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Hynnä, Kaisu; Kyrölä, Katariina

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“Feel in Your Body”: Fat Activist Affects in Blogs

Kaisu Hynnä¹  and Katariina Kyrölä²

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Abstract

This article interrogates how body positive and fat activist blogs offer alternative ways of feeling one’s body, using the Finnish *More to Love* (MTL, 2009–2013) and its successor *PlusMimmi* (PM, 2013–) and the American *Queer Fat Femme Guide to Life* (QFF, 2008–) as its examples. We investigate how these blogs, despite their differences, invite their publics not only to feel positive about their own and others’ norm-exceeding bodies, but to feel in their bodies. While previous studies have criticized body positive discourses for employing a simplistic language of choice and relying on heteronormative logics of feminine attractiveness, they have not paid specific attention to how exactly body positive media attract and engage people affectively. In this article, MTL, PM, and QFF’s strategies of inviting their followers to feel in their bodies are analyzed in the context of three key themes: exercise, fashion, and sex. We argue that when explored through the framework of affect, fat activist blogs do not present body positivity simply as a matter of choice but offer a space to feel through the affective contradictions of inhabiting a fat feminine body in a sizeist society. At their best, body positive blogs open up spaces of comfort which can be radical for bodies accustomed to discomfort.

Keywords

feminist fat studies, blogs, affect, body positivity, activism

My goal is to simply help people feel in their bodies.

—Bevin Branlandingham (PopSugar, 2017), blogger of *Queer Fat Femme Guide to Life*, artist, and activist.

In the contemporary media culture, and particularly in social media environments, “body positivity” and the critique of slim, toned, and rigidly regulated body norms have become a significant phenomenon. Blogs, online discussion groups, and social media sites which explore alternative ideas about what kinds of bodies are valuable, capable, and attractive are gaining in popularity. A key area of these has been called the “fatosphere,” focusing on content by and for self-identified fat people and fat activists (Lupton, 2017; Pausé, 2016). This article analyzes three such fat activist and/or body positive blogs, the Finnish *More to Love* (MTL, 2009–2013) and its successor *PlusMimmi* (PM, 2013–) as well as the American *Queer Fat Femme Guide to Life* (QFF, 2008–) through their practices of affectively engaging their publics (Kyrölä, 2014). We investigate how these blogs, created by and primarily addressing self-identified feminine or femme fat women, invite their publics not only to feel “positive” or loving about their own and others’ norm-exceeding bodies, but to “feel in their bodies,” as the quotation above by Bevin

Branlandingham, the creator of QFF, suggests. We propose that the invitation to just feel in one’s body, as simple as it seems, can be revolutionary in cultural contexts where bodies—fat female bodies in particular—are continuous targets of regulatory practices and configured through an imperative of transformation (Coleman, 2013; Gill & Elias, 2014). Our aim is thus to explore how feeling in one’s body comes into being and operates in fat activist and body positive blogs, such as our three example blogs.

Body positive online sites—overwhelmingly centered on women—have attracted the attention of feminist scholars in various fields, such as media and gender studies (e.g., Murray, 2013; Puhakka, 2018; Sastre, 2014), fashion studies (e.g., Downing Peters, 2013; Kristjansson, 2014), and marketing research (e.g., Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Harju & Huovinen, 2015). Such studies have acknowledged the persuasive power of the media discourses of body positivity,

¹University of Turku, Finland

²Åbo Akademi University, Finland

Corresponding Author:

Kaisu Hynnä, Department of Media Studies, University of Turku, FI-20014 Turku, Finland.

Email: klhynn@utu.fi



pride, and self-love but underlined how these discourses can also implement new norms, transferring the cultural demand to change one's body into a demand to change one's affective relationship to one's body. At the same time, studies have critiqued body positivity for making positivity over one's body seem like a simple matter of a choice, when the body culture at large emphasizes insecurity and the constant risk of shame (e.g., Gill & Elias, 2014; Johnston & Taylor, 2008). Critics have further pointed out that fat pride or body positivity habitually rely on heteronormative logics of feminine attractiveness, valuing women first and foremost through their appearance, and focus on White cis-women (Connell, 2013; Murray, 2008, p. 118). Some of these critiques justifiably apply to *MTL*, *PM*, and *QFF* as well, as they are driven by White cis-women and often employ the language of choice. While existing studies provide valuable views on how normativities around gendered bodies become produced and challenged discursively, they have not paid specific attention to the participatory elements of body positive blogs, or how blogs and bloggers offer possibilities for affective engagement. In this article, we examine the ways in which affective engagements and intensities are generated and circulated in the online collectivities that form in, through, and around the three blogs, momentarily or more lastingly (cf. Papacharissi, 2014). We focus on the question of what makes body positive and/or fat activist online content so persuasive and engaging—in Sara Ahmed's (2004) words, affectively "sticky" (pp. 2-13).

Studies on body positivity and fat activism have mainly focused on the Anglo-American context, to the extent that their existence elsewhere easily goes unrecognized or belittled (e.g., Cooper, 2016; Pausé, 2014, pp. 18-21; for exceptions, see, for example, Maor, 2013; Puhakka, 2018). Studying Finnish blogs alongside an American one diversifies current research on fat activism and body positive movements geographically and culturally. *MTL* and *QFF* were founded in the late 2000s. *QFF* is still active, while *MTL* functioned for 5 years. After that, one of the two creators of *MTL* started *PM* which thus in its way both replaced and continued *MTL*. In this way, the analysis also speaks to the history, continuity, and changes of fat activism and body positivity online during the last decade.

