

From 2020 one of the most significant areas I dived into was the importance of intersectional feminism on a global and cultural scale. For my graduate class Transnational Issues in Gender and Race (SOCIO 633 in Spring 2021), I completed a final research paper that compares and analyzes the Western Body Positivity and Fat Acceptance Movements with African Societies' Ideal Body Image and Feederism. This paper serves as a critical analysis of the intersection of gender and race both locally in the U.S. and internationally. This paper points out how these two seemingly opposite beauty standards are actually two sides of the same coin by how they intersect and limit women's roles in society.

Western Body Positivity and Fat Acceptance Movements Comparative Analysis with African Societies' Ideal Body Image and Feederism

Abstract

Over the past few decades western cultures have marketed, praised, and rewarded thin bodies with many privileges. These privileges actively oppress fat bodies, especially womens' bodies. The response in the United States to the narrow beauty standards was the rise of the body positivity movement and fat acceptance movements. While the beauty standards in the United States have changed throughout the decades they have remained narrow in terms of being thin and white, over the past two decades while slighter bigger bodies trended, it still remained just another item on the checklist to obtain. "Be thick, but only in the right ways." A central concern with fat bodies in the United States is obesity. In several African societies the ideal body for women is a large, voluptuous one that signals the man's wealth and ability to provide for this family. Instead of harmful western diet culture these African societies participate in force feeding to achieve the desired body type. Instead of crash diets to achieve thinness in the west, these African women get their ideal body shape through methods of eating in extreme excess. These women are force fed around 16,000 calories a day (Thompson, 2007). This method of over-eating to achieve their ideal body is also referred to as feederism. The ideal body image and beauty standards may differ around the world, but they share similar intersections transnationally in how they are formed by social media and media representation, feminism and sexism, racism, and the medicalization and commodification of bodies. This paper will strive to understand, analyze, and compare the relationships of the above areas within the body positivity and fat acceptance movements within western cultures to the beauty standards and feederism within

several African cultures. This will be achieved through methodological means of a literature review. It is important to understand that, while both western and African standards of beauty differ in regards to weight and shape, they both remain oppressive. They are two sides of the same coin. They have different beauty standards, but they have the same kinds of forces influencing them, and similarly as a result their role in society is determined first and foremost by their appearance.

Introduction

In western cultures the standard of beauty for women has been thin and white for the last century at least. The type of slenderness has changed, as evident by looking at mainstream models and beauty trends. Even Marilyn Monroe, who is often quoted as a size 14, in today's measurements would have been closer to a size 4-6 (Women's Ideal Body Types Throughout History, 2015). Most recently a woman's curves are embraced as long as she is svelte and athletic with curves in the "right" places and certainly still not fat. The average sized woman today in the United States is a size 16 (Donnella, 2021). The latest trending ideal body image in 2021 is now between the sizes of 8-16, who are in between the objectively thin and fat scale, they are called "midsize" or "slim-fat," and is Gen Z's embrace of body positivity coupled with the long term grips of diet-culture. From a quick look at the types of women's bodies portrayed in leading roles on television shows, in movies, and on the covers of magazines, the women portrayed are for the majority of the time thin and white. These thin ideal beauty standards for the past century have led to a booming and consistent industry for diet-culture. The diet industry sells their products that will solve the consumer's "problem" by creating and capitalizing on their fears of being the worst thing you can be: fat. Diet-culture has not only physically harmed people by getting them to literally starve themselves and create long term damage to their bodies on crash-diets.

Furthermore by creating severe and lifelong damage to their mental health by contributing to major anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. The body positivity movement was created to counteract the harmful effects of the diet-culture.

