Whose Body is Deserving: Discourse, Power, and Ideologies Concerning Non-Normative Bodies on Instagram

Misty Thomas

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Whose Body is Deserving: 
Discourse, Power, and Ideologies 
Concerning Non-Normative Bodies on Instagram 

by 

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Masters in English 

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WHOSE BODY IS DESERVING:
DISCOURSE, POWER, AND IDEOLOGIES CONCERNING NON-NORMATIVE
BODIES ON INSTAGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation uses FCDA to investigate the construction and control of the boundaries of normativity as they relate to the body. Data in the form of comments was collected from three different Instagram accounts run by individuals with non-normative bodies. From the data, I argue that not only are non-normative bodies controlled through the coded language of health, but through racialized dehumanization. Even alleged demonstrations of support are problematized through what is being supported. The Instagram comments left on the accounts of non-normative bodies demonstrates that these bodies are suppressed as a way to maintain normative ideologies.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION:

Outlining the Foundations of the Study

The body positive movement began in the 1990s with the Health at Every Size movement, which then morphed into numerous branches and groups that aimed to alter Western beauty and body ideals. More recently, public media has lauded this movement, coopting it to sell clothing, magazines, and films. Plus-size modeling has become mainstream with more plus-size models appearing on the covers of major magazines and walking in fashion shows. The standard of the normative body is slowly, but surely shifting to include more body sizes. However, the shift does not mean that all bodies are considered normative in the United States. There are still outliers who exist on either end of the normativity scale—obese and emaciated. These bodies are a source of interest to the American population with shows such as My 600-Pound Life or Netflix movies such as To the Bone. These extreme and non-normative bodies are allowed a public platform to be a source of entertainment or a cautionary tale.

Yet the advent of the Internet and social media has given more people access to public platforms. Individuals can sign up for social media sites and take part in the community by posting videos, status updates, and images. Social media is a space in which the content is user-generated, which means the concepts of normativity that are prevalent offline transfer to the online world and social media. In other words, what is considered normative in real life is what is considered normative online. Political and social movements have realized the potential of social media as a platform for various movements and groups, including body positivity movements. Instagram is one such example of a social media site
that houses body positivity movements and messages and has become a focus of research for numerous academic fields, such as sociology and feminist studies. This dissertation adds to this area of research by presenting a study that investigates responses to non-normative bodies on Instagram.

While there is a great deal of research on either fat or emaciated bodies, there is a lack of research that investigates both of these non-normative bodies in relation to one another. The consequences of not studying these two non-normative bodies in tandem is having an unclear and incomplete understanding of non-normative bodies, rhetoric, and ideology. Understanding how non-normative thin bodies or non-normative fat bodies are constructed by rhetoric individuals provides only a single part of the full picture. However, looking at these bodies together allows us to identify the ways normativity is reinforced through rhetoric and ideology across a spectrum of body types. This approach is unfortunately missing within the overall field of not only rhetoric, but also body studies. It this space that my dissertation attempts to fill.

My data shows that in online spaces, female non-normative bodies are routinely controlled using specific rhetorical strategies, such as dehumanization and using health as coded language to communicate body-shaming messages and to reject normative performances. The findings from this study demonstrates that despite moving towards a more body inclusive society, female bodies are still controlled through the use of language and are expected to adhere to traditional female norms in terms of beauty, body size, and femininity.
LITERATURE REVIEW

My dissertation relies on and engages with two main areas of research. The first of these areas focuses on rhetoric, language, and critical discourse analysis. The second area is body studies, which includes subsections that focus on different aspects of body studies. I combine both areas together in the following literature review in order to illustrate the role language and rhetoric plays in relation to body studies and bodies more generally.

Body Studies

The notion of the body and its place in contemporary Western culture has always been contested terrain. Celebrities, activists, and scholars are attempting to work against the notions of what a normative, or ‘ideal,’ body is as dictated by Western society. In relation to research and investigation, the academic study of the body in terms of normativity began in the mid-1900s within sociological fields, with Foucault and Susan Bordo being considered foundational. Foucault developed the idea of biopower, which focuses on the way the body is managed, and control, which manifest in various power technologies, such as the control of public health (1978; 2004). This concept of biopower, in other words, is simply the control of the body which impacts everyone whether they are aware of their participation or not. Susan Bordo, with her book Unbearable Weight (2003), outlined the ways in which the female body is created and controlled by social and cultural ideologies. Building off of Foucault’s work, Bordo discusses the ways in which women are conditioned to fit within social norms and meet the male gaze. Additionally, Chris Shilling (2003; 2005; 2008) outlines the advent of body studies as an interdisciplinary field, explaining the body is “an unfinished biological and social phenomenon which is transformed, within certain limits, as a result of its entry
into, and participation in, society” (11). Within this framework, the body is studied as a site where society, culture, and ideologies are presented. In terms of fat studies, the body can also become a space for resistance against the notions of ideal and normative.

The academic focus on the body has only grown since the 1980s due to a variety of factors. Shilling explains this includes analysis of consumer culture and its ties to self-identity, second wave feminism, awareness of the body as a site to be controlled, technological advances, and academics who study the subject in an effort to advance their respective disciplines (2005). Because of this preservation of the field there has been a growth to include investigating the body in regard to culture as well as the technological body (Conrad, 2009). However, one key point remains consistent: “there is no essential, fixed or permanent body. The body may well be biological, and is indeed composed of living muscle, bone and soft tissue, but it is also subject to its cultural environment” (Richardson, 2010, 10). Since the body is always influenced by culture, there exists normative and non-normative bodies, or bodies that transgress cultural norms. Women are especially affected by this control because the female body is seen as an inherent and crucial aspect of female identity (Gimlin, 2001). This includes bodies that are obese or underweight, especially in the cultural context of body acceptance movements.

The body has also become a more visible object in an increasingly visual Western culture meaning that through advertisements and social media, images of the body are more prevalent. Images not only depict the body, but also effect bodies (Coleman, 2008, Murphy and Jackson, 2011). The tie between images and bodies exists “not separately to (photographic) images but rather become [are created] through these images; knowledges, understandings, and experiences of bodies are not “effected” by images but are produced
through, or become through, these images” (Coleman, 2008, 172). through the images of the body presented, we as a collective create the effects on culture and societal norms. Images of the body can have different meanings, especially as they are increasingly commodified. Yet, in terms of message there is little difference between two of these body images—the overweight and the underweight body— as they do little to disrupt ideas about the female body and female embodiment (Murphy and Jackson, 2011). Despite the fact that more recent images of plus-size models aim to disrupt traditional ideals about the female body, it still places a focus on the body and simply alters what the ideal body looks like. However, even the need for the categorization of plus-size models demonstrates that these bodies are not fully accepted and are still marked as non-normative. The body is a site for control and not just visibility, even in cases where the images are depicting a seemingly positive message. Examples of this is the rhetoric of confidence chic, which is the idea that arguing for self-confidence controls how women view themselves (Favora, 2017), or the attempts to control what is considered “gross” as it pertains to the female body (Fahs, 2017). These concepts, like others, are used to control the female body within Western culture.

I. Body Studies and Normativity

Non-normative bodies exist outside what is physically acceptable within a society. Within the United States, obese bodies are a very clear example of non-normativity. The concept of social normativity is defined clearly by Joseph Rouse (2007): “Normativity [. . .] involves a complex pattern of interrelations among performances through time. Such performances are normative when they are directed toward one another as mutually accountable to common stakes, albeit stakes whose correct formulation is always at issue
within the practice” (48). Another key definition of normativity originates in disability rhetoric, but is applicable to this project as well. Normativity, as defined by Jay Timothy Dolmage, “acts as a noun designating a culture’s desire for homogeneity, and also acts as a verb, in that this agenda is enforced” (2014, p. 21). As these definitions state, normativity is not a set of stagnant rules outlined by an official organization or group. Instead, normativity is fluid, changing over the years as social norms and expectations change through the interactions between individuals. Additionally, normativity is not monolithic either as it varies by geographical location, culture, race, and gender. Finally, normative bodies are contextual performances of societal rules and expectations, especially as it pertains to female bodies.

A body is always defined by its adherence to or deviance from normativity. This adherence or deviance is dictated by what the parameters of body normativity are and is expressed through ideologies associated with the body, both normative and non-normative. Michele Foucault (1975) explains the ideological normativity of the body through his concept of bio-power, which highlights that we are always within the system and cannot be outside of it. Even as we try to work against power, we simply recreate it. For example, with the body positivity movement, it was originally a resistance to body norms. However, as it became more accepted through social activism, body norms shifted to include larger bodies. In other words, by working to resist norms, we ultimately simply create new norms. The same seems to be true for normativity. Hannele Harjunen (2017) connects Foucault’s concept of bio-power to the female body, arguing “fat body is a good example of being the target of biopower and biopolitical action in general, and disciplinary surveillance in particular. The fat (female) body is a site where the powers that are critical to the construction of fatness are
played out” (p. 15). Specifically, bodily bio-power manifests in the medicalization of fatness, control of body size, and accepted presentations of femininity, all social constructs aimed at controlling the body.

Due to this control over the body, normative and non-normative bodies are both evaluated and judged. Normative falls in the space where the body is socially acceptable, while non-normative bodies are the outliers. As a result, a sliding scale is created with two types of non-normative body sizes on either end with the normative body in the middle. A body can land anywhere on this scale and the closer the body is to the normative middle, the more acceptable it is. This scale becomes more complex when intersectionality is considered. Issues concerning race and class are impacted by normativity just as the body is. With intersectionality included, it becomes not a scale, but a data graph in which one axis is race and the other is body size. It is crucial to understand that this data graph or scale for normativity is not perfect nor always applicable. Indeed, it does not take into consideration the multiple variables beyond race, weight, and gender.

II. Bodies in Virtual Spaces: Advantages and Consequence of Social Media

Since the rise in body positive moments in their various forms, scholars have investigated what is actually occurring with these movements, whether they are achieving their goals, and whether they are a force for change. The majority of scholarship has found that despite aiming for body positivity, most social media content actually results in the opposite (Gill 2014; Betz, 2017; Favora, 2017; Mulgrew, 2020; Couture, 2020; Brown 2016; Betz, 2019; Fredrick, 2017; Fardouly 2015). Studies have shown that exposure to any body type that is labeled as ideal negatively impacts viewer’s perceptions of themselves and their
bodies (Betz, 2017). It is not the actual body size; instead, the issue is whether or not that body is idealized. The importance and effects of idealized bodies are tied to the use of language, specifically the word ideal. For there to be an ideal, there must also be the other side, or the not ideal body. The focus on the ideal body ties into other scholarship that assess the impact of online images of the body has on a viewer. Most studies show that viewing images of thin bodies or models has a negative impact on a person’s self-esteem and body image (Fardouly, 2015; Brown, 2016; Fredrick, 2017; Mulgrew, 2020; Couture, 2020). Other scholars have noted the switch from a physical focus to a psychological one, which is termed “confidence chic” by Laura Favora. Women are now expected to also feel positive about their bodies, adding another level of pressure and expectation (Gill, 2014).

However, there is also scholarship that indicates that these online movements along with exposure to various body types can have either a positive impact (Webb, 2017; McKinley 2004; Rodgers, 2020) or have none at all (Slater 2017; Tiggemann 2020; Brown, 2020; Modica, 2019). Webb argues body positive images actually endorse fat acceptance in viewers while Rodgers asserts that online communities provide a space for people to engage in self-care, resulting in higher levels of self-esteem and positive body image. Nita Mary McKinley (2004), however, argues that there is evidence in online spaces that women can and do resist negative body image messages, demonstrating that women can work against internalizing fat phobia or body dissatisfaction.

Other data suggests that there is no evidence to suggest that body positive spaces or content have any effect on viewers at all. Amy Slater in 2017 published data from a study that they argued showed that there was no difference between viewing fitness images versus neutral images. Christopher Modica’s (2019) study revealed that the amount of time spent on
Facebook had no effect on the body esteem of the female users. Similarly, there is evidence that the captions on images do not impact the reception of the image in any way (Brown, 2020; Tiggemann, 2020).

ii. Thin is Beauty: Research in the Dangers of a Thin Ideal Body

Anorexia is a relatively modern concept that has undergone immense changes in regard to how it is understood and treated. Starting as evidence of holiness, the starving girl was seen as being miraculous. However, as science and medicine grew, anorexia went from being a symptom of hysteria to its own diagnosis. The tie between anorexia and a desire to be thin can be traced to the early 1900s with the Victorians. In recent years, professionals have tied anorexia to the popular culture, media, and societal norms that exalt the thin body (Brumberg, 2000). In the medical field, anorexia and related eating disorders are viewed as psychological disorders and as diseases that have a high death rate. People with eating disorders were placed in institutions and treated by force feeding, medication, and electric shock therapy.

However, in the 1990s, eating disorders found a new reiteration through the internet, websites, and asynchronous forums where users can post and respond to other members. While most individuals with eating disorders could only find others with the same disease in group therapy and in-patient treatment, the internet allowed them a place to connect without meeting in real life or disclosing their illness to their parents, which may require they go into treatment. The new version of the eating disorder community took the name “Pro-Ana,” or pro-anorexia. In later years, the name would be expanded to include Pro-Mia (pro-bulimia) and Pro-ED (pro-eating disorder). The Pro-ana movement is understood as “a way of life, in
which the goal is the obsessive pursuit of achieving the ultimate, very low weight” (Hoffman, 2018, 107). This community pursues this weight-based goal by engaging in disordered eating behaviors, personifying their illness as Anna, referring to themselves as “butterflies”, and wearing red bracelets to let others know that they are part of the community outside of the cyberspace (Hoffman, 2018). The language and terminology of pro-ana groups is crucial to understanding the potential goals and purposes of these groups. To be pro-ana or pro-ed means to support, so the use of pro situates not only the discourse of the community but also their positionality within it. Through the use of meal diaries and “body checks” the community is able to engage with others who share their interest in a way that previously was only possible within treatment centers or support groups.