Questions of affect have been at the forefront of many feminist studies about fat embodiment and its cultural representations, particularly how fat connects to shame (e.g., Farrell, 2011), disgust (e.g., Kent, 2001; LeBesco, 2004), and pride (e.g., Murray, 2008, see also Kyrölä, 2014, pp. 157-195). While the invitation to "feel in your body" can be affectively intense and appealing, we suggest that it cannot be captured by or emptied into the affective structure of pride or positivity. The notion of feeling in one's body can offer a powerful critique of contemporary western culture's pull toward treating bodies as objects, to be molded, evaluated, and seen from the outside. This shift can also be conceptualized as a shift from a visually and aesthetically

defined object body to a body understood through its relationality to its surroundings and the world—a living, feeling, affective body (Featherstone, 2010; Sobchack, 2004). In this article, the larger-than-normative body at the center of the blogs, as well as the body more broadly, is understood as a moving, processual entity that is continuously being produced in affective relations to other bodies as well as images, media culture, and its surrounding at large. This challenges the understanding that power works mainly through ideology, and bodies can either comply with or resist norms (Coleman, 2013, pp. 32-35; see also Featherstone, 2010). Our analysis regards affect as central to workings of power, not outside of power.

As we will show, the invitation to just feel in one's body, as offered by *MTL*, *PM*, and *QFF*, does not always work, but the bloggers and blogs' followers are sometimes unable to detach themselves from the normative logics of approaching their bodies as objects. Despite this, we see the affective invitation valuable in itself. Feeling in one's body, as we understand it, is not a matter of personal choice (cf. Murray, 2008, p. 90), nor a feeling that exists "outside" normativities (e.g., Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 945). It is rather about making and pushing for space for particularly non-normative but also norm-approximating bodies to feel, move, and exist under the pressures and barriers of heteronormative gender expectations and "normal" size (see Ahmed, 2006, pp. 134-135; Hemmings, 2005, pp. 559-565). Thus, the question about the failures and successes of body "positivity" becomes rephrased as a question about how bodies can affectively relate to certain images and technologies, rather than others, in ways that might increase their abilities to connect and open up to the world.

***MTL*, *PM*, and *QFF* in the Fatosphere**

MTL, the predecessor of *PM*, is a co-authored blog between two female friends, Peppi and Mimmi (self-chosen pseudonyms). During its active years, Finnish media frequently reported on it as the first blog to encourage its readers to accept their non-normative bodies and to enjoy their lives in the now, not when 20 pounds lighter in a future that might never come (e.g., Petterson, 2010). The blog, with its humorous tone and the bloggers' ironic way of commenting on fat discrimination they had experienced, was hugely popular among its Finnish readers, and in September 2009, only 4 months after it was founded, it already had 30,000–40,000 weekly visitors (a large number in a country of 6 million people). Besides discussing topics such as fat discrimination and representations of fatness in the media, the blog also included regular posts on clothes, food, cosmetics, and travel. In 2010, it received the best fashion blog of the year prize at the Finnish Voice Web Awards. This surprised Peppi and Mimmi who maintained that *MTL* was not really a fashion blog but a "fat blog" discussing all things important for fat women (Peppi, 2010).

Despite its popularity, Peppi and Mimmi decided to stop writing *MTL* in 2013, and Mimmi soon started a new personal blog, *PM*.¹ Although *PM* includes posts on topics such as plus-size clothing and where to find it, it is more centered on discussing fashion, food, and interior design on a general level than *MTL* was. However, based on the iconic status and popularity of *MTL* in Finland, and Mimmi's blogger identity that formed during her *MTL* years, *PM* can be understood as a continuation of *MTL*. Indeed, since *MTL*, no other body positive blog has gained similar status or popularity in Finland—rather, the momentum of body positive activity has moved to other social media, such as Facebook groups.

Like *MTL* and *PM*, *QFF* includes posts about fashion, style, politics, art, food, exercise, sex, and relationships, as well as reflections on various people, pets, and events in Branlandingham's life. Branlandingham also has a multi-platform presence: in addition to the blog, she maintains a Facebook page with nearly daily Facebook live broadcasts, Twitter and Instagram fan pages, and a podcast called *FemmeCast* on the blog. In the summer of 2017, *QFF* reached the height of its popularity so far when a video about Branlandingham's body positive, all genders dance class in Los Angeles, "Fat Kid Dance Party," went viral on the entertainment website PopSugar. Branlandingham has managed to turn her body positive politics into an occupation, which can be seen as a sign of the rising popularity of body positivity in the United States during the last decade.

The emergence, rise, and fall of these blogs coincide with rapid changes in social media and Internet celebrity during this decade (see Abidin, 2018, pp. 14-16; Dean, 2010, pp. 26-27). In the English-language fatosphere today, there are various fat activist or body positive social media influencers whose popularity seems to rely on active presence on multiple social media channels, which *QFF* successfully makes use of. However, in 2008 and 2009, when *QFF* and *MTL* started, it was easier for individual fat activists to stand out and make a name for themselves through active blogging only. By the late 2010s, body positive blogging has lost much of its popularity and status to other social media forms, such as vlogging and Instagram, both in the United States and in Finland.