In the 1990's there began a cultural shift in cognizance about the portrayal in the media of women's bodies. A realization of the "suffocating societal messages that keep people in a perpetual struggle with their bodies" (Body Positive Website, 2021). Throughout the 2000's with the rise of the internet connecting like-minded individuals the body positive movement and fat acceptance movement grew. The body positive movement boomed in 2018 particularly when United Kingdom's model Tess Holliday appeared on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. She was the largest model (at a size 26) to be on a mainstream magazine cover and this sparked transnational (western) debate on body positivity and the obesity epidemic. According to researcher Céline Leboeuf, "Body positivity refers to the movement to accept our bodies, regardless of size, shape, skin tone, gender, and physical abilities. The movement is often implicitly understood as the effort to celebrate diversity in bodily aesthetics and to expand our narrow beauty standards beyond their present-day confines...beyond challenging confining beauty standards, body positivity should teach us that all bodies are worthy of care and respect" (Leboeuf, 2019). The fat acceptance movement aims to change the anti-fat bias in (western) societies. Both these movements have faced several critiques especially over the past decade from the general public often being said that these kinds of movements promote obesity. This paper will not focus on if these claims are true or not, but instead focus on the discourse from researchers in fields of psychology, sociology and anthropology about disagreements within the movement and why the fat acceptance movement tries to separate itself from body positivity. As well as to understand and analyze the complex layers of social media, sexism, racism, and the

medicalization of bodies within both movements. The body positivity movement continues to hold significance in today's society because of the need to become more inclusive with various body sizes, abilities, and the harmfulness of diet cultures (and their new rebranded "wellness industries").

Fatness and weight has shown over the decades that there is a direct link to fat people experiencing discrimination in employment, education, media representation, politics, interpersonal relationships and especially in health care (Stoll, 2019). Fatphobia is connected to several systems of oppression like sexism, racism, and the medicalization and commodification of bodies. Body shaming in the United States is so widely accepted that when talking about social justice issues, many of which intersect with body positivity and fat acceptance (racism, sexism, medicalization of bodies) fat-phobia and fat bias are not thought of as a social justice issue (Stoll, 2019). Currently, in the United States, "it is legal for employers to discriminate against employees based on their weight in 49 states. Michigan is the only state in the United States where it is illegal to discriminate based on weight, but there is no national law" (Stoll, 2019).

Western Body Image, Body Positivity, and Fat Acceptance

Social Media and Media Representation

The western ideal body image body positivity movement and fat acceptance is influenced by social media and media representation, Feminism, racism, and the medicalization of bodies. One of the most prominent research findings done around the role of social media and the body positivity movement is the findings of Ellie Anulis, Gemma Sharp, and Nicole Thomas. They found through an online study that representation of diverse bodies is important. When given the choice of selecting the ideal body from a larger array of BMI types participants were less likely

to select “normal” underweight ideals and favor normal weights. Their results suggested that the ideal body perception shifts around current societal standards instead of extremes (Aniulis et al., 2021). These findings are important because they suggest that ideal body size is malleable and shifting toward a more diverse perception of the ideal body is achievable with increased exposure beyond the thin ideal (Aniulis et al., 2021). This research shows that media representation skews the public’s idea of what “normal” bodies look like and what makes us think that underweight bodies are normal or the ideal standards of beauty. Overexposure to thin bodies in media representation skews the perspective that the ideal female body should be underweight. This is why body diversity and inclusivity is important to normalize, because the more representation the public sees the more they will normalize and change their beauty standards.

Social media is used as the most predominant way to gain mobility, awareness and followers, and understanding of the body positivity and fat acceptance movements’ goal. An example of this is at the intersection of body positive and fat acceptance with social media and media representation through model Tess Holliday. When Holliday debuted on the cover of *Cosmopolitan Magazine* this was the first time someone of her size was so publicly represented. Holliday also used Instagram to feature her living an active lifestyle. This disrupted the general public’s perceptions of fat-bias and fatphobia. As researcher Nicole Hailey Otis said “by visually and textually resignifying the fat body as active, Holliday’s posts performatively disrupt the binary logic that defines health against fatness and reimagine the fat body as a particular healthy body” (Otis, 2020). Through Holliday’s instagram she breaks the idea that fatness inherently means unhealthy, lazy, inactive, unhappy, slobbish, and having low self esteem. Also, that thinness inherently corresponds to health and is the only way for people to live happy lives.