Indeed, studying these communities has been termed “an uncomfortable fascination” for scholars (Holland etc., 2018, 527). There is concern that these communities promote eating disorders both in those who are and are not diagnosed. These pro-ana spaces can also affect the actual treatment of patients with anorexia. Gwizdek (2012) found that there are clear motivations for joining pro-ana communities, including receiving guidance, social interaction, and the sharing of experiences. Despite pro-ana spaces asserting they do not promote eating disorders, these communities and the support found here can impede treatment as the individual has a space in which they reinforce their eating disorder and find support to resist treatment. Indeed, these spaces contain support in the form of emotional support, esteem support, and informational support, creating a community that can hinder medical and psychological treatment (Tong, 2013). However, there are scholars who argue there is “some potential in viewing pro-ana online communities as one option available to individuals living with eating disorders to be in the world” (Holland etc, 2018, 523). In other
words, through the online community, the users are able to interact with the world and other individuals that they may not be comfortable with in the outside world, potentially leading to a lessening of symptoms or entering into recovery (Yeshua-Katz, 2013). Other scholars argue that the influence of these sites are overstated (Brotsky, 2007).

As scholars have noted, the pro-ana community is not homogenous in its goals and visions for the websites and social media accounts. The virtual pro-ana movement aims to subvert the established medical discourse around eating disorders, but also reframe the disease as a choice (Dias, 2003; Ward, 2007; Strife, 2011). The virtual community platforms “are constructed as acting in opposition to the fantasy of an ideal cyber community” (Ferreday, 2003, 293). Ferreday’s main conclusion is the concept of subversions within these sites. Not only do the individuals subvert medical diagnoses, but also the sites themselves subvert what cyber spaces should be and should entail. This concept of power also manifests in the way that users have interacted with one another and who is allowed into the community. In the pro-eating disorder’s early years there was a sharp distinction made between those who were diagnosed with an eating disorder and those who were not diagnosed but were users on the sites, labeled “wanna-rexics.” Those who took part in the community were expected to prove their place by asserting their illness and symptoms (Brotsky, 2007). Here, the power was held by those who had proven their place within this community. They were able to shun those who were deemed wanna-rexics or had not been able to prove their eating disorder convincingly. The issue of authenticity comes from the disembodied nature of the internet, resulting in users developing “group rituals and deploy individual tools to bring the body online and to addresses the quandary of authenticity in the pro-ana online community” (Boero & Pascoe, 2012, 30). These rituals include calorie diaries,
low-calorie recipes, body checks, and thinspiration (photos of thin, bony individuals). By engaging in these rituals, the users can create an authentic presence within the online community by demonstrating they understand the conventions of the community.

However, the shift to social media platforms changed the discourse and identities of the community, specifically terms like wanna-rexics. The label of wanna-rexics is no longer used, but the issue of authenticity still remains (Ging & Garvey, 2018). While the policing of wannarexics is less common, Instagram (as well as other platforms) have “pro and antirecovery comments, memes and quotes sit side by side, both under hashtags and on individual profiles and, while there are sometimes emotional appeals made to pro-anorexics to stop starving or posting trigger images, there are no real boundaries or controls” (Ging & Garvey, 2018, 1193). This demonstrates the fraught nature of the community in that there are users who have different motivations or interests all engaging together. These motivations can be to engage in eating disorder behavior or to advocate for recovery—both exist and thrive in this space.

iii. Expanding Acceptance?: Fat Bodies and its Scholarship

Research on fat bodies focuses on medical issues and definitions as well as the place and stigmas of fat bodies within society (Braziel, 2001; LeBasco, 2004; Boero, 2012; Anderson-Fye, 2017). Media in the United States plays a crucial role in the discussions surrounding fat bodies as stigmas and stereotypes are perpetuated and repeated. The attention the media gives “to obesity is unprecedented, constant, and central to the construction of obesity as one of the greatest social problems facing the United States and the world in the
twenty-first century” (Boreo, 2012). Fat bodies equate to laziness, gluttony, and disease or illness, which is then reaffirmed by institutionalized sizeism. Nicole Taylor (2017) explains, At the beginning of the twentieth century, health and body-image norms became institutionalized through the medical practice of measuring, weighing, and documenting individuals’ body size and weight. By the mid-1900s, insurance companies were using biomedical standards of height and weight to assess morbidity risk in individuals. (p.127)

There are countless stories on social media about fat individuals who are ignored due to their size or have their illness attributed only to their weight and the perceived unhealthiness that allegedly comes with body size. At this point, the word obese carries with it immense weight as well as a plethora of connotations, with the most common and well know being obesity as a contagious disease and obesity as personal and moral failure.

The stigmas and stereotypes associated with fat bodies resulted in numerous reactions including academic scholarship and social movements. Women and feminine presenting people, more so than men or masculine presenting individuals, are controlled by the normative standards of the society in which they live. For women in the United States, the female body dictates a woman’s status, role, and value. An acceptable and normative body will “reflect this gender difference, the hierarchy of power between women and men, and what is considered the ‘proper’ kind of femininity. For women, body size is one of the most important, if not the most important, marker of social acceptability” (Harjunen, 2017, p.15). As a result, conversations around resisting bodily normativity erupted, discussing whether fatness is a feminist issue. In 2012, Abigail Saguy published “Why Fat is a Feminist Issue” investigating and commenting the ties between fatness and feminist theory and movements.
Saguy argues that fatness has been largely ignored by feminist scholars as the majority of scholarship focuses on the experiences of slim or average-sized women (i.e., women whose bodies are normative). However, Saguy’s article was quickly met with a response in the form of a review article written by Janna Fikkan and Esther Rothblum. In the article, Fikkan and Rothblum gather together articles from various disciplines as evidence that the fat body is already a feminist issue. The authors then reiterate Saguy’s original call to action with, “Feminists also need to turn our collective attention to the reality that, because of the pervasiveness and gendered nature of weight-based stigma, a majority of women stand to suffer significant discrimination because they do not conform to this ever narrower standard” (Fikkan and Rothblum, 2012, p.588).

The call to study fat bodies and the biases they encounter built off of various social movements over the years, whether or not scholars were interested in and commenting on them or not. While there have been movements to achieve bodily acceptance or freedom since the Victorian era, the body positivity movement begins in an official capacity in July of 1969 with the creation of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA). The group actively opposed weight loss surgery and dieting, arguing bodies come in different sizes and size shouldn’t dictate their rights. However, the opposition to the movement claimed that NAAFA were simply apologists for unhealthy lifestyle, asserting that fat bodies shouldn’t be accepted or normalized. In 1972, a short-lived branch movement splintered from NAAFA, naming themselves the Fat Underground. The new movement was more focused in their ideas, arguing that social pressures and medical opinion resulted in a campaign to eliminate fat people. Fat Underground, however focused their ideas, was short lived with very few members. The term body positivity became mainstream in 1996 as more attention
was being paid to body size in media as well as in the fashion world. The term grew slowly, gaining popularity until the body positive movement we know now emerged around 2012. Again, there are current alternate branches to body positivity, specifically the body neutrality movement which seeks for people to move past negative feelings about their bodies but does not suggest that people need to feel positive.

iv. Intersectionality and Normativity

It is important to realize that bodily experiences and ideologies of the body are not monolithic. Transgender individuals and people of color experience ideologies of the body differently than white cisgender women. Instead, there are different standards of normative practices or performances depending on whether the individual is a person of color, a transgender individual, or nonbinary individual. A white cisgender woman has different normative standards than a woman of color, and transgender bodies are only considered normative if they are able to “pass.” For example, if a thin white woman is held up as the ideal of beauty and normativity everyone else is compared to that standard, possibly resulting in, for example, African American women feeling pressure to straighten their hair or lighten their skin. Multiple studies have looked into the ways that African American women internalize and resist the white beauty ideal along with investigating the ways that this white ideal impacts their sense of confidence or self-worth.

The research into African American women and white beauty ideals is somewhat complex in that some scholarship argues that African American women are impacted by the white body ideal (Harper and Choma, 2019; Cheney, 2011; Patton, 2006; Poran, 2006; Avery et al, 2021). However, these findings are complicated by two distinct issues with the first
focusing on the design of the research studies that investigate this topic (Lowy et al, 2021). There are scholars who explain that many studies do not account for “how women from other racial and ethnic groups subscribe to Western standards as well as cultural body standards” (Dunn et al, 2019, 121). In other words, intersectionality is not taken into account during the planning of the research project or during the analysis process, specifically with how black women relate and internalize white beauty ideals.

The second issue is the lack of consideration for the African American beauty ideals, which are different from the traditional white beauty ideals that tend to be the overall focus of scholarship. Many scholars argue that is the African American beauty ideals that impact black women the most with white beauty ideals being a secondary concern (Watson et al, 2019; Jerald et al, 2017; Hughes, 2021). Black women “may experience unique body image stressors, it is important to acknowledge that they are also not immune to internalizing a White, thin ideal. Black women may also experience additional pressures to conform to Black standards of beauty” (Watson et al, 2019, 284). In other words, African American women and other women of color experience multiple layers of pressure to adhere to different beauty ideals, which is a crucial factor that is not fully accounted for in some scholarship.

The different bodies, races, genders, etc. of individuals also impacts studies such as those discussed above. Race impacts how women interact with not only body positivity content, but also social media as a whole. Additionally, trans and nonbinary bodies are ignored and left out of dominate body positive movements, which then impacts their experience with these discourses.
ABOUT THE PROJECT

i. Addressing the Research Questions

My project aims to investigate and answer three research questions. The first is *how are non-normative cis-gender female bodies reacted to and discussed within Instagram comments?* The second question is *how do the comments construct normativity in relation to gender norms?* And the third is *how do the comments control normativity in relation to racialized gender norms?*

The overall design and methodology of my study allows me to answer these questions in various ways. One such way is through the social media platform and the profiles that were chosen as sources of data. By picking three individuals with non-normative bodies, I was able to have a diverse data selection, especially since one of those non-normative bodies is white and emaciated, one is white and fat, and the other is black and fat. This spectrum allows for a more detailed and close analysis that can help to answer the above questions. Another way in which my project design helps to answer my research questions is through the use of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), which allows for a focus on the ways in which language is used to suppress and oppress women through normativity.

ii. Problem Being Studied

As of the writing of this dissertation there has been little research completed on public discourses surrounding non-normative bodies and the bodies’ role in public media. The majority of research has focused on popular media coverage of the various body positive movements. Yet, even when looking at these movements online the focus is on how users or participants are affected by the messages, whether that is positively or negatively. In
addition, research into normativity and bodies investigate bodies that are still within normative range, leaving obese and emaciated bodies unexplored. This dissertation aims to fill both of these gaps by researching public responses to non-normative bodies through Instagram comments. The comments act as samples of public discourse created and posted as a response to images of non-normative bodies within a social media environment. This will shed insight into how non-normative bodies are being constructed as outside of the norm and responded to, revealing if and how the body positive movements have altered public opinions, views, and stereotypes. The research will also illustrate how non-normative bodies are being oppressed and suppressed within the public sphere.

iii. **Purpose of Study**

My research project aims to fill a gap in the existing research by looking at both ends of the non-normative body spectrum. Most research either focuses on overweight bodies (fat studies) or underweight bodies. Research on overweight bodies tends to fall into distinct categories, specifically resisting body negativity (McKinley, 2004; Satinskya, 2013; Webb, 2017), societal attempts to control the overweight body (Saguy 2012; Fikkan 2012; Harjumen 2017), and body positive movements as a form of oppression (Gill 2014, Betz, 2017). Additionally, research concerning underweight bodies tends to focus on the connection between popular culture and eating disorders (Malson, 1999; Brewis, 2011) and the online pro-eating disorder movement and its effects on its viewers or participants (Day, 2008; Cobb, 2017; Ging, 2018; Hoffman, 2018). However, looking at both body types will illuminate the similarities and differences in how these bodies are constructed, through language, as non-normative, in particular through online comments on social media. My research into the
discourses surrounding these two body types will illustrate the attempts to control what bodies are acceptable in public online spaces. In this way, my project connects to not only discourse analysis studies, but also body studies.

In addition, my research project connects language patterns to ideologies in relation to normativity and patriarchy. This research has multi-disciplinary applications as it opens up research to include not only looking at non-normative bodies in parallel, but also online comments and discourse in response to images of these body types. My research is also significant for social media and Instagram consumers as it investigates how the comments act as discourse that aims to control female bodies and silence the users who are outside of the normative spectrum. I will be examining the implications of my findings in relation to how the non-normative body is potentially controlled by discourse.

TERM USAGE

Throughout my dissertation I will be using terms that have a specific meaning or framework. Despite these being common words, due to the foundational scholarship and focus of my dissertation, it is crucial to illustrate how these words are used and understood. Many of these terms are grounded in medical theory or are intertwined with medical ideology. One such word is **emaciated**. Throughout the dissertation, I use the term emaciated to describe anorexic bodies, specifically Eugenia’s body. Emaciated is used instead of underweight due to the medical connotations associated with underweight. Underweight implies that there is an ideal or normal range which is decided by the BMI scale. Specifically, underweight is determined by a BMI of 18 or less and is medically
defined as weighing less than is normal. Therefore, underweight as a term implies medical associations, diagnoses, and stereotypes.

Emaciated, instead, is used as a neutral adjective to describe skeletal or anorexic bodies.

Similar to the term emaciated, the words **overweight** and **obese** carry with them ideologies concerning larger bodies. **Obese** and **overweight** brings with it connections to both social and medical ideologies and stereotypes, specifically health and individual worth and strength. Obesity “often incorporates a social model which shifts the focus of interrogation away from the fat body itself and more towards positioning and contingent systems and structures (Cooper, 2010, p. 1020). Throughout my dissertation, obesity is used when discussing the medicalized understanding of the word, specifically by invoking the health assumptions concerning obese bodies.

The word fat, however, does not carry with it the medical connotations that obese or overweight do. Fat has been reclaimed by activists and scholars as a replacement for obese. Fat Acceptance activists “reject the terms obese and overweight on the grounds that they pathologize what some view as a kind of body diversity and instead reclaim the word ‘fat’ in an attempt to transform the word into a ‘neutral or positive descriptor’” (Afful, 2015, p.455). Fat is simply an adjective that describes a body and is used as such throughout my dissertation. When using “fat” I am using the word as a descriptor without any social or medical associations.

The final term that is crucial to my research and dissertation is **normative**. A clear definition of normativity appears to be difficult to find; however, Joseph Rouse explains normativity is a practice that, “is maintained by interactions among its constitutive performances that express their mutual accountability. On this normative conception of
practices, a performance belongs to a practice if it is appropriate to hold it accountable as a correct or incorrect performance of that practice” (48). Normativity then acts as a performance which is tied in with ideological practices and this performance can be correct or incorrect (normative or nonnormative) based on the culture/society in which it is being performed and the performances it interacts with. Within this dissertation, normativity refers to what is deemed normal in terms of body size. Despite normative body size changing over time, there are still boundaries where normativity ends and non-normative begins.