It is vital to emphasize that *MTL/PM* and *QFF* operate in two partly different cultural contexts in terms of body politics: the United States where fat activism has existed since the 1960s in various forms (see e.g., Cooper, 2016), and Finland where fat activism is a much newer phenomenon. While in the United States there is NAAFA, National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, and local community organizing, in Finland there are no associations or organizations dedicated to fighting size-based oppression beyond online communities, and academic literature drawing on fat studies and feminist fat studies has long been sparse (e.g., Harjunen, 2009; Kyrölä, 2014). In the past few years, body positive campaigns have gained increasing publicity in Finland, on television as well as social media, but rather than

"pure" positivity, their emphasis has been on ambivalent feelings about body size (Puhakka, 2018). Nevertheless, body positivity is discussed as a completely new phenomenon in Finland, enabling unfortunate cultural amnesia about only decade-old fat activist and body positive efforts, such as the popular *MTL* blog. The language of novelty—which also speaks to the commercialization of body positivity and its uses as a marketing strategy (Gill & Elias, 2014)—easily disregards the efforts of other activists in the near past.

As blogs, *MTL/PM* and *QFF* participate in and continue the legacy of the fatosphere which can be traced back to the mid-1990s and American discussion groups, such as *FD*, a discussion group for pro-fats, and *FAS*, a bulletin list for fat lesbians specifically. In both groups, discussions varied from where to find right sizes of clothing to how to relate to sex as a fat individual and to struggles against sizeism practiced by employers and doctors (LeBesco, 2004, pp. 99-101). The fatosphere has long been compartmentalized into the more heterosexually oriented and the queer subsections. *MTL/PM* and *QFF* also represent this compartmentalization: while *MTL* and *PM* do not problematize gender and presuppose a heterosexual follower or participant, *QFF* focuses on fat femininity by reflecting on its intersections with queer identity and politics. As Branlandingham expresses in the blog's statement of purpose section "Why Queer Fat Femme?" (Branlandingham, n.d.b), she does not "acknowledge the gender binary" and sees the category of femme as a "tricky one." She describes it for her blog as follows: "Femme is a way of defining for me how I fit into my sexuality, but does not describe my gender."

In their emphasis on fat femininity and queer fat femininity, both *MTL/PM* and *QFF* are representative of the vast majority of fatosphere blogs (Taylor, 2018). Blogs or communities that focus on fat masculinity or queer fat masculinity center on the gay bear subculture, men attracted to and/or identifying as fat or chubby men, and the online communities revolve mostly around sex and dating rather than activism—although they can also be seen as political (e.g., Enguix & Ardévol, 2012; Monaghan, 2005). Blogs that do not associate themselves with either femininity or masculinity are much rarer. Furthermore, most current fatosphere content is created by or focused on white bodies, even though there is an increasing Black and POC (people of color) multi-platform activist presence and following both in the United States and in Finland (e.g., Pehme Collective, n.d.; Shackleford, n.d.). While *QFF* features some non-white bodies (albeit rarely) and is explicit about its anti-racist stance (Branlandingham, 2016), *MTL* and *PM* bypass the question of race. There is good reason to ask what kind of purposes and politics can and does the rarely questioned and implicitly maintained association between white, western femininity—queer or heteronormative—and body positivity serve (see Cooper, 2012, 2016). By including both kinds of blogs, heterosexual and queer, in the data for this article, we want to however emphasize that even fat activist online content, such

as *MTL/PM* that might seem otherwise norm-abiding (hetero, cis, white, able-bodied) or commercial, should not and cannot be easily dismissed, when examined from the perspective of their affective appeal and affective relations to their followers.

Fat Activist Blogs and Affect as Methodology

Conceptually and methodologically, this article participates in debates over definitions and methodological uses of affect (Ahmed, 2004; Coleman, 2013; Wetherell, 2012). We approach blogs as affective connections and engagements (Kyrölä, 2014) between blogger bodies, blog texts and images, social media technologies, and readers/participants, rather than as one-way “influence,” or messages sent by the blogger to her readers (Paasonen, 2011, pp. 16-17). We suggest that the multi-directional, technologically specific workings of fat activist or body positive blogs can be analyzed most productively through an understanding of affect as processual, moving, pushing, and pulling force between the bloggers themselves, images and texts in blog posts, readers, and commentators, as well as the surrounding culture and society at large. When blogs are approached first and foremost as forming and being formed through affective engagements, the conventional frames of positivity and pride may *not* appear as central to their affective appeal. Instead of positivity or negativity, it seems that moments that bring about conflicted or just intense feelings—whatever their tone—become affectively more heightened, and especially feelings framed as difficult to articulate are praised as empowering or most authentic (compare with Dean, 2010; Paasonen, 2011). Following Ahmed (2004), we do not differentiate categorically between emotion and affect, but rather see them as two sides of the same coin, emotion referring to nameable affective relations, such as pride, love, disgust, or shame, and affect referring to the intensity “behind” names, the not-yet-nameable but felt dimension.

At the same time, it remains important to emphasize that blogs like *MTL/PM* and *QFF* are multi-year projects with a devoted follower base that stays with the blogs for months or years. The majority of the followers are not just commenting on or sharing the posts with the hopes of a flame war or a quick affective fix, unlike Dean (2010) has proposed. The blogs grab their public’s attention repetitively, offer them (at least a glimpse of) a community, and potentially open up the world of online fat activism and body positivity for them. The blogs do not invite a gaze—a knowing, objectifying look from the outside—as much as they grab or capture the attention of their users, while the users also grab them back (Senft, 2008; Senft & Baym, 2015).

