliot, a famous fat singer who died from a heart attack in 1974 (Cooper, 2008; Simic, 2016). During the funeral, members of the group took the time to speak of the singer's influence and expose the fatphobic medical practices that potentially lead to her death (Simic, 2016).

During the first wave of fat liberation, activists were building their case against societal norms by addressing issues pertaining to health, political power, and sexuality. They were also networking outside of the fat community with organizations that supported queer identities as well as fostering the expansion of fat activism through smaller community collectives in reference to fashion, dating, and exercise (Cooper, 2008; Simic, 2016). Furthermore, during the first wave, emphasis was being placed on solidifying the legitimacy of the movement, which NAAFA helped to achieve, along with the publishing of pieces like, *Shadow on a Tightrope*. Nevertheless, as times changed, the methods of fat liberation did also, ushering in what is now known as the second wave of fat liberation.

The Second Wave

The second wave of fat liberation is illustrated by the inclusion of other countries and a rise in published works around the topic (Cooper, 2008). Well into the late 80s and 90s, more individuals were publishing books on fat acceptance, national conferences were created, and more organizations emerged to fight against the injustices of the fat community. Unlike the first wave, the second wave of fat liberation tactics included celebrities to speak against fat oppression, and fat activists utilizing the media on their own terms to produce material that accurately reflected the lived experiences of the fat community (Cooper, 2008). Additionally, works geared towards fat liberation became more visible in public policy as NAAFA introduced The Council on Size and Weight Discrimination to fight against size discrimination (“Home,” n.d.).

Fat liberation takes on media. One of the most impactful strategies of the second wave were the ways fat activists used the media and fashion to aid in the dissemination of their message of size acceptance (Cooper, 2008). In 1984, Alice Ansfield created the magazine *Radiance* which showcased fat bodies and served as an organizing agent for women in the Bay Area (Cooper, 2008). Additionally, the early 90s exercise program, *Great Shape*, emphasized the importance of body movement while acknowledging the barriers to people of size, and this inspired many more exercise programs within the fat community in the Bay Area in California (Lyons, 1990). *Yoga for Round Bodies*, an exercise video, was an extension of this phenomenon that allowed individuals to practice body movements in their own homes. In other forms of media activism, cartoonists were creating fat characters that challenged the societal idea of normalized bodies (Edison & Notkin, 1994).

International activists also took part in the second wave of fat liberation as UK celebrities Dawn French and Victoria Wood used comedy as a way to fight against fat oppression, and US celebrities like Ricki Lake and Carney Wilson were on screen as a successful talk show host and singer who bared their history regarding their weight and the struggles that ensued (Cooper, 2008). All the celebrities mentioned would later succumb to the pressures of society and ascribe to dieting and weight loss surgery (Cooper, 2008; Murray, 2011). Still, for those during the time, media utilization proved to be a great asset. So much so, that a culture was created all its own regarding fat liberation through the use of zines.

Zines. A zine is defined as a homemade piece of media, usually published or disseminated online through networking amongst individuals or groups (merriam-webster.com). In the case of fat liberation, the topics covered in zines were atypical (including sex, sexuality, and body celebration) and utilized for political action (Simic, 2016; Stokes, 2013). Using zines, activists were able to unite as well as point out differences about fat liberation by sharing personal antidotes, expressing manifestoes of their own, and exerting a call to action (Stokes, 2013). Many of the techniques utilized by zines and other media products that drew on the previous foundations of fat liberation, expanded ways in which activists could share their information with others. As the second wave continued, fashion became a key element as designers and retailers realized there was a market for what is known today as plus-size clothing.

Fashion. Fashion expanded during the second wave as both designers and retailers found a niche market for larger bodies. It is from this expansion, the term “plus-size” was introduced to the fashion market and corporations began to mass produce

pieces for larger bodies (although still limited in size) (Cooper, 2008). Amplestuff Catalogue was created by NAAFA founder, Will Fabrey, while Pretty Big Magazine served as a directory for those interested in independent designs (Cooper, 2008). Fashion shows also began to tailor events specifically to fat bodies. In 1998, Full-Figured Fashion Week (FFFWeek) was created by Gwen Devoe as an alternative to New York Fashion Week to showcase clothes, styling tips, and business education to those in the fat community and aspiring entrepreneurs looking to be involved in plus-size business (Dunn, 2016).

Through examples like zines and fashion, it is clear to see how these entities coupled with work from organizations like NAAFA and The Fat Underground assisted in facilitating support and a voice to those fighting for fat liberation. By uniting works done in the mainstream with art and video as well as through personal networks utilizing zines, the second wave of fat liberation solidified and expanded on work previously done in its inception. Moreover, as the second wave was coming to a close, there was a push from activists to focus on the celebration of fat bodies, in addition to their oppression (Cooper, 2008). From this era comes the fat positivity component of fat liberation, which is seen most often today in the third wave.

The Third Wave

As Cooper (2012) states, the third wave of the FLM starts from the year of 2000 and can be seen as an evolution of the past two waves, utilizing technology to reach and include broader audiences through social media platforms, radio shows, and TV (Levy-Navarro, 2009; McAllister, 2009; Sokol, 2015; Wann, 2009). Additionally, colleges and universities such as Oregon State University, Tufts University, and Dickinson's College

have added Fat Studies programs as a discipline of study (Osler, 2016). Lastly, there has been a shift in the way activism is being done in the third wave which marks a clear distinction between the work of national organizations and smaller collective groups called communities.

Fat Studies. Emerging from the culmination of the last two waves of fat liberation, Fat Studies is an interdisciplinary area of study that questions and challenges the dominant narrative about weight, health, and acceptance of fat bodies. As Cooper (2010) states, the opposition to fat liberation through academia and elsewhere are plentiful. Thus, having a discipline that further examines the origin of fat shaming and weight discrimination is helpful for society in general. The popularity of Fat Studies, whether through the notions of body positivity or curiosity, is helping inspire students to enroll in courses. Reports from Dickinson College and Oregon State University show classes being filled to capacity each time a course is offered (Watkins, Farrell, & Humeyer, 2017). There is also a sense of the “For Us, By Us,” mantra offered through Fat Studies as the scholarship centers fat activists and authors (Watkins et al., 2017). By incorporating a discipline such as Fat Studies in an institutionalized setting, fat activists position themselves to have a dialogue regarding rights and liberties for students of size, not limited to fat accommodating classrooms (i.e., adequate seating and equipment), fat positive classrooms (i.e., a change in language and labels), and an overall improvement of the lived experience for fat students nationwide. In many ways, the existence of a Fat Studies discipline echoes back to the foundation laid by activists in the first and second wave of fat liberation and further substantiates a need to know more about the FLM and how it operates. One area of particular interest in this dissertation is the formation and

operation of national organizations and smaller groups within the fat liberation movement known as “communities.”

National organizations vs. “communities.” During the first and second wave of fat liberation, national organizations and communities such as NAAFA and The Fat Underground served as social justice sites for members wanting to be involved in fat liberation work. Very much like the first and second waves of feminism, the FLM found itself lacking diversity and inclusion of members (Null, 2012; Stokes, 2013). As Null (2012) reports, much of what has been done via fat liberation is overwhelmingly “White.” Consequently, national organizations began to experience an exodus of members to fat liberation “communities” which facilitated interpersonal relations and community building among more diverse groups (Cooper, 2008; Stokes, 2013). As Williams (2017) notes, the community space *Fat Women of Color* (on the social media platform Tumblr) has been used as a way to illustrate how fat women, femmes, and transgender women, create material for their specific demographic because they do not feel like they belong in White dominated spaces. Furthermore, one respondent of Null’s (2012) study substantiated this claim by stating she left NAAFA after there was a disregard from board members for creating a space for Black members.

Moreover, those within the movement who are disabled or of a different sexual orientation also find it hard to fit into national organizations and seek to find communities. These entities are less formal, yet more dynamic by way of creating personal relationships and connections which is visible through the first type of fat liberation “community” mentioned, The Fat Underground (Bronstein, 2015; Cooper,

2012). As an attempt to foster more inclusivity, the Association for Size Health and Diversity (ASDAH) was created along with NoLOSE in the third wave.

ASDAH and NoLOSE. ASDAH was created in 2003 and promotes fat acceptance and holistic health practices from what is known as the Health at Every Size (HAES) paradigm. Although ASDAH advocates for fat bodies, according to the website, the organization believes that HAES principles can be practiced by anyone of any shape for optimal health (“About ASDAH,” n.d.). In recent years, due to the scrutiny of members, ASDAH revised its principles to ensure the inclusion of people relating to sizeism, ableism, weight stigma, socio-economic status, and other factors that may impact an individual’s ability to have access to resources that promote total health. These principles demonstrate the organization’s understanding of the importance of intersectionality, a term coined by Crenshaw (1989) to explain the disparities women experience amongst one another despite being a part of the same in-group.

Through Crenshaw’s (1989) analysis of Black women’s lived experience in the justice system and in society, she determined that although these women shared a common space with their White counterparts, they were still subjected to rules and regulations that hindered their ability to experience the same treatment or actions that White women spoke of due to race and socio-economic status (Crenshaw, 1989). Tying this concept back to ASDAH, by understanding the added burdens others may receive due to the oppression rendered by having over-lapping marginalized identities (Van Amsterdam, 2013), the organization attempted to take such differences into account before sharing resources online, such as blog posts, pictures, or comments on identity sensitive topics with group members (“About ASDAH,” n.d.). Additionally, other

organizations like NoLOSE utilized the concept of intersectionality by creating a space for those who are interested in fat activism and identify as part of the LGBTQ community (“About NOLOSE,” n.d.). Originally beginning as the National Organization for Lesbians of Size, NoLOSE was founded by Dot Nelson-Turnier in reaction to negative backlash from other lesbian readers of the publication, *Lesbian Connection* which featured a fat woman on the cover (“About NOLOSE,” n.d.). Nelson-Turnier recruited a board of directors and eventually made NoLOSE a safe haven for all genders and trans individuals by 2011 (“About NOLOSE,” n.d.).

Within NoLOSE, the tenets of the organization embrace intersectionality as both a reality illustrating the ways that oppression works against fat people with other oppressed identities, and an ideology that can be used to educate others (“About NOLOSE,” n.d.). From its inception, one can see the evolution of the organization’s growth, as it has transformed to become more accepting of queer identities, genders, and the added oppression that comes with being a person of size. Furthermore, the goal to utilize education as a tool of activism is also present as NoLOSE is focused on advocating for fat people of color, and trans and queer identifying individuals through the work of anti-racism, anti-imperialism, anti-ableism, and classism (“About NOLOSE,” n.d.).

Nevertheless, considering that both NoLOSE and ASDAH have made changes that are reflective in the past ten years, there is a possibility that the effectual incorporation of intersectional ideas has come a little too late for those looking for equal representation. Moreover, although a lack of diversity and inclusion may be an explanation for member departures, another strategy to consider may be based on matters of self-preservation.

A need for community. Research asserts that the third wave of fat liberation is comprised of many channels designed to build community and lead to social change *even* if one's goal is not policy reform (Bronstein, 2015; Simic, 2016). As Nash and Warin (2017) argue, fat oppression is ongoing and relentless, which presents a greater need of communal support for those participating in fat liberation efforts due to the exposure they receive today versus four decades ago (Cooper, 2008). Thus, having a support system available through smaller communities tailored to specific needs of its members could prove invaluable for those who need it. Realistically speaking, these efforts would be extremely difficult to manage through two or three national organizations. Additionally, with the use of the internet becoming more frequent and wide spread, communities can be found instantaneously online to assist members in day to day struggles or lend a hand in activism efforts using new media (Williams, 2017).

Unlike the media discourse of the second wave, new media such as social media platforms and blogging have provided a space for fat activists and the fat liberation movement. As Williams (2017) suggests, most of what is happening in regard to fat activism is now happening online. Bronstein (2015) echoes this sentiment by acknowledging the emergence of the *Fatosphere*, a large network or community of bloggers, activists, "fatshionistas," and resources connected online to resist societal norms that promote fatphobia. The origins of the *Fatosphere* are not clear, but its emergence can be dated back to the early 2000s.

Dickins and colleagues (2011) first published a study on the *Fatosphere* and its positive effects on fat people coping with life. Study findings indicated that the *Fatosphere* served as a space of comfort and information for the fat community by

providing support against instances of fat shaming and advice on everything from relationships to where to buy clothes (Dickins et al., 2011). Participants were also able to find acceptance of their bodies which led to increased physical activity and mindful eating (Dickins et al., 2011). Bronstein (2015) echoed these effects through a study that utilized the *Fatosphere* mailing list, a free email subscription program that enabled users to find relief from the struggles of being fat in society, look for fashion tips, or to have a space that allowed them to voice their frustration among a supportive community. In this regard, the *Fatosphere* can also be seen as an interconnected community of fat members that support one another by publishing material accessible to those who need it at will. These findings demonstrate the need for more intimate interactions which helps to offer another possibility as to why there has been a departure (or at least a straying away) from national organizations and a cleaving to online spaces that promote a communal environment.

In summary, the three waves of the Fat Liberation Movement have laid a foundation for fat activism, while addressing qualms in regard to inclusivity, adapting to the emergence of new media, and capitalizing on the interest of weight stigma in academia with the introduction of the Fat Studies discipline. With the inception of NAAFA, the FLM was able to solidify themselves as an official entity who stood for fat persons and their right to not be discriminated against. From this foundation, the Fat Underground community was created and positioned fat liberation as both a fat and feminist movement, merging ideologies and communities to combat societal norms and expectations of women in reference to body size, sex, and sexuality.

During the second wave of fat liberation, there was evidence of those in other countries taking a stand for fat rights, as well as additional efforts to push policy reform through the Council on Size and Weight Discrimination (CSWD) (cswd.org). Outside of formal organizations, fashion, art, and media all helped to change the way fat activists disseminated information and how they networked within the fat community.

The third wave of fat liberation reflects the current state of affairs. Fat Studies has emerged as an interdisciplinary area of study that gives scholars the ability to question and challenge dominant views of fatness through the institution of higher education. Through the previous work of national organizations and communities, Fat Studies presents a glimmer of hope for researchers and educators alike who hope to see bigger changes in society as well as the classroom that incorporate fat students. Additionally, with further inspection, it is a valid claim that by examining intricacies within each wave of the movement, progress often was hindered due to the blind spots in FLM's agenda. In particular, there seemed to be a disregard for racial, able-bodied, and sexuality differences during the first and second waves. As a result, some members no longer felt connected to the organizations they joined under the movement. Thus, community building has become a focus of fat liberation in the third wave. By utilizing social media platforms, fat activists have been able to connect with broader audiences, utilizing greater inclusivity and creating smaller fat communities that embrace former members of national organizations that seek connection outside of dominant White spaces and greater support for self-preservation.

Taken together, the FLM did much on its end to facilitate growth and add meaning to its existence, but due to the push back of dominant discourses, internal

conflicts regarding issues of identity and identification, there is still much to learn about this movement. With this in mind, the dissertation seeks to understand how the FLM could be around for so long with little to no recognition. Obviously there have been barriers and facilitators, but specifically, who or what is creating them and why? Based on the historical mapping of the movement, the overarching research question for this dissertation is posed: what are the facilitators and barriers to the Fat Liberation Movement?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Power of Discourse

From a discursive or social constructionist perspective, identification can be viewed as an ongoing process that individuals go through to define themselves and communicate with others (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987). Through this perspective, identity is co-created between individuals within interactions through the use of communication. Identification in this view is heavily biased towards the agency of individuals and less of outside influences (Larson & Gill, 2017). In other words, identities are shaped and identification is enacted through discourse. Understanding the relationship between big “D” Discourse and little “d” discourse aids in the understanding of identification in several contexts (Larson & Gill, 2017; Kitzinger, 2005; Watson, 2008).

Big “D” discourses. Big “D” discourses are more dominant frames of thinking that encompass society and conversations (Larson & Gill, 2017; Sveningsson, & Alvesson, 2003; Tracy & Tretheway, 2005), while little “d” discourses are framed as talk that is more local and attributed to action. As Antaki and Widdicombe (1998) posit, little “d” discourses are designed to accomplish a task or goal, as they not only spread information, but also transmit it in a way that creates subsequent action.

In regard to identification, dominant discourses are the forms of communication used to shape expectations of what a person should or should not “be” (Tracy & Tretheway, 2005). Within organizational settings, this influence is clear as big “D” or dominant discourse plays a substantial role in the action and conversation of employees. For example, Tracy and Tretheway (2005) used the study of organizational discourse and

identity to highlight the ways that employees are often guided within organizations to diminish the value of their “personal selves” in hopes of achieving a more positively framed identity in the workplace. In short, dominant discourse can be likened to an aroma that permeates a house and impacts everyone residing there whether they welcome it or not. However, it should not be assumed that because the aroma is present, all react to its influence in the same way. Though dominant discourse is all encompassing, some do choose to push back by dis-identifying with the notions of normalcy, striving to create a different reality through talk and communication (Cooper, 2008).

Little “d” discourses. In the same vein, little “d” discourses are framed as talk that is more local and attributed to action. Like dominant discourses, little “d” discourses are also constituted by communication (Larson & Gill, 2017). They have the power to create, inform, and recreate order through talk and interaction, although the lasting impact may be smaller.

In regard to identity, little “d” discourses are the localized talk that may or may not reinforce dominant discourses commonly known in society. For example, Kitzinger (2005) has developed scholarship examining heterosexism and the assumptions made by heterosexuals when speaking to same sex individuals. As she notes through the analysis of tape-recorded phone calls, lesbians often have to choose to use language indicative of “coming out” (i.e. little “d” discourses) to correct and repair statements made by heterosexuals since they live in a world which often takes heterosexuality (i.e. dominant discourses) for granted (Kitzinger, 2005). Additional scholarship in conversation analysis has critiqued traditional modes of identity research for being too quick to assume that the identity presented by those who self-identify or who are categorized in a group by way of

membership categorization, is part of the communication taking place without examining the context or actual conversation (Schegloff, 1987: 2007; Zimmerman, 1998).

In the context of the FLM, the discourse shared among members are in opposition to Big “D” discourses, playing a dominant role in how members of the movement participate in practices that foster a fat positive identity. Little “d” discourses are employed by the belief in fat acceptance by members, helping to shape what is said, written, and done daily. For those in the FLM, tensions may arise as they attempt to assert themselves against the impending forces of dominant discourses that could act as a barrier to the movement’s agenda, as well as win over others through localized talk about fat liberation and its goals. Pondering the points above, RQ1 asks the following:

RQ1: How do tensions between big “D” and little “d” discourse impact the progress of the Fat Liberation movement?

Identity, Identification, and Fat Liberation

Cognitive Approaches

Identity and identification processes have been central constructs of study in the communication discipline for decades. The ways that identity pertains to fat liberation, social identity theory, identification, and the discursive approach to understanding identity are discussed below.

Social Identity Theory. Social identity theory (SIT) posits that individuals learn about their identity in the world based on how they see themselves and how they are perceived by others (Larson & Gill, 2017). Through a combination of these perspectives, individuals then begin the process of social categorization, assigning themselves and others to social groups that highlight prototypical characteristics of members (Ashforth &

Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Within the context of fat liberation, SIT does well in explaining why individuals would self-identify as fat for two reasons. First, SIT separates the difference between personal and social identity, giving the individual agency in attributing meaning to his or her own personal characteristics (such as one's abilities and interests) (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Second, it provides room for social identification which allows the individuals to "find" oneself through group membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Hence, according to SIT, fat individuals who are part of the movement may find characteristics within themselves that align with the ideals of the fat liberation movement and/or a sense of belonging within the collective. Now, this is not to say that members of fat liberation have no qualms about what happens within the movement. As Hogg and Taylor (2001) argue, self-identification is different from internalization, exposing the personal values and expectations one may have. Furthermore, within organizational identification, a subset of self-identification, many identities coexist, which may cause friction between members or within oneself (Hogg & Taylor, 2001; Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998).

Ashforth and Mael (1989) posit that organizational identification is a "specific form of social identification" (p. 22) that enhances support and commitment and reinforces the "specialness" of group identification that causes members to feel important and compete with outside groups. Through the process of organizational socialization, group members also learn how to label themselves and others as well as internalize the values and goals of the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Scott, 2007). Considering that fat liberation is controversial as it combats societal norms of beauty and body norms, organizational identification becomes more vital to the support of individuals who agree

with the movement's objectives because being a part of fat liberation communities and national organizations provides support and activism strategies for members that help them to define who they are, what they deserve, and what steps to take to achieve their goals (Nash & Warin, 2017; Stokes, 2013; Williams, 2017).

Social Categorization Theory. Adding on to the foundation of SIT, social categorization theory (SCT) approaches identity from a more collective perspective, arguing that individuals in groups aspire to a group prototype for representativeness (Hogg & Terry, 2001). Like SIT, SCT promotes group cohesion, behavior, and shared history, yet it is less concerned about individuality, but rather in understanding the cognitive process that individuals use to depersonalize themselves, exchanging their self-categorization to a social one which is illustrated in behaviors through the perceived meaningful prototype of the in-group (Hogg & Terry, 2001). For those engaged in fat liberation work, this theory also fits well to explain the emergence of fat bloggers, activists, and celebrities who have become the “face” of the movement, spurring actions (i.e., wearing two-piece bathing suits, wearing crop tops, standing up against online “trolls”) in members said to represent the movement (Bronstein, 2015).

Nevertheless, SIT and SCT do fall short when addressing identity outside of cognitive contexts (Larson & Gill, 2017). From a discursive perspective, social construction is utilized to inform society about language and what it means, but this has a very limited role in the process of communicating identities through SIT and SCT (Fairhurst, 2008; Larson & Gill, 2017). Moreover, within the tenets of SIT and SCT there are clear indicators that social identities and categorizations are socially constructed between individuals and groups, consisting of a plethora of meanings and interpretations

that are negotiated through discourse (Larson & Gill, 2017). SIT and SCT leave this out. Additionally, through both perspectives of SIT and SCT, identity is seen as fixed and typically stable, providing little room for fluctuation (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008) which is problematic, because from a discursive approach both identities and organizations change over time (Larson & Gill, 2017). Lastly, the discursive approach emphasizes the possibility of embodying multiple identities simultaneously, which complicates how SIT has been addressed in the past (Alvesson et al., 2008). For those who view identity as a fixed entity negotiated through cognitive processes, particularly in the way that individuals make sense of their connections to other groups, SIT and SCT prove to be useful theories. However, work in the communication field highlights identification processes through the paradigm of social construction which provides a different perspective and centers interactive practices.

Discursive approaches

Identification and the Feminist Perspective. Those who utilize a feminist perspective of identification seek to expose the ways that gender influences how individuals are treated. Work in organizational communication reflects this idea as Alvesson (1998) conducted an ethnography to study how the role of masculinities and femininities at work were constructed and negotiated through dominant discourse at a Swedish advertising agency. His findings illustrated that men were placed in positions of authority in the workplace despite the work they were completing was defined as feminine according to societal discourse. Furthermore, men participated in little “d” discourse throughout the advertising office by utilizing identity work, which consisted of behaviors and talk to reaffirm their masculinity and sexuality, while simultaneously

grappling with performing a job categorized as feminine (Alvesson, 1998). Other research studies help to expose the ways that women are exploited in regard to work despite an organization's commitment to equality (Witz & Savage, 1992), referring to what Deetz and Kersten (1982) call deep structures of organizing.

Identities through this perspective are defined through gender in action (i.e. nursing is a "woman's" job, a boy crying is said to be weak and acting like a girl). Such constructions are negotiated through societal discourse often laden with gendered power dynamics. In the case of fat liberation, exposing how dominant discourses often strip fat women of their femininity and complicate how identity is framed is evident through Patterson-Faye's (2016) work on Black fat women and sexuality, as the author uses Black feminist thought to showcase the ways that fat Black women are often dehumanized and painted as asexual because of their size. By likening Black fat women today to the historical depiction of Mammy(ies), through her analysis of semi-structured interviews of 33 women, Patterson-Faye (2016) was able to make a connection between the intersections of body size, race, and gender, addressing previous critiques of the feminist perspective on inclusion and intersectionality. Additionally, in a study by Bergman (2009), clear distinctions were made in the treatment she received as a fat woman when perceived by others to be a man. Shopping for clothing and food was positively different, as a man's masculinity is not negatively impacted by weight or body size in these contexts. Furthermore, in the context of violence, Royce (2009) draws parallels between partner violence experienced by women and how much this is driven with fat oppression as motivation.

Other studies using feminist theory draw attention to more subtle ways femininity is reinforced or tailored to those of smaller sizes. In Viladrich, Yoh, Brining, and Weiss's (2009) work on femininity and body image, Latinas were tested to measure their desires on body size and what is considered a "normal" feminine body. A mixed method approach (focus groups and surveys) with 44 participants revealed a need for more diverse bodies in the media and that the Latina body is in contrast (and regarded as less feminine) to the White woman body ideal. Also, in a participant observation, Gruy (2012) conducted a study assessing the emotional labor individuals undertake in a women's plus size clothing store. Working as a retail associate, Gruy (2012) witnessed the positive impact the personalization of clothing had on plus size women when shopping for clothes, but also the struggle many women faced in regard to sizing and acceptability. Gruy (2012) reported that many plus sized women found the store to be a "safe space" to make clothing purchases which ultimately made them feel better about their shopping experiences.