Holliday's use of media representation and social media shows what the true intent of the body positivity and fat acceptance movements try to accomplish. To alter society's assumptions and bias against fat bodies and to be more inclusive in their representation across all media platforms. While Holliday's representation in media has been a huge success and pushed the body positivity movement forward, she of course also received a great deal of push back from the general public remarking that she cannot be beautiful because she is "promoting obesity." The discourse within the fat acceptance movement and critique of Holliday is that though she is doing important work in making fat bodies visible and creating representation for them, it perpetuates that fatness is only acceptable on white women. Only having white women like Holliday be shown in mainstream media as beautiful comes at the cost of marginalized fat bodies of color. It's "important to listen to other voices within fat-activist communities, specifically those whose bodies exist at the intersection of various systemic oppressions" (Otis, 2020). This is an intersection within the body positive and fat acceptance movements, where the women who get the most acceptance and representation in media tend to be white and able-bodied.

Social media representation does not only help shape and change the general public's view it also helps change the internal view of those who have been deemed obese on the Body Mass Index (BMI) scale. The body positivity movement can encourage these women to find what happiness and health means to them in their bodies. In a study on 18 midwestern women who have been labeled obese on the BMI scale, they explored how they tried to gain self love and accept their bodies. Participants followed social media accounts of greater diversity with fat bodies. Participants found that attitudes towards fat bodies trends toward greater inclusion and diversity in general, but were frustrated by ceilings of acceptable size, seeing disingenuous messaging, and cultural backslicing (Bombak et al., 2019). This frustration was due to corruption

of representation (or rather lack of representation) within the movement. Social media representation helped them build up more resistance to body shaming narratives and finding a community.

Social media does not just promote diversity through representation, but another keystone is that it provides community building spaces. Through users consuming, creating, commenting, and sharing photographs, videos, hashtags, status updates, and personal biometric data about their bodies and those of others' social media helps like minded people to find and build communities based on body size, shape, and weight (Lupton, 2017). Of course social media is not perfect and comes with complications that separates the body positivity and fat acceptance movements. As the body positivity movement grew and gained followers it also became a marketing term. When smaller bodies and midsize bodies became the default on social media and became the center of messaging by sheer volume of their representation instead of fat bodies there would also be mixed messaging. The messaging became everyone should love thier body, but be the good kind of “slim-fat” not like *those* obese people. Midsize women would oftentimes preach self-love and acceptance, but would contradict themselves by promoting weight loss and praising extreme thinness (Lazuka, 2020). These contradictory messages create a rebranding of the original beauty standards that the body positivity movement was created to push back against in the first place.

Racism's Intersection of Body Positivity

These communities are especially important for people of color. They provide an intersection of social media and racism. Through Apryl Williams research on Tumblr, she studied the role that social media plays as it intersects with racism in the body positivity movement through examining the Tumblr group “Fat People of Color.” “Fat People of Color

uses an intersectional, communal approach to posit counter-narratives against normative ideas about white thinness” (Williams, 2017). Groups like this on social media are important to create and hold space for the most marginalized people within the body positivity movement and for whom it was originally made for. “Fat women of color are committed to dismantling heteronormative, male-centered fat phobic imagery and ideologies by creating counter-narratives about their own bodies” (Williams, 2017). The recognition and importance of these communities is what the body positive movement should strive for, diversity and inclusion, because these community spaces contribute to participants' overall health by focusing on their mental health. Williams notes that these communities would not exist without social media, since there is not the same community or fat accepting discourse offline. The problem with a lack of representation for fat people in the media is that it erases them from the conversation entirely. The misrepresentation results in harm for the majority of the population because it upholds the unreasonable standards and distorts the role weight plays within a person's health (Williams, 2017).

Another intersection of racism, ideal body image, and social media representation is how the body positivity movement was co-opted by fat activists in the late 2000s. While body positivity got a lot more followers and awareness through social media it also focused the messaging on white slim and midsize women, which continues to harm and erase the voices of people of color. Researcher Ashlea Gillon studied fat indigenous bodies' representation and found that for indigenous bodies they had extremely little to no media representation. Because of this they did not embrace the body positivity movement which ignored their voices through oppression. Instead of pushing to join body positivity, they did not see themselves represented

and thus preferred to focus on body sovereignty as a response to the racist oppression within body positivity (Gillon, 2020).