CONCLUSION: ORGANIZATION OF CHAPTERS

The second chapter of this dissertation acts as an outline and explanation of the methodology of the project. This chapter explains my methods in collecting my data from Instagram as well as the analysis and coding process. I also give background on Instagram as a platform as well as the process and challenges of collecting comments. I also discuss FCDA, its role as an analytical framework for my dissertation, and how this framework has been used by other scholars.

The main body of the dissertation is organized according to the findings of from the data. During the analysis, I identified three main discourse themes with each theme containing sub-themes. The first theme identified discourses that established the boundaries of normativity, thus placing the three bodies from the Instagram accounts outside of these boundaries. The second theme centered on the notion of infection as the discourse illustrates that these non-normative bodies are contagious. Finally, the third theme was identified from the various forms of positivity within the comments and the complications that positivity creates. Chapters 3-5 focus on each of these three themes.
Chapter 3 discusses the boundaries of normativity, which are identified by the body sizes of Eugenia, Lizzo, and Tess. Because these non-normative bodies are visually present on social media, they are accused of promoting not only the body size but also the health issues that are assumed to accompany them. In this chapter, I argue that discourses around white non-normative bodies and their visibility center on issues of health while the visibility of black non-normative bodies focus on aesthetics and appearance. This key difference impacts the strategies used to suppress non-normative bodies, notably with black non-normative bodies being heavily criticized and dehumanized.

While chapter 3 discussed the boundaries of normativity and dehumanization of non-normative bodies, chapter 4 focuses on the unstated assumptions and assertions made in regard to non-normative bodies. In this chapter, I argue that the discourses surrounding non-normative fat bodies reinforce ideologies that bodies cannot be accepted or appreciated and must therefore remain hidden. This reinforcement uses two distinct strategies to keep fat bodies hidden. The first is the assertion that fat bodies are contagious and the second is that fat bodies are a choice and is therefore a personal failing. As such, chapter 4 focuses on discourses of the consequences of non-normative in public spaces.

Chapter 5 focuses on the more positive responses to non-normative bodies and unpacks the complexity of those responses. The positivity found in all nine data sets are mostly hedged through the use of “but” or “if,” which works to continue to reinforce the normative expectations of bodies. For Tess, it is that she would be beautiful if she lost weight or would be even more attractive. For Eugenia, it is a focus on weight gain or there are commentors who want to look like her, which is an example of toxic positivity. For Lizzo, there is overwhelming positive support with commentors referring to her confidence and
calling her queen. While both Lizzo and Eugenia have double sided comments (positive with negative spin), Lizzo’s comments are more clearly divided along a binary. Comments are either attacking her by calling her names or they are speaking to her confidence and her place as inspiration for fat women and young kids with body issues.

Finally, chapter 6 discusses the implications of the analyses in chapters 3 to 5. In this chapter, I discuss the implications for my research questions as well as more broad implications for both the field of rhetoric and critical discourse analysis. I also discuss the limitations of the current project, including the limited number of accounts and comments used as data. I end the chapter by outlining future projects both directly related to the current project and also in line with this area of scholarship.
CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

In order to examine the rhetorics and ideologies associated with non-normative bodies, I designed a study that used Lazar’s definition of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to analyze comments left on photos of non-normative bodies on Instagram. I chose three Instagram accounts that belonged to three self-identified women who display a non-normative body: Tess Holiday who is white and fat, Lizzo who is black and fat, and Eugenia who is white and emaciated. For each account, I selected three images and compiled all the comments left in response to the images as of the date of collection; those comments functioned as my data sets. Once the data sets were cleaned of spam and/or non-related comments, I was able to code them and use FCDA to analyze and identify the ways discourse constructed normative boundaries and reinforced gendered oppression and the suppression of non-normative bodies in visible spaces, such as the image-focused social media site like Instagram. Through my analysis and research, I investigated and answered the following research questions: How are non-normative cis-gender female bodies reacted to and discussed within Instagram comments? How do the comments construct normativity in relation to gender norms? How do the comments control normativity in relation to racialized gender norms?

Instagram Accounts

The data set of Instagram accounts is comprised of responses to images posted on three Instagram accounts: Eugenia Cooney, Lizzo, and Tess Holliday. These accounts have a high number of followers, as shown in the table below. Lizzo by far has the most followers
likely due to her success as a musician. What follows is a contextualization and overview of each individual, including both their personal history, public figure history, and social media presence.

Table 1 Number of Instagram Followers as of April 2021 for the study participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Number of Instagram Followers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eugenia Cooney</td>
<td>740.8K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizzo</td>
<td>10.1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tess Holliday</td>
<td>2.1 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Instagram Account One: Eugenia Cooney**

Eugenia Cooney is a popular Twitch streamer and Instagram personality based out of California. She is a 25-year-old white, self-identified cisgender female from a middle-class family. Her followers appear to come from Youtube and the Twitch community who watch her play video games and subscribe to her channel, with the largest number of followers being on Youtube. From her subscribers across Instagram, Twitch, and Youtube, she is able to generate income, as is the case for many other streamers and internet personalities. She started her Youtube channel in June 2011 and now has over 2 million subscribers. Through Youtube alone, Eugenia’s net worth varies between 98k and 589K. As such she lists Youtuber as her profession. In terms of content for her Youtube videos, Eugenia focuses on vlogs (video blogs), make-up tutorials, and fashion. From Youtube, Eugenia branched out on more social media accounts, amassing a large following on Twitch, Twitter, and Instagram.

However, Eugenia became a controversial topic of debate due to her diminishing body size. While it is unclear if Eugenia had an eating disorder prior to her online success, her early videos on Youtube show Eugenia at a heavier weight with her weight steadily
dropping throughout the years. Comments posted to her videos and pictures asked her about her eating habits, mental health, and mental illnesses. A number of the comments asked her if she had an eating disorder while others accused her of having anorexia.

These comments became increasingly common in mid-2015, and in October of 2016, a petition was started to force Youtube to remove her account because of her extreme thinness. Eugenia’s reply was that she did not have an eating disorder. The original petition was taken down by Change.org despite have over 18,000 signatures for community violations. Since the 2016 petition, roughly 20 more have been created on Change.org. The majority of these are seeking to either remove Eugenia’s accounts from Youtube, Instagram, and/or Twitch, or the petition is seeking to demonetize her accounts. This would mean Eugenia would not be able to profit from her various social media profiles. Despite the majority of the petitions being about removing Eugenia from various social media sites, there are a few that are seeking to protect Eugenia, claiming that it is bullying and harassment to try and shut down her career. Prior to the 2016 petition, Eugenia did not necessarily talk about her eating disorder regularly but would answer questions or mention it in her updates. However, after the petition, she avoided the topic of her body size and disordered eating when asked by interviewers and never mentioned anything in her posts or videos.

In February of 2019, Eugenia announced she was taking a break from all her social media accounts to work privately with her doctor. She did not mention what they would be working on in particular, but many asserted it was related to her alleged eating disorder. Then, in July of that year, after five months of social media silence, Eugenia announced her return in a video created and posted by fellow Youtube personality, Shane Dawson. In this video, Dawson interviewed Eugenia about her eating disorder and her treatment during her
five months away from social media. Dawson’s video had immediate results from the video itself trending at number one on Youtube to Eugenia gaining 250,000 followers. Another result was a video posted by fellow Youtubers who claimed to be Eugenia’s friends detailing how they had staged an intervention that resulted in Eugenia being held for a 72-hour psychiatric hold. She is now active on her social media accounts and has continued making videos and posting images that use pro-recovery captions. Yet, since January 2020 there has been an increase in the number of concerned comments as followers and fans fear that Eugenia is once again losing weight and is no longer in recovery.

**Instagram Account Two: Lizzo**

Melissa Viviane Jefferson, better known as Lizzo, is a popular and successful African American rapper, singer, and songwriter. She was born in 1988 in Detroit Michigan before moving to Houston. Lizzo released two albums before gaining widespread popularity with her third album *Cuz I love you*, which was released in 2019. Lizzo has since released two singles, been a voice actor, and taken on roles in live-action films. Lizzo has earned multiple awards for her music and was even named “Entertainer of the Year” by *Time* magazine in 2019.

Lizzo has used her popularity to push for body positivity as well as LGBTQ+ acceptance, such as her speech on feeling comfortable in your body at a concert in July 2019. As a celebrity, Lizzo has experienced various media outlets seeking to body shame her due to her size. One specific instance came from Jillian Michaels, a fitness guru who was one of the trainers on the reality show *The Biggest Loser*, who stated that Lizzo’s body should not be celebrated by society. During an interview in January 2020, Michaels stated, “Why are we
celebrating her body? Why does it matter? Why aren’t we celebrating her music? ‘Cause it isn’t gonna be awesome if she gets diabetes” (France, 2020). Despite immediate backlash from the public, Michaels double downed on her statement. Because Lizzo exhibits confidence despite being fat, she elicited a vast amount of both positive and negative discussion.

In March 2019, during an interview with Allure.com, Lizzo clarified that she was not advocating for any particular body acceptance/positivity movement: “The body-positive movement is the body-positive movement, and we high five. We're parallel. But my movement is my movement” (Lawrence). This same sentiment was not only echoed but expanded in a later interview in September 2020. In this interview, Lizzo explained that body positivity has been taken over by business, media, etc. in order to target consumers. The issue with this is that it limits who is included within this movement. Due to this issue, Lizzo explained she is advocating for body-normativity: “I would like to be body-normative. I want to normalize my body. And not just be like ‘ooh, look at this cool movement. Being fat is body positive.’ No, being fat is normal” (van Paris, Vogue). However, body normativity is not Lizzo’s only platform. She is also a staunch advocate for queerness, Blackness, and feminism—all of which play a crucial role in her body normative stance.

**Instagram Account Three: Tess Holliday**

Tess Holliday was born in Mississippi as Ryann Maegen Hoven in July 1985. In 2011, Tess moved to Los Angeles and worked as a makeup artist until she won Torrid’s House of Dreams Model Search. From there, she started to become a public figure with A&E asking her to be the face of their documentary series “Heavy” and getting signed to Milk
Model Management in 2015. After being signed, Tess was on the cover of multiple magazines, including People in 2015 and Cosmo UK in 2018. Milk Model Management asserts that Tess is the largest model that has been signed to a professional contract since plus-size models are around a size 16 and Tess is beyond that.

With this attention came both support and backlash to Tess being a public figure on magazine covers and walking in fashion shows. When her Cosmo UK cover came out, Piers Morgan posted the following to Instagram, “As Britain battles an ever-worsening obesity crisis, this is the new cover of Cosmo. Apparently, we’re supposed to view it as a ‘huge step forward for body positivity.’ What a load of old baloney. This cover is just as dangerous & misguided as celebrating size zero models” (Morgan, 2018). Morgan’s comments were met with both support and criticism that reflected the larger conversation about fat bodies and the alleged obesity crisis. Supporters of Morgan extended the argument that the Cosmo cover normalizes fat bodies, which is dangerous due to the perceived health issues and diseases associated with obesity. This anti-fat rhetoric has been used in relation to not only Tess but also other public figures who are considered obese.

However, Tess has also received overwhelming support from the general public who view her as an example of the movement “beauty at any size,” which is the same as the body positivity movement in terms of goals and views. The support she receives comes not only from her followers on social media, but also those who buy magazines with her on the cover and other merchandise. Despite any body shaming discourse aimed at Tess and other fat public figures, she continues to book modeling job and gets the cover, such as the cover of Inkd magazine in 2021. Additionally, her success at promoting and endorsing different
products and companies on her social media sites means that Tess is not just a model, but also a social media professional as well.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

*About the Platform*

I chose Instagram as a data site due to its multimodal nature in that it uses both images and text. Users post their images with or without captions and other users can comment in response to that image. This combination provides a rich area in which to gather and analyze direct comments and responses to the images posted. Instagram is a social media platform created by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger that currently boasts over a billion users as of October 2021 (Statista, 2021). The site was originally released on iOS in October of 2010 and then for Android two years later in April 2012. On this platform, users can post images and short videos that can be accompanied by captions and hashtags and can be edited using filters. While Instagram was originally its own company, it has since been bought by Facebook and has become one of the most popular social media sites.

Instagram as a social media site has its own set of conventions and expectations that set it apart from other social media sites, such as Twitter or Facebook. A participant of Instagram is expected to post images that give insight into their day to day lives. This can include just about anything, from pets to food to an outfit worn on a certain day. These images usually are accompanied by captions and/or
hashtags, which act as a categorization system. Other users can then interact with an account or specific image by clicking on the heart to like it or by commenting on the content of the image. In image 1, the various interaction features are displayed with the heart representing a like, the arrow representing sending this image/post to someone else with an account, and a text bubble representing posting a comment. From here, a user can interact with the comments posted to their image, resulting in a virtual conversation or exchange.

Users of Instagram vary in terms of the purpose or goals for their accounts. A popular term for users who profit off their accounts is influencer. While the term is still relatively new, an influencer is usually understood as a person who is able to encourage or influence people to buy a product or use a service and are paid by those companies they are promoting. A large portion of influencers including Eugenia Cooney have gained massive followings, which allows them to monetize their accounts and create a source of income. However, influencers differ from celebrity accounts, such as Lizzo’s and to a certain extent Tess’s in that they use it to interact with the public and/or endorse products. Companies use Instagram to advertise their products or company. And others simply use the platform to connect with friends and family, sharing visual snapshots of their lives.

Users of Instagram span across the globe, with Brazil claiming the highest number of users while the United States claims the second highest with 120.7 million. As shown in the graph below, roughly 56% of users identify as female while 44% identify as male. Unfortunately, as of 2021 Instagram only offers three options when choosing a gender: Female, Male, and Not Specified. However, collected data only include female and male demographic numbers. In addition, 30% of the global audience is 18-24 years old and 35% of
global users are 25-35 years old. Overall, on a daily basis, around 63% of Americans log into Instagram (Statista, 2021).