It is important to note, in relation to the aforementioned pieces, the instances of overlapping, oppressed identities and the treatment ensued by the individuals involved. As previously mentioned, Crenshaw (1989) articulated the importance of intersectional identities through her seminal study documenting the lived experiences of Black women seeking justice against discrimination practices in the courts. Within communication, the feminist perspective is criticized as being too narrow in assessing the way that gender is defined and how researchers should seek to measure it moving forward (Larson & Gill, 2017). Thus, viewing identities through an intersectional framework has been mentioned

as a remedy to this, allowing flexibility in gender and expanding the way identities are examined.

Identification and intersectionality. Through the third wave of the FLM, more identities have been sought after, making multiple targets a possibility that can be both exhilarating and challenging. As previously mentioned, a remedy for the way the feminist perspective has been framed in the past is to defer to the perspective of intersectionality to explain the ways that identities are layered, overlapped, and oppressed (Larson & Gill, 2017). There is additional need to investigate the ways that identification is happening within the movement as a whole, giving credence to self and organizational identification. Moreover, intersectionality assessed through the lens of communication provides a viable way to examine multiple identities shared through interaction (West & Fenstermaker, 1995; Larson & Gill, 2017).

In addition to Faye-Patterson's (2016) piece on Black women, the depiction of "mammies" and sexuality, additional research adds to the conversation, noting that fat Black women are categorized as the "other" within the Black community as thinner Black women can better align their experiences with that of White women when it comes to size acceptance (Null, 2012; Shaw, 2005). Furthermore, Null (2012) points out that members of the LGBTQ community may also experience "otherness" within the fat community depending on how they define their sexuality. Within this context, some Lesbians express dissatisfaction with their bodies like those who are heterosexual despite being more likely to cast off traditional images or standards of beauty (Pitman, 1999; Null, 2012; Smith & Stillman, 2002). Moreover, those who are bi-sexual are more likely to hold firm traditional standards of beauty (Pitman, 1999), which only reinforce White,

fatphobic ideologies since traditional beauty standards are drenched in dominant discourses that perpetuate these ideas (Null, 2012). Again, this idea is present in Viladrich and colleagues' (2009) assessment of Latina body ideals as a typical feminine Latina body shape was not considered "normal" when compared to Eurocentric or White standards. As Null (2012) asserts, fat White women often are not challenged to think about the ways that their identities intersect like other groups, thus creating a blind spot on their part to understand the ways that fat multiple identities are further hindered through society.

Like Williams' (2017) assessment of the Tumblr site, *Fat Women of Color*, researchers are concluding that being fat and living with multiple oppressed identities may mean something different for individuals who experience weight oppression as opposed to a common idea that the experience of fat oppression or acceptance means the same thing for everyone (Nash & Warin, 2017; Null, 2012; Stokes, 2013). Furthermore, parsing out and identifying differences in identity that are in need of additional support and resources foster greater interpersonal connections and identification with groups and members (Stokes, 2013; Williams, 2017). Thus, delving into the identification processes that are negotiated and managed in marginalized spaces should be of interest for researchers, as they help to add to the conversation about identity and give a voice to those often muted by the dominant discourse in the fat liberation movement. One way to ensure "fat" voices are receiving recognition in the movement is to have some researchers participating in embodiment practices, documenting their experiences.

Identification and embodiment. For those invested in fat liberation work, identification is visible through the communicative behaviors that help activists define

themselves and the work they submit as a form of resistance to push back against societal discourse and social norms. An example of this is the way fat liberation is first offered to those who possess fat bodies. They are typically first partakers of liberation, learning to identify their bodies as something that should be treated with value and honor (McAllister, 2009). Previous research illustrates this point further as individuals share narratives of embodiment to illustrate how they came to accept their bodies by challenging the discourse that fat bodies are inherently bad (Cooper, 1998; Dickins et al., 2011; Lupton, 2013; McAllister, 2009).

Researchers like McAllister (2009) and Lee (2014) utilize the methods of auto-ethnography to take readers into their own personal journey of fat liberation and embodiment. Lee's (2014) writings speak of what it means to be fat, queer, and sexual, noting that none of these identities are suitable for what is typically considered normal in society. Conversely, McAllister (2009) describes her experience as a fat burlesque dancer, citing that neither dancing, sexuality, or the open display of fat bodies in public spaces is normalized or often welcomed. For both authors, liberation is personal first, but has great social implications when shared with others. Lee (2014) speaks of her liberation which ultimately leads to a greater appreciation of self and inclusion of others in her social circles. McAllister speaks to the ways that her burlesque show has become popular with other fat women, causing them to embrace their own bodies, highlighting the ways that identification can be both a personal and shared meaning. Moving forward, identification and the critical perspective will be discussed to highlight the ways that power and influence control some identities more than others.

Assessing identification grounded in feminism, intersectionality, and embodiment, through (a social constructionist lens) departs from the assessments of SIT and SCT, situating little “d” discourse and dominant discourse as way to understand identification processes, and highlighting the use of these communicative tools through different perspectives utilized for the study of fat liberation. Intersectionality should be of great interest to researchers as the ability to examine multiple identities and experiences are present, along with heuristic value of adding to literature on marginalized groups. Within fat liberation research, special attention should be given to that of Black fat women, women of color, and those who identify as members of the LGBTQ community to further investigate how the meanings of fatness differ and what group identification means for them. Thus, an opportunity to investigate the ways that identification plays a part in how members see themselves and their place in the movement, prompts RQ2:

RQ2: How do identity and identification processes impact the progress of the Fat Liberation Movement?

Fat Liberation and Social Change

After assessing the history, organization, and identification components of fat liberation, the last section of the literature review will focus on fat liberation within the context of social change, as it is the primary goal of the movement.

Social Construction and Fat Liberation

The social construction framework also can be utilized to understand how public policy problems are socially constructed, negative and positive target populations are classified, and how stigma and privilege play an integral part in who is benefited or disadvantaged through agenda setting (Sabatier, 1999). It is important to understand that

unlike Kingdon's policy entrepreneurs (2010), which can be likened to advocates, utilizing their resources to improve the likelihood of policies and/or solutions getting put on the agenda, the social construction framework takes away some agency from interest groups, and places focus on the policy itself. In other words, despite one being well liked by his or her peers or having a considerable amount of time to dedicate to raising awareness, their policy proposals can be disregarded based on who the policy is for (Sabatier, 1999; Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Considering that fat is despised and negatively regarded in society, it would not be uncommon for initiatives to be rejected on the grounds that fat people are undeserving of additional protection or care. As Schneider and Ingram (1997) note, the social constructions of target populations are defined similarly up through the chain of policymakers, often being taken as normal and uncontested. Furthermore, these constructions have lasting implications as institutions and culture are influenced and reinforced through the ways that public policy is implemented (Sabatier, 1999; Schneider & Ingram, 1997).

Schneider and Ingram argue there are two components to defining a target group. The first is to determine one's political power (Sabatier, 1999). Are they organized? Are they wealthy? Do they have networks in government? The second is to determine how involved they are in civic duties (Sabatier, 1999). Do they vote? Do they know their elected officials? How likely are they to get involved and reach out to them? Based on these factors, target groups are then said to be placed in one of four categories: advantaged, contenders, dependents, and deviants, which all have consequences of being defined as such. I will cover each one briefly.

Advantaged Populations. Advantaged populations are groups that are well-liked in society, with high amounts of political power (Ingram & Schneider, 2005; Sabatier, 1999). People in these groups are often seen as deserving of benefits (i.e. military service members, police officers, senior citizens), and any negative consequence in policy is usually optional (Sabatier, 1999). Members of advantaged populations are typically notified about policies and are welcomed to discuss the details of such to ensure they are included in the decision-making process (Sabatier, 1999). In other words, the benefits in policy are designed to serve them; all they have to do is show up to get them.

Contenders. Contender populations are people not well-liked in society, but have a lot of political power (Sabatier, 1999). People in these groups are often seen as less deserving of benefits (i.e. Wall Street, big banks, Dakota Access Pipe Line [DAPL] contributors), but cannot be denied because of the political power they hold (Sabatier, 1999). For this population, public policy has granted them benefits, however, the right to these allotments are deliberately hidden in paperwork (Ingram & Schneider, 2005; Sabatier, 1999). There are no public announcements. Negative consequences are not voluntary. Those that are in the contender group know this. They hire lawyers to ensure they receive the benefits they fight for (Sabatier, 1999).

Dependents. Dependent populations are those that do not have a lot of political power, but are felt sorry for (Ingram & Schneider, 2005; Sabatier, 1999). People in these groups are seen as deserving (i.e. children, the homeless, the poor), but lack political power to fight for additional benefits (Sabatier, 1999). Due to the implications of impression management, benefits in public policy are granted to them so those in government do not appear as though they do not care (Sabatier, 1999). Their access to

benefits may or may not be easy and they are left to the mercy of those in government to determine what they should get.

Deviant Populations. Deviant populations are lacking in both political power and societal liking (Ingram & Schneider, 2005; Sabatier, 1999). People in this group (i.e. fat people, felons, terrorists) receive the least amount of benefits in public policy and are often blamed for the brunt of societal ills (Ingram & Schneider, 2005). They do, however, lead all groups regarding the number of policies passed that harbor negative consequences (Sabatier, 1999). With the lack of political power and individuals who will fight on their behalf, deviants are often left to deal with the implications of policies on their own (Sabatier, 1999).

It is important to note, with exception to the Deviant population, target groups are not permanent (Sabatier, 1999). It is possible to be advantaged in one policy, but dependent in another. Also, in instances where there are clear distinctions between groups, there is little likelihood of altering who is constructed as deserving and who is not (Ingram & Schneider, 2005). To mitigate these effects, there has been an influx of “moral entrepreneurs” fighting on behalf of undeserving groups and using public awareness and support as an agitator to influence policymakers (Ingram & Schneider, 2005).

In the context of fat liberation, the prevalence of weight stigma in society is uncontested, making *Deviant* the most fitting label for fat people. Furthermore, the moral panic of the “obesity epidemic” fuels the fire for politicians, policymakers, and business (including the pharmaceutical industry) to “cash in” on the plight of fat individuals (Lyons, 2009; Monaghan, Colls, & Evans, 2013). With a message that is guised and framed under health, weight loss discourse makes for great influence in the public, as

well as in government regarding policy. The health community is positively constructed in society with great political power to lead the way in receiving benefits in public policy when compared to the deviance of fat liberation. Additionally, pharmaceutical companies may find themselves framed in the target group of contenders, but because they have lobbyists and lawyers who advocate with policymakers on their behalf, they are more likely to receive benefits in public policy over fat individuals' rights against discrimination.

Consequently, it is extremely difficult for public policy to be passed for fat people despite the need being there. Through the social constructions of fat and deservedness, weight stigma is perpetuated by excluding fat people based on non-significant differences in health outcomes when compared to smaller bodies, and ultimately diminishing their quality of life (Ingram & Schneider, 2005). Additionally, these constructions continue to perpetuate institutionalized fatphobia and provide no relief from weight stigma and discrimination, as the probability for securing rights to special populations is difficult to do even with no contention present (Ingram & Schneider, 2005).

Perhaps what is most telling about the power of social constructions is that, despite the long history of mobilization in fat liberation organizations or the political power they may possess, because *Deviant* populations are typically considered permanent, the possibility of them fighting and receiving policy written in their favor with benefits, is still incredibly slim. As Ingram and Schneider (2005) posit, changing a negative identity is extremely difficult if not impossible. Thus, through the social construction framework, the social construction of fat keeps individuals oppressed and less likely to have public policy in their favor placed on the agenda.

Political Action

Political action can be defined as behaviors utilized by individuals or groups to influence political power within the sphere of politics. As Stekelenberg, Klandermans and Akkerman (2016) note, political action can encompass several types of behaviors. Past research typically separates the type of action based on institutionalized (i.e., voting, creating ballots, signing petitions) or uninstitutionalized practices (i.e., marching, demonstrations, protests), as well as if these practices are done by individuals or collectively as a group (Van Deth, 2014; Stekelenberg et al., 2016). Diemer and Rapa (2016) argue individuals of marginalized groups are more likely to participate in uninstitutionalized practices of political action when they perceive inequality is present. Furthermore, motivations for political action can vary based on issues like group cohesion, civic duty, or knowledge about the political system (Diemer & Rapa, 2016; Kanas & Martinovic, 2017, & Stekelenberg et al., 2016). For those involved in fat liberation, past initiatives are well documented of groups' involvement in uninstitutionalized political actions such as, "fat-ins" and protests (Cooper, 2008). Campaigns also have been started on social media platforms as well as in the fashion industry to confront weight stigma and change the public's mind about fat. Lastly, there have been laws passed that protect fat people from discrimination based on their weight, illustrating that through the use of institutionalized political action, change can also be had ("Home," n.d.). Today, both political avenues are still being utilized but there seems to be less of a focus on institutionalized actions from those within communities compared to national organizations.

Uninstitutionalized Political Action within Fat Liberation Communities.

Throughout the history of fat liberation, individuals and groups have ranged from conservative to radical approaches of fat acceptance. Fat liberation communities such as The Fat Underground focused more on the production of manifestos and zines to spread knowledge about fat oppression (Stokes, 2013), while NAAFA went on to create the Council of Size and Weight Discrimination to address fat oppression through policy reform (“Home,” n.d.). Furthermore, as Russo and Amna (2016) state, political talk is more likely to cause political action when there is intimacy among members and those members are politically engaged. In the context of communities like The Fat Underground who fostered interpersonal connections and face to face gatherings (Stokes, 2013), a call to political action would be more effective in this setting. This is important because a call to action from leaders within a community would be considered more personal than a notification blast from an organization. Kanas and Martinovic (2017) also echo this sentiment as group identification is a considered deciding factor in whether political action is carried through.

Those who belong to fat liberation communities do so by self-identifying as a member while also participating in many acts of uninstitutionalized political action by way of art, burlesque shows, and book writings all geared towards serving the fat community and educating the public (Stokes, 2013). Furthermore, newer collectives such as *Fat People of Color* use pictures and short stories to voice their struggles and triumphs with being fat while spreading awareness (Williams, 2017). By using their physical visibility as a political tool, fat people showcase their bodies through unconventional means to get the attention of the public about the detrimental impacts of weight stigma.

Previous studies on political action highlight these same tactics as activists utilize the visibility of homeless persons to change the discourse around homelessness and displacement (Middleton, 2014). Additionally, political action tactics studied overseas highlight the ways that communities come together to raise awareness locally and tackle problems that have national implications (Ensign, 2016; Kanas & Martinovic, 2017).

What's missing in the literature regarding uninstitutionalized political action in fat liberation are the intricate details of how members are summoned to participate.

Arguably, there is a consensus within fat communities that activism on a more personal, local level yields social change (Stokes, 2013). Yet details lack in who gets recruited to participate and why. It is hard to tell if members of an organization already know one another or if there are direct efforts that bring members together to further social change. Nevertheless, previous research demonstrates less commitment to institutionalized political actions within the movement which can be for numerous reasons not limited to: less trust of the political system due to marginalization (Diemer & Rapa, 2016), the acts of policy entrepreneurs to stifle advancements of agendas (Kingdon, 2010), and the social construction of what it means to be fat in society. However, despite these barriers, institutionalized political action is still utilized and can often be found through the use of public policy.

Institutionalized Political Action within Fat Liberation. Using the justice system or participating in civic duties all have their place within fat liberation. For example, individuals have used the courts to get justice regarding weight discrimination in employment (cswd.org; Lyons, 2009) locally and statewide. There are also instances where members of the movement are encouraged to write letters to those in Congress or

popular media to advance the movement's goals or prevent a bill that would do specific harm to fat persons (cswd.org). Still, due to the pervasiveness of fatphobia, greater possibilities may exist for the movement by viewing the quest for fat liberation through collaborating with other special interest groups that serve as an umbrella for their needs without the stigma. Hence, the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) provides a reality of such.

Advocacy Coalition Framework. Created by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999), the advocacy coalition framework (ACF) is a comprehensive research model that is designed to address both belief systems and policy change in the presence of persistent friction between government, interest groups, and the media. In short, Sabatier (1999) explains that the ACF is used to explain and address many of the shortcomings in researching the policy process. Comprised of five foundational tenets: (a) scientific findings substantiating concerns, problems, causes, solutions; (b) longitudinal information of at least ten years regarding policy change; (c) policy subsystems becoming the foci of attention opposed to the policy itself; (d) subsystems consisting of anyone of any group, (e) and an assumption that the goals sought after come with a theory or plan on how to accomplish them. These tenets situate the ACF as a revolutionary method to examine and evaluate policy practices.

ACF envisions beliefs of policy subsystems as the way policies are created and translated (Sabatier, 1999). Comparing this to Schneider and Ingram's social construction framework, it is easy to see the similarities. Both have a foundation in the subjective way the world is viewed through the eyes of actors. Within this framework, three types of beliefs within subsystems exist. The first belief system is labeled deep core beliefs

(Sabatier, 1999; Weible, Sabatier, & Flowers, 2008). This system is very much similar to the impact of discourses discussed earlier. Deep core beliefs are the assumptions individuals believe about the world to be normal (Weible & Sabatier, 2007). They are not likely to change, they are broad and encompass values about the role of government and who has a right to participate civically.

The second belief system is known as policy core beliefs (Sabatier, 1999; Weible et al., 2008). These beliefs are best described as beliefs that encompass whole policy subsystems (Weible & Sabatier, 2007). Within this system, Sabatier and Jenkins (1999) also identify what is known as policy core policy preferences (PCPP). PCPP directly relates to how policy subsystems are expected to function (Weible & Sabatier, 2007). Similar to Kingdon's (2010) policy entrepreneurs, individuals in this system help to bolster their claims while diminishing others and help to envision strategy for the coalition to move forward and accomplish goals (Weible & Sabatier, 2007). Arguably PCPPs are what holds most coalitions together (Weible & Sabatier, 2007). Taken together, policy beliefs are less likely to change, but are more flexible than deep seated beliefs.

Lastly, there are secondary beliefs (Sabatier, 1999; Weible et al., 2008). Secondary beliefs are used to explain issues of the budget or rulings outside of the other two tiers (Sabatier, 1999). They do not encompass the same space as policy core beliefs and therefore receive less push back from those within the subsystem when change is expressed (Weible & Sabatier, 2007).

Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999) also identify two outside influences that impact subsystems: stable parameters and external shock. Practically identical to

Baumgartner and Jones' (1983) punctuated equilibrium theory (PET), ACF incorporates these factors into their framework noting that parameters that remain stable are less likely to change under the influence of subsystems, while “shocks” can cause changes due to changes in environment, leadership, or the public (Sabatier, 1999; Weible et al., 2008).

ACF has undergone several revisions to help suit the needs of those interested in studying the policy process (Weible et al., 2008). For example, additional paths to examine policy change have been added as well as the application of the framework in several countries, encompassing several different topics to substantiate its usefulness. All these factors taken together make ACF arguably the most useful, yet the most complex framework when researching public policy and agenda setting.

Advocacy Coalition and Fat Liberation. In the context of fat liberation, ACF offers great possibilities for fat liberation organizations in the realm of public policy. Heavily reliant on collective action, ACF would frame fat liberation organizations as an asset, in this case, the advancement of fat rights. To illustrate such, two of the original ACF tenets (scientific findings and the focus of policy subsystems) are aligned with that of fat liberation movement.

In line with ACF's first tenet of scientific backing, the FLM lays claim to an array of scientific articles substantiating the harm done by weight stigma and dieting (Aphramor, 2010; Cooper, 1998; Herndon, 2008; Heuer et al., 2011; McClure et al., 2011; Puhl & Brownell, 2003). These articles give the movement credibility as they are typically peer reviewed and assessed by like-minds in the same fields. They critique and critically analyze the discourses surrounding fat, weight loss, and acceptability, providing activists and the public policy community with real-life data to substantiate their

arguments for fat acceptance. Moreover, the FLM has done well to solidify its existence through the past four decades to arguably become a subsystem of its own (Cooper, 1998; Sokol, 2015). However, based on its involvements in health through organizations like ASDAH, and anti-bullying campaigns found on the CSWD website, herein lies continued opportunities for fat liberation organizations to align their goals and values with other subsystems involved in women's rights, bullying, and disability rights.

Similar to the review of uninstitutionalized political action, the movement in this context also lacks in the accessibility of steps to understand how organizing or calls to action take place. Are there petitions for public policy and fat acceptance? Who is sparking the debate about weight stigma within the levels of government? Does the movement ever make it that far?

In summary, this dissertation is concerned with social change as it occurs through both institutionalized and uninstitutionalized methods of political action by members of the FLM. The FLM has seen success in both arenas of political action as awareness is currently being spread to educate the masses and ordinances have been passed by law that prevent weight discrimination. Uninstitutionalized political action highlights the ways that fat liberation communities call members to action by utilizing their talents of dancing, art and storytelling to frame a narrative about the fat experience in the US and call for a change in fatphobic attitudes. Institutionalized political action illustrated through the use of the advocacy coalition framework showcases the particular struggles the movement faces to ensure that weight stigma has consequences through the eyes of the law and how they can collaborate with others to have their grievances heard. With a lack of recorded organization about political action and social change, and despite the

acknowledgment of barriers and facilitators, there still leaves much to question about the intricacies of how the FLM use different tactics to create social change. Based on the preceding information, RQ 3 is posed:

RQ3: How do institutionalized and uninstitutionalized political actions impact the progress of the Fat Liberation movement?

Understanding social movements through culture and framing. Melucci's (1996) assessment of social movements help to give greater understanding to the term collective identity, which simply states that the work of social movements is facilitated through that of shared experiences or the social statuses of the individuals involved. Through collective identity, individuals gain solidarity with one another through similar pains, whether perceived or actual, and a sense of belonging (Flynn, 2015; Melucci, 1996). Like fat liberation in this context, group members are not focused on self-achievement, but rather on the collective, organizing to connect interpersonally with members and achieve group goals (Stokes, 2013). Thus, through this process, members become connected through the group's identity, creating a culture that consists of work practices and group behavior.

Research focusing on collective identity and culture base their examination around the "why" behaviors of a collective as opposed to the "how" (Carty, 2015). Arguments surrounding the emergence of collective identity are situated in the transition of social classes in America with the rise of post industrialism and the shifting of social classes, while other arguments center on the possibilities that some individuals are not interested in being involved in social change simply for personal gain (Carty, 2015). Other researchers posit there are cultural similarities that bring individuals together and

inspire them to act collectively, particularly using frames which help to manipulate information in the movement's favor (Flynn, 2015; Johnston, 2014).

Frame alignment is illustrative of this idea as activists look to recruit and increase membership loyalty by clearly displaying the ways in which their organization objectives align with the stories and interests of those they seek to connect with (Benford, 1993; Carty, 2015). Very much like that of The Fat Underground, women gathered to share stories and manifestos of triumph to both promote self-acceptance while also disseminating information about the ills of society in relation to fat oppression (Cooper, 2008). By reframing fat bodies to be something that is worthy of dignity and respect, the FLM has grown throughout the years, attracting more members and maintaining the ones they previously had. Both national organizations and communities have increased through the power of shared experiences and the framing of personal stories that highlight oppression, discrimination, celebration of fat, and the rejections of societal norms (Cooper, 2008). As Carty (2015) notes, framing is a useful tool designed to connect social movement organizations (SMOs) with members, potential members, and the public through the use of alignment with group norms and expectations, networking with those who possess shared beliefs, and connecting the goals of the group to the beliefs deeply held in the public for consensus. One way social movement organizations utilize these strategies is by adopting the use of new media.

Social movements and the digital age. Melucci (1996) referred to information sharing as the most important difference between new social movements and those of old. Today, technology is seen as mobilizing agent, enabling new social movements to collaborate, congregate and move to action quickly and efficiently using smart phones

and other mobile devices (Carty, 2015). Social media is also seen as a useful platform for organizing as it appeals to a younger demographic of users, is easy to transmit messages, and can reach a large mass of individuals at one time (Bimber, 2003). It also allows for a sense of community to be created among users despite never meeting in person (Larson & Gill, 2017). Research done on the *Fatosphere* helps to substantiate these claims, as those involved in fat liberation use social media platforms and email lists to stay abreast on the latest news being shared in the community (Bronstein, 2015). There is also a sense of community online as noted in Williams' (2017) examination of *Fat People of Color* site on Tumblr which is used as a support system and educational tool for those who subscribe. Membership of new social movements is not limited to county, municipality, or state. Rather, new social movements have the ability and capacity to become global entities with the press of the "send" button (Bimber, 2003). Furthermore, activists have the capability to summon help from other countries and expose wrong doing on larger scale, producing a type of political leverage to have need and grievances met by the state. For example, "Black Lives Matter" demonstrations have been held globally in response to the information shared from activists in the United States (Tharoor, 2016a). Furthermore, recommendations regarding reparations and treatment of Blacks in the U.S. have been garnered by the United Nations in part due to the uproars made about the killings of unarmed Black men by the police (Tharoor, 2016b). Similar to previous shifts in social movement research symbolized by political leverage, new social movements have also found a way to make today's technology strategically work towards their cause by airing out their grievances to garner public attention through non-traditional tactics. By persuading their masses to participate, social movement organizations position

themselves to mobilize under a new pretense. Nevertheless, additional questions persist regarding the intricate ways the FLM specifically operates today which may subsequently modify the way social movements are studied in modern times. Considering these things RQ3a poses:

RQ3a: How have internal practices and strategies impacted the progress of the Fat Liberation movement?