Finally, one of the clearest examples of the intersections of racism within the body positivity movement is how body positivity is appropriated in the yoga industry. Famous social media ``yoga and wellness'' influencer Kathryn Budig showed that despite the appearance of having the best of intentions with positive messages of body acceptance, she used body positivity as a means of marketing and personal profit. The messaging overwhelming social media was used for individual gain as a marketing ploy that capitalized on loving your body as long as it is white, thin, acrobatic, female, heterosexual, and so on (Miller, 2016). Perpetuating the systemic problems that Budig and countless other ``wellness'' influencers directly benefit from shows an appropriation of what the body positivity movement was meant to stand for and the marginalized people it was created by and for. If influences like Budig actually believed in body positivity and fat acceptance they would be an ally and have partnerships that help promote fat and people of color's bodies. They would also promote that all bodies can be yoga bodies no matter their size. ``In order to solve problems of negative body image, we must acknowledge the structural forces individuals attempting to love their bodies are embedded within. Rather than a spokesperson, what is needed is allyship based in mutual, equitable cultural exchange'' (Miller, 2016). The body positive movement had several intersections where racism and personal gains continued systemic oppression instead of fighting it.

Feminism's Intersection of Body Positivity

The intersectional feminist view that Celine Leboeuf provides is that the body positivity movement should not just focus on opening up beauty standards, but it should also inherently focus on how all bodies are worthy of care and respect. As well as to ``promote equal access to

physical activities and celebrate accomplishments of all athletes, regardless of body size or level of ability” (Leboeuf, 2019). Leboeuf’s research shows the feminist theory of how women’s bodies are policed by society and how body positivity is a form of resistance to social norms.

Although social media is often used in western cultures as a “democratizing force, digital divides and ideological conflicts between factions based on experiences of size, race, or class reproduce power structures that continue to haunt contemporary fourth wave feminism” (Darwin & Miller, 2020). Another researcher looks at the four social movement frames within the body positive movement and notes the key differences between these factions within body positivity often arise due to intersecting experiences of privilege and oppression within the movement, as well as disagreements between activists about whether the movement should focus on individualized, psychological issues such as body image or structural concerns such as size discrimination” (Darwin & Miller, 2020). Because people have competing priorities there are often divergents in the movements, mobility and action. When the movement became centered around white women (like many forms of feminism, it left behind the considerations of intersectional feminists such as people of color). Members, especially fat/obese and people of color within the body positivity movement became disenfranchised and moved towards fat acceptance so that their movement would not be taken over since midsize people do not want to reclaim the word “fat” (Donnella, 2021). Through this feminist lens we are able to understand how for white feminist, the policing of bodies was purely a gender issue instead of the intersectional feminist lense of how body positivity has more to do with the issues of gender, racism, class, and privilege. Because the body positivity movement was used to promote individual white and smaller bodied women they used the movement to promote their own privileged interests (Darwin & Miller, 2020). Darwin & Miller’s research shows how feminist

organizing in social media is shaped by unequal power and deepens our understanding of how intersectional feminism plays a significant role in the the body positivity movement (Darwin & Miller, 2020).

Medicalization of Bodies Intersection of Body Positivity

Since the body positivity movement began, it seems that health has been a major source of discourse from the public's perception as well as within the movement. "Under the rhetoric of "health," a large body size has come to be symbolic of self-indulgence and moral failure" (Wray & Deery, 2008). Obesity has become an epidemic in the west, but body positivity challenges the notion of the medicalizing of bodies' abilities and disabilities. This medicalization of obesity being classified as a disease also added to the commodification of bodies, through perpetuating a body's worth directly to its perceived physical abilities.

Fat bodies face higher discrimination in healthcare, since fatness is perceived as "less than" there is an oppressive unequal power relation for a fat person (Wray & Deery, 2008). Through medicalizing obesity as a disease, it became sensationalized in the media. Oftentimes when medical information is spread throughout the media it is highly sensationalized in the news and it often loses its context as it becomes "popular science." This "popularized biomedical knowledge that encourages women to connect health to appearance" (Wray & Deery, 2008).