![Graph of Instagram Data from Statista](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 1 Graph of Instagram Data from Statista**

**Data Collection**

For the current project, I analyzed data collected from 9 different Instagram posts (3 posts for each of the 3 accounts). Data was collected from the social media site Instagram, which is a site that is constantly in flux with comments added and deleted on a regular basis. This makes continual data collection difficult. On average, around 100 million photos and
videos are uploaded daily and there are around 4.2 billion likes per day across the platform. Therefore, at any point that one goes back to post, there are potentially more likes and more comments, creating a continuous and fluid data set. Instead, I collected data for Eugenia, Lizzo, and Tess on specific days, which provides a snapshot of the ongoing conversation occurring around these images.

Three images total were picked from each of the three accounts. Each one was posted on a different day. As a method of choosing the images themselves, I went by row on their Instagram profiles at the time of data collection, specifically rows 11, 13, and 15 which were randomly selected. There were two data collection dates, with the first data collection occurring for the pilot study. The first collection was of only two images (one for Tess and one for Eugenia), and comments were collected on October 13th, 2019. The second batch of data collection, collected on March 22nd, 2020, included data additions for all three accounts: 2 more images each for Tess and Eugenia and 3 images from Lizzo’s Instagram account. Tables 2, 3, and 4 show the date that each image was posted along with the number of comments as of the collection date.

*Table 2: Number of comments, likes, and date posted for Tess Holliday (before cleaning).*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image 1: Black and white photo of Tess sitting naked on a hotel bed.</th>
<th>Sept. 11, 2018</th>
<th>115K</th>
<th>2,569</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Image 2: color image of Tess sitting front of a mirror in a gym</td>
<td>Aug. 27th, 2019</td>
<td>66.7K</td>
<td>3,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image 3: color front image of Tess in a white top and black underwear</td>
<td>July 9th, 2019</td>
<td>99.1K</td>
<td>1,700</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Instagram profile of Tess Holliday*
Table 3: Number of comments, likes, and date posted for Eugenia Cooney (before cleaning).

| Image 1: a selfie angled from above with Eugenia in black shirt and pants | Sept. 11, 2018 | 30.4K | 2,407 |
| Image 2: a mirror selfie of Eugenia in black dress with her room in the background | Nov. 30, 2018 | 34.1K | 2,716 |
| Image 3: a front image of Eugenia in a blue wig with pigtails, a sleeveless shirt with a tie, and a skirt. | Dec. 6, 2018 | 21.8K | 2,251 |

Source: Eugenia Cooney Instagram profile

Table 4: Number of comments, likes, and date posted for Lizzo (before cleaning).

| Image 1: Rolling Stone magazine cover with Lizzo naked on a silver cushion playing a flute. | Feb. 7th, 2020 | 1.2m | 22.4K |
| Image 2: A far away shot of Lizzo kneeling on the beach in a gold bikini. | Jan. 22nd, 2020 | 843K | 13.5K |
| Image 3: Lizzo posing on the beach in the water in an orange bikini. | Jan. 15th, 2020 | 1m | 8,626 |

Source: Lizzo Instagram profile

The comments on these photos as of the collection date were then copied and pasted into Word documents and lines were then numbered for analysis. Posts that were repeated comments by the same users or were advertisements for products, profiles, or services were deleted from the data set. The promotion comments were removed as they are considered
spam and did not pertain the actual image that was posted. What remained are comments that were a response to or a comment on the image posted. After collecting all the data and cleaning it, I counted and tallied the number of comments that I had. This included how many comments per data set (comments per image) as well as how many comments total for each profile. For Tess, there were 1,268, for Lizzo there were 1731, and for Eugenia there was 1107 comments.

As part of the collection process, I categorized the data according to three general themes: positive, negative, and other. The positive comments were ones that expressed direct support or encouragement towards the original poster, such as comments that state “You are beautiful!” or “Simply love you. Continue to be you love your family and enjoy life.” Negative, on the other hand, were comments that attacked the poster or were overarching rude, such as the comment that asks, “did you eat all the people in the gym.” Finally, the category of “other” was used for comments that were responses to other comments or were unclear in their meaning. For example, the comment “thicc” in response to the size of a body part can be both positive and negative depending on the context. When there is no context with these types of comments, for example, if the comment was just that word, it is unclear if the use of “thicc” was meant to be positive or negative. In these cases, I coded them as “other.” In the sections below, I discuss and describe the data sets for Tess, Lizzo, and Eugenia.
Data Set for Tess

The three images from Tess’s Instagram provide different contexts while still being focused on Tess. For example, images 1 and 2 are both selfies while image 3 is a professional shot from a magazine photo session. Image 1 shows a seemingly naked Tess sitting on the side of a bed. The photo is in black and white. Her hair is up in a high ponytail and her hand covers her breasts while the other hand holds the camera. There is nothing in the background to indicate the location. However, from the caption, viewers are informed that the picture is being taken in a hotel room.

For image 1, the caption discussed Tess’s trip to NY for fashion week with the hashtag “effyourbeautystandards.”

Image 2 is a selfie taken at a gym. In the photo, Tess is sitting on the floor in athletic clothing. In this image her body is facing the side, meaning the viewer sees the profile of her body. Her hair is in a high bun, and she does not seem to be wearing any makeup. In the background are multiple pieces of gym equipment, specifically equipment that looks like weight and cardio machines. This second image is followed by a caption that is longer than both image 1 and image 3 at 408 words that detailed her experience working out and her goal to illustrate that fat individuals do workout or are
healthy. As with most of her posts, Tess ends the caption with her somewhat signature hashtag, “#effyourbeautystandards.”

Image 3 is a professional front facing photo of Tess. In the image, she is wearing a cropped white top and black underwear. Her hair is down and curled with it sitting on one of her shoulders. Her hands are on her hips, and she is smiling directly at the camera. She does not seem to have makeup on, and her tattoos are visible. The background for this image differs from images 1 and 2 as it is a plain, solid color background. Image 3 is captioned with the following statement: “Who is she so glowyy. I’ve been modeling for ten years and each campaign I shoot means as much to me as the first.” Again, the caption ends with the hashtag, “#effyourbeautystandards

When looking at the data from Tess’s account, figure 2 illustrates that comments that would be classified as “other” were in the majority. From there, the positive comments outweighed the negative comments. In figure 2, the data is broken down by images as well as by category (positive, negative, and other). In data sets 1 and 3 (Tess, images 1 and 3), the positive only outnumbered the negative by only one or two. In data set 2, the positive comments heavily outweighed the negative. The comments that
were labeled as other included comments that were debates occurring between two or more users about the connections between health, weight, and self-acceptance. Since these comments were not aimed at Tess but were part of a side conversation, I categorized them as other. For example, in data set 1 (Tess, image 1) there is a lengthy debate between two main users who are discussing whether or not an individual can be obese and also love themselves. I categorize these comments as other as the stance about obesity is not clear. Instead, the comments are vague in regard to the stance of the individual. When looking at the data overall, as is done in figure 3, it is clear that comments categorized as “other” make up the majority of the comments at 69%. The positive comments are 18% of the total data while the negative comments are 14%.

**Data Sets for Lizzo**

Image 1 is a shot from Lizzo’s Rolling Stone cover. This image shows a naked Lizzo kneeling on a silver cushion with a flute. She is posed as if she is going to begin playing the instrument. She is wearing silver stilettos and is wearing a silver, fan-shaped headdress. In the background is an image of Grace Jones and a single wall light. Lizzo appears to be looking off into the distance and not at the camera. The caption for this first
image states “Roll Model.” This is meant to be a joke on the term “role” model. By referring to “roll” instead of “role,” Lizzo is referencing her fatness.

Image 2 is a candid distance shot. Lizzo is knelt down in the sand at a beach in a gold bikini. She is posed with her leg out in front of her while the other leg is bent beneath her. Her head turned upwards, and hair is positioned off to the side. In the background is a small rocky hill and the shoreline. The second image is captioned with a comment by her that is quoted in Rolling Stone magazine: “We eventually get used to everything so people are just gon’ have to get used to my ass.”

Image 3 is another beach photo with Lizzo standing in the water. This picture is taken from below, so it is showing a slight upward view of her. She is standing straight up in this image, with one of her legs out to the side with her hand resting on that thigh. She is in an orange bikini with sunglasses on and her hand is holding out strands of her hair. In the background is the ocean with a view of the sky with a few small clouds. This third image has the caption, “I love you. You are beautiful. You can do anything. (Repeat).” This caption functions as an affirmation not just for Lizzo, but for the followers who support her. After the comments were cleaned, there were a total of 1,731 comments between the three data sets. There were 804 comments for data set 1 (image 1); 455 for data set 2 (image 2); and 472 for data set 3.
Unlike the data sets for Tess, comments gathered from Lizzo’s profile were more evenly distributed throughout each data set. In figure 5, the comments categorized as “other” are more frequent in data sets 2 and 3. In data set 1, the negative comments outnumber the comments labeled as positive and other. However, in data sets 2 and 3 (images 2 and 3) the negative still outweighs the positive. The “other” comments were a combination of discussions of whether Lizzo deserved the award she was given and comments that reacted to comments calling Lizzo fat or other negative words. For example, one user responds to a comment that says “Eww” with questions about whether or not the original commentor feels better or if they think their comments stop her from selling albums or cashing checks. For the data taken from Lizzo’s images, the distribution of positive, negative, and other comments was close with the lower amount being the positive comments. However, the data gathered from Lizzo’s account does come with complications, especially during the analysis of the data. Lizzo’s celebrity status beyond a social media influencer or model adds extra considerations for the analysis. For example, for
some comments, it is difficult to discern how much is about race versus a different factor that is unique to Lizzo’s data, which tempers my claims about race.

Data Set for Eugenia

Image 1 is a selfie of Eugenia taken from above. Eugenia’s arm is extended upwards and away from her in order to take the picture from this particular angle. Her hair is parted off to the side, and she is wearing black eyeliner and red lipstick. Eugenia is wearing a black crop top, black skinny jeans, and converse. She is also wearing gloves on her hands. The background around her is nondescript, meaning that there is nothing to indicate where she is. In terms of captions, Eugenia’s captions tend to be more vague or general with no references to body size, weight, or body image at all, which is something that is found in Tess and Lizzo’s captions. For the first image, the caption is a series of emojis, specifically a heart, flower, and star.

Image 2 is another selfie of Eugenia which is taken in a mirror in what seems to be her room. She is wearing a black dress that has cut outs on the shoulders. She has one hand on her hip while the other holds the phone. Her hair is parted to the side and is pulled together with a
loose hair tie. She is also wearing black stockings or thigh high socks. In the background there is a pink computer chair and a poster of a castle on the wall. This image has a more substantial caption than image 1 with, “Hope you guys are all doing good!! It’s been raining so much in LA in the last 2 days and I actually love it haha the sound is so pretty.” This caption ends with two emojis—a heart and a star.

Image 3 is full front photo of Eugenia in a cosplay (character costume). In this image she is wearing a long teal wig with pigtails. She is wearing a sleeveless blue shirt with a tie and a black and blue skirt. She has gloves on her arms and her hands are on her hips. Her face is tilted down a bit and she is looking into the camera. In the background there is a full-length mirror, a bear shaped purse, and a life-size Jack Skellington figurine.

The third image is a content update for her Youtube channel: “Hi guys I posted a new video today! It’s a kawaii and cosplay haul with clothes from [tagged business]!! Go check it out! Link is in my bio.”

After the comments were cleaned, there were a total of 1,107 comments between the three data sets. There were 304 comments for data set 1, 393 for data set 2, and 410 for data set 3. As with the data for Tess’s images, the comments categorized as “other” were in the majority in each
data set. Once the “other” comments are accounted for, the next frequent is negative comments. In each data set, the positive comments are few, but still present enough to be worth analysis. For Eugenia, the “other” comments contained demands that commentors not attack or comment on Eugenia’s body. The rationale for this is that by commenting on her size or her health the commentors are actually doing more damage than help to Eugenia’s health and psyche. These comments were classified as other because they are not clearly positive or negative. Instead, these comments simply ask for Eugenia to be left alone. Another aspect to the comments categorized as “other” were considerations and questions about Eugenia’s parents and responsibility to her followers/fans. Over half of the comments were “other” while the second most frequent was negative comments. The negative comments ranged from comparing Eugenia to a Holocaust camp prisoner to comparing her to the popular animated figure, Jack Skellington from *Nightmare Before Christmas*. Others demanded that Eugenia eat or to simply die for the betterment of herself and those who follow her.

**Data Analysis**

**Coding**

The first stage of analyzing my data was to use in vivo coding by paying attention to any repeating words, phrases, or concepts. These words and phrases were taken directly from the data as I used words and phrases to create the codes. Specifically, my process was to take
each of the data sets individually and write coding memos for each of the 9 data sets. From each participant’s data set, I generated a list of repeated words and phrases as well as their frequency. I also made note of the words and phrases that appeared in some individual data sets but not in others. An example of this is the use of racial references in relation to Lizzo, which compare her to popular media characters in films such as *Norbit* and *Big Mamma’s House*. Both of these films’ main characters are fat black women, who are actually played by men, who fit into either the “mammy” stereotype or the excessively sexual and dominating black woman stereotype. These popular culture characters create ties to ideologies of size, race, and gender while it is only size and gender that is discussed in the comments surrounding Eugenia and Tess without any comparison to human popular culture characters.

Once the memos were written and frequency lists were generated, I proceeded to the second-stage coding and focused on pattern coding, which allows for the “development of major themes from the data; the search for rules, causes, and explanations in the data, examining social networks and pattern of human relationship” (Johnson, 2017). In this stage of coding, I looked for commonalities and differences in the discourses in the data sets, focusing on comparing the data of each participant to the data of the other participant (e.g. Tess’s data compared to Eugenia’s data compared to Lizzo’s). In other words, I used my first stage coding to direct the second stage, allowing me to build from the initial coding. Here is where my analytic tools of questioning and making comparisons were used. By asking questions such as “how is the non-normative body being responded to?”, I was able to probe and develop provisional hypotheses (Corbin, 2008) and by making comparisons between both comment to comment, but also Tess to Eugenia to Lizzo I was able to find incidents in the data that were conceptually similar or strikingly different. Making comparisons also
allowed me to “differentiate one category/theme from another and to identify properties and dimensions specific to that category or theme” (Corbin, 2008, pg.73). For example, a common theme in all three data sets was “health,” either being healthy or unhealthy. However, this theme contains both similarities and differences between all the data sets. With Eugenia, the theme of health is more about her individual physical deterioration and her need for help while with Tess it is more about the connections between fatness, in general, and health.