In summary, this dissertation is concerned with social change as it occurs through both institutionalized and uninstitutionalized methods of political action by members of fat liberation groups. The FLM boasts a long history, yet it lacks the same documentation as more popular social movements regarding issues contingent on its success (both internally and externally) as well as its failure.

The following methods section seeks to lay out the details of answering the research questions related to this problem utilizing qualitative methodology.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

To explore the research questions, a mixed methods approach was taken using both content and thematic analysis to examine the data. Considering the research questions for the study were interested in exploring both sides of fat rejection and fat acceptance in public and private settings, incorporating methodologies that examine both was of importance. Furthermore, the dissertation was interested in the written, verbal, and visual meanings of fat rejection and acceptance, not suitable for just one type of methodology. Thus, a content analysis seemed most feasible to measure aspects of fat rejection and acceptance in TV shows, as it is designed to analyze what is visible and invisible in cultural settings (Krippendorff, 1989), and a subsequent thematic analysis served as a method of triangulation to add validity and depth to the study, combing through written text in blog posts, Facebook posts, and interview data.

The following methods were used to explore facilitators and barriers to the movement through anti and pro fat discourse situated in (a) fat positive blog posts/magazines; (b) TV shows; (c) social media platforms; and (d) in-depth interviews. For clarity, barriers are defined as talk, pictures, and discourse that impede the expressed mission of the Fat Liberation Movement. Facilitators are defined as talk, pictures and discourse that advance the movement's goals. Specifically, when looking at barriers to the movement, the researcher identified words used negatively to describe fat along with the context and outcomes of how fat bodies are talked about. For example, the researcher looked for instances on TV shows depicting fat bodies continuously in negative contexts

such as laziness or in health decline, which are in line with the current discourse around bigger bodies and weight loss.

Additionally, the researcher also took an account of instances when euphemisms were used in hopes of glossing over the negative impact that the connotations to the meanings of the word fat may have, which may also be seen as a barrier to fat liberation. Conversely, when assessing facilitators of the movement through text and video, the researcher assessed the words associated with the positive meaning of fat and looked for.

Phase One

Content Analysis

Phase one of data collection began with a content analysis of TV shows to analyze fat rejection and acceptance discourse. Due to its flexibility in management of textual and media data (Hesih & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 1989), content analysis serves well in this context. It was used to delve into the intricacies of the language and practices embedded within pro-fat and anti-fat discourses, revealing messages spoken and unspoken to advance either agenda.

TV Shows

Sample. Based on a word search through the search engine, Google, the researcher typed phrases related to the study (i.e., weight loss, fat, fat positive, weight gain, weight, TV shows), subsequently choosing the top three shows from each search, utilizing, *The Biggest Loser*, *My 600 lb. Life*, and *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* to be analyzed. Nine episodes were watched from each show ($n = 27$), totaling 29.5 hours of watch time (10 hours of the *The Biggest Loser*; 12 hours of *My 600 lb. Life*; 7 ½ hours of

My Big Fat Fabulous Life). Episodes were randomly selected from the past 3 seasons of broadcasts (2014-2017) using a random number generator.

Coding procedure. Coding served as a tool to operationalize fat rejection and acceptance discourse practices by previously conceptualizing Arroyo and Harwood's (2014) definition of "fat talk" (negative comments about your body or the body of others) along with behaviors and practices that incite these same meanings under the banner of fat rejection. "Fat liberation talk" (Cooper, 1998; Fishman, 1998), is conceptualized as positive comments about fat bodies or the fat bodies of others, along with behaviors and practices that incite the same meanings. Both discourses were operationalized through the frequency of negative and positive communication, InVivo (quoted) remarks from individuals on shows who spoke about their own bodies and the bodies of others, the number of scenes on each TV show that revolved around issues of fatness, and the total number of scenes per episode. See Appendix B: Fat Rejection/Acceptance Coding Scheme.

Frequency of negative communication. Following previous coding schemes by Fauts and Vaughn (2000) and Fauts and Baugraff (2000), frequency of negative communication to examine the prevalence of fat talk in each show was used to count the number of negative comments or behaviors made in reference to weight or body image (i.e., verbal: "You're too fat to wear that." or behavioral: *grimacing in disgust while grabbing a portion of their body*). The researcher counted the number of times these comments or behaviors were performed by those in power (trainers, practitioners, bosses, mothers and fathers, etc.) towards main characters on the shows, from others (fellow participants, other family members, neighbors, strangers, friends, etc.) towards main

characters on the shows, and personal comments and behaviors communicated about oneself by main characters in the shows.

Frequency of positive communication. The same coding procedure was done for the frequency of positive comments or behaviors made in reference to weight or body image: (i.e., verbal: “*That dress looks great on you.*” and behavioral: *finger snaps and a nodding of the head at one’s outfit*). The researcher analyzed communication from those in power (trainers, practitioners, bosses, mothers and father, etc.) towards main characters, from others (other family members, neighbors, strangers, friends, etc.) towards main characters, and personal comments and behaviors communicated about oneself throughout the course of the TV programs.

Direct quotes. Additionally, direct quotes of negative comments (i.e., “*I’m getting so fat!*”) and positive comments (i.e., “*My fat is beautiful!*”) were recorded of those featured in each episode regarding how they spoke about and were spoken to in regard to themselves, others (friends, family members outside of parents, and strangers), and those in authority (i.e, doctors, parents, fitness trainers, etc.). This was used to further examine the language surrounding the topic of weight and body image by those featured on each TV show.

Total scenes fat related. Scenes were aggregated to reflect the total number of scenes that were fat or weight related in each episode of shows.

Total number of scenes. In addition to counting the total number of scenes in each episode, the researcher also calculated the total number of scenes focusing primarily on weight or body image.

Demographic information. Demographic data was collected on TV show participants to in the areas of perceived race, age range, sex, episode number, and season number.

Blog posts and online magazines

Sample. By utilizing information from the *Fatosphere* on the social media site, Facebook, the researcher inquired about blog posts or online magazines that inspired fat liberation members the most, tallying the top responses. As defined in Chapter 2, the *Fatosphere* is an online communication channel used by the fat community to exchange news and advice. Results from inquiries resulted in analyzing two blog posts, *Dances with Fat* and *The Militant Baker*, as well as the online magazine, *The Body is not an Apology*. In order to understand the discourses that were present in the fat liberation movement around the same time period of the television shows, three articles from each outlet between 2014-2017 ($n = 27$; 90 pages) were randomly selected for analysis using a random number generator.

Facebook posts

Sample. Three recent incidents within the *Fatosphere* were chosen by the researcher to be analyzed based on the intersections of fat acceptance and the popularity of the story circulating in mainstream media. The researcher selected these incidents by looking for commonalities of coverage in mainstream media, on fat acceptance blog posts, online magazines, and fat positive public Facebook posts. Incidents that appeared on all platforms and trended on social media between the years, 2014 - 2017 in the public were chosen to be examined. Those three incidents were, *The Biggest Loser's* Bob Harper having a heart attack (Winter 2017); weight loss surgery of prominent figures,

Gabourey Sidibe and Ashley Nell Tipton (Spring/Summer 2017); and the naked statue crafted of Donald Trump during the fall 2016 election cycle.

Coding procedures. By utilizing content analysis in the first phase of data collection, the researcher was able to assess what already existed in print and media regarding fat acceptance and fat rejection. Through the use of open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), conclusions were able to be made that expounded upon previous ideas and equipped the researcher with knowledge to craft the necessary questions for phase two of data collection, in-depth interviews.

Open coding. The researcher participated in several rounds of open coding, as the data was mined for significant passages of text and messages (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) sent from members of the FLM to one another and nonmembers. Once general codes were developed, the researcher moved forward to axial coding parsing out the findings and comparing them to previous research for further analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

Axial coding. Axial coding was performed after narrowing down preliminary codes in the data. From here, the researcher began forging relationships between the data collected, previous literature, and new concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Phase one data analysis

TV shows

In addition to a content analysis, a frame analysis was also used to analyze the data collected in the TV shows to understand how stories are situated and talked about in the media (Goffman, 1974). The researcher created a code book based on the literature to

designate meaning to the words, pictures, and contexts used by both pro-fat and anti-fat platforms. Following this, the researcher began recording the data reviewed based on these criteria, capturing rich content through narratives told and shown by participants on TV shows.

Frame analysis. Once the data were collected, the researcher began by open coding, developing preliminary labels for significant pieces of the data found within the text based on descriptions, followed by axial coding, by which themes emerged (Corbin & Strauss 1990; Saldana, 2008). Relative to Johnston's work (1995), the researcher was interested in unpacking micro-discourses or little "d" discourses of fat rejection and acceptance, connecting them to larger systems of organizational communication through roles, practices, and meanings.

Blog posts, online magazines and Facebook posts

Thematic analysis. After data were coded, the researcher was able to identify themes that emerged from the data, illustrating patterns (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011) in how individuals involved navigated through fat accepting spaces. This analysis further allowed the researcher to connect codes and themes to previous literature and form an analysis of her own, identifying new patterns not previously examined (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 2014; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014)

Phase Two

In-depth interviews

Being informed by the content analysis in phase one, the researcher followed-up the initial analysis by conducting in-depth interviews in order to understand how

individuals in the FLM utilize localized talk or little “d” discourse about fat, their identity in the movement, and participation in political action.

Sample. Twenty-five interviews were conducted using a convenience sample of self-identified fat supporters of fat acceptance. Individuals who qualified to be interviewed were all women or femmes and ranged in age from 22 – 64 ($n = 25$; $M = 33$, $SD = 10$). Given the sensitivity of some questions, demographic information was not required to participate in the study. Consequently, some individuals did not provide all demographic information. Hence, percentages will reflect this absence accordingly.

Race. In matters of race, 60% of participants identified as a Black, 4% as Native, and 32% as White or Caucasian ($n = 25$).

Sexuality. Due to the FLM having such a rich history in queer history, it was important to make sure that the representation of other sexualities besides that of heterosexual be present ($n = 18$). 28% of participants identified as queer, while 44% identified as heterosexual, and 1% identified as bi-sexual.

Able-bodiedness. A topic that emerged quite frequently throughout interviews was the talk of what it meant to be able-bodied. 60% of participants identified as able-bodied, while 16% did not ($n = 19$).

Acceptable vs. super fats. In line with issues of accessibility, some participants shared details that separate bodies from being the “acceptable” type of fat society currently accommodates, versus the type of “super” fat individual that would have trouble fitting into seats and purchasing clothes at plus size retail clothing stores. This assessment was added into the demographic information to be cognizant of the difference. 20% of participants identified as “super” fat, while 32% identified as an

“acceptable” fat. Thirty-two of participants also said that they are somewhere in the middle ($n = 21$).

Recruitment. The researcher utilized Facebook for recruitment by posting an invitation for participants in fat positive groups on the social media site, as well as, on her own personal page. Posts were then enabled to be shared by group members or those who viewed the researcher’s public post to sign up through the scheduling app, Setmore and choose a time best suitable for the interview to take place. See Appendix D: Recruitment Post.

Procedures. After participants viewed the invitation to participate, they could click a website link that redirected them to the Setmore website to schedule an interview. During this process, participants were asked for their name, email address, and telephone number to be contacted by the researcher. Next, the researcher received a notification email from Setmore with participants’ information. She then sent out a follow up email with an informed consent form attached for them to sign and return. See Appendix A: Informed Consent Form.

Once the researcher received the consent form and the appointment time was confirmed, the researcher sent out a link for participants to use to be a part of the interview through their telephone or computer using the free conference call service, Uber Conference. On the date of the scheduled interview, participants would “enter” the conference room, instructions about the interview would be given, and the interview would begin. The duration of each interview ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour and 10 minutes in length.

Following the conclusion of the interview, participants were compensated with a \$30 electronic deposit of monies to a peer to peer payment system of their choice. At the call's end, a link of the recording was forwarded to the email of the researcher automatically by the conference call service. All recordings were then transcribed using a third-party service. This yielded 305 pages of written data. All participants' identifying information was kept confidential throughout this process.

Interview protocol. Participants were asked a series of questions in a semi-structured interview format regarding the topics of identity, political action, and if there are any outstanding characteristics that bar or facilitate the movement's progress. Such questions were framed like the following: *"In the last year, what kind of activist activities have you participated in to promote or spread the word about fat acceptance?" "In what ways does your identity play a role in the groups you belong to?" "What types of things do you do to spread awareness about fat acceptance?"* Hearing from members about their own experiences in this context helped add to the understanding of how grassroots movements deal with issues of identity, political action efforts, and how they utilize the social movement framework for social change. See Appendix C: Interview Protocol.

Coding procedures

Open coding. The first-round of open coding was done by the researcher using NVIVO software. During this process, initial codes were developed for the data found within the text based on general descriptions. Coding in vivo responses was also of importance during open coding as it assisted in allowing the researcher to identify codes for patterns, similarities, differences, and idiosyncrasies within the data in participants'

own words (Corbin & Strauss 1990; Saldana, 2008; Saldana, 2013). The researcher participated in open coding several times before moving forward to axial coding.

Axial coding. During the stage of axial coding, the researcher was able to identify patterns and descriptions that were connected and accurate (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 2014) in the realm of fat acceptance with several participants. She also analyzed data that included instances of accounts within the movement that were few but nevertheless, meaningful (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Following this process, themes were developed that fit the phenomena of fat acceptance, the FLM, and the works of participants in political action.

Phase two data analysis

Thematic analysis. After coding, the researcher began to develop themes through a thematic analysis to summarize codes that fit under common topics (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 2014; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) in relation to fat acceptance and the research questions based on previous literature on the FLM and new concepts not yet written.

Inter-coder reliability. One additional coder was employed to participate in inter-coder reliability to ensure the codes and themes assigned by the researcher were accurate. The coder received a refresher's training course in NVivo software and a thorough explanation of instructions and the codebook for the data analysis. Twenty percent of the data was coded by the additional coder, returning a $k = 79.9$.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Through data collection of TV shows, blog posts, an online magazine, Facebook posts, and in-depth interviews, insight has been given into the research questions posed in Chapter 2 and the ways that those answers impose barriers or facilitate progress in the growth of the Fat Liberation Movement. Taken together, these findings will then be merged into a thorough articulation of the dissertation's overarching RQ, explaining how the data has uncovered both internal and external facilitators and barriers that impact progress of the movement.

Tensions between Competing Discourses about Fat

RQ1: How do tensions between big “D” and little “d” discourse impact the progress of the FLM?

The influence of dominant discourses in society are unavoidable but not irresistible. In other words, although society be filled with practices around dominant discourses, individuals can still reject these for a less recognized discourse, along with its practices and verbiage (Larson & Gill, 2017). As noted in Chapter 2, Big “D” discourses are defined as larger frames of thinking, consisting of words, texts, and practices that encompass society (Larson & Gill, 2017). While, little “d” discourse can be described as localized talk that is housed in big “D” discourse, attributed to action (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). Considering the significance that discourses play in society and how some voices are privileged over others, examining how dominant discourses impact the message of marginalized collectives is of interest for this study. More importantly, understanding how marginalized collectives like the FLM utilize discourse for their own

advancement is necessary to gain better understanding in how organizations thrive with limited support and resources.

Thus, in response to the first research question (RQ 1: How do tensions between big “D” and little “d” discourse impact the progress of the FLM?), this study used content and thematic analysis of 27 TV shows (*The Biggest Loser*, *My 600 lb. Life*, and *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*), 27 blog posts from 2 blogs (*The Militant Baker* and *Dances with Fat*) and one online magazine (*My Body is not an Apology*), along with 3 fat positive incidents through Facebook posts to identify themes around discourses of fat rejection and acceptance along with their impact to the progress of the FLM. Results indicate that big “D” discourses of fat rejection and acceptance utilize similar methods of informing to render outcomes that work for and against the objective of the FLM. While the discourse of fat rejection was found to spread messages situated in the pathology of fat, personal responsibility, and restricted access, fat acceptance discourse focuses on messages that empower followers to reclaim the negative connotations of fat, acceptance of the body holistically, and challenging societal norms. These messages exist in tension with each other such that they are in direct opposition. Three primary tensions were identified: natural/unnatural, acceptable/unacceptable, and fact/fiction.

Natural/unnatural tension

The discourses of fat acceptance are in stark difference to the discourses around fat rejection. The discourses of fat rejection and acceptance both use the same tools to share messages, but what is being shared and how the messages are being received are drastically different. The big “D” discourse of fat rejection shares messages about fat that pathologize weight gain as trauma that represents itself in the body. The competing

discourse of fat acceptance refutes these claims, emphasizing that being fat is not only genetically natural, but it is also a term that can be used as a descriptor without negative connotations suggesting personal flaws in an individual. This can be identified as the natural/unnatural tension.

The pathology of weight gain and fatness. *The Biggest Loser* (TBL) and *My 600 lb. Life* (MSPL), both pathologized weight gain and fat through stories and frames to depict being fat as something unnatural. Throughout the shows, participants are shown discussing their weight in therapy or therapy-type sessions with trainers and therapists. During these sessions, weight is linked to trauma in ways that prompt the trainers and therapists to suggest that the key to weight loss is to overcome the psychological damage done in trauma that presents itself in the body, ultimately represented through fatness. As Gideon in episode seven of season four (2016a) of MSPL recalls,

Food has always been comfort for me. Parents got divorced when I was 8. Things went downhill emotionally. At 9, weighed over 150 lbs. Ate from stress. By 12 I had to buy clothes from big & tall section in men's dept. Stepmom ridiculed me. Sent me to fat camp. I remember the stigma attached to the whole situation. No matter what I did it was never weight loss. Weight just gradually continued to climb. By the time I graduated high school I was over 400 lbs. Mom passed at 25. Guilt and pain came back. Shut down. Put on more weight after that... Within a year, dad and sister die within 3 days of each other. Turned to food for comfort. Food helps me with the pain and I don't know how to stop that.

According to Bettie Jo's story in season three of episode eight (2015c) of MSPL, she too suffered trauma and sought comfort in food,

Started to become chunky at 5. By 12, I weighed 180 lbs. At 13 was sexually assaulted. Ate more. I thought if I was bigger I could protect myself. Life went downhill. Could barely walk. Hated myself. Hated everything. Tried to commit suicide. Gave up. Didn't care anymore.

To add, MSPL also provided "before and after" stories to show that being fat was pathologized as an outcome of mental trauma. After characters visited the therapist for

treatment, they reported success in weight loss. Again, Gideon in episode seven of season four (2016a) of MSPL shares,

“Never realized how much pain I carried around. Just like losing weight, I also know I have to lose the emotional baggage. [After seeing the therapist] I can get up and play with my son and help around the house. I’m planning on getting a job in the next month.”

Sean in episode 12 from season four (2016b) of MSPL, also concluded,

Sean: Food troubles started when I was 10. [His parents got a divorce] I felt like it was my fault.

Mom: I worked full time...Sean had free access and ate whatever he wanted.

Therapist: Patterns are created because they fill a need and humans keep doing them as long as that works. Sean is not trying to change the pattern, he *IS* [emphasis added] changing the pattern.

Sean: I’m ready to start pushing myself there. [He is Ok’d for surgery following his meeting].

The “trauma” frame was also present in TBL, as some contestants spoke about experiencing trauma and passing on that “hurt” to other family members. Jacky in episode six of season 17 (2016b) recounts her story,

My kids don’t really know me, I feel like. My dad died, and I was 26, and it was a heart attack out of the blue. And I had a really hard time losing him. Because of this I started to make poor choices. Our daughter Haley struggles, because we struggle, she’s only 12. It’s time to change that. It’s time to be strong and teach her healthy habits. Like, how did I let this [weight gain] happen to myself?

After having therapy-like sessions with trainers, contestants showed improvements in weight loss outcomes. Damien in episode four, season 16 (2014b) attributes his weight loss to his ability to overcome the emotional trauma of his mother’s passing two years prior.

Damien: That was a big piece of the puzzle as far as how I fell off. A part of me died during that moment. Those feelings of regret, guilt...I didn’t know how to handle those feelings. I just thought that I was dying inside.

Jessie: The big reason Damien is at the Ranch is because he wasn’t willing to let go what happened with his mother... he needs to be able to forgive himself. Now we know where we need to focus. That’s Damien forgiving himself.

[Later in the show] “I did it! I got the number! There’s gonna be reasons why you can’t work out, why you can’t get it done but you can’t let those excuses get in the way.”

In these shows, the discourse around fat is rooted in trauma and fat is pathologized. Fat and weight gain are seen to be something that happens when things go wrong. Fat or weight gain is not seen as something that happens naturally. It is not talked about as something to be desired or be comfortable in. Trauma in this case is the cause of fatness that rests in the body and mind. It can even be passed on to other family members by way of “poor choices,” creating a cycle of producing unnatural bodies. Furthermore, this discursive construction assumes that weight loss is the outcome of healing. As characters are featured in these show segments, talks about recovery and pictures of weight loss are shown simultaneously, framing the two realities as inextricably tied to one another.

The empowerment of being fat. In contrast to the connotations of fatness in the discourse of fat rejection, members of the fat liberation community espoused the discourse of fat acceptance. This was demonstrated through the use of their spaces as a place to reclaim the term “fat,” destigmatizing its meaning, and using it simply as a descriptor. By stripping the negativity associated with the term, members of the movement were able to explain their bodies without shame. These factors help to underlie the tenets of the movement, making the meaning of fat vital to discourse of fat acceptance. For example, in the online magazine, *The Body is not an Apology*, members of the movement recounted the opposition that they received from being fat although they did not see being fat a negative for themselves,

For pretty much as long as I can remember, I have been the fat girl. Apart from a brief period when I was about five years old, I was always the most heavysset girl in my class – by a considerable margin. When I was seven, my mother and my nanny made me aware that my large size was a problem, and they put me on my first “official” diet. I got put on a few diets during the rest of my primary school years and they all sucked (some more than others). Thanks to a permanent cloud of hereditary depression that we would not find out I had until several years later, I cannot put my hand to my heart and say that I was a happy child. However, my fatness did not have a lot to do with that unhappiness. I was certainly well aware that I was fat and that people thought that fat was bad, but I was mostly upset because I was always on diets against my will and I wanted to eat tasty food with all the other kids. At that point, I still didn’t think of my body as “unacceptable” (Brown, 2017, para 1).

Additionally, Shirley an interviewee, explained that she would be more comfortable if fat was more of neutral term used to explain another type of body individuals have.

Well, really, ideally it would be great I think if we were all fat neutral, if it was just a state of being, because we are the culture overtly fat negative, I think that we have to combat that with positivity, but ultimately, I think there are a lot of legitimate ways to have a body. And, it would be great if it was just another way to have a body.

Dialogue about confrontations in medical settings also took place on social media posts, as commenters added their own experiences with medical professionals,

Commenter 1: A nurse told me a few months ago that if I don't get WLS [weight loss surgery] now, I will be dead before 40. I told her I'm already 39 and my internal health is perfect. She had nothing to say after I told her that.

Commenter 2: Wanker. I hate these death threats. They sound to me like wishful thinking.

Commenter 1: I loved the look on her face when I called bullsh!t on her (Facebook post, 2017).

Moreover, in the body positive show, *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* (MBFFL) (2017),

Whitney in episode 11 of season four shared her sentiments on being fat and unashamed,

“As a person of size, I always have to ask for a seat belt extender which a lot of people get embarrassed about. You can always tell because the flight attendants are always discreet when they hand it to you. I’m like, it’s ok just hand me the seat belt extender.”

These interactions demonstrate a stark contrast in beliefs about fat than those seen in TBL and MSPL. Localized talk about being fat within the fat acceptance discourse is framed around the idea that fat bodies being larger in size is not problematic. Those who self-identify as fat reclaim the term in a way that destigmatizes its meaning and enables them to use it without negative connotations despite a running understanding by others that see fat as a problem. Using the term and being ok with one's body size can result in confrontation that may cause members to defend themselves, but this is taken in stride as challenging dominant ideologies that are fatphobic is something members are prepared for.

Acceptable/unacceptable tension

Next, fat acceptance and fat rejection discourses fail to find agreement in what one has to do in order to be acceptable in society. While fat rejection discourses cite physical and social barriers as motivation to push weight loss, fat acceptance discourse promote acceptance and transparency of oneself that enables others to see parts of the body often hidden due to how mainstream society has deemed them unacceptable (i.e., visible belly outlines). This is done without spreading a message of weight loss and challenging authorities who say otherwise. This can be identified as the acceptable/unacceptable tension.