Through looking at the discourse around the medicalization of fatness, a major part of the discourse within body positivity and fat acceptance is the notion of "Health at Every Size." Health at Every Size (HAES) is an idea that a person's health is not just composed of their weight and that people of all weights and sizes can live healthy lives (Bruno, 2017). This ideology also comes in part from skepticism that most health professionals use the Body Mass Index scale as the benchmark to determine a person's health. The BMI has been cited as an

“inappropriate tool to assess the impact of weight on health” (Kasten, 2018). The argument is that the BMI scale is archaic since it was invented by Adolphe Quetelet, a mathematician who was not a medical professional. The BMI scale takes in only two points of data: a person’s height and weight. This has no contextualization of the person’s health including factors like the climate where they live, pre-existing conditions, their gender, if they’re pregnant, how old they are, etc...HAES has been called many times “promoting obesity” by medical professionals and media outlets, but the weight>equals=health paradigm needs to be replaced to understand the full picture of someone’s health (Bruno, 2017). Using the BMI scale “contributes to overlooking the life circumstances that truly cause morbidity: social determinants of health such as income, social connectedness and isolation, adverse childhood experiences, and cultural erasure,” (Kasten, 2018).

Ultimately, HAES challenges the medicalization of obesity, because that notion also promotes ableism and the commodification of bodies. By valuing bodies that are perceived as healthy and devaluing bodies that do not meet that perception, society is limiting people's roles based on their perceptions of what able-bodies look like. The idea that people who are less able-bodied or else will be less productive in physical ways and are thus worth less to society. This is a capitalistic notion tying assumed physical and mental ability to a person’s direct worth and to specifically their appearance.

Ideal Body Image and Feederism in African Societies

In several African and South African societies western beauty standards are not necessarily associated with healthiness. In fact in Zulu culture, “the thin ideal of a female body that is idolized in the West is considered sickly among traditional Zulu thinkers” (Ogana, 2014). For Zulus the fuller body exemplifies positive attributes such as “beauty, sexual desirability,

fecundity, healthy, physical hardiness, happiness, being good-humoured, kindness, good nurturance, generosity, respectability, wealth, success, and affluence. Thin people, on the other hand were deemed unhealthy, weak or not hardy physically, miserable, miserly and ugly” (Ogana, 2014).

Located in North Africa is the nation of Mauritania, where the ideal body image is for women to have large bodies to the point of morbid obesity. This comes from an old tradition where a larger body was an indication that the man was able to keep his wife and family fed. So the woman’s body is used as a status symbol of wealth and prosperity. This beauty standard has led to “feederism” the process where to gain weight women and young girls are excessively force fed and ingest up to 16,000 calories per day (Thompson, 2007).

Social Media and Ideal Body Image in African Societies

Researchers John et al. studied Nigerian women’s interactions on Instagram to examine their body satisfaction and self-esteem. Their findings showed how even for a non-western audience having celebrity images portray thin as an ideal body image can lead to negative effects as the world globalizes. “Young Nigerian women experienced body dissatisfaction and reduced self-esteem when exposed to thin ideal images of Nigerian celebrities to the same extent as their counterparts in Western industrialized societies” (John et al., 2019).

For new generations of Zulu women, western diet-culture trends have made their way to African and South African societies social medias In doing so there became a “burgeoning body weight industry” full of “over-the counter slimming products, slimming underwear, concoctions prescribed by izinyanga (herbalists), izangoma (diviners) and pharmacists, and high heel shoes to create an illusion of extra height thus a slimmer silhouette” (Ogana, 2014).

Racism/ Postcolonialism and Ideal Body Image in African Societies

Vincent & Chantelle examined the intersection of racism in South African media through news reports about the obesity epidemic between 1997 and 2012. They noted news reports (almost always written and hosted by white men) singled out the fat black body as the perpetrators of the obesity epidemic (Vincent & Chantelle, 2016). By singling out Black South Africans as the problem it perpetuated white supremacy, white colonizer sentiments and values onto the whole society. It is “important to recognize whose voices are heard and whose are muted in this process of representation” (Vincent & Chantelle, 2016). Again, at the intersection of media and racism there is a decontextualization of the socio-economic reasons why marginalized bodies have higher rates of obesity.

Another example of racism and postcolonialism intersecting in African societies’ ideal body image is how they make Black people wrestle to take back their own culture. Instead of continuing the western post colonized standards of beauty, there is a push to reclaim their own beauty standards without “direction and permission [from the West] and reclaim the pride, dignity and knowledge [that is Zulu’s to begin with]. But only when we can tap into our own culture and find our identity as a people, can we be truly proud of who we are and where we are headed.” (Ogana, 2013). So amidst the transnational messaging of western beauty standards that seep into African’s culture there is a reckoning of having to reclaim their traditions of beauty.