Word and Phrase Frequency

As noted, during the coding process, I analyzed each of the data sets individually, making notes of any words that were used repeatedly by commentors and compiled a master list, which is the same list from the first stage of coding. From here I moved from identifying individual words and phrases to gathering quantitative data in the form of frequency. I went back into the data to analyze for frequency using the “find” (CTL+F) function in Word. For each of the instances that were highlighted in each data set, I read the comment in order to contextualize the individual word within the sentence as a whole as part of the analysis of the codes and categories. I also recorded the frequency that each word appeared within the individual data sets. The frequency data was then used to have a bird’s eye view of the data. This allowed me to identify the major discrepancies between

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequent Words</th>
<th>Tess</th>
<th>Eugenia</th>
<th>Lizzo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(un)health</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eat</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>help</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beautiful</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weigh/weight</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obese/obesity</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fat</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Master list from the first round of coding and the frequency of each word for each account
accounts in regard to specific words, thereby demonstrating the context for the individual comments.

As shown in table 5 and figure 8, the most frequently used words included references to health or lack thereof, eating, and weight. The context for these words varies depending on the data set they originate from. For example, weight can be referring to either a lack or an excess of. This difference in usage impacts how it is used in response to Lizzo, Tess, or Eugenia. For example, “health” is used with all three accounts with slight differences. With all three accounts, “health” is used as justification for an attack in that the commentor accusing them of promoting unhealthy bodies and/or habits. However, with Eugenia there is a focus on her getting healthy and receiving treatment. For Tess and Lizzo, there is no concern for their health, only the health of those who view their bodies, which is discussed in chapters 3 and 4.

Analytical framework

The analytical framework through which my coded qualitative data was analyzed is critical discourse analysis (CDA) and feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), which has roots in both CDA and feminist theory. Teun van Dijk (2001) explains that CDA is “discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (466). CDA uses two elements to investigate discourse: “political concern
with the workings of ideology and power in society; and a specific interest in the way
language contributes to, perpetuates, and reveals these workings” (Breeze, 2011, 495). CDA
focuses on language and the way language should be viewed as a medium of power. It is
through this medium of power that individuals pursue their own interests and reveal their
competence (Bourdieu, 1991). Any linguistic interaction will have traces of social and power
structures that are connected to ideologies.

While CDA does investigate and analyze power structure and ideologies within
discourse, FCDA narrows the focus to issues of gender, feminism, power, and ideologies. In
2007, Michelle Lazar published an article that aimed to outline what a FCDA approach
would look like and involve: “The aim of feminist critical discourse studies, therefore, is to
show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-
for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced,
negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities” (142). This definition of
FCDA is mostly accepted throughout the discipline, with slight variations found depending
on the scholar.

Feminist Critical Discourse analysis allows for a focus on issues that pertain
specifically to not just women, but gender and inequality. Michelle Lazar articulates the
theory of feminist discourse analysis as investigating “the interconnections as well as
particularities of discourse strategies employed in various forms of social oppression that can
feed back into feminist strategies for social change” (5). The internet, namely social media,
allows for a rich ground to analyze as it is a space where users feel comfortable commenting
and even attacking one another, which allows for a further extension of social oppression.
This social oppression is revealed through the user’s power relations, or imagined power
relations, which manifests as “overt forms of gender asymmetries or sexism include[ing] blatant exclusionary gate-keeping social practices, physical violence against women, and misogynistic verbal harassment and denigration” (Lazar, 9, emphasis added). The internet and social media have provided a lush landscape for this verbal harassment to take place. Hiding behind a screen and a keyboard, users can post comments that function as little more than an attack towards the original poster.

Examples of using FCDA include investigating female success in STEM (Dekelaita-Mullet, 2021), the change in discourse in midwifery textbooks (Harkness and Cheyne, 2019), the gendered nature of blame in response to the sexual abuse of children (Azzopardi, 2021), and the reinforced gender stereotypes and expectations present in work-life balance images search results (Ruzungunde, 2021). Recently, FCDA has been used in numerous disciplines and contexts to investigate street harassment, sexual harassment and violence, and online social movements.

Of particular note to this study, FCDA is frequently used to study online discourse, whether that be memes, blog posts, comments, and official statements. One such example is a 2020 article from Kelli Boling that examines the meme-based discourse that occurred on Instagram during the feminist movement #ShePersisted. Boling collected memes that were posted using the hashtag of “she persisted” between February 8 and 9 of 2017. The aim of this analysis was to explore the digital communication of a networked community while also examining how future feminist movements can lead the conversation regarding feminist issues. Similar approaches were used by two other scholars who published their work in 2021. One of these papers examines online advice advertisements from charismatic movement by examining 40 posts on two different websites that were set up by prophets who
offer healing for needs related to marriage, family, and infertility (Vanyoro, 2021). The other study analyzes the blogposts of Ghanaian feminists for resistance strategies in response to systemic gendering of privilege and inequality (Narreyy, 2021). These studies intertwine with my own as they all focus on online discourse along with using FCDA to analyze that discourse. Similar to my own study, these projects investigate and identify issues about gendered oppression and discrimination.

Other approaches also focus on online data to examine violence and harassment against women either in relation to sex workers or sexual harassment in politics. Emma Dalton (2019) examines sexual harassment that has occurred in Japan, specifically in the context of the #MeToo movement. Dalton uses comments made by male public figures from both politics and bureaucracy to identify the ways sexual harassment is spoken about and framed by men in power. In a similar vein of inquiry, Rita Simoes and Maria Silveirinha (2019) investigate the ways in which street harassment was framed and counter-framed in the legal developments between August 2013 and September 2018. The data used for this analysis was twofold: news media texts that were posted on Facebook and the comments of users who read and reacted to said new media post. Sex workers and legal brothels in Australia are also a topic that FCDA is used to investigate and analyze. In a 2018 article, Natalie Jovanovski and Meagan Tyler use 148 online brothel review and 2000 replies to those reviews to look at how discourse was being used as violence towards women. The authors found that sex buyers actively created and normalized stories about sexual violence through discourses of unsafe sex practices, rape, and objectification. While this particular study focuses on brothels and sex work, it uses online discourse as the data source, which is similar to my own project.
Instagram as a social media platform provides an environment that yields not only harassment, but also text-based interactions that are both positive and negative. Investigating these comments allows for an illustration of how “gender ideology and gendered relations of power are (re)produced, negotiated, and contested in representations of social practices, in social relationships between people, and in people’s social and personal identities in texts and talk” (Lazar 11). As I intend to demonstrate, the comments left on Instagram images are an attempt to exert power over the female body, resulting in a policing of the body to create a body that conforms to what is considered normative by Western society.

Using FCDA as an analytic tool allows me to interrogate the ways that bodies are oppressed by discursive strategies, especially on social media where there is less concern of the consequence of what is said to others who are active online. For example, one comment stated the following: “FR [for real] girl. Got these girls out here thinkin it’s ok to put yourself into an early grave. Shame.” In this comment, the poster is attempting to silence Eugenia and control her social media posting through the use of guilt and shame. The poster is implying through the comment that by putting photos of herself and her body on Instagram, Eugenia is promoting this body type and that this body type should not be encouraged or promoted. Discourse analysis allows us to see how this comment is a strategy to control what Eugenia is posting and what bodies are visible on social media.

Theoretical Framework

Throughout my analysis, my theoretical framework includes the concept of normativity and the body positive movement. The concept of normativity in general implies that there is also non-normativity, meaning that it is outside of what is normative. This can
apply to most ideologies that make up Western society. For my research, I used the framework of normativity to look at how non-normative bodies are controlled and oppressed through discourse. Specifically, I am using normativity as a way to identify the strategies used to control non-normative bodies and to reinforce normativity, especially in relation to bodies. It is crucial to remember that normativity and female bodies are intersectional, meaning that normativity ties into gender roles, social worth, morality, aesthetics, and others. Therefore, using normativity as a framework to analyze non-normative bodies allows me to also investigate the ways normativity impacts other intertwined ideologies.

The body positive movement is also a crucial framework as it accounts for the social context as various groups and corporations take part in attempting to expand body normativity. The number of companies and groups that interact with the body positive movement tend to have slightly different definition as to what body positive means. For example, the Love Your Body (LYB) movement focuses on resisting not just body norms, but also beauty norms. On the other hand, the body neutrality movement, which is a branch of body positivity, aims for people to view their bodies as simply that—a body. While Tess actively works with the body positivity movement with her repeated use of her hashtag #EffYourBeautyStandards, Lizzo has criticized the movement as ignoring fat people as well as Black people. Instead, the movement focuses on white and normative bodies. Eugenia, while not considered or included as a body positivity figure, is still discussed in relation to the movement specifically in that bodies like hers are the counter argument to body positivity. Because of this tightly connected social context, the body positivity movement must be included as a framework as it provides insight into the larger conversation that is influencing the discourse in the Instagram comments.
Conclusion

Using FCDA and the methods discussed above, I investigated the discourses surrounding non-normative bodies, looking particularly at how these discourses reinforce dominant ideologies concerning female bodies. The discourses used in response to public non-normative bodies reveal the strategies and approaches used to oppress and suppress these bodies and reinforce gender norms. These strategies are outlined and explained in the upcoming chapters, which are divided up based on the connections or purposes of said strategy. In chapter 3, I discuss the boundaries of normativity and the rhetoric used in order to reinforce those norms, specifically issues of disease promotion and body aesthetics. In chapter 4, I investigate the unspoken arguments, which focus on the constructed dangers that are associated with non-normative bodies. The underlying rhetoric is that non-normative bodies are contagious in regard to both physical and mental health. Chapter 5 focuses on the seemingly positive comments. However, that positive content is problematic due to exactly what is being supported and the way it is being supported, specifically the use of hedging. Finally, in chapter 6, I discuss the implications of my findings for the field of rhetoric, critical discourse analysis, as well as societal ideologies. Also, I discuss the limitations and future directions of my research.
CHAPTER THREE

Outside the Boundaries:

Defining and Enforcing Normativity

Issues of visibility and permission are discussed throughout the discourse in all nine data sets with slight variations in phrases. The focus across the date sets is whether the non-normative bodies within this study should be in a public platform such as Instagram, particularly images of these bodies. As noted previously in this dissertation, the concept of normativity exists on a sliding scale where each end represents a boundary. Once a body moves beyond a boundary by being obese or underweight, that body becomes non-normative and takes its place on the scale. As a result, the bodies who find themselves in between these two ends are normative. For Tess and Eugenia, the discourse surrounds the assumed connection between her body size and her health. Commenters argue that by placing Tess’s body in a public space, she is promoting obesity and the health issues related to that categorization. For Eugenia, with her emaciated body, the conversation is also about not only Eugenia’s health and her alleged promotion of eating disorders, but also the health of her followers. Lizzo, however, is not accused of promoting obesity as regularly as Tess. Instead, the conversation around Lizzo showing her body on Instagram is centered on the perception that fat bodies are unattractive or gross. The health of black non-normative bodies is not a concern for the users commenting on Lizzo’s images. In this chapter, I argue that discourses around white non-normative bodies and their visibility center on issues of health while the visibility of black non-normative bodies focus on aesthetics and appearance, resulting in a higher frequency of dehumanization. The strategy of dehumanization as a strategy to enforce body normativity takes two distinct forms, with one being equating the fat body with large
animals and through references to popular culture figures. This key difference impacts the strategies used to suppress non-normative bodies, notably with black non-normative bodies being heavily criticized and dehumanized.

**Ends of the Spectrum: Asserting Boundaries of Normativity**

While the area of the scale that signifies normative has shifted throughout the decades depending on beauty standards and dominate ideologies, there have always been ends where the body becomes non-normative. The ends of the body normativity scale are then reinforced through the use of rhetoric that reflects ideologies concerning female bodies. When viewed and analyzed as a collective, the comments found on the images posted by the three individuals establish and assert social boundaries of normativity, or outline where normativity ends and begins. These boundaries are asserted and maintained by the public audience in response to photos of these bodies that fall outside the boundaries. In Excerpt 1 (Eugenia data set #1), which was posted in response to Eugenia, the commenter illustrates the boundaries by outlining two ends to a spectrum:

**EXCERPT 1**

1. If Eugenia is getting told all of this
2. it really shows the double standards in our society today.
3. You hate on someone with an eating disorder that is diagnosed anorexic
4. yet cheer on obese people telling them stuff like
5. "You go girl! Slay BICH!"
6. YASSS wear that sexy dress and show your curves!~"
7. Obesity is also promoting an unhealthy lifestyle.

8. Obesity and anorexia are the opposites of each other

9. but exactly the same.

10. Both are unhealthy.

11. Both cause death.

12. Both are not a good example to young people.

In lines 7 through 9, the commenter describes a spectrum that is marked by body size. The key assertion concerning this spectrum comes line 8: “Obesity and anorexia are the opposites of each other.” The use of the word “opposites” implies two ends, whether that be a binary or a spectrum. In this case, it is a spectrum that is implied since there is a middle ground that is unstated and yet present. Hartley (2001) argues, “When the mouth is silent, whether it is closed against food and filled with food, the body speaks its needs to the world. The fat body is not merely lazy or self-indulgent: it is inscribed by culture, and it is a reflection of oppression as surely as is the body of the rail-thin anorectic” (p.70). Just as the commentor asserts that the anorexic body and the fat body are opposite sides of the same coin, both bodies reflect cultural ideologies and the associated oppression that comes with it. It is also clear from this comment that these two ends, thin and fat, are equal to one another in the sense that they are “exactly the same” (line 9). For this poster and others who express similar arguments, the two ends of the spectrum mirror one another in that both are unhealthy and cause death as well as constructed and oppressed. The only difference then is the size of the body involved.
There is also a notion of the two ends of normativity that appears in Excerpt 1, which is echoed in comments left on Lizzo’s images. In Excerpt 1, the commenter explains, “it [the criticism Eugenia received] really shows the double standard in our society today.” The double standard the poster is referencing is that bigger bodies are celebrated while thin bodies are ignored. This concept of a double standard is argued for in both directions—bigger bodies are celebrated, or thin bodies are celebrated. Within many of the comments of both Lizzo’s and Tess’s profiles there are repeated references to thin and skinny bodies along with fashion models as a way to counter negativity, which seems to reinforce the double standard being articulated. In Excerpt 2 (Lizzo data set #1), there is an assertion that it is the thin bodies that are celebrated, not the bigger bodies.