Physical barriers. In the beginning of each episode of MSPL, participants are featured in a scene that vividly illustrates some type of physical struggle with their weight. These depictions are accompanied by stories from participants explaining the fight they have with being larger in size. In the opening of episode eight of season five (2017b), Michael begins,

“My back hurts. My butt hurts. My legs hurt. The weight itself. I feel like it’s deteriorating my body, but I push myself to get up. And I sit there waiting for my family to come help me because I can’t do a lot of stuff for myself.”

Ashley in episode two of season five (2017a), also describes her struggle,

“Being over 600 lbs. I can’t do much. Had to get a job that doesn’t require me to be active. This world is not meant for people my size. I can barely fit in my car... Every time I get out of the car my stomach is so large it presses on the horn.”

Similarly, Joe in episode 10 of season three (2015) describes the struggle he faces with his body and what he is unwilling to subject others to as a result,

When I fall I can’t get up on my own, so I have to call the ambulance. It’s very embarrassing. [Joe in the bathroom to wash up] I refuse to let someone bathe me. It would just be too humiliating. I can barely do it for myself right now, but I’d rather die than have someone do it for me.

Physical barriers are also expressed in TBL. However, in this show, contestants often spoke about their barriers only after they had lost weight. Trainers also made comments in regard to their physical abilities. For example, in episode six of season 17 (2016c), contestant Lauren explained her life now trying on new clothes,

“I’m excited. It’s always been a struggle for me to fit into the things I like... get to be a girl.”

Jackie in episode 10 of season 16 (2014b) also spoke of her previous physical barriers after her body has changed,

“The Jackie walking out of here is really happy. I talked about being an outside mommy [a mother who spends time outside being physical active], but now I get to go home and actually be an outside mommy.”

During the season 15 finale, Sal (2014c) is introduced to the crowd and his story is played back for the audience to see. He did not make it onto the show, but he lost 125 pounds on his own. Bob, the trainer on the show, said this about him during his casting interview,

Sal: I'm a big guy.

Bob: You are not a big guy. You're a morbidly obese man. If I saw you getting off a truck to save my family in a fire, I would not feel good about their chances of survival.

In these segments, the “physical barrier” frame vividly illustrated the physical struggle the larger sized individuals featured experienced. In MSPL, the discourse within this frame also communicated other messages about the quality of life which include problems settling in occupations, the inability to care for oneself, and the constant pain one may feel. In contrast, while TBL depicts similar outcomes, they are discussed only after one loses the weight, which reinforces the notion that life becomes better after weight loss. In these scenes, contestants can fit into clothes, do their jobs better, and be more active.

Social barriers. Similar to physical barriers, participants in TBL and MSPL, both expressed limitations in being able to flourish in their social and interpersonal lives. In multiple scenes, fat was framed as restricting, while weight loss was framed as “a new lease on life.” Fernanda in episode 15 of season 15 of TBL (2014c) spoke of this regarding her marriage,

I have been married for 7 years and have never been able to fully show myself naked to my husband. My weight has made me self-conscious about everything. My second chance is to be the sexy confident wife my husband deserves. Now, I'm feeling good about myself. No more hiding myself from my husband.

Whitney in episode two of season 17 (2016a) of TBL, also spoke about her new lease on life framed as an openness to try new things and start dating in the context of weight loss, despite her show being framed around fat acceptance,

“I'm not afraid to try new things now. Life is a lot more fun. Now that I'm feeling good and looking good, I'm definitely ready to find someone [dating]. I have a whole new realm of things that I'm interested in. The journey's not over.”

Amber in episode one of season three (2015a), on a date with her boyfriend, Rowdy, recounted her ability to now date because she weighs less,

“[I’ve] never been on a date because of my weight. Now the world is open to me. [I’m] able to be myself everywhere.”

Again, the depictions used in these shows continuously frame a fat lived life as one that inhibits living more than it liberates. Participants in these shows all say their lives are better now due to weight loss. Both their physicality and social lives have improved, bettering their interpersonal relationships and giving them courage to try new things.

Accepting the body holistically. Similar to the discourse of fat rejection, members of the FLM also used the power of personal stories in blog posts, MBFFL, and interviews to describe the ways that they arrived at body acceptance. However, in this context emphasis was placed on the importance of what their bodies do for them as opposed to how they look. Furthermore, body acceptance for members dealt more with feeling worthy to exist in the world as a fat person instead of working to make their bodies conform in order to feel worthy. Blogger, Jess Baker (2016b) explains how she posed for pictures without filter that made her body to appear more socially acceptable,

I sometimes feel like when we (we = all fashion/fatshion bloggers *ever*- me included) share outfit posts, we tend to show the most "flattering" photos that we've taken. But that shit ain't the entire story, y'know? So, baby, today I give you the full glory of me at my most authentic: visible belly outline, dermatillomania scars, bra-less and flawless, dirty hair (thank you dry shampoo!) and all. Because: real life, guys.

Again, in an article encouraging parents how to discuss body diversity with children, Blogger, Jess Baker from *The Militant Baker* shared her own experience on body acceptance,

Knowing that we're all made of the same stuff, no matter what our size, is empowering. Our bodies are more than beautiful: they're necessary for living in this world and experiencing a wonderful life! This is something I was blessed to have growing up and looking back, I know it was my saving grace (Baker, 2016a, para 24).

Whitney in episode 11 of season four (2017) of MBFFL adds to this notion as she explains how exposure alongside smaller bodied people doing the same activities helped to lend credence to the argument that fat is not inherently bad,

I hate that getting an opportunity to be in the Fitness Marshall video has caused contention between me and Todd but here's the Fitness Marshall, he's very fit & his back up dancers are very fit and to put a woman my size in his videos that says a lot to the people who watch him. It shows that fat people can be talented just like thin people, and it just shows a relationship that really important in the body positive community and in my life.

Interviewee, Sharla expounds on her personal encounter with the movement, and the liberty it has afforded her,

I can't talk enough about how the Fat Acceptance Movement has truly changed my life. Even in just the last two years when I really got into it, I wouldn't even eat in the restaurant, I wouldn't order food, I wouldn't stand up for doing anything where I might be the center of attention because I was ashamed of my body. I found the Fat Acceptance Movement and my life is completely different. I have a whole new set of friends because I'll actually go talk to people. I got the job of my dreams because I actually went to the interview. I do things that I would never in a million years dreamed of doing. I wish that I could show every fat person how free and amazing life is once you accept yourself in the body that you're in.

Members within the movement speak about their personal journeys in blog posts and interviews as points of evolution in their growth in the movement. The ability to be transparent is also seen as growth. Like those on MSPL and TBL, by looking inwardly, they too are maturing and believing in themselves, but they are stating that they do not need to lose weight to have access to body acceptance or to be "better." Instead, members place emphasis on what the body can do, what it has been through, and how it has overcome to be a place of strength and acceptance. This is not to say that those in the fat

community do not find themselves attractive, but rather that they make assessments about their bodies holistically without weight loss being a factor.

Fact/fiction tension

The final tension between the fat rejection and fat acceptance discourses identifies differences in the ways individuals employ what they believe to be reputable reports and facts to substantiate their claims for weight loss or fat acceptance. In fat rejection discourse, individuals must take personal responsibility for why they do not have the body they should, while fat acceptance discourse critiques mainstream messaging and information and highlights the ways that dieting is harmful and information about weight and sickness is misunderstood. Outcomes associated with these two dichotomies were coded as the fact/fiction tension.

Personal responsibility. TBL often used messages around hard work and nutrition to reinforce the idea that weight loss is one's personal responsibility.

Today we will show you what will happen if you continue to make those bad choices once you go back home.” When I look at you guys I see people who are looking to find their way. The food choices that we make can be a matter of life or death. That's unequivocally true (Bob the trainer, *Biggest Loser*, season 17, episode 2, 2016a).

Jay from TBL, in episode four of season 15 (2013) acknowledged the outcomes of his hard work when he said, “It's been a rough week and I've worked. You put in the work and you get to see the results.” Roberto from episode six, season 17 (2016b), also shared these sentiments as he spoke about his transformation due to the effort he gave,

“How in the world did I allow myself to get that big. To see what I've done, made me really proud of myself...haven't had that moment since I was in high school.”

Comments such as these were common throughout the show. Both trainers and contestants associated personal responsibility with weight loss outcomes based on the

effort given. Even when outcomes did not meet weight loss expectations despite contestants following the rules, personal responsibility was still the leading reason as to why they were not having success. For example, in episode two of season 17 (2016a), when results did not turn out like expected during a weigh-in, contestant Toy, disappointed that she lost only four pounds, commented about the outcome,

“I worked so hard.”

Personal responsibility also was coupled with messages of pathology, encouraging a departure from other methods of weight loss and adhering to nutrition and physical activity. Bob a trainer on the show in episode 10 of season 16 of TBL (2014b), sat and discussed these outcomes with Damien after hearing he had weight loss surgery,

Lap Band surgeries don't work in the long run because they don't address where the weight came from in the first place. [Lap bands] are a temporary fix. You can't put a lap band on your brain. You can't shortcut a comeback. It's all about good old-fashioned diet and exercise.

In these segments, weight loss is continually talked about in a fashion that puts the responsibility of gaining or losing weight solely on what one is doing or putting in his or her body. Weight loss surgery is not seen as an answer, just a “temporary fix.” Participants in the show are seen as individuals who make “bad choices” and who haven't “put in the work,” because those who do, see “results.”

MSPL also used the discourse of personal responsibility, as those on the show are seen to have a food addiction. Often, participants were told to take control of their habits or else they would not qualify for weight loss surgery or maintain their weight loss after the procedure. Dr. Nowzaradan from MSPL (2016d) was clear that the responsibility of weight loss would not be on the procedure,

“They’re looking for a magic pill to solve their problems without effort. They both know what healthy eating is, they just don’t want to make the change.”

Pauline, in episode three of season three (2015b), also took the responsibility of weight loss upon herself despite noting its difficulty,

“I’ve been trying to eat healthier. It’s not easy. But I’m trying to be as determined as I can. A year ago, I couldn’t do things for myself. I’m doing what I need so that will never happen [going back to the way she was].”

After losing 71 pounds, Joe in episode 10 of season three (2015d) confesses,

“That was very surprising and very awesome. I pushed myself and the numbers are there.”

In these segments, weight loss surgery is not considered a magic way of reducing weight. Participants are expected to work for change, eat healthy, and push themselves to achieve their weight loss goals because being smaller in weight affords them a better life holistically. Relating this back to the other tensions, messages within the discourse of personal responsibility spread the idea that fat is a consequence of actions or a lack thereof. Consequently, blame is placed on fat individuals with the accusation that they are violators of their own bodies without consideration of other factors.

Refuting the norm with evidence. In contrast to the dominant societal discourse that uses education to demonize fat, members of fat acceptance used education to refute the idea that weight gain and fatness is a negative outcome rooted in pathology or the lack of one taking personal responsibility for their size. This was particularly apparent when analyzing the Facebook posts. These posts captured times when fat was in the news and members of the movement interacted with both other members and non-members to explicitly discuss fatness as an issue. During these conversations, members of the movement utilized their platforms to educate others about all things anti-fat. Topics

covered issues in pop culture, politics, and research. This education included anecdotal evidence as well as thorough assessments of medical and social science research articles to substantiate arguments about weight stigma, fatphobia, and weight discrimination. Emphasis also was placed on educating others about matters of genetics and systemic oppression.

Regarding genetics, many people used research to substantiate claims of how sickness is not just a “fat” problem. For example, when Bob Harper (the trainer from TBL) had a heart attack, a commenter on fat positive Facebook post said,

Yep, he can fuck right off for sure. I come from a long line of fat women who all lived well into their 80s/90s (except for my mother, who died after 10 years of fighting ovarian cancer - also something that's genetic). My husband is sorta kinda maybe fat and he has type 2 diabetes - also genetic, both of his parents had it, as do 4 of his 6 brothers. So, if it's a genetic disease when you're thin, it's also a genetic disease when you're fat. And I hate to tell him this, but there are a LOT of studies showing that your chances of surviving heart attacks/cancer/other serious diseases are better if you're fat (you actually have reserves on which you can draw when you're too sick to feel like eating) (Facebook post February 27, 2017).

In reference to Gabourey Sidibe’s weight loss surgery, a Facebook conversation discussed the determining factors of diabetes and why it being conflated with fat is problematic,

- Commenter 1: She said she developed Type 2 Diabetes cause of her weight.
- Commenter 2: Which is very unlikely. While weight is correlated with diabetes, it doesn't cause diabetes and WLS doesn't cure diabetes.
- Commenter 3: Especially since both she and her brother developed Diabetes as adults. That points to genetics.
- Commenter 4: I concur. Not all fat people get Diabetes. Consuming excessive amounts of sugar, not eating 3 square meals a day, genetics play a key role.
- Commenter 2: If you have the genes for diabetes then you can become diabetic even if you eat moderate to small amounts of sugar and eat regular meals. Nothing is a guarantee.
- Commenter 5: It's a myth that consuming a lot of sugar causes T2 [type 2] Diabetes.

Commenter 2: It's not that eating sugar causes T2, it's that eating sugar isn't handled well by your body when you have T2, right? So, people assume it's the sugar that causes it. It's just another assumption that we're looking at the wrong way.

Commenter 5: You're in the ballpark, and this is yet another example of correlation not being equal to causality (Facebook post, March 8, 2017).

Members of the movement also asserted the importance of acknowledging the ways that oppression plays an active role in how fat individuals are treated based on issues of race and skin tone, and despite research findings supporting a “fat and fit” perspective (Greene, 2017), maltreatment persists due to stigma. About Gabourey Sidibe’s weight loss surgery, one commenter shared the way that oppression specifically impacts Black fat women,

“Fat black women suffer poorer health outcomes than fat white women. Gab is fat AND dark skinned. There are layers and intersections to this” (Facebook post, March 8, 2017).

In the blog, *Militant Baker*, Louise Greene also shared her sentiments about the advancements being made in regard to research but how barriers still exist due to stereotypes,

While many people assume that fat automatically equals unfit, a growing number of highly respected researchers and agencies say otherwise. Dr. Steven Blair is a renowned exercise researcher at the Arnold School of Public Health at the University of South Carolina. His research shows that excess weight is not “the enemy.” Not getting enough exercise and being cardiovascularly unfit are much greater contributors to poor health than any extra pounds can be. Blair stands firmly by his research showing that fit, fat people outlive thin, unfit people. The National Cancer Institute also backed this finding, reporting that physical activity is associated with greater longevity among persons in all BMI groups: those normal weight, and those considered fat. Although many studies demonstrate that a fit body can come in a range of sizes, many people can’t see beyond the stereotypes. Larger bodies seldom appear in advertisements for gyms or in fitness magazines. When we do see a fat body in the media, it often accompanies an article about the latest demonizing obesity study and shows the person from only the shoulders down, dehumanizing the person. Athletes like me who fall outside of the athletic norm often feel we don’t fit in because we’ve been told, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, that we don’t (Green, 2017, para 10, 11).

Through educational efforts, members of the FLM use the information they obtain to equip other members to feel good about themselves, but also to be mindful of the ways that science and power structures impact their lived experiences. Education in this capacity can be seen as a way to “strengthen” followers to transition to behaviors that give the movement “legs.” Education also enables members to actively refute bigger discourses that limit their access to the same resources given freely to smaller bodies. By having the skillset to relate to pop culture and critique modern day research, fat liberation activists put themselves in a position to interact with several different demographics, that includes those involved in politics and the medical field.

Tensions in interaction

Two incidents regarding MBFFL and the statue created to resemble Donald Trump were used in data collection to enable an analysis of some of the tensions previously conceptualized. Since part of the objective of this study is to understand the impacts made to the FLM through discourse, it is helpful to see these competing discourses in action among members and nonmembers of the movement. By assessing the interactions between members and nonmembers regarding Donald Trump, and the contradictory statements made by Whitney on MBFFL, there is a sense of validity with the tensions conceptualized and helps to add understanding in how members of the FLM are combating dominant discourses of fat rejection. Facebook post data captured the Donald Trump statue protest, and the other tension was shared throughout MBFFL with Whitney Way Thore.

The problem with Body Positivity. MBFFL is a reality TV show that chronicles the life of Body Positive activist, Whitney Way Thore. Thore initially was discovered

through social media after videos of her dance routines went viral. TLC later offered Thore a TV show designed to showcase her life as an unapologetic fat woman, however, throughout seasons two through four, Thore often made comments that perpetuated fatphobia, depicting the current struggle between fat acceptance and body positivity.

Although Thore had a campaign that promoted “no body shame,” she was actively attempting to lose weight. On many occasions, Whitney used messages that aligned more with the “personal responsibility” discourse around acceptable bodies and weight loss (2015),

“I am proud of myself for taking better care of myself both with food and how regularly I’m eating and for kicking ass at they gym again. Keep up the good work, eat good food, think good thoughts.”

In reference to being active, episode four of season three (2015) showed Whitney struggling physically to complete a biking event with others. After completing the event, she commented,

“It’s important to know that limitations are so self-imposed. There are things that I think that I can’t do that I can.”

Lastly, in episode two of season three (2016), Whitney from MBFFL, was in recovery after she passed out during a danceathon. While reminiscing about working out again with a physical trainer she once hired in the past, she had this to say,

Will is a body builder who looks terrifying, but I’ve had “success” [weight loss] with him. He helped me lose 100 lbs. in 8 months. I’ve also gained 150 pounds since the last time I saw him. Part of me thinks he would be really disappointed.

Considering that Whitney was first recognized because of her body acceptance and that her TV show is entitled MBFFL, some of the messages she shares about weight loss and health contradict the overall message of body acceptance. In many ways, this puts a show like MBFFL in opposition to fat liberation despite Whitney Way Thore

acting as a representative for the liberation of fat people. Moreover, MBFFL has a platform that many fat positive activists do not have. Data analyses show that Whitney, on average, makes three times more negative comments about her body than positive. She also talks about her fat in ways that are insulting but masked by jokes. During a trip to New York, Whitney in MBFFL (2017b), makes jokes about a carriage ride she and a friend get from a bike peddler after asking if there is a weight limit,

“Is this leaning? He’s peddling like the equivalent of 4 people. It’s twice his weight.”

Again, statements like these are in opposition to the message of fat acceptance, even in jest.

Trump protest. In August 2016, a statue was erected depicting Donald Trump with a larger body size and his testicles removed. Fat and LGBTQ+ activists quickly stepped in to advocate against fat and transphobia, arguing that there was more to criticize Donald Trump for besides his body. Consequently, an activist by the name of Shane Brodie decided to protest the statue by standing on a corner naked citing a lack of compassion and empathy for people whose bodies resembled the Trump statue. The local news was notified and featured his protest on their Facebook page eliciting several responses from fat positive advocates, those who supported his protest, and those who had opposing views.

The interactions of commenters demonstrated the fact/fiction tension throughout. On several accounts, many commenters argued that Shane’s protest was misguided due to the fact that the point of the statue was not meant to fat shame,

Shane - not to belittle your own statements of expression and courage, but my take on that statue is completely different and if you are coming to your own conclusions to its meaning, it seems to me it wasn't just another lump of something meaningless. I see it as a perfect summation of this election; everyone got into an uproar over the superficial issues instead of what the piece was really trying to convey (Facebook post, August 22, 2016).

Many commenters argued that the statue was not erected to fat shame but was a play on the Hans Christian Anderson story, "The Emperor has no Clothes."

I kinda had the same reaction to it as I had to the old folk tale where it got its name from "The Emperor has no clothes" is a story about a narcissist who insists on nothing but positive feedback after being duped into wearing a "Special Outfit" that couldn't be plainly seen and when everyone fell in line due (I'm sure) to fear of execution or imprisonment, one child was innocent/brave enough to see through the facade to point out the truth. The Emperor is foolish (Facebook post, August 22, 2016).

However, this argument was refuted by those associated with fat acceptance,

There's no particular application of the naked Trump statue to the Emperor's New Clothes story, besides the depiction of nudity and the allusion in the title. But the title makes clear that there is more to it than the original reference - it's called "The Emperor Has No Balls." Surely you can recognize that something is intended to be significant about that? Upon what does it rest, the aspersion cast by suggesting a physiological dearth or inadequacy of masculine-read traits? It's completely different from the Hans Christian Anderson story, which mocked the hypocrisy of people denying their own senses to fit in and be seen as worthy. This analogy goes as far as "haw haw he would be ugly naked and probably not impressively endowed" and that relies on reinforcing shame for everyone with a body that looks anything like any part of that statue. Which **BY THE WAY** is way bigger than actual Trump's actual body, so it doesn't **EVEN** touch him **AT ALL** with its "satire," just innocent other fat people (Facebook post, August 22, 2016)!

Through these interactions, there is a clear communicative disconnect between the way the statue was perceived by those who are a part of the fat acceptance community and those who are not. This fact/fiction tension is illustrated between both parties in deciding the purpose of the statue and if it depicts the emperor with no clothes or a fat person with no genitals. While those who were not a part of the fat acceptance community did not see any harm in the ways that the statue depicted a fatter Trump, those in the community saw the harm done by the statue to not only impact Trump, but

that the most harm would be inflicted upon those who possess the type of body depicted. For them, this body was an illustration of how the country already feels about fat bodies.

These interactions also highlight the tension between what bodies are considered acceptable and what bodies should be rejected. Those not affiliated with fat acceptance sought to explain alternatives to the meaning of the Trump statue, but in assessing their interpretations, fat was still associated with problematic behavior,

I understand the sentiment however I do not feel that the statues message was to necessarily "body shame". On a deeper level the statue could have been meant to represent people like Trump in their overly-privileged, gluttonous, self-entitled, self-serving, and self-absorbed ways. The fact that someone who makes himself appear to be so appealing physically is on the inside very ugly. That when you take off the toys and dollar suits and fashionable attire, you see the man and other likes Donald trump for who they really are. Was the statue necessary to show that? No, but I do not feel the message was to body shame (Facebook post, August 22, 2016).

By associating fatness with negative connotations, there is an assumption that bigger in the terms of bodies is something that is unacceptable. Those who refuted arguments pointed out that if shame was not the goal, why exaggerate features at all,

That's specifically what bothers me with the piece: I would wholeheartedly support it if it depicted Trump _as he is_ without clothes, a la the Emperor's new clothes. However, why no testicles? Why make him fatter and with a small penis? (Facebook post, August 22, 2016).

Based on the outcomes of the tensions in interaction, much can be gleaned. First, those who subscribe to fat acceptance discourse are present and show up to defend and debate those who are not. Also, when they arrive, they do not show up empty handed, but they come with valid arguments to challenge dominant discourses, often times using the same talking points used by their opposition. In many ways, these traditions harken back to the work of the first and second waves of the FLM, using social media as a medium. In these interactions, those invested in the FLM are not passive bystanders. Rather they are

deeply involved, spreading the discourse of fat acceptance in text (Facebook comments), practice (the protest), and verbiage (language).

Regarding MBFFL, a different contention arises that helps to identify the impact of competing discourses in the hands of dominant culture and the pervasiveness of fat rejection discourse. First, although the show is designed to promote body acceptance, a tenet of the FLM, the star of the show is often taped expressing discomfort in her own body, opting to use fat rejection discourse as a way to mitigate these issues. Through the acceptable/unacceptable tension, the outcome of her body is placed on what she can do for it, as opposed to what it does for her. In this space, the tensions between the discourses of fat rejection and fat acceptance is clear as Whitney often struggles with both as she is seeking to promote body acceptance under the banner of body positivity.

Summing up, fat rejection and acceptance are competing discourses present in society with fat rejection discourse dominating throughout, having an impact on the FLM by influencing individuals through language, text, and practices. Through the use of fat rejection discourse, those who subscribe to a culture around weight loss and Westernized beauty standards, send messages that communicate fat to be unnatural, the responsibility of individuals, and restrictive in daily living. Fat acceptance discourse contends with these messages, as subscribers of fat positivity point to genetics, body acceptance, and argument critiques. When confronted, members of the movement do not shrink back from raising their voice collectively and defending their views. They also do not hesitate in separating themselves from entities that promote body acceptance with contingencies. In short, the fat acceptance discourse is the substance that sustain rules, regulations, and

behaviors for the movement, advancing their agenda and rejecting any message that does not.

Identity and the Struggle to Integrate

RQ2: How do identity and identification processes impact the progress of the Fat Liberation movement?

The second research question of this dissertation examines the notion of identity and identification processes of members in the FLM. Understanding how identities are managed and negotiated in this space is of interest because there is not much known about FLM members and their interactions with one another. The concept of intersectionality is also an interesting case of study in this context since it is a new concept introduced in the FLM's third wave of progression. By analyzing 25 in-depth interviews from members of movement, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify themes in the data exhibiting the processes of identity management and negotiation.

Results from the data analysis show that members of the movement utilize social media as a vehicle to house specialized groups or "virtual communities" to accommodate members' needs based on interests and social identities. Membership negotiation couples with organization identification, as members work to decide what groups to be a part of, while simultaneously struggling with multiple identities alongside that of fatness impacting their identification with the movement. Causes for membership withdrawal was also a theme, as exclusionary practices caused members to retract participation, followed by the theme of intersectionality, covering its triumphs and setbacks as members resist and accept the concept.