For this article, we have read through the entire *MTL*, *PM*, and *QFF* blogs until June 2018, taking specific notice of moments when bloggers and/or followers express affect in

particularly charged ways. This includes named emotions as well as seeking out posts in *MTL*, *PM*, and *QFF* which have generated most engagement, comments, or shares. Looking at the number of comments on a post cannot tell everything of the affective intensities generated between a post, the bloggers, and the followers² but it is indicative of clusters of attention in the blog space. A post with a large number of comments is a particularly sticky one, with affective intensity attached to it (Paasonen, 2015, pp. 28-29). The affective intensity of a post is produced in connection to its readers, whose comments or shares may further increase its intensity for other users and bloggers (see Ahmed, 2004, p. 13).

Many of the most commented posts in *MTL/PM* and *QFF*, when looking at them together, address practices of exercise, fashion, and sex, discussing not only their empowering potential but also the feelings of marginalization and alienation that fat subjects face when taking part or occupying space in relation to these activities. In other words, exercise, fashion, and sex are discussed as activities oriented around thin bodies. This usually results in the fat body trying to fade into the background but, in many cases, is unable to do so (See Ahmed, 2006, p. 135). Fat activist blogs, however, redefine these activities as ones that actually hold healing affective power when taken up by fat bodies and on fat bodies’ own terms. The examples chosen for closer scrutiny are therefore ones where these three practices become objects of discussion and where multiple affects compound. The examples claim and discuss ways in which fat bodies can and do things they have often been excluded from, such as dance and enjoy sex, even though these activities do not only involve feeling proud, positive, or loving. In fact, feelings of awkwardness, shame, and insecurity are welcomed as ways of feeling in one’s body on a journey toward greater freedom to inhabit one’s body as it is. In what follows, *MTL/PM* and *QFF* are analyzed as media that *enable feeling in one’s body while moving, being fashionably adorned, and sexual*, rather than analyzing them simply as representations of positive or negative affect.

“We Cheer for Awkward!”—Exercise in *QFF*, *MTL*, and *PM*

Gyms,³ fitness classes, swimming pools, and other public places of exercise have long been some of the most hostile spaces for fat, gender non-conforming, and otherwise non-normatively bodied people, spaces where their bodies easily turn into objects of staring and ridicule. As Harjunen (2019) shows in her study about fat Finnish women, public visibility, and exercise, fat people are simultaneously expected to engage in exercise and mocked when they do so. The purpose of exercise, for them, is always assumed to be weight loss, not pleasure, fun, or fitness only. This can be seen as a function of what Kwan (2010) calls body privilege, drawing on the notion of white privilege: the ability to move through

the world and engage in various mundane activities in relative comfort, without drawing excessive attention but also without feeling invisible.

Against this background, the Fat Kid Dance Party blog posts, social media videos, and classes by Bevin Branlandingham of *QFF* stand out as particularly interesting. Branlandingham teaches the body positive dance class in person in Los Angeles and tours with it in the United States (Branlandingham, n.d.a). *QFF*, even though it has long been a household name in the fatsphere, reached new levels of popularity in the summer of 2017, when the Fat Kid Dance Party promotional video went viral through the online entertainment platform PopSugar (Branlandingham, 2017c). This kind of breaking into mainstream would unlikely have been possible a decade ago, when the body positive movement was still relatively unfamiliar to people outside the fatsphere circles in the United States as well as in Finland (e.g., Malacoff, 2018). The video reached 3 million views and over 19,000 shares on Facebook by the summer of 2018 (PopSugar, 2017).⁴ The dance class aims to be inclusive to all bodies, regardless of size, race, gender identity, or ability, and as Branlandingham (n.d.a) states on *QFF*, “If you’ve ever been called ‘too much’, ‘too fat’, or felt too awkward to dance, this is the supportive class for you!” The participants are even encouraged to shout out their awkwardness during class, and they get cheered for it.

Notably, the video does not set the dancing, fat, and/or otherwise non-normative bodies as bodies to be gawked at, nor simply as representatives of positivity or pride, but as bodies moving pleasurably together in a space that most often excludes them or makes them uncomfortable. In the promotional video, Branlandingham talks about “learning to love yourself,” and also about her experiences of being “the odd one out” in fitness classes, which lead to the idea of creating a dance class that prioritizes the odd ones out. The 644 comments on the Facebook post by PopSugar (in June 2018) expressed mostly enthusiasm about the existence of the class, how it looks like so much fun, and how much commentators would like to participate themselves. A few commentators voiced worries about weight loss not being discussed but met with swift silencing as “concern trolling.” The intense affective affirmation the video received was not self-evident, as PopSugar is a lifestyle media publisher which does not particularly specialize in alternative or body positive content.⁵ The amount of views, shares, and comments far exceeded any of Branlandingham’s own blog or Facebook posts.

Following Ahmed’s (2006) thinking on bodies that stand out and produce/feel discomfort in normative spaces, there is always potential for productive disorientation in the arrival of such bodies. The normativity of a space is built, in part, through the bodies that pass through it: in a gym environment, most bodies passing through it do not stand out in size, thus it can be and often is uncomfortable for fat bodies. The mass arrival of bodies “out of place” carries a high risk of ridicule or shaming, but when they nevertheless arrive, take

space, and receive broad affirmation, they enable the experience as well as the sharing of out-of-habit possibility of comfortably inhabiting the gym space, as well as their own norm-exceeding bodies. This comfort may be momentary, but its force is still apparent, and further multiplied and intensified through social media publicity and viral sharing. The comfort may not be seamless either, which becomes clear in the focus on making space for failure and awkwardness in the Fat Kid Dance Party class. However, the comfort of “just feeling in one’s body,” even if momentarily and awkwardly, is not exactly the same as positivity or pride. Comfort, feeling in your body, does not dismiss the shame of living in a non-normative body but recognizes it as the very reason why “just feeling” is already revolutionary.