EXCERPT 2:

1. Exactly what’s wrong with society,

2. one it’s not glorifying obesity

3. she is who she is,

4. what [?] only skinny people or

5. in shape people can post pix?

6. So many ppl saying go on a diet

7. or to the gym, maybe she does that.

8. Not like you lose weight in a few days.

In lines 4 and 5, the commenter asks, “what [?] only skinny people or in shape people can post pix [picture].” By including “in shape people,” the comment sets up a distinction
between not only fat and skinny people, but also in-shape people and fat people. The use of 
“or” between skinny people and in shape people implies a distinction between these two 
body types, putting both of them in their own category that excludes both each other and 
fatness as well while still remaining normative. These lines follow the opening that asserts 
that this double standard is “exactly what’s wrong with society.” This assertion of a double 
standard reflects the belief that images of fatness are met differently than similar photos of 
“skinny” people. However, my research into the comments left on Eugenia’s account suggest 
otherwise due to the negative responses to her images, which also suggests that “skinny” can 
be both normative and non-normative depending on the actual size of the body.

Additionally, in this excerpt, the use of the word “can” illustrate a sense of permission 
that must be unofficially given by the public that is receiving that image. Therefore, fat 
bodies do not have permission to post images that are deemed normative for thin or in-shape 
individuals. Here there is an implication of normativity that public photos of thin bodies are 
within that boundary and fat bodies are outside that boundary. In this, it is clear that the issue 
of performance is a key factor. When fat individuals perform what is normative for thin 
people, that highlights the transgression of normative body size. This transgression of the 
normative boundary has consequences, which are the various negative responses to the image 
posted. Nicole Taylor (2017) explains, “discipline occurs specifically at the site of the body 
as individuals [. . .] monitor the behavior and appearance of others, and constantly compare 
themselves and others against co-constructed norms” (p.129). Due to this focus on discipline, 
commentors feel justified in responding to non-normative bodies and the use of negative 
comments as a consequence. This then functions as an attempt to suppress the fat body in 
these public spaces and therefore control normativity.
Normativity is then expressed in terms of extremes in relation to language use in comments left on Tess’s images, which then ties back to comments left on Eugenia’s images. Indeed, in Excerpt 3 (Tess, data set #3), the distinctive ends of the normative boundaries are outlined clearly through the use of the word “extreme” in lines 1 and 10. In terms of the spectrum, the word extreme denotes when the body becomes non-normative and suggests that some difference is allowable within the normative center. When the differences push into the ends of the spectrum, it is labeled as extreme.

EXCERPT 3

1. Diversity is fine, but why be extreme?

2. This is downright morbid obesity.

3. Why glamorize it?

4. Do we glamorize other things on magazine covers

5. that will give us cancer and

6. shorten our lifespan like cigarettes?

7. Excessive drinking?

8. Maybe before we knew better, but now we do.

9. Just as we know the health risks of being this big.

10. I will say that going to the other extreme

11. at the skinny side isn’t healthy, either.

12. If we are going to show images to impressionable girls,
13. let’s show them the healthy ones.

Excerpt 3 opens with the use of extreme to imply there are boundaries to what is normative. The user declares that diversity “is fine” before adding limitations to that diversity. The “extreme” here is announced in line 2 with the user declaring that the extreme is morbid obesity, “this is downright morbid obesity.” Through this definition, the user links non/normativity to un/health and explains that Tess’s body is not within normative boundaries due to the health issues that are automatically assumed to be associated with fat bodies. Indeed, in line 9, the user writes about the tie between health and obesity: “Just as we know the health risks of being this big.” In this line, the author uses “we” which creates a collective in which everyone agrees that obesity is unhealthy. The use of “we” also increases the strength of the comment because it is not coming from a single person, but from a group.

In this comment, the user defines both ends of the normative spectrum while also tying these ends to health, which is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. In order to accomplish this connection between non-normativity and health risks, the commentor talks about not only fat bodies, but also thin bodies. In lines 10 and 11, the commentor explains, “I will say that going to the other extreme/ at the skinny side isn’t healthy, either.” Here the author outlines the boundaries of normativity—not too thin, but not morbidly obese with the reasoning being that both are unhealthy and extreme. These established boundaries play directly into dominant discourses and rhetorics of female bodies. Within Western society “women’s bodies are the prime targets of intensive normative control. To begin with, a woman’s role, status, and value in society are still determined very much by her body, by the idea that there is a natural gender difference, and by the consequent gender order” (Harjunen, 2017, p.12). Therefore, these established boundaries construct and illustrate the normative
middle of the body normative spectrum. By implementing and reinforcing the boundaries of the spectrum, female bodies are reminded and told what size and shape to be in order to be deemed normative.

“Cover Up”: Normativity and Aesthetics

Race also plays a crucial role in how bodies are represented, depicted, and reacted to by the public at large. Indeed, one cannot divorce race from body as they are intersecting points that impact how individuals experience the world around them. Race has impacted and dictated body standards and parameters of normativity. In *Fearing the Black Body*, Sabrina Strings demonstrates how ideologies and stereotypes associated with black bodies dictated not only how black bodies were viewed, but also white bodies. The ideologies that existed in the 1800s asserted the unsubstantiated claim that thin is synonymous with beautiful and civilized and the black body was viewed as gluttonous due to its perceived size. These unseen connections and associations exist in the 21st century despite claims that the United States is living in a post-racial world and accepts all bodies. In truth, black bodies are reacted to and discussed differently than white bodies, especially within social media and public platforms. In the last decade there have been a plethora of publications from black authors who discuss reactions to black bodies. A notable author in this group is Roxane Gay who writes specifically about the intersection of race, gender, and body size as a fat black queer woman. This is also true for the author of *This Body is Not an Apology* written by Sonya Renee Taylor and *Unapologetic: A Black, Queen, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements* by Charlene Carruthers. All of these authors draw attention to the ways in which
black bodies are viewed as different and the way this difference is highlighted in everyday interactions.

The data from this study demonstrates that when fat bodies appear within public spheres there is an attempt to suppress them by asking or demanding the person cover up, which also functions as a way to maintain normativity. If the non-normative body is covered up, then it provides a sense that these bodies are not to be supported and cannot post the same content as normative bodies. This demand seems to be deployed using two strategies with the first being through language of disgust and repulsion. The second strategy is through an appeal to modesty and the alleged position of the fat individual as a role model. While these strategies appear in comments on both Tess and Lizzo’s accounts, there is a much higher frequency of them on Lizzo’s account. Within the comments left on Lizzo’s images, the first strategy of expressing disgust and/or repulsion was more commonly and widely used.

Along with the multitude of “throw up” and “sick face” emojis that communicate a sense personal disgust, there are direct comments that demand Lizzo cover up her body because it is deemed repulsive to the user. The use of “cover up” or “put on clothes” is used 15 times throughout the three data sets, showing that is a somewhat common reaction to Lizzo’s body. In the following excerpts are two comments that imply disgust:

EXCERPT 4 (Lizzo, data set #1)

1. “Disgusting please cover up!!!!!!”

EXCERPT 5 (Lizzo, data set #3)

1. “No, just no. Cover that up.”

In both of these comments there is an attempt to suppress the fat body by demanding that Lizzo cover up. For the first comment, the reasoning is that the photo and therefore Lizzo’s
body is disgusting. Socially, fat is the opposite of beauty. Indeed, it is the “antithesis of the beauty ideal of the day: tight, lean, and toned. Viewed, then, as both unhealthy and unattractive, fat people are widely represented in popular culture and in interpersonal interactions as revolting—they are agents of abhorrence and disgust.” (LeBasco, 2004, p.1).

The comment is relying on the cultural belief that because Lizzo’s body is fat that she is automatically unattractive or “disgusting.” Due to this lack of ideal body and beauty, Lizzo should cover herself up as she does not have the right to participate in this type of normative performance. A similar goal is present in the second comment but there is a different strategy being used. In the second comment, there is an othering of Lizzo’s body through the use of “that.” By using the word “that,” the commentor is assuming that everyone else who comments will know exactly what is being referred to. Instead of using a word such as “body” or even “fat,” Lizzo’s body becomes a that, in other words, an object. By transgressing body norms, the individual loses their status in terms of humanity. Indeed, Tracy Royce (2009) explains that people, “see fat women as less than fully human and therefore undeserving of the treatment typically afforded to thinner strangers” (p.154). By asserting not only that Lizzo’s body is disgusting but also that it needs to be covered up, the poster is attempting to suppress the posting of photos of fat bodies.

Other comments are also actively working towards suppression but by using other strategies. One such strategy is directly referring to the weight of the individual and the need for them to lose it in order to be allowed to post images of their body. In both positive and negative comments, there is a repeated reference to losing weight with the reference appearing 46 times for Tess and 35 times for Lizzo. The main difference with this reference between Tess and Lizzo is that the comments telling Tess to lose weight focus more on
health. However, the request or suggestion for Lizzo to lose weight is only tied to her ability to post images in the negative comments, marking it as a suppression strategy. In Excerpt 6 (Lizzo, data set #3), the user asserts:

EXCERPT 6

1. You should probably lose some weight
2. If your [you are] gonna [going to] post stuff like this

In this Excerpt, it is only through losing weight that Lizzo is allowed to post images of her body. The user explains that Lizzo should lose weight “if [she is] gonna post stuff like this.” A key word in this comment is “if,” which implies an uncertainty about similar future posts from Lizzo. This uncertainty is crucial to the overall comment as it assumes that the efforts to suppress Lizzo will be successful. The user is informing Lizzo that if she is going to post revealing photos of her body (referred to as “stuff like this”), then she needs to get closer to an acceptable body size. Demanding a more “acceptable size” in order to post images is a direct tie to the fact that the “stigmatization of fat bodies encourages the use of self-disciplinary practices (e.g., extreme dieting and exercise) to achieve a socially desired version of selfhood” (Afful, 457). The content of Excerpt 6 illustrates that it is the size of the body that is the issue, especially in terms of aesthetics. Her body can only elicit negative reactions due to the way it looks, which is highlighted in line 2 as the commentor is putting conditions on what an Instagram image should look like and it isn’t Lizzo’s body. By commenting that her body is too large, the user is attempting to stop any future postings; in other words, they are attempting to suppress Lizzo’s body by putting conditions on the images posted. By taking this approach, fat bodies are further stigmatized and are kept in a position of non-normativity and invisibility, positions that reinforce one another.
However, there is a deviating focus in discourse surround white fat bodies. Along with Lizzo being told to lose weight if she is going to post images that include her body, commentors also resort to calling her disgusting as a reaction to her body. Throughout the three data sets, the word disgusting is used 24 times. In addition, the puke emoji and sick face emoji, which also conveys disgust, was used 370 times. In contrast, for Tess, there is not a focus on the loss of weight; instead, beauty is explicitly named as the reason for shaming Tess. For example, Excerpt 7 (Tess, data set #3) states:

**EXCERPT 7**

1. Ok boys, does this girl turn you on?

2. No? But I thought beauty is every size?

3. See what I mean this is not beautiful,

The user begins the comment with a rhetorical question posed to the heteronormative “boys” who are viewing both Tess’s images and the comments written in response. The use of “boys” instead of “men” creates a sense of camaraderie which is cemented by the user answering their own question and speaking for the “boys” as well. In lines 2 and 3 the user declares an answer to their question: “No? But I thought beauty is every size?/See what I mean this is not beautiful.” The use of the question marks in line 2 implies a sense of sarcasm as they comment on the movement that argues that fat bodies are beautiful, which this user disagrees with. It is in line 3 that the user finally declares the overall message of their comment: “this is not beautiful.” The reference to size in conjunction with the assertion concerning beauty illustrates that Tess’s size is not beautiful and makes her aesthetically and sexually unappealing. While both Tess and Lizzo are considered unappealing, the fact that
the focus is on beauty for Tess implies that it is her body that is not beautiful. However, for Lizzo, she is given specific parameters for losing weight and posting images, which is not present in the comments to Tess. This difference implies that non-normative white bodies have more freedom to post their images despite being unappealing while black non-normative bodies must meet specific requirements, adding an additional requirement for their acceptance in visible settings.

The physical appearance and attractiveness of non-normative bodies is also disputed with underweight bodies, as is demonstrated through the comments aimed at Eugenia. There is a vital thread that questions the tie between beauty and body size that can be traced through the data concerning Eugenia. Many users assert that Eugenia is “sick” and should therefore not post images, with the word sick appearing 32 times out of 1107 total comments. In addition, there are other users who argue that Eugenia is beautiful despite her body size. The descriptor of beautiful is common throughout the comments posted to Eugenia’s pictures, with declarations of “you are beautiful” expressed frequently at 70 total instances. However, the notion of attraction, in this case a synonym for beautiful, is not explicitly stated with the exception of Excerpt 7. Instead, Eugenia’s body is constructed as unattractive through a contrast with beautiful. For example, multiple comments state, “this is not beautiful.” This negation implies a lack of attraction despite not overtly stating it, which excludes the emaciated non-normative body from both beauty and body ideals. Excerpt 8 (Eugenia, data set #3) demonstrates the assertion that underweight bodies are not attractive:

EXCERPT 8:

1. I don't even understand why

2. you think that this is beautiful?!!!
3. This looks completely disturbing and disgusting!

4. I understand that most of the young girls

5. (even grown up women)

6. desire to be slim and attractive;

7. however, this is not the right way to stay in shape!

8. However, your state looks neither attractive nor healthy!

This data excerpt demonstrates that beauty is a fraught part of the ideologies surrounding non-normative bodies. The opening to this comment admits a vague confusion about the use of the word beautiful to describe Eugenia. The use of “you” in line two is what creates the sense of vagueness as the “you” could be aimed at both Eugenia herself and at the other users who have commented that Eugenia is beautiful at her current size. No matter who the opening line is aimed towards, there is still a sense of disbelief due to the use of a question mark. In line three the user clearly asserts their opinion about Eugenia’s body being “disturbing and disgusting.” Two [things] are expressed through these two adjectives. By using the adjective “disturbing,” the user is stating that there is a standard and normative body that is acceptable when viewed by the public. Because Eugenia’s body does not meet this standard, it is rendered disturbing and makes those who view it uncomfortable, which we see in line 3 with the use of “disgusting” and “disturbing.” However, Eugenia’s body is not only disturbing but is also “disgusting,” which adds an aesthetic layer to the first two lines.