Identity

In addition to identifying as fat, interviewees also described themselves in terms of their race, gender, sexuality, body size, and body ability. For example, interviewee Sharla identified herself as both queer and Native, explaining how her proximity to these identities help her to understand the plight of fat individuals,

I'm native, and I'm also queer. I think that... helps me to relate to different people and their different perspectives. I grew up in a very diverse family as well, so I have an easy time putting myself in other people's shoes. It makes me very open and very empathetic and things like that.

Janet also spoke about her identity, connecting her activism for the movement with being disabled, “So, the identity that most relates to my fat positive activism is my identity as a disabled person. I have several invisible illnesses. so many people don't see that I'm disabled. And I'm able to work though.”

Lastly, Violet spoke regarding her identities, stating the importance of being represented in the movement,

“I'm black. Okay? I'm blackity black and I love it, so that's one beautiful thing. My gender, I'm nonconforming.”

As these quotes demonstrate, members of the movement possess more than one identity and acknowledge them as important and salient within fat positive spaces. These identities are not seen as separate from their fat identity but rather, they help to inform participants' experiences in the spaces they inhabit. By drawing multiple identities into membership, members of the movement highlight diversity and the need for fat activism in several contexts with different considerations of approach. Members also seemed to gather on the social media platform, Facebook and negotiate their identities through membership in fat positive groups based on personal interests and salient identities.

The importance of social media

All interviewees reported having some tie to social media and the FLM. Facebook was mentioned the most, while Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter all served as resources for members to stay up to date with information on fat acceptance. Renee points out how participating in blog posts and face to face meetings are limited, making Facebook her primary channel of communication with others,

Mostly Facebook is how I interact with people. I used to read blog posts and comment on blog posts more, I don't do that as much. We do have some people who get together in "real life" periodically, but that's more socialization. We get to socialize together in ways that we don't necessarily get to hang out with other fat positive people that often.

The sentiments of Renee resonated with many other interviewees as they cited Facebook groups as a way to interact with other fat positive members and negotiate their identities through membership in groups or “virtual communities” based on their needs. Members talked about groups that were created to focus on resources like clothing or travel advice as well as some that were created to focus primarily on aspects of their identity, like race.

Virtual communities for interests. Members of the movement utilized virtual communities for interest to share stories or advice in groups comprised specifically around topics pertaining to certain activities. In these groups, membership negotiation is utilized to unify members of the movement who possess a shared identity of fatness, while also enjoying everyday activities like dancing, flying, or fashion. In these spaces, fatness is the most salient identity that emerges, as group interests are the primary reason for communing. For example, Michelle, an avid athlete, talked about how she is part of a Facebook group specifically for other fatties who enjoy physical fitness outside of weight loss,

Yes, I find that in the Fat Folks Getting Fit. I feel it a lot just because that's a group that does censure weight loss. In fact, talk of weight loss is prohibited in the

group. Before and after pictures and things like that are not allowed in the group. The fact that in that group, everybody has agreed to these ground rules has been really nice so that we can just enjoy the experience of being fat and trying to get in more movement.

Other members spoke about Facebook groups that provided goods, services, and advice.

When speaking about the advice she receives from a Facebook group she is a member of, interviewee, Joann talked about getting advice not readily accessible due to her body size,

I like the Looking Out for Our Fat Bodies group because it's useful to have so many tips. Specifically, people who have bodies who are like mine, so we can talk about things like what do we do when we get yeast infections... How do you deal with this or where do you find, what is your experience with something like menstrual cups or cloth pads, like fiber cloth pads that come in kinds that are long enough or large enough for us? All of that is pretty exciting.

Vatrice also saw the value in Facebook groups, as she discussed a group she was a member of designed to be a service to fat individuals who wanted to exchange clothes,

It was the first was established by my dear departed friend Pat was a huge influence on me getting started on activism. Even though she herself was not specifically an activist. But she started this Facebook group Fatties Clothing Swap. It now has over tens of thousands of members and it's where we go to buy and sell clothes to one another.

Lastly, Sharla's comment captures the theme of virtual communities for interest, as she explains the difference between the make-up group she is involved in and other Facebook make-up groups is qualifier of being fat, "Like, there's a group for makeup that's specifically for plus size and fat people. It's called Makeup Size Plus or something like that. Different groups like that are the things we do in our daily lives but [when] we're among fat people feels more comfortable."

These responses show how Facebook groups have become a meaningful component for fat positive groups, creating a place of comfort among members of the movement to share common interests. Members here are fat first, before any other

identity. Here, possessing a fat identity is the qualifier that distinguishes group members from a typical Facebook group created around the same interests. Spaces such as these employ fat acceptance discourses such as exchanging clothing and participating in similar activities, allowing members of the movement to participate in everyday practices with others who can relate to similar experiences, participating in activities while fat. In contrast, another sect of communities emerged in the data, characterized around members' need to create social spaces that allow for the centering of multiple identities alongside being fat.

Virtual communities for identity. Like virtual communities for interests, virtual communities for identity also do well in accruing members of the movement. However, instead of these groups being appealing to members based on activities, identity takes center stage as members are drawn to these groups through identification processes that enable them to negotiate their identities in terms of race, sexuality, gender, etc. In these spaces, multiple identities can exist simultaneously alongside that of fatness. In fact, fatness in these cases is interpreted through a multifaceted lens of understanding, adding complexity to the lived experiences of those who identify with the movement.

Toya, a member of a fat positive group for Black women and femmes, shared her testimony on how a virtual community of identity has impacted her experience as both a Black and fat woman,

Growing up, I was only the fat kid, I was also only fat Black girl. So, growing up, I was the only girl in our group who was fat, so I was lacking that friendship a lot. Society, now, as an adult, it's like a fresh air. It's so amazing that everyone is so supportive. Posting pictures of their outfits, so amazing. Their makeup is beautiful, and you see so many Black women supporting each other, especially fat Black women. It has been amazing. It has changed how I viewed my body in the last couple of months. I appreciate that group so much... It's the only group I'm in where the majority of the group are Black women.

Beth spoke about her past experience in communities that did not take an account of multiple identities. She shared how it is imperative she be part of a space that leaves room for such,

I really like More Bellies to Love. I really like Fatlandia, which is a part of NOLOSE, which is another organization that I am a part of and I was a part of the Board of Directors for. And the Anti-oppressive Fatshion. I really liked that group and was able to really find a source of community there. Mainly because of the fact that they're intersectional. In the past, I've had issues with fat acceptance being majority white, and when it's overwhelmed with a lot of whiteness, it can get really toxic. And for my mental health like it helps me to be able to be a part of spaces that are mainly ran by people of color or people that are highly knowledgeable about people of color issues, especially black people. Just because we are left out a lot when it comes to the movement.

Lastly, Renee's comment illustrates the evolution of some communities, coupling the factors of both interests and identity, but also differentiating that identity comes first,

I'm in like 10 different groups for fat people. And a couple of them are sort of more explicitly, like one of them is called anti-oppressive queer fashion. Theoretically it started off talking mostly about clothes, but it's not what it's all about. It's not just about fat, it's also about the interconnectedness of the different kinds of oppression and how we're trying to get rid of all of them and not just one of them.

Similar to previous uses of the *Fatosphere* like providing advice for daily upkeep (i.e., where to hang out, buy products specifically for larger bodies, find resources, etc.), members who identify with the movement share a common interest in navigating through social media channels to find spaces that accommodate their needs in fat acceptance. In the spaces of virtual communities for identities, members negotiate membership by identifying and dis-identifying with other communities based on salient identity characteristics in addition to being fat. In these spaces, members see being fat as an identity they hold simultaneously with other identities that help to frame a more holistic view of their person. This is not to say that the same activities happening in virtual

communities for interest do not take place here, but rather that the purpose for gathering is different.

Considering this, the next theme expounds on the possible reasons as to why communities of identity may be needed, highlighting the difference between diversity and inclusion.

Downsides to community membership. Matters of inclusion within virtual communities surfaced in 20 of the 25 interviews conducted. Most interviewees expressed frustration with being overlooked in virtual communities or having too much visibility which ultimately had an impact on their participation in the groups. Kennedy talked about an incident that took place in an online group due to an administrator's refusal to address and fix comments she previously made about comparing slavery to the diet industry,

So, I was in a fat activism group or fat acceptance group on Facebook for past couple of years actually. Excuse me actually and it took a wrong turn when one of the admins posted something about weight loss surgery being akin to slavery or being on the diet rollercoaster like the diet industry is akin to like the slave's system that we had in the United States. And she was called out or in whichever way you want to say it where people said this is not exactly a great reference for you to be using. You shouldn't exactly be comparing anything to slavery and it would be great if you could alter your post and just kind of apologize because that was not okay. And for me, I think that's a great calling in because of course yes, the diet industry is really terrible, and, in some ways, we are slaves to the diet industry because it is all around us. But comparing it to actual chattel slavery that's not exactly great especially considering the political climate and it's just not a great idea. But the original poster decided not to understand what she's being called out for and double down on why it was not a problem and just kind of refused to apologize. And in this situation, it was kind of difficult because most of the people in the conversation were white and they were asking for a person of color to come in and kind of co-sign what they were saying, and, in that way, I felt kind of tokenized like my experience wasn't really important. My lived experience. But like I was needed as a bludgeon or a witness or something like this. I wasn't a person, I was a textbook and that I thought was not so great.

Sharla also echoed these sentiments when speaking about her own experience in a virtual community,

With this group, the girl who used to run it, who's not in it anymore, she was not sensitive to racial issues at all. That was a bit of a struggle because it came to her head one day when she posted something and then those ones who are people of color to trying to explain it to her and she just wasn't getting it. At that point in time, I felt very excluded but now since she's been gone in the last few months, things have really improved on that front.

Using these excerpts, incidents that overlooked members based on issues of race, caused them to feel left out and alienated. When race was salient for the individual but was ignored by the original poster, an effort to reconcile the different perspectives was extended by members but to no avail. In instances such as these, when other identities are overlooked for the sake of fatness, harm is brought to members of the movement who see their coexisting identities as important. Thus, tensions around identification are present as members of the movement seek to negotiate membership around other identities they are inextricably tied to.

Nichelle also used silence after an incident happened between her and group members exposing how some were more privileged than others,

At first, after that whole situation happened, I damn near didn't say something for like a whole week. I just stayed to myself. I kept my commentary to myself. I had turned off the notifications for the group. Anytime one of my friends who was in the group be like, "Nichelle, look what ... look in the group." I don't care right now, 'cause I was just kinda over it, because it triggered certain things with me that I was still dealing with.

Again, when identities clash in virtual communities, there is a negative impact on participation as members feel like they are not welcome or in a position to share their thoughts. Through this process, members are deciding who can speak on issues and who cannot, particularly on topics that indirectly relate to fatness. Through organizational identification, members are deciding what groups they have a place in or not based on their attachment to identities they feel equally part of. This ongoing struggle within the

third wave of fat acceptance speaks to the presence of diversity but the need of inclusion within the FLM, impacting its progress and growth.

The Impact of an Intersectional Perspective

As previously discussed, the third wave of fat acceptance includes the concept of intersectionality, addressing the ways that oppression is multiplied when marginalized identities are compounded. Many interviewees spoke about intersectionality throughout interviews, acknowledging their privileges and intersections. Some spoke specifically about the ways that resources and oppression differ in the context of fatness.

Simone shared her thoughts on how she often had to correct White women around the lived experiences of being Black and fat,

Oh. I live in the middle of all the intersections, and I know, as an out-loud fat, black woman, sometimes I have to check white chicks like, no, it's not easy to be fat and black because we're still considered the lowest on the totem pole, so, no, it's not easier. Well, black men love fat women. No. Black men love fat white women. Let's be real clear...It's not just being fat. It's being fat, and a woman, and black, and, in my case, at this point, and middle age ... All those things ...”

In contrast, Hope added her perspective on privilege and the opportunities it afforded her,

My privilege allows me to be heard and to not be looked down on or seen like I don't know what I'm talking about or all these other things. I'm easier to swallow in a sense. I'm thin, I'm transgender, I'm pretty clean cut, a lot of people wouldn't even know I was queer if they saw me, in middle class and has a degree. These things that make me seem more palatable.

Lastly, Beth talks about intersectionality in the context of body size, mental health, race, disability, and being poor, illustrating the ways that oppression is compounded based on matters of identity,

I am referring to the fact that I'm black, the fact that I'm super fat [above the body size, also have mental illness, physical limitations, also like low SES. I'm trying to think of other things, like non-binary. I have a lot of things stacked up against me, basically.

Through these segments, members of the movement are explicit in the ways that their identities advantage or disadvantage their position in the FLM. Although being fat is an oppressed identity, matters of race, socio-economic status, body size, and the like making existing in a fat body harder. By viewing identities through an intersectional framework, members' identities cannot be separated. They are carried in every lived experience, and inform those who carry them through unique perspectives, including that of fatness.

Nevertheless, there are those attempting to make an effort at being cognizant of the differences in oppression, making room for those previously overlooked or ignored. Vatrice said the following about her involvement,

I'm a white woman and it definitely impacts my role in the movement because the unfortunate reality is that I have privilege that others don't. I have privilege on multiple levels. I'm able to use that to center those who don't have the same privilege. For example, yesterday someone was challenging me, she couldn't believe that I was not queer. She said why do you post these pro queer stuff, she herself is but she was just baffled as to why she thought what I did went beyond being an ally and it just confused her. I said I'm empathetic; I care about social justice, that's what I'm doing.

Patricia also shared how being cognizant of her identity enables her to make space for marginalized identities, "I'm also a white woman so I have to be aware of how much space I take up. Try and be aware of that and leave room for other people to comment and post and not speak over their experiences, because they're very different from mine."

Shirley also noted that she was aware that her plight in life was not the same as others and as a result refrained from sharing information,

Well, I do think I carry a lot of privilege and so ... It's one reason I mostly lurk. So, I lurk because I do think that I carry a lot of privilege and it's not helpful to come in there and throw that around, and then the other thing is because my ... I am very passionate about this topic, but my passion, like I said is sort of tempered. I think I just benefit more from listening than I do from participating.

According to these excerpts, members of the movement who were aware of their identities outside of fatness, understood the ways that those identities had an impact on the life they currently live within the FLM. As a result, members were willing to make efforts at accommodating those who do not share the same experience in hopes of creating a leveled platform within virtual communities. The acceptance of intersectionality for the movement is a step forward in the FLM's objective, however, since its incorporation in the new millennium, some members still struggle with the concept. Shirley explained her resistance to the idea of compounded oppression by advocating for combining oppression without differentiating the degree,

I have faith in you guys, I don't ... I told my son, "You're gonna have to correct me, I'm gonna get so much wrong." But I do have tremendous faith in you guys. And I think you're at a tough place because having some of these discussions, there's a lot of rigidity, and I get why it's there. But just like we're all of the sudden, you're choosing between Trans kids and fat kids, and I'm like, "Can't we ... it's all oppression man, it's all shitty, it's all screwing up the kids." I don't know, just like with the small fats and the [super] fatties arguing, I'm like, "Don't you see? We're all getting fucked?"

Carla also shared her struggle with intersectionality, noting its size as a reason for her difficulty,

I love all the work that people are doing on intersectionality. I try to incorporate that into how I live my life as much as possible, but it's just such a huge, huge area. It's hard to grasp all of it.

This active struggle (and at times resistance) to the concept of intersectionality highlights an ongoing problem with the FLM, impacting its progress amongst members. Despite being in favor of intersectionality, some members simultaneously speak against its concept or hint to not fulfilling a commitment to it for reasons of difficulty or matters of divisiveness, bringing up questions around one's commitment to the FLM's objective

as an organizing force and the message of fat acceptance in its third wave. Hence, membership negotiation is ongoing in this regard as the FLM has members on both sides of support for this endeavor. Moreover, by some members resisting the concept of intersectionality, it limits the reach of the FLM, and restricts it from gaining new perspectives about fatness from lived experiences otherwise inaccessible.

In sum, the freedom to express one's identity has a great impact on the progress of the FLM. Through membership negotiation, members of the movement make decisions to join or leave groups based on interests as well as matters of identity. Members who are comfortable possessing multiple identities within the movement, navigated towards groups that were accommodating towards this factor, while other members joined virtual communities based on interests. Those for whom multiple identities were salient sometimes reported challenges in feeling included in fat acceptance spaces that did not see identities other than fatness in equal regard. As a result, a withdrawal in participation and community membership was present, highlighting ongoing problems with matters of diversity and inclusion.

Interviewees' thoughts regarding intersectionality reflect similar issues and problems present in previous waves of fat acceptance, but also an effort by some in the movement to learn and adapt, being more inclusive of those with intersecting identities. However, difficulties persist suggesting that learned terminology does not equate to the application of terms in interaction. Members of the movement with intersecting identities report feeling left out with some members remaining obstinate after correction. This in turn, impacts their participation in the movement because they feel unwanted or only wanted for the labor they provide.

Political Action Impacts to FLM Progress

RQ3: How do institutionalized and uninstitutionalized political actions impact the progress of the Fat Liberation movement?

Based on outcomes of institutionalized and uninstitutionalized political action, there are both internal and external impacts to the progress of the FLM. Both create change but in different ways. Institutionalized political action seeks to create social change to the collective of the fat community, using political power as a tool to change rules, laws, and policy. Uninstitutionalized political action utilizes power to create social change on a smaller scale, connecting with individuals interpersonally, while encouraging members of the movement simultaneously.

Institutionalized Political Action

For this study, institutionalized political action is defined as voting, writing letters, and signing petitions (Stekelenburg et al., 2016). Through these actions, fat activists are allowing their voices to be heard in a system where they feel marginalized and often silenced. While institutionalized political action is not utilized often, it does serve an important purpose in moving the movement forward in the context of institutional power.

Thoughts on institutionalized political action. 76% of interviewees were in favor of institutionalized political actions. Vatrice expressed a need for members to participate,

Yes, please give us something to vote about. We have a lot of people who are alarmed to find that weight discrimination is only against the law in just a handful of municipalities in the U.S. and one state. It is occasionally, it does come up as a referendum and is voted down. When it does come up then we spread the word and we try to get people out. Being that when it does come up it's not a national thing it's local to that area.

Others, like Patricia, spoke about understanding the limitations such actions present and her faith in creating change out of participating,

Petitions, I don't know, I see petitions and I'm like, that's a big cause but I don't know what that petition is going to do, so I guess I'm skeptical of their impact, but I'm not going to be the person who says, "Petitions are useless and you shouldn't do that." I'll be like, "You go, girl." But I probably don't sign very many of them because I don't feel like it's a good use of my time.

However, petitions may prove to be more accessible for those who experience limitations in their mobility or are not as politically involved to participate in uninstitutionalized political actions. Yaya explains how actions like marches present a problem for those who cannot be as mobile,

"I think marches in general are very ablest in the sense that it's for able-bodied folk. So, I'm not sure how that might open up space for other people who aren't. I mean I kinda feel some way about that."

Considering these outcomes, questions arise around the difference in support and the application of participating in institutionalized political actions for change. If members are in support of these actions, what hinders them from being active? Also, what other efforts can be employed by members who suffer from physical and mental health hindrances, limiting their involvement in uninstitutionalized political actions? It is possible that the implementation of additional institutionalized political actions could help to progress the FLM further as they continue to move forward in fat acceptance initiatives, but the method of this implementation is unclear.

Institutionalized political actions in action. In the blog, *Dances with Fat*, Chastain (2015) participated in a call to action informing readers of a grievance (i.e., "Tell the EEOC not to Allow Workplace Discrimination"), providing evidence on why the grievance is harmful to fat bodies, and what members of the movement can do to let

their voices be heard (i.e., “read this and sign the statement,” “read this and comment”). In this post, the goal of signing the petition was to stop an institutional practice requiring employees to sign up for a wellness program through their health insurance or be penalized.

The use of institutional political actions for the same cause was also present in interviews as some used their ability to write letters in hopes of dismantling the harm done to fat people within medical settings. When referring to the activism participated in, interviewee Sharla stated, “I’ll try and advocate for other people. I have sent letters and stuff like that to different hospitals, to different medical facilities, to different places where people have felt discriminated against or really felt their needs weren’t being met, things like that.” In this context, the use of letter writing is being utilized to stop discrimination and bring awareness on a larger scale to the way fat individuals are treated in systems of society.

Within pop culture contexts, Carla also commented on writing letters to combat fatphobic institutionalized practices to famous editorial personality, Dear Abby,

“I also periodically write letters to Dear Abby, when she has a fat phobic response to something, I’ll write a letter and tell her that I think she was wrong. I pretty much think she’s wrong every day, but I write her letters when it’s fatphobic.”

These practices are not just seeking justice for one individual, but for the collective in a way that dismantles fatphobia on a larger scale. The advancement and well-being of the collective is of primary interest even if the offense raised was by one person. Arguably, members of the movement see a shared identity also as shared experiences. A hurt to one is a hurt to all, and by utilizing institutionalized political actions, they put themselves in a position to get “justice” for everyone. Ideally, actions

like these would prove to be effective and result in institutional change, however, those participating in these practices are also using actions that are prescribed by the government or specified institutions to share their grievances, leaving their fate in the hands of a system that has been known to actively fight against their cause. Nevertheless, despite these factors, many members still support the efforts of institutionalized political action and think it is helpful towards the cause of fat acceptance. Hence, by adhering to the rules given them, activists find a metaphorical seat at the table to share their ideas and feelings. Institutionalized actions also allow activists to remain “safe” from ridicule because of their appearance, and they are accessible if individuals experience mobility issues that hinder them from marching or walking in protests.

Nevertheless, some of the drawbacks to these actions may be that playing by the rules to confront institutional injustice may not render the results activists are looking for. In each instance provided throughout data collection, there were no follow up stories that spoke about an institutional change rendered on behalf of the political action taken. In many ways, going through the channels of taking up a grievance with a corporation or institution may result in complaints being lost in the process of things, or simply being discarded due to the pervasiveness of fatphobia and weight stigma.

Uninstitutionalized Political Action

In contrast to institutionalized political action, uninstitutionalized political action allows activists to connect with their base while seeking to create social change on a smaller, more intimate platform with those who participate in fatphobia and weight stigma. In this study, uninstitutionalized political action was defined as any action used to create social change outside of institutionalized political actions such as voting and

signing petitions. Through these processes, activists have more freedom to embody their activism and display a message that cannot be contained in a signature or ballot.

Uninstitutionalized political actions in action. Thoughts on uninstitutionalized political actions were also favored by 60% of interviewees and participated in by roughly 50%. Less emphasis was placed on institutional change and more focus was given to changing minds on an interpersonal level. Regarding these actions, members of the FLM operate outside of government and institutional means to raise awareness and create change for the cause of fat acceptance. As illustrated in MBFFL, Thore (2017) uses her body as a site of protest and speaks about how her dancing raises awareness towards fat acceptance,

...here's the Fitness Marshall, he's very fit & his back up dancers are very fit and to put a woman my size in his videos that says a lot to the people who watch him. It shows that fat people can be talented just like thin people, and it just shows a relationship that's really important in the body positive community and in my life

In this segment, she also adds that the goal is not to change systems, but rather the minds of individuals who subscribe to the Fitness Marshall. Lastly, there is also a commitment to uplifting the body positive/fat community through her work.

In his protest against the Donald Trump statue, Shane Brodie also used his body as place of protest as he stood naked in the Castro District in San Francisco, CA to illustrate the harm that the Trump statue created for fat, transsexual individuals that have bodies like the one given Trump. He explained his protest saying,

I am an overweight transsexual man. I'm also a sculptor. I'm a very private and shy person, but yesterday I went to the Castro District of SF and stood at the place where the Trump statue was glued to the sidewalk. I'm going back again today. This is a silent, nude protest/performance where I am rotating through some signs I've made about how I love my body and who I am. I'm doing this as a response to the lack of compassion that's been shown for bodies like mine in the past few days (e.g. small genitalia, small hands, fat) and the current narrative about equating

physical features with the quality of a person. I'm responding to the artist and "anarchist" collective who made the Trump statues and to the people who jeered at the physicality of the statue and equated their riled-up disgust with the quality of Trump as a man and as a candidate for President. Trump's words and actions are enough reason not to support him as president and this body shaming was completely unnecessary and a new low in our culture. The effect of body shaming ripples out beyond Mr. Trump and hurts everyone (Facebook post, August 22, 2016).

In Brodie's post, he states that the purpose of his protest was to raise awareness of fat and transphobic behaviors by those who partook in ridiculing the statue. He also added that the signs he carried that were part of the protest, shared messages of love for his body and identity. In this situation, his protest was designed to touch people on an individual level.

Several interviewees also spoke about their activism involvement in uninstitutionalized political actions in hopes of creating social change. What they define as activism like photo campaigns, party events, and flash dance mobs, varied from the traditional ideas of uninstitutionalized political actions offered at the beginning of this section but fit within broader categories of the definition. Vatrice spoke to how her personal style plays a part in her activism,

When I walk down the street in a tight bodycon dress or big horizontal stripes, or a halter dress as I'm in most days in the summer time or miniskirts, I'm making ... I'm my own little walking political campaign and people will often stop me. I get sneers, I get negative response. But I also get a lot of positive response particularly from other fat people who will stop and ... sometimes they only want to just share a smile but sometimes they want to ask where I got something or they want to sort of give me a "attagirl" for being bold.