The high possibility of failure and thus the revolutionary potential of “just feeling in your body” through exercise becomes also apparent in *MTL* and *PM*’s (lack of) discussion of exercise. In the few *MTL* posts that discuss exercise, the focus is on how the bloggers stood out and did not feel at home at schools’ gymnastics halls or other spaces of exercise oriented around thin or more-normatively sized bodies. This was manifested not only in feeling out of place but also in the concrete ways that exercise equipment used in such spaces are designed for smaller people:

Also, everything related to apparatus gymnastics and especially that damned LEAPFROG makes me super angry. I could not jump over the vaulting horse but my jump always ended short and I was left sitting on the thing. I was also the person whose thighs were too thick to fit inside the gymnastics hoops that the others used as swings. I could not swirl on the barre so I always had to be the person who counted how many swirls the others could do. Neither could I ever climb up the ropes to the ceiling of the gymnastics hall. The reason for this: fatness, I was afraid the ropes could not carry my weight but would break and I would die. (Peppi, 2009)

Still, as exercise is regularly approached as a vehicle for feeling good and staying healthy in popular discourses, Peppi and Mimmi express a wish to take up some sports. In a post from July 2009, Mimmi (2009a) asked their readers to recommend some form of exercise “that could get fatsos into moving and possibly even enjoying sports.” They promised to report in the blog how trying out the different forms of exercises would go, but in the end, only one such post (Mimmi, 2009b) was ever published. Peppi and Mimmi never discussed what had happened to this blog series but perhaps just feeling in one’s body or enjoying sports proved too difficult to accomplish in the public spaces of exercise, and the blog itself in the current day Finland.

Based on *PM*, the situation arguably has not changed much in 10 years’ time. Exercise is not a major theme in *PM* but whenever it gets mentioned, it becomes discussed as a vehicle of self-care that one *should* take up to feel good. However, in posts where Mimmi does mention going to the gym, she maintains that a regular gym routine is hard to

stick to or rejoices whenever she has been able to hold on to the plan (e.g., Mimmi, 2017). Although reasons for this are up to the reader's interpretation, at least one possible explanation could be the discomfort of passing through a more normatively oriented space. Still, in *PM*, as well as in *MTL* and *QFF*, regular exercise becomes recognized as an aspiration and as something that a happy individual *should* be doing.

“Girl You Look Expensive”—Failures and Successes of Fatshion

The same way that exercise is discussed as a vehicle for feeling in one's body in fat activist blogs,⁶ fashion also becomes a way of helping one feel more comfortable in one's body, or in other words, for opening up the affective restraints around how a fat body should take up visual space and stand out. In the *fatosphere*, the issue of fashion, or “fatshion”—finding ways to dress in trendy, quirky, and sexy clothes in a world which offers very limited clothing choices for larger-than-normative bodies—has been central ever since its early days in the 1990s (e.g., Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). Fatshion is a major theme especially in *MTL* and *PM*, where it becomes regarded as something that can make the non-normative body feel more comfortable in relation to its surroundings—not proud, but comfortable. However, *MTL/PM* as well as many other fat activist blogs often discuss a key contradiction in relation to fatshion: although clothing has the potential to make the fat body more passable, agreeable, and feeling more at home in a thin-privileged environment (compare with Ahmed, 2006, p. 134), attractive and trendy plus-size clothing is extremely difficult to find in stores.

As white cis-bodies, the bodies of the bloggers of *MTL/PM* and *QFF* are comparatively passable in their surroundings (in comparison to black fat bodies, e.g., Kwan, 2010), but their passability is usually managed in relation to how well they fit into conventional feminine ideals of appearance (Kristjansson, 2014; Taylor, 2018). As fatness is something that is often read as “unfeminine” or “masculinizing” for a woman (Gailey, 2014), fat women and their appearance are always in danger of being read as frumpy or tired, and thus expected to make an extra effort to look stylish and polished in everyday situations. When numerous clothing guides targeted for fat women recommend clothes that make the body look smaller than its actual size,⁷ some fat activist blogs do the opposite: they suggest clothes that accentuate the round stomach or belly instead of hiding them (e.g., Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015; Connell, 2013). In both cases, however, clothing negotiates the fat body's affective relations to the world outside it: more subtle, fat-downplaying clothes can make the fat body appear more easily as affectively neutral or pleasing, whereas size-accentuating, flabulous (Taylor, 2018) clothing appears more affectively risky. Clothing which draws extra attention to the fat body's fatness enables admiration for courage and uniqueness but can also lead to

dismissal and even anger, exemplified by two examples from our material: a post about Beth Ditto in *MTL* and a post series “Girl you look expensive” in *QFF*.

In *MTL* and *PM*—as opposed to *QFF* which focuses on flamboyant queer femme style—the focus is mostly on making the fat body pass and feel more comfortable in its surroundings. The conventionally feminine style of Peppi and Mimmi is regarded as a style that increases comfort related to one's surroundings by making the non-normative body not stand out but not invisible either. *MTL* and *PM*'s followers mostly welcome this style and react positively toward it. However, riskier, flashier, and perhaps more queer styles are sometimes also featured, and their reception is more unpredictable.

In April 2010, Mimmi (2010a) posted a picture of Beth Ditto—a plus-size queer indie rock-star and style-icon—wearing a bright orange tiger tunic. In the accompanying text, Mimmi explained,

You already know that we admire Beth Ditto so you can guess how excited we were when Pirjo Suhonen from Ivana Helsinki [a Finnish fashion design brand] sent this picture to us by email. So the picture is of Beth Ditto from The Gossip and she is wearing a fabulous tiger-tunic custom made by Ivana Helsinki. In other words, two of our favorites in one picture and LOOKING GOOD!!