The standards of beauty are passively recognized and glossed over in lines 5 through 6. The user explains, “I understand that young girls/ (even grown up women)/ desire to be slim and attractive.” The user is acknowledging the pressure girls and women feel to meet
social standards which state that to be attractive they need to be “slim.” However, these social pressures to be thin and therefore beautiful can only be met in approved ways. Eugenia’s alleged method is not the “right way” (line 7). The reason Eugenia’s way isn’t the correct or approved method is due to the size of her body that is assumed to be a direct result of her methods. She has gone too far from what is considered normative, which makes her “neither attractive nor healthy” (line 8). The fact that the descriptor of “attractive” is put before “healthy” and that the majority of the post focuses on aesthetics illustrates that beauty and body size are more crucial than health. In other words, the aesthetic is deemed more important when Eugenia critiqued for posting public photos of her that include her body.

Whales and Pigs: Strategies of Dehumanization

In the discourses surrounding Lizzo’s body and the visibility of it through social media, there is a distinct difference in the messages and arguments being made by the comments posted. This difference in discourse demonstrates that there are different suppression techniques used to reinforce normativity. In all three data sets for Lizzo, there are repeated comments that use the words gross and/or disgusting in addition to the number of puke and disgust emojis used. Another distinct difference is the repeated references to animals, which does not appear as frequently in the comments surrounding...
Eugenia and Tess. For example, Lizzo is referred to as a whale, a pig, a black pig, an ape, and a hippo throughout the data sets. As evidenced by the use of “black pig” and “ape” race is a factor in how Lizzo’s body is seen and discussed, which is discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

While Tess is referred to as a “whale” and “hippo,” the frequency with which these references are used are miniscule when compared with Lizzo’s data. When the data between Tess and Lizzo is normalized for frequency, the results are 17 instances for every 500 comments for Lizzo and 3 instances for every 500 comments for Tess. This demonstrates that even when normalized, there are more instances in Lizzo’s data. Figure 9 outlines the frequency in which animals were used as either a comparison or as a stand in for Tess and Lizzo. Eugenia is not included in Figure 9 because there were no instances of these words in the comments gathered from her Instagram images. The majority of non-human references were in the form of emojis, specifically the emojis butterfly, unicorn, and skull. The frequency of these emojis can be found in Figure 10.

As Figure 9 demonstrates, comments aimed at Lizzo contained a greater number of animal references, most notably the term “whale.” This specific comparison is usually used in the context that states Lizzo is a beached whale, which coincides with one of her images being of her at the beach. Of the total number of comments on this image, only two directly referenced the beach. While the beach (whether or not comments mentioned it) may have influenced the reference to a whale, the fact remains that commentors turned to dehumanization as a tactic of suppression. When equating Lizzo and to a lesser extent Tess to a whale or any other animals, the users dehumanize both individuals. Other animals are used to describe the two individuals, but nowhere near to the same extent that whale is used.
While words like *whale* and *pig* were not used in relation to Eugenia, there were other examples of dehumanization that are directly tied to eating disorders and the pro-ana community. Butterflies and unicorns are key figures in the pro-ana community and create a common discourse between members. Butterflies for example are meant to denote fragility and small size.

Specifically, individuals “identifying themselves with Pro ana, called themselves "small butterflies" or "porcelain butterflies". A red bracelet resembling a thin string, worn on the right wrist has become their badge” (Hoffman, 2018, p.109). The unicorn, on the other hand, is normally a reference to “unicorn syndrome,” which claims that for those in recovery there are special rules that apply only to that person. One interpretation of the presence of these emojis act as a dehumanizing element within the comments, with Eugenia being equated to a butterfly and unicorn. Another interpretation is that these emojis function as symbols that stand in for people. In either instance, the emojis imply that Eugenia’s place within the pro-ana community is a source of thinspiration.

When analyzing specific comments, the use of the term whale moves beyond an association to the animal and instead becomes a projected identity for Lizzo, resulting in dehumanization. As is clear in Figure 1, whale is a common association for Lizzo. In Excerpt 9 (Lizzo, data set #1), the user commented:

EXCERPT 9
1. Stop being mean to her!

2. Don’t y’all know that whales are going extinct?!?!? (emphasis added).

By referring directly to Lizzo, the use of “whale” takes on another meaning. The commentor begins the statement with “to her,” which makes the following use of an animal an act of discourse-based dehumanization. Lizzo is not simply being called a whale. For this user, Lizzo is a whale, not a person. Dehumanization has specific results with the most important being that the dehumanized individual no longer deserves the same level of compassion or similar responses. In regard to dehumanization, when an individual “falls outside this universe, offenses against them are no longer violations of the normative order” (Owusu-Bempah, n.d., p. 27). In other words, for non-normative bodies or dehumanized non-normative bodies, a negative response is the normative reaction within many different social contexts. Reacting or responding to the non-normative bodies with attacks, dehumanization, or insults is the normative response that is both expected and accepted. There is a clear example of this in Excerpt 8 as well as the data set as a whole. By dehumanizing Lizzo through calling her a whale, the comment creates a space where this type of discursive attack is not only appropriate but expected by both viewers and commentors. This creates a virtual space where oppression and suppression through discourse is common and constant.

We see the strategy of dehumanization in comments to Tess as well, just in a different manner. In this comment and others like it, the user does not specifically state what animal Tess is. They just assert that she is one. Excerpt 10 (Tess, data set #1) states:

EXCERPT 10

1. jesus christ shes [she is] fucking huge
2. I didn't know zoo animals

3. could take selfies

The reference to “zoo animals” in line 2 is another example of dehumanization of fat bodies. In line 1, the commentor specifically states Tess is “fucking huge,” making her body size the focus on the comment. Once the non-normative size of her body is brought forward, the commentor dehumanizes her through a vague reference to an animal. With Lizzo, the commentor referred specifically to a whale. However, with Tess, the commentor just references a zoo animal. The significance of this stems from the vagueness allowed for Tess since “zoo animal” can be any animal of a somewhat larger size. With Lizzo, we are given a direct and specific reference to a massive animal. In other words, for Lizzo there is no ambiguity and room for interpretation as there is for Tess, which implies that while there is space for Tess to be seen as human, Lizzo cannot be. From this, the reader understands that Tess and her body are the same as a large animal, meaning that she does not count as a human due to her size.

Despite commentors dehumanizing both Tess and Lizzo, race also plays an important role in the comments posted in response to Lizzo’s images. While animals are referenced for both Tess and Lizzo, there is no mention of race in the comments to Tess. There are no statements or allusions to a “white” animal. It is only with Lizzo that race and skin color becomes important and part of the dehumanization. For example, in Excerpt 11 (Lizzo, data set #1), the commenter states,

EXCEPRT 11

1. I thought id [I would] never
2. find a black pig [pig emoji]

3. well hello” (emphasis added).

On one level, this comment is performing similar work as previous excerpts that dehumanize Lizzo. The user calls Lizzo a pig by stating they never thought to see one but now they have through “well hello.” The use of “hello” designates an introduction between two individuals. The commentor then is stating that they have now met a “black pig.” However, this dehumanization is furthered by including race. The commenter does not simply call Lizzo a pig; instead, the commenter calls her a “black pig.” This specifically points to her skin color and ties her fatness to her black body.

We see this reference to race again in two other comments. While there may be only two comments that reference race, this is notable due to lack of any reference to race in data from Tess and Eugenia. The complete lack of race in the comments posted to Tess and Eugenia serves to highlight the importance of race being mentioned or referenced in the comments posted to Lizzo. In the first of these excerpts, the user refers to Lizzo as a “fat ape.” The use of this comparison is based in a deep history of the dehumanization of black individuals, specifically through the comparison of black people and apes. It was originally used as a scientific rational to explain why black people were inferior. However, this comparison is still used, notably in reference to the Obamas during their time in office.

Studies have provided evidence “of a bidirectional association between Blacks and apes that can operate beneath conscious awareness yet significantly influence perception” (Goff, 304). This specific comment simply states, “fat ape,” which demonstrates not only an association between apes and black individuals, but also an expected social understanding of the comments underlying connotation.
It is not only through the use of animals that there is a direct reference to race in comments about Lizzo. Indeed, geographical location is also used, which then relies on a collective understanding among the other commentors and viewers. In excerpt 12 (Lizzo, data set #1), the commenter posts,

EXERPT 12

1. What in the Nigeria is this.

2. Is that a foreign species

3. I guess she thinks she is healthy too lol.

The reference to Nigeria is a specific reference to race and potentially as close to a slur as the poster could achieve given the rules on Instagram. The usual phrasing is “what in the world.” However, the commentor made the distinct decision to use Nigeria. The comment then takes this racial discourse a step further by referring to Lizzo as a “foreign species.” By referencing Nigeria in the first line and then and connecting it with “foreign species” in the second line, the user dehumanizes Lizzo on two fronts—race and body size. The comment also uses the word “that” in reference to Lizzo instead of a pronoun, such as she. In line 3, the commentor uses the pronoun “she” to refer to Lizzo. However, when the phrase “foreign species” is used, Lizzo is dehumanized. The dehumanization of Tess does not have the racial element either in terms of the animal referred to or an adjective concerning skin color. Lizzo, however, does, which illustrates that race is inextricably tied to discourses about fat bodies. The dehumanization for Lizzo renders her more available for abuse and critique, even more so than Tess.
The use of non-human identifiers is also found in comments concerning Eugenia who is commonly addressed or referred to with dehumanization discourse. Throughout the data, the most frequent word used to dehumanize Eugenia is skeleton, which is used 19 times across all data sets. Indeed, the extent of the dehumanization is illustrated in Excerpt 13 (Eugenia, data set #3):

EXCEPRT 13

1. why the fuck you arguing
2. about a skeleton
3. it doesn't have feelings,
4. or a brain for that matter.
5. Oooohhh maybe that's what happened
6. her last two brain cells did a high five
7. and she could get your attention
8. by killing numbers of small children.

In lines 1 through 4 the commentor uses specific rhetoric to dehumanize Eugenia and argue that she is not worth conversation or argumentation. The dehumanization begins in line 2 with the user equating Eugenia with skeleton and then continues the dehumanization in lines 3 and 4. The author uses the word “it” to refer to Eugenia, denying her a pronoun or any language that would humanize her. The author also denies Eugenia feelings, another aspect that would render her human. After the dehumanization, the author then speculates about what Eugenia’s motives and goals are. No matter what Eugenia is trying to accomplish by
putting her image on Instagram, the viewers see her as less than human and the language used illustrates this dehumanization.

Eugenia presents another contrast to the dehumanization aimed at Lizzo’s body. Indeed, both Lizzo and Eugenia experience dehumanization in that they are compared or equated with various popular culture characters, rendering them caricatures of stereotypes. Eugenia is equated with Jack Skellington while Lizzo is equated with characters such as Raputia from *Norbit* and Big Momma from *Big Momma’s House*. While the data for both individuals showcase this particular form of dehumanization, there is a clear racial element in regard to Lizzo as it is fat black characters that she is associated with and not simply any fat characters. The focus on race and fat bodies is displayed through the use of popular culture characters. Here are two Excerpts (Excerpts A and B below) that refer to popular black fat characters:

Excerpt A: You be looking like raspusha from norbit when she goes to the water park.

Excerpt B: @lizzobeeating out here looking like big momma.

These two comments refer to specific popular culture characters, both of which are fat black women who are depicted as oversexualized and gluttonous in their respective films. Moreover the fact that these characters are played by men is both a method of mocking the characters in the films and mocking Lizzo. *Norbit* is a 2007 movie in which one of the main characters, Rasputia, is a heavily overweight and sexually aggressive black woman. As Gina Chen argues, this is a newer representation of the mammy figure. While previously, the mammy figure has been maternal, they have also been desexualized. However, with these more recent popular culture representations, the mammy is depicted as “desexualized or
sexual predators who are domineering, full of attitude, and weighed down with massive breasts and buttocks” (Chen, et al. 118). The use of the film *Norbit* is meant to equate Lizzo’s body with that of Rasputia. Aubrey Gordon (2020) explains in her book *What We Don’t Talk About When We Talk About Fat*, Rasputia’s body “depicted as a monstrosity, played for both fear and disgust. The film is one long fat joke, all hinging on the idea that this fat women is categorically undesirable, that she only found a partner through a comedic kind of abuse, and that being desired by a fat black woman is something to fear” (p.131). This equation between Lizzo and Rasputia becomes clear with the specific scene referred to in the comment. The “water park” scene was a popular feature of the film to the point it was included in the preview and commercials. In this scene, Rasputia’s fatness is highlighted as she wears a bikini and has to hold up her stomach fold in order to prove she is wearing bikini bottoms. The image posted of Lizzo is one of her in a bathing suit, which could explain the reference to the water park scene. But, by simply referring to Lizzo as this specific character at this specific moment of the film the commentor is using discursive comparison to ridicule Lizzo. Indeed, this comment is ridiculing both the size and color of Lizzo’s body since it is specifically a black character who is used in this comparison. Finally, these comparisons also work to question Lizzo’s femininity as the characters are not fully feminine due to the “joke” of them being men dressed up as women.

Eugenia is equated with only one popular culture character and that character is a direct comparison to her body size and weight. As noted previously, the use of the word skeleton is used repeatedly and the same is true for references to bones. Due to this frequent association, Eugenia is equated with a character who is also thin and is a literal skeleton. The character is Jack Skellington from *Nightmare Before Christmas*, who is a tall skeleton with
long thin legs and arms. References to Jack Skellington are common in the data, which is most likely due to the presence of a Jack Skellington figurine in the background of one of her images. While this could arguably account for the references to the skeleton character, there are also multiple other figurines and studded characters in the same backgrounds. However, despite the immense collection of characters the commentors focus in on Jack Skellington. As is clear in Excerpt 14 (Eugenia, data set #2), the comparison is direct:

EXCERPT 14

1. she looks like the chick version of [J]ack [S]kellington

As with Lizzo, there is a focus on comparing Eugenia’s body to a popular character who would be recognizable to the other users. This comparison creates a dehumanization as the focus is not only on a fictional character, but also a skeleton. Yet, this comparison and dehumanization is complicated by the pro-anorexia culture as a whole. Within the pro-ana community, being skeletal or being able to see bones is an accomplishment; indeed, it is an actual goal to be achieved. However, this does not negate using these terms and Jack Skellington to dehumanize her. Instead, the dehumanization comes from how these terms and characters are understood by those outside of the community. While pro-anas might view these comments as positive or as confirmation they are making progress, those who are using this approach are dehumanizing her by reducing Eugenia down to her body size and removing any reference to her as an individual. As a result, the commentor is using Jack Skellington as a dehumanization tactic that then works to maintain normative boundaries and attempts to suppress any further images from being posted. Just as Lizzo is compared to
popular characters who are both black and fat, Eugenia is compared to a skeleton due to her skeletal frame.