Simone spoke about her activism through dancing, encouraging others and taking up space,

The last thing we did, we went to LA for the Hollywood Burlesque Festival, and performed there, which I think is important because, as I said, I believe that could be the home of our body issues, and they need to see the bodies moving and having a good time, and stripping, and being proud like, "This is my tummy. It didn't hurt you. It didn't cost you your job. It didn't smother a child. This is just

my belly. That's all." That's how I do activism, and I'm really out loud on Facebook, and I'm really out loud in public where I think a lot of activism comes... If someone's putting their body down in front of me, I'd definitely stop them, or if I see somebody bullied for their body, I'd definitely jump in. I think that's important. I think that's important for people to know that bullshit will not be tolerated.

Renee used her activism to focus on the demographic of thin allies to create change,

The majority of my activism regarding fat liberation actually is trying to get other activists who are thin to think about us. I do a lot of work with I'm in the DC area... I spend a significant amount of emotional energy trying to get them to think about how to include me and people like me and people who are similar in size but also have lots of other different issues than me into the ways that we are activists together.

In all examples, uninstitutionalized political action shows up outside of the typical ways formulated to create change and spread awareness in smaller environments. In these spaces, activists are often putting their bodies on the line to spread the message of fat acceptance through word and deed. In line with the tradition of the FLM, members are carrying the legacy of the movement, continuing in actions that reinforce the idea of community and the identity of an unapologetic “fattie,” striving to live in a world where they are afforded the same rights as everyone else. By engaging smaller groups, there is a greater interpersonal connection, not readily accessible through institutionalized political action. Consequently, this may give activists more control over their objective and outcome of an action as they can manage who to engage with and how much of themselves or the movement they want to make visible to their audience. As these actions possess a two-fold purpose, fostering social change and community building, there are some setbacks with using uninstitutionalized practices as a primary source of social change. When asking interviewees about their thoughts on uninstitutionalized practices,

some members raised concerns around organization and mobility issues, while others shared thoughts in regard to burnout.

Drawbacks of uninstitutionalized political actions. Although uninstitutionalized political actions seem to be most popular in the movement, however some did point out drawbacks around protesting without a set cause, mobility, and burnout. To begin, Sharla spoke in favor of uninstitutionalized political actions, simply stating, “I’m definitely for them [marches and protests]. I think they work, I would love to be a part of something like that.”

Interviewees expressed their willingness, frustration, as well as uncertainty with how the process of protest would work based on the actions chosen. While some welcomed marching and protesting with open arms, others specified that it would only work with clear objectives and a plan. Still, some confessed that they were unsure about how a protest for fat rights would manifest in the public and work in the movement’s favor. Marcy and Linda spoke about protesting without a clear objective. Marcy commented,

I support those [protests] but I only support it to the fact of them having a next step. Because yes, marches are great and yes, walking for our rights is amazing but after the march is over and the TV, the recorders, everything goes off, the lights turn off, everybody goes home, what are you gonna do after? How are you in your personal day-to-day life gonna take the empowerment that you gave in the streets, how are you gonna bring that home? How are you gonna bring that in your personal spaces, how are you gonna bring that in your professional spaces? These are real spaces that we need to take back the, basically take back autonomy and be like, this is who I am. This is who I feel comfortable with and I don’t need to change it for anybody.

From Linda,

I think when highly organized people are doing it, and that that is one part of a plan of action where there's this is what we're gonna do leading up to that. This is the big movement that we're gonna do. Once this action is over, this is the thing

that we're gonna follow up and these are the other smaller actions that we're gonna do until the next big thing, I'm fully in support of that. And I think that that is important for fat folks because it's important that we're visible. I think it's important, like any other movement, that we don't shrink, that we're out there literally taking up space.

Similarly, Simone questioned whether actions like marching fit the work of fat acceptance,

That's a very big question. I'm not sure if they work the same way for fat community than those ways of moving work for something else like a march for queer rights, a march for civil rights. All those things make sense to me, but a march for fat rights, I'm not ... I'm not sure if it will be received the same way, which then begs the question why wouldn't it be?

One overarching concern of uninstitutionalized political action was in the form of protest and the impact it would have on those who were not able-bodied. This concern was brought up by those able-bodied and those who were not. Many interviewees spoke about this despite wanting to be involved. Jackie mentioned the physical hardships some may experience not being able to march,

“I think also not everyone can get out on these streets. When you talk about folks that are not able-bodied, it's not easy for them to get all on these streets and march fucking five, ten blocks. You know what I'm saying? It's not accessible to some people.”

Hope echoed these sentiments as she felt accommodations for those not able-bodied should be a priority of those involved in uninstitutionalized political actions,

I think that there's a lot of value in marches and protest. I would want to make sure that they were accessible to everybody, even somebody who isn't able to march or isn't able to stand up for a long period of time and things like that. I'm not sure how that would work. It's hard, I can even feel myself feeling anxious about that idea.

Kennedy also explained the power that marches and protests harness, but how larger bodies are not always as privileged to participate,

I think that there's definitely a place for marches and protests because being able to see a large assembly of people together is visually striking where maybe you've

never heard of this kind of thing before. But all of a sudden you see thousand people marching in the streets like whoa this is a big deal. So that's a great way to make something visible. The problem is that generally people in larger bodies we suffer stigmas that tend to lead us to having poorer health outcomes. So, a lot of us have mobility reduction or disability that make marches and like large-scale protests less possible and less probable and less desirable as those met ways for so sure, marching yes but more importantly like what happens next.

According to these respondents, there is a suggestion that more accommodations need to be made for those who participate in physically demanding uninstitutionalized political actions. This may be something more specific to the needs of those in the movement but could prove to hinder progress if the needs of members are not taken seriously and accommodated. Considering that community is such a meaningful component of the FLM, continuing to facilitate projects as those mentioned above without being inclusive could halt participation of members not being included and those who stand for matters of inclusivity.

Lastly, interviewees spoke about burnout when participating in uninstitutionalized political action. Experiencing burnout caused some respondents to take breaks in their participation, ultimately impacting the reach of their work in the movement. As Janet explains,

I did spend energy I didn't have in order to show up to the town hall meetings, do that kind of thing, if that makes sense. So it's like I knew that I could push myself to do those things and make those commitments but then the day after, I knew that I would feel horrible even for the week after because I was expending energy I didn't have.

Jackie also added,

Look, I literally had to take a mental break from doing that stuff because I was paranoid... It was, some of it ... All of it's very justifiable considering the setting, but I think the last year, graduating, ooh God, last year and just taking this past year to kind of just chill out and really figure out what my version of activism looks like because it may not necessarily be out in these streets.

These were the only two cases that described burnout in depth. In both cases being involved too much caused members to expend energy that ultimately depleted them beyond the point of quick recovery. As a result, they needed to take a step back and reevaluate how to be involved in the movement while sustaining good mental health. Again, because of the power of community described in RQ2, it is worth pondering why the community of fat acceptance experiences a lack of help, support, or both that would render some members of movement overworked and suffering from burnout. While these issues may be attributed to individual difficulties, it is unclear to tell this from the analysis.

In sum, members of the movement utilized both institutionalized and uninstitutionalized political actions to advance the progress of the FLM. Members expressed support for both types of actions, despite participating in uninstitutionalized political actions the most. Institutionalized political actions lagged behind but served as a facilitator for social change in institutions and institutionalized settings. Through writing letters, signing petitions, and voting, members of the movement expressed themselves in the defense of fat acceptance in hopes of creating change that would benefit the collective and ultimately the community of all fat people. Although optimism about these endeavors persists, members of the movement do find themselves facing a culture and political presence that avidly works against the things they stand for. Considering that many members of the movement have intersecting identities and experience limitations due to mobility and mental health, it would be useful to think about these things along the lines of political power to possibly build coalitions with other groups to have their grievances heard. Additionally, there does not seem to be much follow-up on the institutionalized

political actions members do participate in, limiting the feedback that could be returned to the collective. It is possible that with more organization, feedback would encourage members to get involved in these types of political actions instead of just being in favor of them and help to foster political power this way also. In short, there is much that institutionalized political actions could afford the movement, but it is an uphill battle, as the dominant discourse of fat rejection extends well into government, medical, and most institutions.

For roadblocks around institutionalized progress, the alternative is presented through uninstitutionalized political actions. It seems that those who participated in uninstitutionalized political actions were adaptable in finding endeavors that worked best for them to remain active in the pursuit of justice. If protests did not work, they sought to find another way that harnessed their creativity and enabled them flexibility to spread awareness how they best saw fit. The interviewees who participated or facilitated actions did so by being involved in practices that ranged from outfit choices to burlesque shows. The goal in these settings were to make a statement to others, spreading awareness, while simultaneously encouraging fellow members of the movement. These activities were organized on a smaller scale, seeking social change through interpersonal channels opposed to progress towards institutional reform. Members of the movement expressed being in favor of these actions, but also had concerns about mobility issues and mental health outcomes resulting from burnout. Considering the close bonds of community within the movement, additional questions arise to matters of inclusivity and involvement of members to relieve pressure from those who suffer from being overworked. Still, uninstitutionalized political actions suit the movement well as they have been a part of

the tradition of fat acceptance since its inception. Members find power and strengthen their base through these endeavors, inspiring social change through unconventional means.

Progression through Internal Practices and Strategies

RQ3a: How have internal practices and strategies impacted the progress of the Fat Liberation movement?

The last research question of this study examines the internal practices and strategies of the FLM to understand how it operates through the lived experiences of members. Like the practices and strategies of waves one and two, members of the third wave of the FLM have continued the behaviors of creating their own media and meeting in “communities” over possessing national organization affiliations. They also have continued to increase their presence on the internet through the use of blog posts and social media, doubling as a tool to disseminate information and correct behavior not aligned with the movement’s objective. There are some shortcomings when discussing the progress of the FLM. A lack of organization to the structure of the movement’s practices are highlighted by decentralized governing and the failure to initiate follow-up endeavors to ensure the works of political actions have made a difference.

To clarify, internal practices refer to the day to day operations employed by the movement between members, while internal strategies speak to the efforts designed within the movement to impact nonmembers. Examining these practices and strategies are of interest regarding the FLM due to how much is unknown about the movement and how much of an impact these activities have to do with the visibility (or lack thereof) of fat acceptance in the public sphere.

To make the following assessment, a thematic analysis was conducted to investigate the leading themes derived from the 25 in-depth interviews and 27 blog articles from members within the movement who profess fat acceptance. Participants were asked questions that pertained to their activities in staying informed about happenings within the FLM. The three themes of community, information, and correction emerged as facilitators to the progress of the movement, while barriers highlighting a need for more face to face interaction and a lack of organization also emerged.

Internal Practices Shaped by Community

Based on data analysis, it is clear that the internal practices of the FLM revolve around the work of community. Through community, members experience encouragement, support, information, and correction. Calls to action are facilitated through community channels for members to get involved in causes akin to fat acceptance and all its intersections. Encouragement and support also help to keep movement members engaged as they face daily trials of weight stigma. Lastly, community creates an environment that allows for “call ins” and “call outs” by members of the community to address error and misconceptions. By building a thriving community, the FLM simultaneously progresses, at least amongst itself.

Experiencing support and encouragement. The components of community within fat acceptance help to inform members, correct members, and encourage them through their daily activities with others. For example, many interviewees spoke about the sense of encouragement and rest they get from having spaces specifically carved out for them. Shirley comments,

I am fortunate that I have in real life [a] community ...I have people in my real life that I get to talk to about some of this. I have a circle of online virtual friends

that I've talked to about it. And some of them are the people who've led me to the groups actually. But so, the groups are important for me to kind of know what's going on, hear what's happening, get reminded of other people's points of view, so that when I hear them in my office, I kind of know what people are talking about

Joann mentioned the importance of having a place where self-hating fat people are not present,

It's nice to have a place where I'm not dealing with the particular, unexamined and casual assumptions that fat people are bad or fat people are sloppy or that fat is a thing to war against in our bodies or that our bodies are a thing to war against in general. I'm in number of fat groups. There's a big, flying fat group and there's fatties groups and there's some other groups where people are definitely they're fat, sure, but they certainly come out with the ... they definitely hate themselves. If I can just reduce my exposure to self-hating fatties in my online space that makes it a lot easier for me to deal with them in my real-life space because I have to. I am a burlesque performer. I'm a fat burlesque performer. I help, I've spent about the past 9 years helping to organize the Burlecon, which is a burlesque social and educational convention where I host the fat caucuses. I'm one of the people who does that.

Toya discussed her gratitude for having a community to interact with,

You're like, "Oh, where was this group when I was in high school? Where was this group when I was in college? Why am I finding this group at 24?" Like, "Where were you when I needed you at 16?" You know what this means to me? Like, "I'm so glad I found you." Even in my late 20s, I'm so happy to be in a group like this. I can't wait to see how the group's going to evolve or what's next for the group. I know she's, first of all, she's going to do a website or something like that. If you have a website, I will pay for the website, I will pay to join the website. We need that.

In these segments, there is a benefit to members who are a part of an online or physical community. Members talk about feelings of belonging and comfortability. These spaces also provide a sense of escape from the constant inundation of fatphobia and weight stigma.

In contrast, members do not see the community being created or supported by national organizations. Simone was explicit about her departure from national organizations and why,

I'm not too keen on NAAFA. I think, like the NAACP, they pass the time, and they either need to disband or revamp... I think they're past their prime. I think they're still operating on 1960s standards of fat and womanhood that really don't apply right now. They seem to have a very still idea like if you're fat, don't be sexy. There are a lot of fat and very sexy women out there. I remember for one of their conferences, my troop was like, "Hey, we support you. We'll donate an act." I wasn't able to go because I had a show to host, but they were treated really bad... There's one my dancers who is a BBW (big beautiful woman), but she's on the smaller side. She's not a supersize. She's not as big as I am. She's maybe a size 14. No. She's probably 16 at that time ... And they're treated so horribly. She's the first person to get there, and she called me up crying. "You don't deserve this kind of treatment." I do have a sister friend who they've invited to the board. She's trying to bring them to 2017. I wish her all the luck in the world. The things I'm hearing, and they try to attach themselves to everything, it's just ... NAAFA it's like either be through or get better.

Simone sees NAAFA, the biggest national organization for fat acceptance, as outdated and out of touch with the more modern approach of the movement. Through the experience of the dance troop member, the feelings typically associated with community are not there. In fact, the opposite seems to be prevalent as disconnection is what is causing this interviewee to express the need to not be affiliated. Notions such as these can also be connected to the progress of the FLM, because if members do not believe that the national organizations can provide them with the resources they need, the burden will be placed on local and virtual communities to fill these gaps.

Hubs of information. Communities also serve as a hub to inform. Many interviewees spoke about this through the process of joining Facebook groups, staying updated on happening in the movement, following known activists, and meeting others who experience similar life experiences. Jackie explains,

I think The Fat Life, the group, the fat Facebook group is very important. I think it's one that I've seen that I definitely feel comfortable with. And I've met a lot of people in there that are dope. It's cool to see other women that have my same body type. It's like, "Whoa, your stomach rolls like that too? Great. I was getting tired of seeing only mine roll like that. Yours roll like that too? Oh my God, that is cool." You know what I'm saying

Michelle also talked about the ways she stays informed about happenings in the movement,

Yeah, so a lot of the stuff that I'll do is I'll read different articles because I'm in a lot of different Facebook groups that will post different articles. There's a fat feminist group. I'm in a lot of fat kind of fitness groups. I'm also a member ... What is that ASDAH? Which I have a card somewhere in my wallet, which again is about size acceptance. So, I'll do that, and sometimes I'll say, "Oh, what are my friends up to?" I'll go and look and see what they are doing.

Kennedy expressed using several types of mediums to stay updated on information, including blog posts, online magazines, and podcasts,

Melissa Fabello was a good one as well she's a great ally. I do read *Dances with Fat* written by Ragen Chastain from time to time. I have my own blog. Also, *The Body Is Not an Apology* has one. *Ravishingly* sometimes is pretty fat positive though sometimes they also fall off into more mainstream body positivity where weight loss is okay. Let's see what else? Oh my, there's lots of good stuff on Medium your fat friend is an amazing writer. Podcasts. I forgot about podcasts. There's *Fresh out the Cocoon* and there's my own podcast with two great episodes. There's *Kaitlyn Poses*, *Friends of Marilyn*. There's the *Fat Lip*, *Two Bad Fat Broads*. The *Do No Harm* podcast is a new one that's also really excellent.

Lastly, Jackie's preference to staying informed about what was happening in the movement was to use sources by individuals with marginalized identities. She explains, "I think definitely following other fat femmes. I don't think there's really ... I feel like fat femmes really doing the work. To be really honest, fat women, fat femmes, I think they're doing the work, yeah, definitely like Ashleigh Shackelford."

As these responses indicate, the importance is not just who is being followed but also why. Members of the movement are actively choosing to follow or subscribe to activists that are a "good ally" or femme. Websites like the *Body is Not an Apology* and activist Ashleigh Shackelford are both intersectional in their approach towards fat acceptance and liberation. These points harken back to the objective of the third wave of

fat acceptance and the current direction of the movement. In line with third wave behaviors, there is an active consciousness shared by members to be intersectional in their social justice efforts and approach, shifting the internal practices of the movement to incorporate information from marginalized identities.

“Call outs” and “call ins.” Lastly, the community served to correct. This practice was used in social media spaces like Facebook or on blog posts to call out other members in fat acceptance for making problematic statements or comments that were simply incorrect. For example, when a discussion of the weight loss surgery actress Gabby Sidibe underwent appeared on a fat positive post, supporters and opposers of the surgery critiqued an interview Sidibe did with People Magazine. When reviewing her reasons for weight loss, a commenter talked about fat individuals’ ability to lose weight. They were then met with a response from a member of the FLM calling out their language and refuting their argument.

Commenter 1: "When people get weight loss surgery, it's because weight loss through diet and exercise is physically impossible for their body."
This is misleading... More often than not there is a hormonal issue underlying the weight.

FLM Member: I disagree with a lot of what you've written in this comment and how you're presenting it. I don't think I'm fat because I lack "normal function" or have a "hormone issue." (Wow, that one takes me right back to the 70s!) The body's weight-regulating mechanism is a complex system with more inputs and variables than our science currently knows about. It's not just hormones. Your comment assumes that fat people should want some kind of "cure" for our weight diversity. I disagree.

FLM Member 2: Fat black women suffer poorer health outcomes than fat white women. Gab is fat AND dark skinned. There are layers and intersections to this. Please stop acting like you have any idea what it means and feels like to be fat and black. You don't.

FLM Member 1: I'm concerned about the ways that racism and sexism and misogyny in the medical system threaten black women's lives. Also, in medical

research. That combined with the weight bias in medicine... you're right, I don't know what it's like to try to navigate all of that.

FLM Member 2: Not you in particular, but fat white people in general. It's a frustration I have with the fat acceptance community and its inability to think critically about the intersection of fatness/blackness/etc.

FLM Member 1: For sure!!! I want my posts and comments to encourage that awareness in fat white people. I can always expand my awareness too! My responses to this latest story can do (Facebook post, March 8, 2017).

Activists also do not hesitate to set boundaries on their pages or posts about what will be allowed. In the ongoing discussion with Commenter 1, the FLM member 1 continues,

What subset are you talking about? The fat people who want to lose weight? That's not a desire I have any intention of satisfying. Not on my timeline or in my fat activism. I don't believe there's a more-okay method to pursue a weight-loss goal. I think they're all based in fat oppression and all just suck (Facebook post, March 8, 2017)

Lastly, blog writers also have used their platform to call out those within the community on how to be better,

Lisa Frank BoPo is what I (now) call the branch of body positivity that isn't intersectional, focuses on white and often thin bodies, and refuses to dig into the deep and critical political issues around comprehensive body liberation and, instead, relies on topical positive messages to keep us all feeling cheerful, and--most importantly: comfortable. This particular lens of body positivity has gained an enormous (and seemingly unstoppable) following—which isn't surprising, as it has taken the original focus of Fat Acceptance and purposefully replaced its polemic aims with palatable conversations (Baker, 2017, para. 7, 8).

Through acts of calling in/out, activists can control their space as well as ensure accurate information be disseminated. By doing so, they keep their space “safe” for those abiding and uncontaminated with fatphobic information by members who may be uneducated or have mixed views. Proper information and intersectional support would be considered vital to the progress of the FLM as these issues align with both its history and

present movement objectives. By activists controlling their space in this respect, they also are helping to add to the progress of the movement.

Problems with Internal Practices and Strategies

A second set of themes emerged from the data revealing possible barriers to the progress of the FLM, highlighting how the source of the movement's strengths could also become its weaknesses if not used with proper consideration. The barriers include: the lack of face to face meetups, lack of notifications of news within the movement, and lack of organization in the follow-up of political actions. Again, within the context of newer social movements, the same tensions of organization, notifications, and face to face interactions are present (Taylor, 2016).

Face to face meet ups. Amongst interviewees, face to face meetups among the fat positive collective were rare. 13 out of the 25 interviewees explained a desire to have or already had consistent face to face interactions in addition to the virtual groups they're currently active in. When asked about improvement that could be made to virtual groups, Michelle mentioned the addition of face to face meet ups,

...But yeah, so that's what I would do, and probably find ways for more people to meet in real life. I would do that. Find ways to connect maybe people who live near one another, to have community outside of the group, the Facebook group.

Other interviewees like Linda and Patricia used face to face meetups as an opportunity to supplement the relationships they built online to discuss topics or provide physical resources. Linda shared her experience by stating she does regular meet up with fat friends in addition to her online activity,

I am a member of several different groups on Facebook. I do regular meet ups with my fat friends specifically, where we can really talk about what our experiences are in life, in dating, in sex, in our family. It's the holidays. So, the

holidays can be very triggering because family members, in my family in particular, for my grandmother it's a compliment to say, "Oh, you look like you've lost weight."

Patricia talked about her involvement with local groups to exchange clothing,

We're all local to Winnipeg/Manitoba or at least associated with Winnipeg in some way. There's a few people who've moved away but they still stay in the group. They organize two clothing swaps every year, which are exclusively for plus-sized clothing, which is super awesome. They also do book clubs, and sometimes we just get together for cupcakes because Fat Babes eating cupcakes.

By expressing needs to add or supplement virtual meetings with face to face interactions, members may be acknowledging that although the internet does have positive outcomes, it also lacks in other areas they deem necessary for engagement and membership. Through member comments, there is a need specified for face to face interaction, additional sharing of information on topics and issues, and the exchange of physical goods.

Although social media proves to be a hub where members can gather and cultivate interpersonal connections, relying solely on online interactions to foster social change in society is not the most productive way. As Wolfson reports (2014), face to face interactions is one of the driving forces behind a successful movement. Moreover, the reliance on online connections through the use of Facebook groups, limits the reach of the movement in this respect as some members may be unaware that these groups exist or lack access to the internet. By making face to face interactions a priority, this shifts the dependency on social media back to a tool used to communicate the message of fat acceptance and not the site of the movement itself.

Notification of news. A reliance on social media and social media notifications are said by members to not be the best way to get information disseminated throughout

the network of users who need it. In fact, some members report turning off notifications and visiting online communities at their own leisure. Moreover, despite the movement having a system designed to circulate information through the *Fatosphere*, it is not utilized as it could be, maximizing efforts to make sure members are notified on a single platform designed specifically for all things fat.

72% of interviewees relied most on Facebook notifications to alert them about news in a group. These alerts ranged from “turning them on” to receive all notifications, highlights from posts, and only when friends posted. One member remarked that the administrator of the group would notify group members when something was pertinent, but outside of this, there was no formal system set up for members to be notified about happenings within the movement. This could prove to be problematic in the event news needed to circulate among individual communities for everyone to be notified. For example, when speaking about notifications and a popular group being shut down, Joann did not know until she noticed the group had “disappeared.” She said,

“...If it's Many Bellies of Love, I used to notice it because the group would disappear. I was like, oh, well clearly somebody was on some shit because the group's gone again.”

Yaya also talked about the effectiveness of notifications being the primary way to receive information stating that there could be more effective options, “It's been working. I'm not going to say that it's the most effective way, but it's been working. Of course, there's other direct ways that information can be given to folks via direct emails, Messenger, through outlets, but it works.”

When considering social media is the primary way most members in the study stayed connected with the movement and its happenings, notifications of those

happenings should be of importance. If a call to action is sent out and some members do not see it, it is less likely they will participate. Also, if someone within the group needs resources or finds themselves in a crisis situation, members may not see the alert for these posts, leaving members feeling without the support base communities are designed to provide. Lastly, one must consider how the issue of notifications can be tackled on a larger scale when the movement is comprised of so many smaller communities. Who will be responsible for sharing the message? Do administrators from pages know one another? Are there plans to come together collectively as needed and later retreat to smaller groups? All questions that answers can help to add or subtract to the impact these internal working have externally on the FLM.