While the number of the comments that the post received was certainly not the highest in *MTL*'s history (only 10 comments in all), the post was emblematic in that it shows the problems fat women can face when they strive for visibility and demand space through fatshion and fatshion blogging. *MTL*'s followers (Mimmi, 2010) saw Ditto's style as too over-the-top to fit inside the framework of comfortable passability and complained about her “I am so beautiful” attitude. One follower recommended that Mimmi and Peppi should admire themselves instead of setting Ditto as their style icon:

I had never even heard of Beth Ditto. I googled her and oh my God what a sight, just horrible! In this blog, you have shown that a chubby person can be beautiful and dress nicely. The key is to dress right according to one's waistline. This Beth Ditto has sooooo much to learn from you when it comes to clothes.

Ditto's style, offered by Mimmi as an empowering example, failed to appeal to *MTL*'s followers, but broke all the rules of how fat women are “supposed to” dress. Ditto's style made her body stand out too much and was read as a sign of her “weird attitude” and confidence which the followers did not find appealing. This shows how body pride, although often recognized as the objective of body positivity, does not necessarily fit into the framework of fat activist blogs like *MTL* and *PM*, where the focus is more on feeling comfortable than being proud. The aim of “just feeling in your body” can also serve rather conventional ideas about bodies, femininity, and visibility through clothing. The affective rebuttal

reveals the strict parameters of more broadly acceptable fashion that, although not hiding the fat body, makes it look passable and in this way to feel more comfortable in public surroundings.

Coleman (2013, p. 35) points out how consumer culture engages the body first and foremost affectively. Fashion is a key site of feminine consumer culture and a site where unfit, sad bodies are continuously made and transformed into celebrated, happy ones in the media (see also Gill & Elias, 2014). The relationship between fashion and happiness, fashion's ability to restructure a body's affective relationship to the world, is taken for granted in *MTL/PM* and *QFF*, just like in the majority of the fatosphere. However, *QFF* broke the relationship between consumer culture and fashion interestingly in the mini-series of blog posts called "Girl you look expensive." In the blog post "Girl you look expensive: Taueret," Branlandingham (2009) reflects on the relationship between a femme identity, fat women's difficulties of finding suitable clothes, and critique of consumerism. She concludes that to highlight the power of sharing, scraping, bargain shopping, and looking fierce without spending a lot of money, she will start a blog post series about gorgeous fat femmes: "Femme cannot be bought. Period." In the blog post, Branlandingham's friend Taueret who identifies as a Femme of Color shows off her pink and black, glittery style in a photo, explaining how she, as a fierce fat femme who is also poor, finds her clothes:

There are folk who are constantly talking about how femmes are totally materialistic and into consumerism and how it's rare and special for a femme to have a budget, be eco-friendly, diy-fierce, or even poor. That idea is really classist, all on its own . . . I am lucky that I live in New York City and have cheap and fashionable clothing resources available to me. As a femme of Color, I also have a shit ton of pressure imposed upon me to dress and carry myself in a certain way (clean and poised). I have the privilege to dress as funky as I want, have natural hair, and still be seen as human in the POC and queer communities. (Taueret in Branlandingham, 2009)

The comments to the post praise the topic of the post as well as Taueret's fatshion as "fucking inspiring." A flashy "fierce" style on a fat queer femme of color body can, thus, evoke entirely different affects, depending on the cultural context, particularly in terms of how mainstream the idea of fat activism and fat people as a notable consumer group are—in the United States to a certain extent, while in Finland very little—and whether the blog speaks mostly to a straight or a queer community. In the world of (mostly) heteronormative and heterosexual femininity, that is the world of *MTL/PM*, the possibility of passing as affectively neutral and unimposing in public, as in inhabiting a nearly acceptable and normative body, is understood to still be within grasp for a fat female body through "dressing nicely." However, in the (presumably) queer community around *QFF*, the fat feminine body

pushes, through its very existence in space, not only against size norms but also against sexual norms, making the possibility of affective neutrality a non-existent one. Thus, the clothing most affectively charged in *QFF* is flashy and cheap and is welcomed and celebrated as such.

"Being Naked is More Fun!" Feeling Sexual in Blogs

The same way that fashion and clothing have been central themes for fat activism and body positivity since their conception, so have sex and sexual desirability.⁸ For example, the world's largest fat rights association NAAFA had (hetero)sexual rights of fat people on its agenda from the time it was established in 1969, including events like sexy underwear parties for fat women and parties where fat women could meet men attracted to them (see e.g., Cooper, 1998, pp. 130-137). According to Harjunen's (2009) research on Finnish women's experiences of fatness, one of the most traumatic issues was the feeling of invisibility as a potential sexual and romantic partner. Besides these feelings of invisibility, questions of hypervisibility (Gailey, 2014) also relate to fat sex and sexuality. Sex sets the fat subject in an intimate space with another person and gives the fat body no other option than to appear as itself before one's partner. The strong affective intensity of sex, however, also has the potential to make one forget to view one's body as an object but to just feel its feelings and pleasure.