Feminism and Patriarchy in Ideal Body Image in African Societies

Even though western beauty standards through media exposure have seeped into Zulu culture and started to change attitudes on preferring women with slimmer bodies, the research still shows that the ideal body image and beauty standards are judged and determined by the male gaze and by men’s preferences above all else. In a separate study again focusing on Zulu women, Ogana found “ how patriarchal discourse contributes to women's body size ideal,

and women's response to traditional and global symbolism of their bodies" (Ogana, 2013). Again this transnational ideology is present that a woman's worth to society is based first and foremost on her appearance.

Instead of diet-culture to achieve the thin ideal body image, there are similarly harmful methods women go through to achieve the fat ideal body image in Mauritania. "Force-feeding takes place in "fattening farms," in which older women, force girls as young as five to consume excessive amounts of food and become obese. The girls are sent away from the home without understanding why. She suffers but is told that being fat will bring her happiness" (Guerrero, 2012). While the people of Mauritania have traditionally considered the practice of force-feeding to be an important part of the culture, the government, and a group focused on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women ("CEDAW" or "the Convention"), has an obligation to protect women's rights and pushes back to end force-feeding. "Because the practice is deeply rooted in history, tradition, and religion, the government will have to develop a foundation for change by encouraging the public to view obesity as unhealthy and to be open to change" (Guerrero, 2012). The push to end force feeding is important to look at through a feminist lens because it provides the understanding how women's bodies are controlled and thus determine the role they are limited to in society. "When women are expected to gain weight and maintain this image of excess, they are tethered to the home and are unable to engage in the community. Their voices have effectively been silenced in Mauritanian politics" (Thompson 2007). This policing of women's bodies can be seen clearly as a means of control through the example: "At the beginning of the century, Mauritania saw a lapse in the trend of feminine obesity, which was accompanied by the entrance of more women into the public sphere. Then when a military coup established a "return to tradition" they basically undid this change. This

shows that body image is a defining factor in a Mauritanian woman's place in society" (Thompson 2007).

Commodification of Bodies and Ideal Body Image in African Societies

Women's bodies in Mauritania are used by their husbands and fathers as a status symbol of wealth. By commodifying women's bodies for their appearance for mens' social currency they are limited in the role they can play in society. In patriarchal cultures, policing women's bodies makes them focus their time, energy, and resources on their appearance which stops them from having any real power, freedom, or ability to be an active participant in shaping society. The junta's "return to tradition" has rolled back several decades of progress and effectively silenced Mauritanian women in the political sphere" (Thompson 2007). Again, the focus in the culture is how to police, control, and commodify womens' bodies for mens' gain.

Conclusion

No matter whether the ideal body image is a slim or full figure there is still a halo effect for those who meet the ideal body image, where they inherently are thought of as more attractive, healthier, more sexually desired, happier, kinder, successful, and affluent. Though ideal body image and beauty standards may differ around the world, they share similar intersections transnationally in how they are affected by social media and media representation, feminism and sexism, racism, and the medicalization and commodification of bodies. These areas determine the amount of respect, legal & social rights, and privileges afforded to those with the ideal body type and discriminate for those without. Around the world womens' worth is tied to their appearance first and foremost. When women are reduced to spending their resources on how they look because it determines how society will treat them, the problem ultimately is not how women look, it is that their worth in society is determined by their looks. Losing weight or

gaining weight to be attractive and thought of as worthy of existing does not solve the inherent and normalized problem of it being socially acceptable to treat people unequally because of their weight, size, race, or gender. It ignores the complex layers of violence, control, and the limits society has placed on them. The concern for obese bodies as far as the beauty standard is fat bodies, can be just as harmful to force women to be force fed and experience feeder farms. Ableism and the commodification of bodies are valued because of a neoliberal-capitalistic lens of societal productivity. Health and weight should be considerations in people's lives, but the push for what is beautiful and acceptable should be expanded and/or devalued. Society and specifically sociologists, psychologists, medical professionals, and policy makers should push to demonetize and devalue diet-culture. We need to fight for national policies of anti weight-based discrimination, outlaw feederism, and discuss weight as a piece of a person's whole health.

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