Lack of organization. Lastly, in addition to a failed notification system, the FLM seems to struggle with follow-up efforts regarding political actions they participate in. Though calls to action exist, much is not done to alert members about outcomes to initiatives previously accounted for. One reason for a lapse of follow-up may be due to the decentralized structure of the movement. Since the hierarchy of the movement is horizontal in nature, no reigning authority exists within movement, and no requirement for members in organizing is kept. Hence, members are left at the mercy of their own knowledge of what organizing should be, which varies based on a multitude of factors. Despite making calls to action and some members participating, the movement does not seem to do well with following up on these initiatives. Throughout the data collection process, there was no comment to how movement members followed up with political action outcomes. It seems that the call to action and execution of such is valued most, however, with less attention given to the outcomes of these actions, it is hard to tell what

the outcomes of these actions are and what changes in law or social awareness can be attributed to the work of activists who participated in acts for change.

This outcome is like that of RQ3, because political action behaviors do not seem to always be tracked by the movement collectively. Within communities, political actions are organized and, in some cases, completed, but collectively there currently is no person or persons to date to keep data on who participated, how, and what were the outcomes. Consequently, this also means that the FLM cannot take credit for social change and prove it with substantial evidence, lending credence to the movement.

In sum, internal practices and strategies are vital to the upkeep of the FLM and helps to progress the movement when used efficiently. Three themes were identified as factors that help to progress the movement through community building, information sharing, and corrective behaviors.

Having strong communities is an ongoing characteristic of the movement, fostering interpersonal connections among members and creating spaces of safety. Information sharing is also a part of the long tradition of the FLM, growing through the work of social media and the internet, broadening the reach of the message of fat acceptance throughout the world. Message sharing serves many purposes for the FLM, revolving around encouragement and education, equipping members with the necessary information to move forward in their pursuit of justice. Message sharing also aids in the corrective actions of the movement, as members do not shy away from holding one another accountable, “calling out” missteps and “calling in” misunderstandings to keep the movement on track.

Barriers to the progress of FLM also exist. By focusing primarily on online connections, work towards face to face interactions lacks, possibly impacting the influence of the movement negatively in the public. This also limits the reach of the movement to members of fat acceptance who may not have access to social media groups or internet connections. There is also a lack of organization within the movement, affecting the way information is disseminated and the way calls to actions happen and are followed up on. The lack of organization may be attributed to the decentralization of authority within the movement, giving members independence to function within the movement the best way they see fit without a governing entity to be accountable to.

CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY,
AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate factors that served as facilitators and barriers to the progress of the FLM. Results demonstrate that limitations to the progress of the movement not only rests on external forces through the media, politics, and interpersonal interactions. Internal roadblocks also exist, by way of language, identification processes, a lack of inclusive political action endeavors which are equipped with tools to measure impact, and a power structure that cannot sustain and maintain the movement's momentum.

Conversely, facilitators that support the progress of the FLM are strong in areas of education, uninstitutionalized political action efforts, community, and networking through systems created to offer services and material goods to members of the movement. Taken together, the FLM is a complex compilation of organizations and communities striving to create social change on platforms they have been given and taken in the name of liberation. The following discussion will expound on these factors, connecting them to the research findings discussed in chapter four.

Facilitators and Barriers of the FLM

This study gave insight into the progress of the FLM by highlighting facilitators that help to move the movement forward in one shape or another. Through the triangulation of research methods, findings reveal that the FLM has facilitators in the

areas of discourse, identity and identification processes, political action, and internal practices and strategies through the use of social media and blogs.

Discourse and its impact. It is undeniable that discourse used in the ways employed by the FLM make it a facilitator to the progress of the movement, as it is the foundation on which all other forms of collective action rests. In line with previous research and the historical practices of the FLM, the discourse of fat acceptance was present throughout blogs and in-depth interviews representative of practices, text, and dialogue shared within the movement. Like Mumby and Stohl's (1991) assessment, discourse is much more than what is written or said for the members organized under the FLM banner. Rather, through an array of practices, members of the FLM incorporated the discourse of fat acceptance into their lives daily by partaking in actions that signify they are active participants in fat positivity (i.e., critiquing articles, challenging medical professionals, exchanging services and goods, etc.), while simultaneously throwing off the more dominant societal discourse of fat rejection that encompasses the pathology of weight gain, personal responsibility, and physical and social barriers due to fatness. As information is received throughout the FLM, it is put into action, manifesting itself in different ways (i.e., uninstitutionalized political actions, articles, group formation, etc.) pertinent to the survival of the movement, propelling its progress forward.

Key findings in RQ1 exemplify the tensions present between the discourses of fat acceptance and rejection, as similar methods of practice are used to obtain drastically different results. With the reclaiming of the word "fat," members of the FLM, utilized the little "d" discourse of *Defining fat* to reduce the word to a descriptor, removing negative connotations, and transforming it into a site of action (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). In

other words, by removing the negative connotations that the word fat carried, members were able to also remove those same connotations that their body was said to be representative of, releasing them to practice the discourse of fat acceptance more freely. Moreover, with freedom from fatphobic negativity in fat positive spaces, members employed the second little “d” discourse of *Body acceptance*, shifting attention away from societal beauty standards and embracing the functionality of their bodies, creating a dualism (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016) with the discourse of *Personal responsibility*, used to incite action around self-deprecation and deferred acceptance. The body acceptance discourse aids in the progression of the movement as members find peace within themselves to be themselves and flourish both physically and socially. Lastly, by utilizing the little “d” discourse of *Resistance* to refute claims made through *The Pathology of Weight* discourse, members of the FLM continue to move forward in their goals by equipping their community with information and educational tools to expose the weight loss industry, critique publications around topics of fatphobia, and use their knowledge as a tool to publicly stand against maltreatment by dominant groups who invest in the ideology of the discourse of fat rejection. Through this process, the FLM members invoke the sentiments of the first and second wave of fat acceptance through protest (Cooper, 1998), and do so through the use of their own channels (Cooper, 2008), connected to a network of rich media resources full of enlightenment for individual and group needs.

However, it is hard to dismiss the power fat rejection discourse has within society’s organizational structure (Clegg, 1975, Mumby & Stohl, 1991). Similar to the methods used in fat acceptance discourse that leads to the facilitation of the movement,

results from RQ1 also show fat rejection discourse is successful in being a barrier, as it depicts fat bodies as undesirable, devalued, and unnatural. These depictions are supported by previous research when explaining the ways that fatphobia is prevalent throughout society as it peddles weight loss and restricts access to larger bodies (Cooper, 2008). Even more problematic is the incorporation of figures of power (i.e., doctors, therapists, personal trainers) on TV shows to share fatphobic information, as the lines of truth become muddled, making the credibility of advice rest more on the image sending the message, than the actual statements used that speak ill of fatness since they are often refuted. For example, throughout TBL and MSPL there are fat positive narratives silenced for the sake of the dominant discourse of fat rejection. In episode 3 of season 17 (2016a) of TBL, contestants in the beginning of their weight loss journey were challenged to get together by group and pull food trucks to a designated area. At the time, some contestants still weighed over 300 pounds, yet only weight loss was the focus of the show, silencing other fat positive “victories” gained through things like physical activity that are weight neutral, and were performed while contestants were still fat. This is also prevalent in MSPL as most participants featured are immobile without assistance or bedridden. The storyline is designed to feature the pain and anguish individuals live in until weight loss is achieved. However, through data collection, results showed that all but four participants were romantically involved and met their romantic partner when they were over 350 pounds. Romantic partners reported loving their significant other and not being concerned about their weight when they first met. They also did not mind assisting their partners in daily activities to make sure that they had the help that they needed, but the show only frames them as enablers, silencing the romantic and supportive

roles that they play in their significant other's life. Given the exposure both TV shows receive, it is a fair assessment that fat rejection discourse has a stage not afforded to that of fat acceptance. Rather, fat rejection is supported and perpetuated by the everyday talk used by the media, politicians, and the medical field, making another discourse that is contradictory to its ideological assumptions hard, if not impossible, to prevail. The effects of this can be seen in the FLM, as most of what is done in the movement happens online through interpersonal connections. While this is not all negative, the effort to make change using this "bottom up" approach does mean that institutionalized change may take longer and be harder to come by.

Frankly, the hegemonic power of fat rejection discourse is damning to the FLM in a myriad of ways. Localized talk around the physical and social barriers of fatness and practices that reinforce these ideas (i.e., not dating until one loses weight) do no good for those who are fat positive. More so, they also pose problems for those who do not ascribe to fat acceptance, as diets possess a 95% failure rate and living a restricted lifestyle like those advertised through fat rejection discourse, is extremely hard to maintain (Wang, 2009). Although fat acceptance discourse is the foundation for the progress of the FLM, fat rejection discourse is its biggest opposition due to the leverage of power and the stakeholders involved.

Major findings:

- Three primary tensions were identified: natural/unnatural, acceptable/unacceptable, and fact/fiction.
- Fat acceptance discourse sets the foundation for the movement impacting matters of identity and identification processes. It is the greatest facilitator of change.

- Fat acceptance discourse also informs members in embodiment practices which are used as a form of uninstitutionalized political action to create social change.
- Internal practices and strategies benefit from fat discourse in two ways as it strengthens the self-esteem of members, while simultaneously equipping them to “fight.”
- The discourse of fat rejection was found to spread messages situated in the pathology of fat, personal responsibility, and restricted access.
- The hegemonic power of fat rejection discourse is damning to the FLM in a myriad of ways, being strengthened by rhetoric in institutions that help to further its message.

Identity and identification processes. Arguably, an accepted fat identity is the crux that holds the movement together, and it is by identity and identification that members find a home in the communities that create space for them to express triumphs, grievances, and calls to action. Through membership negotiation (Gailliard, Myers, & Seibold, 2010; Scott & Myers, 2010), member relations are strengthened, as members join communities, become administrators, offer group support, and participate in fat acceptance discourse. As a result, families and defenders of fat acceptance are created, and undoubtedly causing progression in the FLM internally and externally.

While RQ2 revealed that improvements are still needed in understanding the intricacies of identity and how to make inclusivity work, members still carried on the tradition of the FLM, utilizing identity and identification processes as way to stay connected to the movement. They continued to link up with virtual communities of interest, communing over shared activities, and communities of identities for support, reifying the legitimacy of possessing and living with multiple identities simultaneously.

Supported by the tenets of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the data demonstrates that the identity of members of the FLM are due in part to the interactions they have with others that help them to know how they are perceived in society. Throughout interviews, members discussed how they were often bombarded with fat rejection discourse and acknowledged these practices (i.e., not being able to find clothing in their size) enacted by society. However, through virtual communities, members were able to escape the the infiltration of fat rejection discourse, if only for a small time, as communities provided them a space for safety and support. Support that served as a way for members to be “recharged” before facing a world that they do not feel like they belong in. In these spaces, not just a fat identity was reinforced, but for groups that catered to those who possessed multiple identities, those identities were catered to as well. So, despite this being a semi-departure from the collective in a sense, the shared culture among members strengthens some FLM members to continue in activism for the cause of fat acceptance, illustrating that segregation is not always negative.

In the literature review, intersectionality was discussed as an alternative to the feminist perspective to identity and identification, providing a broader scope of analysis to assess identification processes. Coupling this with the discursive approach, members of the FLM were very vocal about the intersection of identities and the implications of acknowledging these realities in theory and application to make room for those who are most marginalized in the fat community.

Drawing on work from Tracy and Tretheway (2005) and Larson and Gill (2017), managing multiple identities is not something new or novel. However, within the FLM, the concept of intersectionality with the acknowledgment of identities just as salient as

those who identify as fat is something that takes center stage to be dissected. Issues of able-bodiedness, race, sexuality, and body size are all subjects of how these identities coupled with the experience of fatness impact members of the movement differently. As a result, members of the movement participated in identification processes through membership negotiation (Gailliard et al., 2010; Scott & Myers, 2010), within the movement and virtual communities, seeking out groups that were accepting of multiple identities, engaging and withdrawing involvement based on feelings of inclusion. In some communities, members of the movement made space by limiting their participation during certain times for individuals possessing less privilege, ensuring they would be heard. By the FLM continuing their quest to ensure oppressed identities are considered when addressing fatphobia, it situates the movement to be in a great position to create social change in fat acceptance, disability rights, racism, LGBTQ+ rights, and sizeism. Taken together, celebrating diversity and practicing inclusion helps in facilitating progress for the movement as it expands the reach of the FLM and enables members to learn from the experiences of those who possess more oppressed identities than themselves. By operating in this capacity, the FLM is transformed from an entity focused on fat acceptance to a movement fighting for human rights.

In contrast, when there is lack of inclusion efforts by movement members, the movement suffers. Members withdrawal and leave communities, if not the movement all together. Results from the RQ2 speak to the issues of division as barriers within the movement persist and inclusion still lacks in some spaces, as intersectionality is still a novel concept for the FLM. While sentiments around making space for those often invisible or marginalized seemed to be a goal for members who were cognitively aware

of the privilege they carried, talk abounded on this topic without much action to support it, leaving some members feeling rejected and alienated as a result.

Among the reports of communities disbanding and members of the movement not feeling “safe” where representation was few, there was also a tendency for members to shrink back from involvement in communities, presenting a glaring barrier to the progress of the movement, as the connection between identity, inclusion, and involvement are necessary to optimize member participation. Members choose to leave groups due to their identities not being accepted or acknowledged properly, and although the FLM prides itself as progressive in incorporating an intersectional framework to welcome more members, actions within some groups only accept the concept in theory, not practice. In these spaces, members simply were not willing to participate in erasure of self-identification to merge into an organizational identity under fatness, which at times caused friction (Hogg & Taylor, 2001). However, considering that intersectionality is embraced by the movement, members having to choose one identity over the other should not be a choice they have to make.

Like the concept of intersectionality, no one component is more important than the other. Rather, identity, inclusion, and involvement are connected and inseparable, with impacts compounded as violations occur. So, while the movement does well in talking about intersectionality, it lags in making sure the care and concern for marginalized persons are addressed. And although the FLM boasts a long history of housing intersectional identities on the margins of society (Cooper, 2008; Lee, 2014; Faye-Paterson, 2014), a conscious choice to incorporate intersectionality as a meaningful component of the movement did not come to be until the third wave, which began in the

beginning of the millennium (Cooper, 2008). Considering that the crux of the FLM is hinged on interpersonal connections, understanding the impacts of identity and inclusion under the umbrella of intersectionality is not an option as the multiple identities those in the movement possess are also some of identities facing the most oppression (Null, 2012; Williams, 2017).

Thus, addressing the barriers of exclusion that cause friction should be of priority to members of the movement as this is a self-inflicted wound to their progress otherwise. Acknowledgement of the various ways that members put themselves at risk due to the oppression associated with their identities can be both a teachable moment and an opportunity for those who are in positions of privilege to get involved. Members of the movement should understand there is a need for some associated with fat acceptance to maintain their own self-identifications while simultaneously working in the movement towards fat liberation because the realities of the identities they possess, help to inform their lived experience in a fat body.

Major findings:

- An accepted fat identity is the crux that holds the movement together.
- Through membership negotiation, member relations are strengthened, as members join communities, become administrators, offer group support, and participate in fat acceptance discourse.
- Members still carried on the tradition of the FLM, utilizing identity and identification processes as way to stay connected to the movement.

- The FLM gathered in virtual communities of interest, communing over shared activities, and communities of identities for support, reifying the legitimacy of possessing and living with multiple identities simultaneously.
- While the movement does well in talking about intersectionality, it lags in making sure the care and concern for marginalized persons are addressed and followed through in action.

Political action. When looking at the the FLM holistically, much insight can be gained in assessing what type of political actions are chosen to be participated in within the movement, and how these choices facilitate progress. Supported by the previous work of Diemer and Rapa (2016), members of the FLM were more inclined to participate in uninstitutionalized political actions to raise awareness about fat acceptance. Furthermore, it also seems that within the sample of interviewees, most were more invested in interpersonal connections that emerge from uninstitutionalized political actions within their communities rather than vying for social change on a political or institutional scale. At first glance, a lack of initiative for institutional political action appeared to be a drawback for the movement, however, after assessing the value that interpersonal connections bought, the importance of members' focus is understandable as their purpose for these actions were to create social change in smaller circles, while fostering community connections. By the movement investing more in these endeavors, change is funneled from the "bottom up," impacting individuals that impact institutions, not the other way around. Through these endeavors, strength is also imparted to members, reinforcing their allegiance to the movement through events like protests, art exhibits, and photo campaigns. In the case of the FLM, this is important because it is by community

that the movement thrives and facilitates subsequent political actions. Hence, political action is tied to group identification (Kanas & Martinovic, 2017), and that identification spurs additional acts of political action in a cyclical process. Previous work on protest and religious groups in Eastern Asia support this notion, suggesting that it is imperative for group members to feel like they are part of a community to participate in political action (Kanas & Martinovic, 2017). In short, without community, initiatives toward political action do not exist.

Additionally, considering the climate of today's culture, uninstitutionalized political actions seem to be a preferred answer to injustice, adding to the long tradition it plays in the history of fat acceptance. Moreover, these actions also enabled members to express themselves through acts of embodiment (Lee, 2014) in a way not readily accessible through activities like voting or signing a petition. Many members talked about using their art, fashion, or talents in writing to spread awareness about the movement. In this space, fat artists can connect with other fat artists, and dancers with other dancers.

Institutionalized political action also served as a facilitator for progress in the movement. While many members of the FLM reported participating in uninstitutionalized political actions, there were a few who found their strength in participating in systems that resulted in prospective changes to institutions and larger entities. Some wrote to hospitals on behalf of those who experienced fatphobic treatment, while others wrote to authors who employed fatphobic narratives throughout their writings. These actions can be seen as complimentary to the uninstitutionalized political actions currently taking place in the movement but should not be taken lightly as there is

much stake to be had in the realm of public policy. Considering that the FLM is equipped to handle issues of law and policy through the Council of Size and Weight Discrimination (cswd.org), it is possible that opportunities are being missed as the work in institutionalized political actions are underutilized.

RQ3 highlighted the ways that dedicating the majority of one's energy to uninstitutionalized political action may prove to be a barrier for progress in the FLM as it stunts growth towards a change in institutionalized practices and is not always accommodating towards members in the movement who deal with mobility issues and burnout. Considering other options that encompass institutionalized political actions could prove to be worthwhile, creating endeavors most members of the movement can be involved in, as it is possible by branching out and connecting with other groups, coalitions can be built, increasing the political power of the FLM.

Explanatory through the ACF's model (Sabatier, 1999), coalition building could be an option for the FLM as they face many difficulties in furthering a policy agenda considering their identity is tainted or deviant in the public. Stated in Chapter 2, The ACF situates itself as a model to address both the interests of grassroots organizations and public policy to create social change (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999). In the context of the FLM, this model would be a good fit to explain the the intersections between grassroots building and policy change (Sabatier, 1999). Furthermore, coalition building could help those who cannot be physically active to remain involved in the process to create social change through institutionalized political actions like voting and signing petitions. This is important because many members of the FLM expressed wanting to be involved in institutionalized political action to create change on a bigger scale. For those

also living with mobility issues, less vigorous forms of activity would allow them to participate, doing their part in advancing the agenda of fat acceptance. With additional support being given by the coalition, the responsibility to uphold interests would be distributed among all organizations and/or members, helping to alleviate the pressure felt on those that are overworked and unable to be as active. As the FLM movement continues to incorporate an intersectional framework for members, it is imperative to offer a way for everyone to be involved, as well as recognizing those who are part of the movement and giving more than their fair share. This barrier highlighted within the movement is one that could be mitigated over time with proper networks and a greater awareness of fellow members' differences.

Major findings:

- Members of the FLM were more inclined to participate in uninstitutionalized political actions to raise awareness about fat acceptance.
- Despite less involvement from members, institutionalized political action also served as a facilitator for progress in the movement.
- By focusing on community, the movement thrives and facilitates subsequent political actions. Hence, political action is tied to group identification.
- By the movement investing more in uninstitutionalized political action endeavors, change is funneled from the “bottom up,” impacting individuals that impact institutions, not the other way around.
- Based on the sample of interviewees, most were more invested in interpersonal connections that emerge from uninstitutionalized political actions within their communities opposed to vying for social change on a political or institutional scale.

- Dedicating the majority of one's energy to uninstitutionalized political action may prove to be a barrier for progress in the FLM as it stunts growth towards a change in institutionalized practices and is not accommodating towards members in the movement who deal with mobility issues and burnout.

Internal strategies and practices. Before this study, much was unknown about the modern-day practices and strategies of the FLM. However, through the content analysis and interviews conducted, a better understanding can be gleaned about how the movement functions and the implications those functions have in facilitating progress for the movement.

Like previous arguments from Flynn (2015) and Melucci (1996), members of the FLM form a collective identity by sharing stories and information, evident through blogs and social media posts creating a familial type of community. The importance of community is vital to how the movement functions as much of what is done in the FLM is through online channels. Through the use of social media, the FLM have solidified practices that assist in its progress by disseminating information and participating in call-ins and call-outs, correcting movement members, and addressing any misconceptions about fat acceptance and liberation.

Additionally, members use social media notifications to stay up to date on what is happening with the movement. Many interviewees reported that notifications were the primary way to stay connected within communities. Through notification automation, notifications can be set to members' preferences enabling them to be alerted when issues pertinent to the movement arise. These in turn, make it convenient for members to stay

“in the know” anywhere mobile service is available instead of trying to rely on receiving messages in person or by mail.

Supported by Bimber’s (2003) assessment of social media’s influence on social movements, the FLM too, utilizes social media as a tool to connect with other individuals they are less likely to meet face to face. Furthermore, Taylor (2016) asserts that as with the movement of Black Lives Matter, younger activists are getting involved in grassroots organizing bringing different views and methods than the generation that came before them, changing how political actions are carried out. Taken together, these notions support the data that emerged from this study, depicting members of the FLM not particularly younger in age, but internet savvy and open to incorporating new ways of organizing with methods focused on building communities (as opposed to institutional change) with a level of expertise to form these connections via social media channels that fully function with members, administrators, notifications, content, and accountability. Moreover, although face to face interactions are more limited due to the streamlining of communities online, facilitating these connections also broadens the reach of the movement, enabling members to connect with supporters and activists across the globe, spreading the message of fat acceptance worldwide, and challenging dominant discourses of the West. With the right connections and use of social media, the FLM has poised itself to be a global force in the awareness of the injustices and maltreatment of fat bodies.

Based on the outcome of the research questions posed, facilitators to the progress of the FLM emerged through the data to highlight the ways that members in the movement are continuing the legacy of fat liberation, benefiting from the message and

spreading awareness to others. By assessing issues of discourse, identity, political actions, and internal practices, it is clear that the FLM is a sound movement utilizing interpersonal connections to build a collective identity, while simultaneously using creative initiatives by members to dismantle ideologies that underlie fat rejection.

The last barriers to be discussed are those that relate to the internal practices and strategies of the FLM. Despite the importance of community helping its progress, the inner workings of the same communities also present setbacks to the movement that could be modified to encourage better practices and collective organizing. Supported by previous research, social media is the medium by which most newer social movements operate today (Bimber, 2003). The possibilities this affords social movements are great, however, having a movement run primarily virtually presents new problems that should be parsed through.

RQ3a revealed that members of the movement lacked in initiative to organize a formal process in keeping track of activist endeavors. These practices are not uncommon among grassroots organizations, but also are not sustainable over the long term (Taylor, 2016). Taylor (2016) recommends a need for better organizing and coordination among grassroots organizations, transforming individualized endeavors of people and groups into movements that can create consistent change year-round. In the case of the FLM, better coordination would help an array of issues not limited to uninstitutionalized political actions, but also include a better way for members to receive notifications about movement happenings, fulfilling the need of a designated online space to get information about the structure and tenets of the FLM.

By improving internal practices and strategies, online communities of the movement could benefit by having better structure in organizing. Since there is evidence of some systems in place to facilitate better information distribution in the movement by way of email lists (Bronstein, 2015) and the *Fatosphere* (Dickins et al., 2011), a new system may not need to be created. Rather, a commitment from communities to utilize these tools would be a good first step. A commitment from communities to unify with one another would also help activist endeavors as members of the movement can gather virtually to be made aware of when acts of activism will take place. The same system could also serve the movement well by putting out calls to action to get members involved and exchange ideas. In short, smaller communities work well for interpersonal relations but are poor tools of organizing if not unified for the greater cause (Taylor, 2016).

For each barrier identified, there is a solution that can be used to overcome its existence. Through the work of those invested in the movement's objective, mitigating the impact of barriers to the movement should be of concern given that the barriers listed are interconnected, impacting one another. For example, by tackling the issue of intersectionality, progress will also be made in areas of inclusion and political action efforts, as members will be more mindful of what and how things are done in the movement. Moreover, an improvement in internal practices means an improvement in organizing, which all help to inform the discourse of fat acceptance, shared online, impacting groups globally. Considering these factors, the incentives to combat barriers are great and far outweigh any costs incurred.