Although heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships in a broad sense are recurring themes in *MTL* and *PM*,⁹ sex as bodily activity rarely becomes an explicit topic in the blogs. Perhaps for this reason, whenever sex is addressed straightforwardly, the posts gain a lot of attention and thus become "sticky" with affect. In January 2011, for example, one follower approached Peppi and Mimmi through a comment under another (unrelated) post, asking if they ever felt "a certain pressure (e.g., to hide their tummy) when in close contact with a man." Peppi (2011) soon took up the subject in a post titled "Being naked is more fun!" There she wrote that when she first started seeing her (ex-)boyfriend, it was agony to be naked in front of him and that she tried to schedule their dates to late at night when it was dark, so that he could not see her fat body. She says that nowadays she can already look at her body in the mirror and is more comfortable with other people seeing her naked as well. "Fat people also have the right to enjoy and feel sexy!!!!" Peppi (2011) exclaimed. She ended the post by encouraging everyone to share their stories of trying to hide their bodies from their partners, since these are both funny, sad, and important to share.

The post got 111 comments, one of the biggest numbers in *MTL*'s history.¹⁰ The followers identified with Peppi's story and described similar experiences of turning off lights or pushing away potential partners in order not to let anyone see

them naked. Many expressed a strong emotional reaction to Peppi's words:

This text made me choke and got tears running down my face. It sounds so familiar to me to struggle with one's self esteem and feel ashamed of one's plentiful curves. But one man told me straight up that since he wanted me in his bed, he really has the hots for me—with or without clothes. And that's how it really is! Thank you Peppi for your wonderful and courageous text!! (A follower in Peppi, 2011)

In the end, both Peppi and the commentators seemed to agree that “with the right person and in the heat of the moment one tends to forget to think about how one's tummy looks like.” A consensus thus existed over how sex, while difficult to get to due to the fear of being seen naked, could reveal itself as healing practice that enabled one to enjoy one's body and what it can do in a new way—to shift from the focus on the body as a visual object to a sense of the body as affective, feeling through its tactile connections to others.

This shift is not presented in *MTL/PM*—nor in *QFF*—as a simple, voluntary, individual choice that one can just decide to make, regardless of societal pressures—the issue that media discourses of body positivity and body love have been criticized for (Gill & Elias, 2014; Johnston & Taylor, 2008). In *QFF*, the language of choice does appear regularly, especially on Branlandingham's Facebook live broadcasts, and more so than in *MTL/PM*. However, in contrast to the uses of body positivity in explicitly consumerist advertising contexts (Johnston & Taylor, 2008; Murray, 2013), *QFF*—as *MTL/PM*—simultaneously highlights issues that make that choice difficult, processual, and always incomplete.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in *QFF*'s blog entries about sex, which offer tips about better sex and dating, and resources for fat queer folks and their lovers, and also specifically address people who have learned self-loathing and to consider their bodies unworthy, or too much. In fact, the post about dating, “In solidarity with those who have been called ‘too much’” (Branlandingham, 2010), received 44 comments, more than any other post on the blog. Commentators both identified with the description of “too much” in dating and sex and critiqued the post for devaluing people with more introverted personalities and more subtle sexual expression. *QFF* has featured several posts and post series about sex, being an explicitly sex positive blog: “Gay Sex Week” in October 2011 (Branlandingham, 2011), “Fat Sex Week” in February 2013 (Branlandingham, 2013), and “Fat Sex Week XXL” in March and April 2017 (Branlandingham, 2017a). These series include interviews with porn and burlesque stars; tips and reviews about sex toys and erotic clothing; recollections of sexy events in the queer party scene; reflections about sexual attraction, preference, and identity; and fat bodies' specificity in sex.

Sex in *QFF* is discussed as a physical activity that can do a lot for one's individual sense of bodily self-worth and help

to inhabit one's body more entirely through pleasure and also as an activity that can connect one to a queer and fat community. For example, in the blog post “Fat sex week XXL: 6 tips for reclaiming FUPA, the fat upper pubic area,” Branlandingham (2017b) discusses fat pubic area with a friend called Katy, because “I had noticed that fat people often have fat pubic mons and I have always thought it was cute!” At the same time, their discussion recognizes that fat people of all genders might have extra insecurities about bodies, including their genital areas. Branlandingham and Katy's tips for reclaiming FUPA entail both visual and tactile, both private and public strategies: taking photos of it and sharing them online, tattooing or otherwise decorating it with glitter or rhinestones, and worshipping it through lovers' touch.

The majority of contemporary mainstream media culture that represents fatness in a “positive” light has been seen to focus on fat femininity as beautiful, attractive, or straightforwardly sexually arousing, to a degree where positivity is often collapsed with sexual desirability to others (Kyrölä, 2014, pp. 158-165). In relation to this tendency, *QFF* and *MTL/PM* seem refreshingly divergent in focusing on fat women as desiring agents and on sex and sexuality as concretely fleshy, physically pleasurable activities. Sexual pleasure and desire become affective forces that not only have the potential to rearrange the ways one inhabits one's body and relates to lovers' bodies, but also how one relates to the world. In this sense, feeling sexual also becomes about feeling in one's body—and through one's body in relation to others.

Conclusion

Existing research often critiques body positive media for making self-love and pride seem like a simple task and for transferring the imperative to transform from the body to one's relationship to one's body (e.g., Johnston & Taylor, 2008; Murray, 2013; Sastre, 2014). In this article, we have shown that this critique is not entirely applicable, when the focus shifts from discourses to affective strategies of engaging followers and when considering participatory online material. The three blogs we have analyzed have multiple producers and users, a multi-platform existence, and go on for many years. While individual posts in *MTL/PM* and *QFF* may speak of affective states such as love and pride as fixed locations to be reached, studying blogs as wholes points to their constant fluidity and contradictions and challenges the idea that the media discourses around body positivity necessarily gravitate toward the pitfalls of choice and voluntarism.