Major findings:

- Members of the FLM form a collective identity by sharing stories and information, evident through blogs and social media posts creating a familial type of community.
- The FLM, utilizes social media as a tool to connect with other individuals they are less likely to meet face to face.
- Through the use of social media, the FLM have solidified practices that assist in its progress by disseminating information and participating in call-ins and call-outs, correcting movement members, and addressing any misconceptions about fat acceptance and liberation.
- Better coordination would help an array of issues not limited to uninstitutionalized political actions, but also include a better way for members to receive notifications about movement happenings, fulfilling the need of a designated online space to get information about the structure and tenets of the FLM.
- Members of the movement lacked in initiative to organize a formal process in keeping track of activist endeavors. the FLM too, utilizes social media as a tool to connect with other individuals they are less likely to meet face to face.

Contributions

This study involved research questions to explore outcomes about the structure and operations of the FLM regarding identity, political action, and internal practices. Outcomes associated with the research questions include theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions that will be useful for research moving forward and the application of practices in the movement for improvement.

Theoretical Contributions

For Communication

A major contribution of this dissertation to the communication field is its findings about how members of social movements negotiate their identities in online spaces. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) and social movements in virtual spaces have not been widely researched within the discipline of communication. Throughout this dissertation, only one article was located that explicitly spoke of these two mediums simultaneously (Diani, 2000). However, this dissertation found that attending to the use of CMC within the social movement revealed interesting findings about identity as well as FLM's internal practices and strategies, thus revealing a new avenue to examine other social movements who operate primarily online.

Identity, social movements, and CMC revealed how membership within virtual communities serve as a gateway to better understanding organizational identification in virtual contexts, revealing how membership is often dependent on the degree to which individual identities are seen as valuable along with the the identity of the organization. Issues such as these transcend the FLM, being applicable to other movements and online groups who negotiate identity in virtual spaces. Findings on membership identification within the FLM extend research in organizational communication by understanding the ways that members negotiated their multiple identification demands in virtual communities. Through joining and exiting groups, being vocal about inclusiveness, modifying notification alerts, and participating in political action endeavors, members were drawn to virtual communities based on interest and identity needs. Although membership negotiation was examined through the practices of the FLM, many groups and organizations utilize Facebook groups that employ the same affordances as

negotiating membership and creating a sense of community through interaction. By utilizing these research findings from this dissertation to examine other virtual spaces on Facebook, much can be gleaned about member behaviors and membership negotiation regarding organization identification.

Findings on organization identification have also been extended through this dissertation as identification was tied to discursive resources such as practices, slang, and sayings prevalent in the fat community. These resources ultimately helped to shape individual and shared identities among members, while equipping them with the means to express feelings about their identities and others. Both blog posts reviewed and those interviewed show strong examples of identification with members through these practices. Moreover, as evident in virtual communities, frequent communication with members in the movement also led to a sense of stronger ties to organizational identification, supporting previous research findings (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002). Again, while these findings speak to the FLM, they can also be extended to other virtual communities that seek to build identification among members, positioning these communities as potential sites of examination for scholars to extend theorizing about how CMC impacts organizational identification in the 21st century organization.

Overall organizational identification remained among members, but they chose to disidentify with certain groups due the contradiction of movement values and application. Considering conflict is normal and common in shaping collective identities (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002), the violation of membership became relevant when virtual communities devalued members' identities outside of fatness. In this space, dynamics in identification, identity, and power were revealed, resulting in members leaving groups, administrators

refusing to remove problematic posts, and new groups forming to welcome rejected identities, creating a new type of fat acceptance genre. These findings highlight deep power structures in progressive movements derailing the progress of inclusivity, despite the acceptance of multiple identities being voiced. As long as these structures remain and are not addressed, intersectionality will pose a threat to the FLM, and other groups who use intersectionality as a platform to draw membership. Social movements should seek to address underlying power structures in leadership and among members to ensure that the identity they purport is being practiced in deed. Otherwise, movements that adopt new terms and a progressive stance only do so on the “face,” and ultimately repeat the failings of the generations before them whom they seek so adamantly to disassociate from.

For social movements

Based on previous findings and those pertaining to the FLM, social movements should reconsider how a decentralized leadership structure hinders them in achieving goals and seek to implement different types of leadership that allow them to maintain organization and freedom within local chapters/organizations. As Taylor (2016) notes, one reason newer social movements have adopted a decentralized leadership structure is due to the inequality (i.e., women not given credit for work within movements; members’ sexualities forced to be hidden) some members faced within social movements of the past. And while there is a valid argument in revisiting these structures to ensure that inequality does not fester, it is also clear based on the rise and fall of other movements like Occupy that decentralized leading ultimately does a disservice to newer social movements as they cannot be sustained due to lack of organization and leadership.

Wolfson (2014) also adds that social movements are more likely to thrive when members meet face to face, which highlight an ongoing problem with newer social movements, over utilizing the internet as a meeting place for change instead of making it function more as a tool used to mobilize for face to face political and cultural success.

Drawing again from the not so distant past, newer social movements should seek to find a way in their organizational practices to stay relevant and keep momentum by remaining present to the public in thought and deed. It is no coincidence that the existence of the FLM and other newer social movements are quickly forgotten in part due to their own leadership structures. Consequently, there is an incessant cyclical process of reintroducing the presence of movements to the public before agendas can be advanced. Setbacks such as these quell the embers of the eternal flame social movements seek to possess. Instead, there only remains a spark that is ignited more often by external agitators and is non-existent otherwise.

Methodological Contributions

This dissertation collected four types of data (TV shows, blog posts, social media posts, and in-depth interviews) to analyze research questions related to the progress of the FLM. Through data triangulation, the researcher was able to assess answers to research questions from four different perspectives, bolstering the claims made in this study, and contributing to social science research through the rigorous use of qualitative methods.

In phase one of data collection, the researcher used TV shows, blog articles and social media posts to assess the discourse around fat acceptance and rejection, identification, and political action. Examining various sources of data through content analysis enabled the researcher to not only look at what was being said, but also what was

not. By utilizing this method, the researcher was able to deepen her awareness of the messages sent through text and images, weighing the impact of frames and themes carried in these sources throughout the study. Furthermore, content analysis provided a flexibility in analysis not readily found in quantitative methodology.

In phase two of data collection, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with members of the FLM, adding more rich data to analyze the lived experiences of those in the movement watching answers to research questions emerge from the data. By conducting in-depth interviews along with a content analysis, interviewees corroborated the claims made in TV shows, blog articles, and social media posts, adding credence to previous findings. Additionally, interviews allowed the researcher to modify and evolve questions throughout interviews, including additional insight from interviewees on the topic of fat acceptance and rejection. Lastly, in-depth interviews added value to this dissertation by capturing the experiences of FLM members in their own words, allowing them to represent themselves how they best saw fit in the areas of race, body size, sexuality, able-bodiedness, and age.

Taken together, the methods used in this dissertation showcase the benefits of triangulation and rich data through a qualitative lens, lending credence to qualitative analyses. By collecting data that encapsulated self-reports through interviews and real-life conversations from Facebook and blogs about fat acceptance and rejection discourses, the findings revealed were much more powerful. Moving forward, scholars should look to triangulate research studies from a wider variety of data, as this dissertation is a prime example of why qualitative work is necessary and how it can be used effectively to bolster validity, reliability, and transferability to research studies.

Practical Contributions

The FLM is a living, moving, entity serving communities of fat individuals in several ways. As such, suggestions for its improvement should move beyond the walls of academe to educate scholars, and transition into practical, real-life recommendations grounded in the research findings and fueled by the input of those closest to the ins and outs of its operation. The following practical implications are given in hopes of merging the academy with the activists doing the work for social change. For, just as the world is informed by the expertise of science, science cannot inform without the input of the world.

Communicate, communicate, communicate

Throughout this dissertation, much has been said about discourse, communities, and inclusion. Based on the data analysis, communication is the FLM's strength as much as it is its weakness. With tools previously created to help the dissemination of information (Dickins, et al., 2011) and a mission encouraging communication through matters of identity and intersectionality written in the vision of the third wave of fat acceptance (Cooper, 2012), members of the movement should be poised to communicate verbally and by action to build communities and broaden their base of support. Initiatives could be fostered with members based on virtual communities of interests and identities to have face to face interactions, helping to spur political actions to progress the movement. Furthermore, there is a need for members to talk and know one another and learn each other's stories to help keep the community solid. Unification of members in addition to spaces that allow members to recharge is needed and necessary.

From a moment to a movement that lasts

The current drawbacks in the way that the FLM operates adds to some of the difficulty it has in its progress to being recognized. Just as in other movements like Black Lives Matter, the FLM is built on a horizontal leadership structure that eliminates a sole authority to see the movement to victory. There is no “hub” of communion for members to meet or access pertinent information, despite having the Fatosphere that could be utilized for such. Furthermore, there is concern that although political actions are enacted upon, no designation has been given to track these events or measure the outcome of each, presenting the movement more as a safety flare than a constant flame that burns throughout the year.

Implications for actions such as these should center the idea of unification to meld the thoughts and sentiments of smaller communities in the movement with national organizations to discuss what they see and need from one another. If forming a consensus around the movement can be created, it would be helpful to then create tenets that identifying members can refer to and move forward in, circulating the information throughout the Fatosphere. As Taylor (2016) stated in reference to the work being done by Black Lives Matter, some structure is necessary to make a grassroots organization viable and sustainable. Otherwise, members run the risk of having no direction, misrepresenting what the movement stands for (i.e., body positivity), and suffering from issues of burnout because they are doing too much alone.

By communities and national organizations working together to discuss the vision of the movement, identities and expertise could meet in a way that would allow the movement to grow outside of community circles, without dismantling their fellowship. Education on intersectionality and accessibility can be discussed and exchanged with

those who are well versed in diet culture, research analytics, and politics, enriching the movement in ways that would strengthen national organizations to represent the FLM in institutionalized practices, and fuel community and interpersonal dialogue between members and those they interact with through the utilization of uninstitutionalized political strategies. Unification here is not just good for interpersonal enrichment, but also serves as a tool to build collective action with others.

Being willing but not able

What does one do with the motivation they have without the means to support the cause? RQ3 three highlighted this conundrum among FLM members and their quest for social justice as there seems to be an experience shared for those who are willing to participate in uninstitutionalized political actions, such as marches and protests, but feel restricted to do so because of mobility issues and the need to protect their mental health. Other members spoke to the notion of burnout, reporting that they needed to relieve themselves of the labor required to participate in such activities due to feeling overwhelmed and overworked in a movement that houses members who possess multiple identities where matters of intersectionality are present and abound. Moreover, in blog posts, authors speak to the fact that some may never be healthy as their physical abilities decline despite efforts to maintain them. Herein, lies a challenge for the FLM that could be mitigated by utilizing strategies given through the Advocacy Coalition Framework.

By pooling resources with similar movements or organizations that believe in the FLM's purpose, the ACF provides a roadmap for members of the FLM to collaborate with others, easing the burden of the physical and mental demand on those who are unable to participate in activities like marches and protests, and opens the possibility of

those members to give themselves in other areas of activism that impact the public policy landscape.

A benefit the FLM already has in this regard is their networking abilities that have attracted members of multiple identities to become advocates for fat acceptance, meaning that the work to locate other communities and organizations wanting to participate should not be as tedious since those holding membership and belonging to other groups have a familiarity with the challenges of mental health, disability, bullying, racism, white supremacy, sexuality, grassroots organizing, and the like. Rather, more time could be spent on coalition building to focus on the issues the FLM has in common with other groups and the resources they could offer one another. Furthermore, the ACF would also provide the necessary framework to measure the impact of public policies implemented for or against fat acceptance and community engagement with initiatives, something that is lacking today in great measure in the movement.

Study Limitations

A few limitations to this study are worth mentioning and should be taken into account as research in this area continues to grow. First, the content analysis used to examine discourse was limited to three TV shows, Facebook incidents, and blog sites spanning over the past three years. Additionally, only 27 episodes and blog articles were covered out of the three years as well, leaving possible variance in stories or accounts not accessed by the researcher. Moving forward as time allots, a bigger sample of TV shows and blog posts to analyze would be ideal.

Regarding interview data, despite the researcher sampling from a diverse population, reach of the population was limited to members of Facebook groups, and

those who saw the post that was shared. The announcement to participate was also only available online, leaving out individuals who did not have access to the internet.

Furthermore, it should not be assumed that the voices of 25 interviewees involved in the study spoke for the movement in general terms or the groups they are a part of. Although saturation was reached with 25 participants, there are additional identities and experiences that were not represented. Moving forward, additional studies should look to increase the number of participants, recruiting on and offline.

Lastly, with qualitative research there is an assumption of inherent limitations when compared to quantitative research methods. In the case of this study, transferability is questionable, simply due to the small sample sizes used to collect data. Although the use of triangulation helps to strengthen the arguments presented, greater coverage of movement members and textual data is desired to make a better case.

Future Directions for Research

Following the insights gained from this study about the FLM and its progress, future directions for research are recommended to add depth to scholarship in the movement, as well as extend theory in communication, using a mixed methods approach.

A comparison study is recommended to dig deeper into matters of identification of members of the movement to understand the ways that they negotiate their membership in different fat positive organizations, narrowing the scope of the movement to certain virtual communities or face to face meetups where a better understanding of identification and its processes can be had. In this dissertation there were limitations due to sample size and the overall scope of analysis. Additional studies could look to increase the sample size, utilizing another mixed methods approach, using qualitative (i.e.,

observations) and quantitative (i.e., surveys) methods with a focus on national organizations, or communities of interest, or only groups that meet in person.

There is also an interest in parsing out the idea of “discourse as a practice,” examining the spoken and unspoken ways members of the movement communicate a fat positive agenda in their personal spaces, and their motivation behind their choice of messages. Discourse is vast and cannot possibly be captured in one study, however, having a better understanding of how movement members navigate the world around them through the use of communicative effort, would add to previous research on discursive practices, and extend literature in the context of the FLM and marginalized populations.

Assessing matters of assistance among movement members through a communicative lens would be of interest to understand how help manifests itself in grassroots organizations, and how members communicate a need to one another. In this study many members raised concerns around mobility issues. There are also virtual communities designed for members of the movement who need help for specific needs, but in the context of political action, how do organizers ask for help? How do they avoid burnout? What messages are sent to let other members know an administrator or organizer is in need of member support to help keep fixtures in the movement going?

Lastly, future studies should focus on CMC and social movements within the context of organization communication. Research in this area lacks greatly in the discipline of communication and yet poised to offer ripe insight into organizational identification, membership negotiation and social movements. Some questions remaining from this dissertation ask, do virtual communities present a new type of community that

operates primarily online? If so, what are the implications of this? Also, what is the outcome of modified communicative behaviors in virtual groups?

Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine facilitators and barriers of the FLM through qualitative inquiry, utilizing a mixed methods approach. Through the review of literature, the researcher drew from works on social movements, and melded the disciplines of communication and public policy to derive four research questions, informing the overall purpose of the study.

Four research questions were explored to examine the progress and barriers of the FLM around issues of discourse, identity, political action and internal routines. Through content, thematic, and frame analysis, the researcher analyzed 27 episodes of *The Biggest Loser*, *My 600 lb. Life*, and *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*, along with 27 blog posts from *The Militant Baker*, *Dances with Fat*, and *My Body is not an Apology*. In addition to this data, the researcher also analyzed 3 viral Facebook posts, and 25 in-depth interviews, triangulating data to strengthen validity and make proper claims.

RQ1 revealed the competing discourses of fat rejection and fat acceptance, as both discourses used similar methods to spread different messages, in line with the discourse represented. Through data analysis, fat rejection discourse was used to pathologize fat and weight gain, placing the responsibility of body size solely on individuals, and highlighting physical and social barriers, blaming fatness. Throughout this discourse, fat was seen as unnatural condition, citing a lack of self-control and discipline as the culprit. Whereas, fat acceptance discourse focused on the function of the body, the reclaiming of the term “fat,” and body acceptance, emphasizing individuals

could live their best lives without losing weight. Three tensions emerged from the data to illustrate the ways fat rejection and fat acceptance discourse competed in interaction. They are unnatural/natural tension, fact/fiction tension, and acceptable/unacceptable tension.

Research question 2 highlighted the identity, identification, and inclusion efforts for the FLM, recognizing facilitators as virtual communities, and diversity among members as they continue to practice fat acceptance discourse through social media groups and in face to face meet ups. The concept of intersectionality was also present in RQ2, as members with multiple identities sought out communities that had an emphasis on identity. Intersectionality was both a facilitator and barrier for the movement as diversity is a strength, but it must come with inclusion to be effective. Members who felt left out of communities due to multiple identities would withdrawal from participation, and at time leave communities based on the severity of the offense.

Political action was the focus of RQ3. Members of the movement were heavily invested in uninstitutionalized political actions, utilizing these as a vehicle for social change the most. Carrying on the traditions of the FLM, many members participated in embodied practices, using their bodies as a message to share knowledge about fat bodies and the FLM. Institutionalized political action was also utilized by the movement, though less for those interested in institutional reform. Members who also experienced issues of mobility reported using institutionalized political action as an alternative to uninstitutionalized political action to get involved. Both actions serve as facilitators to the movement, but could also pose as barriers, since all members may not have the mobility to participate in uninstitutionalized political actions and change through

institutionalized political action may prove difficult as societal discourses are more fatphobic than not.

Lastly, RQ3a examined the the internal practices and strategies of the FLM. Results from data collection revealed that virtual communities are a great strength to the movement, as they are used as hubs of information and correction. It is through communities, members of the movement are socialized into fat acceptance discourse, along with the practices of communities. Barriers also presented themselves, revealing that virtual communities may not be enough to sustain the movement. Furthermore, with no authority to be accountable to, members of the movement are left to be accountable to one another which may be problematic if everyone is not learning the same thing due to the lack of organization in the movement overall.

In conclusion, through the examination of the FLM, rich data has emerged to explain several actions movement members participate in through verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors including language (reclaiming the word “fat”), and physical activity (uninstitutionalized institutionalized political actions) adding to or taking away from movement’s progress. Theoretical frameworks of discourse, identity and political action all have been extended as the context of a marginalized grassroots movement has been added to the literature. Furthermore, practical implications have been given as recommendations to improve the actions of the movement in regard to communication, public policy and social movement literature.

There are many avenues one can take with these findings. Future directions for research will seek to build on these within the discipline of communication, exploring more questions around discourse, identification, and member assistance.

APPENDICES

Appendix A - Informed Consent Form

Greetings,

You have been invited to participate in a research study being conducted through the Department of Communication at Rutgers University. This study is designed to capture the lived experiences and stories of those involved in fat liberation through national organization affiliation and fat positive communities. This interview should take approximately 30-45 minutes and will be recorded. Interview questions will be asked to gather information on the topics around how you identify with the movement and what behaviors you participate in to create social change. Basic demographic questions such as age and race will also be collected.

It is my hope by conducting research such as this that I may gain greater insight into how fat liberation entities understand and manage identification processes as well as mobilize in political action pursuits.

There are no known risks if you decide to participate in this research study, nor are there any costs for participating. This study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate in the study or discontinue its completion at any time. Additionally, your answers will be kept confidential. If any of your information is used in the write up of the study, aliases will be utilized to protect to your identity.

You must be at least 18 years of age; a woman or femme identifying; belong to a fat positive national organization or community and self-identify as fat to participate in this study.

Rutgers University's Institutional Review Board has reviewed the request to conduct this project. The researchers can answer any questions you have about the study to help you choose whether to participate. If you have any questions about the survey please contact Joy Cox at joy.a.cox@rutgers.edu or by telephone at (814) 418-1291.

By signing below, you agree to the terms and verify that you meet the requirements to participate.

Signature

Date

Appendix B – Fat Rejection/Acceptance Coding Scheme

Codes for TV Shows

Frequency of negative comments about weight/body image: Negative comments are both verbal (“You’re too fat to wear that.”) and behavioral (grimacing look of disapproval at one’s outfit.) (Fauts & Vaughn, 2002; Fauts & Burggraf, 2000)

1. From those in power (trainers, practitioners, bosses, mothers and fathers, etc.)
2. From others (contestants, other family members, neighbors, strangers, friends, etc.)
3. About self

Frequency of positive comments about weight/body image: Positive comments are both verbal (“That dress looks great on you.”) and behavioral (snaps and a nodding of the head at one’s outfit).

1. From those in power (trainers, practitioners, bosses, mothers and father, etc.)
2. From others (other family members, neighbors, strangers, friends, etc.)
3. About self

In Vivo codes of negative and positive comments: Direct quotes of what was said whether negative or positive about the character’s weight or body image.

1. Negative example: “You are getting too fat!”
2. Positive example: “My fat is beautiful!”

Demographics: Information gathered that tells us a little more about the character

1. Race: W = Caucasian or Caucasian passing; B = Black or African American passing; L = Latino; A = Asian; Mixed = More than one race appearing
2. Gender: If it is explicitly stated, one should code for it.
3. Age: Adolescent, Young Adult, Middle Aged, Elderly

Number of scenes total: Total number of scenes in each episode

Number of scenes on weight/body appearance: Total number of scenes in each episode that focused on weight or body image

Major characters/minor characters: Names and classifications of each major or minor character coded for.

Season, Episode: Number of the season and episode coded for

Appendix C – Interview Protocol

The following questions have been created to assess how matters of identity play an integral role in individuals' choice of participation in fat acceptance and political action, as well as, to examine the discursive tensions present between larger societal discourses and that of those active in the fat liberation movement. The goal of this interview is to hear your personal experiences and perceptions of these topics in hopes of piecing together a bigger story of the progression and/or lack thereof in the fat liberation movement. These interviews are designed to be inclusive of voices which include different races, body capabilities, sexualities, age, and so on. All your information will be kept confidential and you are welcome to stop participation at any point during the interview.

If you agree with the following statement, I would now like to begin.

Questions

1. What does it mean to you to be fat positive?
2. How do you express this to others (to family and friends, online, etc.)?
3. Would you consider yourself part of what some would call the “fat acceptance/liberation movement”? Why or why not?

I see. So, before we get into the primary issue we're here to discuss, I'm curious about your thoughts about how fat is portrayed in society.

4. Overall, what messages do you think are given about fat in our culture/country?
5. What is your take on how shows like *The Biggest Loser* or *My 600-lb? life* talk about fat?
6. What about shows like *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* that try to be more fat positive?
7. How do you feel about the message that is being shared through these platforms?

8. How do you feel these messages/shows impact the fat acceptance movement?

I'm sure we could talk about this for hours. But what I really want to know about is your involvement in the movement. Back to the positivity...

9. So how do you stay up to date on what is happening in the fat acceptance community?
10. What about fat acceptance blog posts or online magazines? Do you read them? If so, which ones and why? If not, why not?
11. Have you found a hub or groups where you are with others who feel the same as you do about fat acceptance?
12. What are some of the groups you are most involved with?
13. Are there specific reasons as to why?

Wow. That's definitely enlightening. So, digging a bit deeper, let's talk a little more about these groups.

14. Do you have a favorite or one that you're involved in most?
15. Can you tell me what the group is like? For example, how are things run? How are interactions with other group members? Etc.

Nice. So, it sounds like you feel like you belong here.

16. How do leaders interact in the group? Are they involved with members? In agreement with one another? Etc.
17. How are you typically notified about issues relative to the group? Are you told through the leaders or members individually? Is there a Facebook group or group chat, etc.?

Ah, I see.

18. And do you feel like these notifications are the most effective way to get information to members?
19. If you were involved in the leadership, what would you do differently?
20. Are there any other groups that you're in that you think do things better? Which ones? What do they do that's better/more effective?

I see. So, I would like to now talk about the ways that feelings of inclusion may stifle or boost participation in groups.

21. In what ways does your identity play a role in the groups you belong to? By identity, I mean your race, sexuality, SES, etc.?
22. Have there been times when you felt like your identity or those such as yours were not included or addressed in the group? Can you tell me about a time when this happened?
23. Ok, and so based on your previous answers, how does/did the feelings of being included or not impact your participation in the group?

I understand. So, in reference to participation,

24. As a (identity previously revealed), how does impact how you currently participate in the fat acceptance movement generally?
25. Can you tell me why?
26. How do you feel about actions like marches and protests as techniques to create change for the fat community? Do you think they are effective?
27. What about actions like voting and signing petitions
28. In the last year, what kind of activist activities have you participated in to promote or spread the word about fat acceptance? How many or which ones?

Ok. Thank you so much for your time! I really appreciate your input. This concludes the interview.

Appendix D - Recruitment Post

Without further ado, I'm happy to announce I am in the final stage of data collection for my dissertation!

“This document was approved by the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects on 11/7/2017; currently, there is no expiration on the approval of this document.”

Announcement:

Calling all women and femmes over the age of 18!

Are you a current member of a fat-positive organization or community? Are you involved in social change efforts to change the way people think about their bodies and fat?

Do you have an hour to chat?

If so I would love to hear from you, as I am looking to capture the lived experiences and stories of those active in the work of fat acceptance! All participants will be compensated \$30 for your time. Feel free to schedule an interview at <https://joyacox.setmore.com/> or email me at joy.a.cox@rutgers.edu if you have any questions!

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