Approaching blogs through an understanding of bodies and images as affective (Coleman, 2013) challenges the very idea that their key goals and appeal revolve around a promise of transformation of one's affective relationship to one's body. Our analysis has shown that the blogs actually gather

most affective charge and engagement around contradiction on one hand, and on offering glimpses into “simply feeling in one’s body” on the other hand. The three themes we have discussed, exercise, clothing, and sex, each highlight how mundane bodily activities of moving, wearing clothes, and having sex can help (re-)imagine how norm-exceeding bodies could just inhabit their space, feel comfort, and affectively connect to their surroundings in ways that make them feel more alive—not in spite of but in constant negotiation with the pressures of the society that privileges thin bodies.

However, there are evident paradoxes in how bodies are discussed in the blogs’ texts and how they are visually represented in images. The visual imagery of *MTL/PM* and *QFF* is not particularly radical. Even though there is some playfulness in the images, they do not dismantle or reimagine ways in which feminine bodies can be performed or represented. In her analysis of body positive sites, Sastre (2014, pp. 939–940) imagines and calls for a more radical visual rhetoric than what can currently be seen on body positive sites in general. This could mean meticulously exposing and perhaps playfully distorting bodies, not to reveal their corporeal truth but instead the affective truth of their experience. Still, considering the blogs as affectively produced through posts as well as comments, that kind of distortion or reimagining would run the risk of alienating the followers or the community, as the case of posting about Beth Ditto on *MTL* exemplified. The blogs are by no means exempt from broader normativities that set the boundaries for acceptable and desirable femininity. Blogs such as *QFF*, and especially its most recent posts, can stretch those boundaries quite far—further than *MTL* and *PM*—partly through its alliances with queer and sex positive communities. The “Fat kid dance party” viral video, for example, features a community of vastly different bodies in motion, sweating, being awkward as well as agile, flamboyant as well as ordinary, and a plethora of viewers whose experiences of joy as well as marginalization become visible and voiced in the commentary of the video. There is, however, good reason to wonder whether something like the “Fat kid dance party” could have existed and gained widespread positive reactions during the early years of *QFF* or *MTL*.

Feminist critiques of body positive online and other media content are direly needed, so that we do not just end up replacing body normativities with affective normativities. However, we want to conclude by emphasizing that the widespread affective appeal of body positive online content and online communities should not be dismissed too quickly as a new form of making compliance and consumerism attractive and implementing an affective imperative of “positivity.” Rather, we argue that despite their problems and paradoxes, or perhaps partly because of them, online body positivity—especially when it involves multi-year, perhaps multi-platform, fluid, and continuous involvement of several bodies and actors across different cultural contexts—has the potential to reimagine corporeality as complex and fraught

with anxieties as well as joy. Instead of seamless happiness or pride, it can at its best offer ways to “feel in one’s body,” to open up spaces of comfort for the body to forget itself and just feel, and thus increase the body’s affective connections to other bodies and the world.

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ORCID iD

Kaisu Hynnä  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9344-1395>

Notes

1. Peppi also started a new blog, *I am Peppi*, shortly after *More to Love (MTL)* ended. In comparison to *PlusMimmi (PM)*, however, *I am Peppi* remained short-lived (2013–2014) and was updated only infrequently. It will not, for that reason, be discussed in this article.
2. A post with no comments, for example, may be crucial for a single follower’s understanding of their body even though they have not commented on it, but this affectivity is impossible to trace without empirical research with followers.
3. A phrase by Branlandingham (PopSugar, 2017).
4. In June 2018, the dance class was also available for download purchase and live streaming, so that people can participate from different parts of the world in private or public.
5. It is also difficult to trace the exact tone and context for the 19,000 shares the video received.
6. *Girl you look expensive* refers to a mini-series of blog posts in *Queer Fat Femme Guide to Life (QFF)*.
7. For example, *The Curvy Girl’s Guide to Style* (2010). In these, a fat woman is often recommended to accentuate her waist, to wear relatively conservative (often vintage-inspired clothes), and to avoid white and other light shades (see Downing Peters, 2013).
8. A phrase from *MTL* (Peppi, 2011).
9. Most often, Peppi and Mimmi address these themes in *MTL* using the tag “MTL Boyfriends.” In posts written under the tag, Peppi and Mimmi discuss their imaginary celebrity boyfriends, such as Zac Efron and Pharrell Williams, or sometimes tell about their real-life boyfriends, often in a joking and self-deprecating manner. In *PM*, Mimmi’s first boyfriend and now husband is a regular topic of discussion.

10. Only some commercial posts, where Peppi and Mimmi raffle products like cosmetics or candy among commentators, have received more comments.

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Author Biographies

Kaisu Hynnä is a doctoral candidate of Media Studies at the University of Turku, Finland. Her research interests include social media, affect theory, fat studies, gender studies, and selfie research. Her dissertation project studies the body positive movement on media contexts focusing on its affective dimensions and ways of moving the subject.

Katariina Kyrölä is a Kone Foundation senior research fellow, visiting scholar at Women and Gender Studies, Queens College CUNY (2019–2020), and lecturer in Gender Studies at Åbo Akademi University, Finland. She is the co-editor of *The Power of Vulnerability: Mobilizing Affect in Feminist, Queer and Anti-racist Media Cultures* (2018) and the author of *The Weight of Images: Affect, Body Image and Fat in the Media* (2014) as well as articles in, for example, *Feminist Theory, Sexualities, and Subjectivity*.