**CONCLUSION**

Within the data from Lizzo, Tess, and Eugenia’s accounts, the comments outline illustrate where the boundaries of normativity are. Normative bodies are those in between fat bodies (Tess and Lizzo) and skeletal bodies (Eugenia). Once a body moves beyond these boundaries, they become non-normative and subject to oppression and suppression through discourse and other methods. Indeed, this discourse is employed not only on social media, but also in fields that have social and medical impact on non-normative bodies and individuals.

Not only are the boundaries of normativity established, but the ties between size and beauty are as well. Comments concerning fat and thin bodies highlight the importance placed on the visual, which is then compacted by the visual nature of Instagram as a platform. The is no expressed desire to have a fat body, only to have bodily self-acceptance. However, non-normative thin bodies elicit the opposite in that the thin body is the goal and not the psychology that drives that body. This is directly connected to the issues of dehumanization as it is the fat body that has its humanity removed through the use of animal comparisons, reinforcing that the body is not ideal or to be desired.

A key method of suppression that appears in all nine data sets is dehumanization, either through the use of animals or popular characters. It is clear in the data that race is an important aspect to the dehumanization, whether it be through the use of specific animals (ape) or through characters (Big Momma and Rasputia). While the use of animals is found in
comments aimed at Tess, there was not a racial element. This racial discrepancy illustrates one difference in reactions to white and black non-normative bodies. While visible white non-normative bodies are attacked in an effort to remove them from digital public spaces, the predominate strategy is health concerns. For black non-normative bodies, the strategy is predominantly dehumanization, resulting in these bodies and individuals becoming simply a focus for unrestrained criticism and attack with no concern for the person themselves.

In the next chapter, I focus on the unspoken and underlying ideology that works to reinforce the suppression and oppression of non-normative female bodies. While the overt comments seen in this chapter focus primarily on determining and defending normative boundaries, chapter 4 identifies the assumptions and accusation being made to support the need for suppression. These underlying ideologies create and use rhetoric that declares the non-normative body as contagious, meaning it is able to infect others if not contained. Indeed, it is the alleged tie between mental and physical health that directly ties back to the issue of contagious non-normative bodies.
CHAPTER FOUR:

Deserving of Mental Health:

Discourses of Infection and the Presence of Mental and Physical Health

While the discourse and rhetoric that is overtly and clearly stated in the data is crucial to understanding discourses surrounding non-normative bodies, it is equally important to investigate and analyze the unspoken assumptions and assertions that allow for the rhetoric described in chapter 3. The unspoken content identifies and highlights ideologies about non-normative bodies. In chapter three, I discussed the boundaries of normativity that were defined in the Instagram comments. I also argue in chapter three that the visual presence of non-normative bodies is seen as promoting not only these bodies, but also the alleged health issues that accompany these bodies. As such, in this chapter I investigate beliefs about non-normative bodies and health further. I argue that the unspoken and underlying ideology is that non-normative bodies are contagious and can infect those who are exposed to them, which renders these bodies dangerous. By simply being visible in this virtual space, their body will infect others. In regard to fat bodies, it is their mindset or confidence that is desired, not their body size. The fact that thin bodies are the desired body despite any health risks demonstrates that dominant body ideology is still focused on the ideal thin 1. Moreover, I argue that the issue of contagious bodies and infection centers around the issues of physical and mental health, both of which are prominent in the Instagram data. A thin body, even one as thin and emaciated as Eugenia’s, is still desired over being fat.

While both mental health and physical health are present, there are key differences in the way they are discussed. For example, the rhetoric around white fat bodies creates a reality in which mental health is only possible through physical health and, relatedly, bodies that fall
within the normative center. Therefore, people who are fat and white cannot be mentally healthy because they are automatically assumed to be physically unhealthy. Similarly, physical health is crucial for the white emaciated body albeit for different reasons. Instead of physical health being needed for mental health or simply overall health, physical health is directly tied to beauty. Because people who are white and emaciated are not healthy they cannot be beautiful and vice versa. To be physically healthy is to be beautiful and yet this is complicated by how normatively thin bodies are viewed as ideal within Western society. Finally, it is with fat black bodies that the greatest difference occurs between the three individuals because black bodies are not allowed a connection between mental and physical health. Instead, mental and physical health are two separate categories that have nothing to do with one another and fat, black people are not fully allowed to have either.

**Infection and the Epidemic of Fat: Non-Normative Bodies as Contagious**

Non-normative bodies are usually labeled an epidemic with special attention being paid to what is called the obesity epidemic. Using the word epidemic to refer to body size implies that there is a contagious aspect to it, meaning that it is able to spread among populations. The idea of non-normativity and obesity being contagious has been researched by medical professionals as well as medical sociologists. The argument throughout the studies is that obesity is indeed contagious through social norms (WHO, 2000; Hammond, 2010) and conformist natures (He Huang et al, 2016; Mathieu-Bolch, 2020). The notion of contagious non-normativity is crucial to the rhetoric for non-normative bodies, as I will demonstrate in this first section of the chapter.
Within the data, there is a distinction between promoting a body and a body being contagious. The key distinction is the active and passive natures. When an individual is promoting their body, the individual is actively promoting their body or weight. Contagion, on the other hand, is passive in that the body is contagious without intention and anything needing to be done or said by any individual. The data in this study suggest a belief that non-normative bodies must be hidden due to their contagious nature. By simply viewing the body, the viewer can catch not only the body size/weight but also the associated health issues. In this first section, I focus on how the discourses of contagion are taken up in the data and illustrate how Tess, Eugenia, and Lizzo are positioned in relation to the threat they pose.

The contagious nature of the non-normative is complicated by not only body type (emaciated versus fat), but also by race. For emaciated bodies, like Eugenia’s, the contagious element is only the body and the body size. There is no evidence in the data to show a discussion of mental illness or health problems—the actual size is the concern despite being connected to a dangerous mental illness. Comments posted to Eugenia’s images illustrate the belief that her body has far reaching impacts on different levels for her viewers. Not only is she inspirational to those who either have an eating disorder or are pro-eating disorder, but her body has an inherent effect on others outside of that scope. The question posed by commentors in response to Eugenia’s body is not whether her body is contagious. It has already been collectively understood as such. Instead, the question is whether her body will be contagious in a negative or positive way—will it infect others with an emaciated body or with a “healthy” one? For example, in Excerpt 1 (Eugenia, data set #1) the commentor writes:

EXCERPT 1
1. I'm surprised that you are still alive
2. after all these years of suffering from anorexia.
3. It's also sad that people are commenting stuff
4. like "you are beautiful" "I wish I was you" "skinny queen" "body goals"
5. like wtf no offense because yes you are beautiful a sweet girl
6. however this is not body goals and
7. no one should wants this body including you Eugenia.
8. Please get help for not only you
9. but your fans, friends, and family
10. that all care for you because we want you to live a long life

The excerpt as a whole acts as a plea to Eugenia as the commentor is speaking directing to her, as demonstrated by the repeated use of “you.” The first two lines assert that Eugenia has anorexia and that her current body size is a result of that illness. The focus of the comment then switches from Eugenia to her followers. At this point, Eugenia is a no longer the focal point, but is instead the background reasons of her thinness and eating disorder are the causes for concern. The switch in Eugenia’s body’s positioning marks it as a patient zero as others are allegedly directly infected by viewing Eugenia’s body.

The context for the implication of the contagious body appears in lines 3 through 7 while the actual implication comes in lines 8 through 10. In line 7, the user asserts “no one should want this body including you.” A key word in this line is the use of “want,” which highlights two distinct pieces to the overall discourse. The first is that those who are commenting positively on Eugenia’s account desire this type of body. The second is that Eugenia also desired this body, implying her eating disorder and resulting body were actively
pursued. In this selection, the user also refers to other comments on Eugenia’s images and profile that express a desire to look like Eugenia, specifically her body. In this context, Eugenia’s body is communicating with the viewers, either by infecting them, furthering their pre-existing infection, or by eliciting a concerned and/or negative response. There is an assumption that the potential victims either are at risk or infected and would be discouraged from seeking treatment. Eugenia’s body, then, is both “expressive and pro-active. This enabled and enabling body is always in process; actively reconstructing itself, impacting on environment, self and other” (Ward, 2007, p.7). The commentor uses quotes from other users who do express a desire to look like Eugenia, which are a combination of both thinspiration phrases and general expressions of want. These quoted phrases demonstrate that Eugenia’s body does indeed have an impact, specifically the comment that clearly states, “I wish I was you” and the other that simply reads “Body goals.”

However, the implication that Eugenia’s body is contagious appears most clearly in the last three lines. Prior to this, the user asserts that it is sad there are people who envy or idolize Eugenia because no one should want to look like her, which provides a context for the accusation of contagion that comes in lines 8 through 10. The last three lines function as both a reference to the contagious nature of Eugenia’s body and as an appeal to Eugenia to seek help, although it is not specified what form of help she should seek. Instead, the commenter focuses on why Eugenia should seek help. For this commentor, Eugenia should get help for her “fans, friends, and family.” The order in which these groups are listed is significant as it demonstrates the commentor’s thoughts as they wrote with the most important coming first. Her fans, then, are the primary reason for her to seek help due to the effect and possible contamination she could pose. However, this is not the only interpretation for this excerpt as
another interpretation could be that they are sad or worried about Eugenia and therefore should seek help.

The accusation that Eugenia’s body is contagious is expressed more overtly in Excerpt 2 where the user comments specifically on the effect her body has whether Eugenia intends it to or not. In Excerpt 2 (Eugenia, data set #2), the user explains,

EXCERPT 2

1. Please you are amazing
2. But this doesn’t benefit you or anyone else u
3. Because of your health and disorders
4. Are really not okay to deal with and
5. Because there is other people who will see you
6. And see a healthy picture perfect body
7. And that isn’t okay
8. That could KILL people or literally
9. Lead someone to deaths door
10. If you just seek help for your weight
11. You could be sooo much healthier
12. And you could just make a better world
13. For yourself and others all around

The author of this comment directly links Eugenia’s body with the spreading of anorexia and its negative health effects. The first four lines clearly set up the soft accusation that is coming in lines 5 to 9. The user ties together Eugenia and her followers by explaining that “this,” meaning anorexia, doesn’t benefit anyone. The use of “benefit” implies that there is
something to be gained from having anorexia or an eating disorder in general, highlighting the conception that anorexia is primarily about body size. This is in line with the motivation behind pro-eating disorder websites, which offer tips, tricks, and motivation to lose weight and become bone (Ward, 2007; Strife, 2011). It isn’t only Eugenia who won’t benefit from anorexia; instead, it is anyone who sees her and considers her thinspiration, or inspiration to be as thin as possible.

In line 5, the user begins an explanation of what occurs when people see Eugenia’s body in an online space. The commentor explains, “there is other people who will see you/ and see a healthy picture perfect body/ and that isn’t okay.” The use of the word “other” implies that while this specific user can recognize Eugenia’s body as unhealthy, there are others who cannot. Indeed, these other people will have an incorrect view as they will see Eugenia’s body as “healthy” and “picture perfect.” This incorrect view of Eugenia is not necessarily Eugenia’s fault, at least not for this user. Instead, there doesn’t seem to be any agency assigned to either Eugenia or her followers. The user explains that people will see her, not that Eugenia is actively doing anything beyond positing an image of herself as part of her monetized social media presence. It is just by viewing her body that people develop the mindset that Eugenia is healthy. In other words, the emaciated body, once in a public space for the public to view it, becomes contagious.

However, with Tess and Lizzo, it is the associated health issues that are contagious along with the body size itself. This connection is due to the underlying ideology that to be fat or obese is to automatically be unhealthy. Yet, race complicates this dynamic as there are no comments that assert Lizzo’s body is contagious. Instead, a black non-normative body, despite being the same size as a white body, is not contagious, implying that black bodies
lack impact on not only those who view the body but also society at large. Instead, it is the compliments and the fans who post them that are spreading contagious ideas or materials.

While Eugenia’s body is passively contagious, Tess’s body is actively infecting those who view her body in either offline or online settings. The actively contagious nature of Tess’s body is directly tied to the rhetoric that by posting images of herself, she is promoting obesity as is discussed in the previous chapter. Out of 1268 comments, the words promote or promoting appear 23 times. Eugenia, on the other hand, was not accused of promoting emaciated bodies with 0 instances of the word promote in her data sets, which is a key distinction between the two. In Excerpt 3 (Tess, data set #3), the user explains,

**EXCERPT 3**

1. If you want to promote yourself as a public figure
2. and **be symbolic of something (such as obesity),**
3. then the public as a whole might have something to say about that **symbolism**

Despite the excerpt being only three lines long, there are two crucial moments. The first focuses on the key words “symbolic” and “symbolism.” In lines 1 and 2, the user equates Tess’s position as a public figure to being a symbol, implying that her body is simply an object that stands in for something else. In this case, Tess as a public figure is a symbol for obesity. While this comment does not overtly discuss the fat body as contagious, it does assert that this body is more than a physical thing. It is a symbol for the entirety of the obesity problem. The second moment is the use of the word “want.” The commenter explains that Tess wants to promote herself, meaning that she is making the decision to be contagious. Because she is allegedly purposefully placing herself in this position, particularly of being a symbol of a non-normative body, she has chosen to be contagious.
The accusation of Tess’s body being contagious is more explicit in the next excerpt.

Indeed, in Excerpt 4, the focus is on what Tess’s body does to others. The user even goes so far as to declare they do not care about Tess. Instead, they are more concerned with anyone who is exposed to her body. In Excerpt 4 (Tess, data set #3), the user explains,

EXCERPT 4

1. I don't care if she dies
2. because of her own poor lifestyle choices.
3. I care about her influencing gullible people,
4. making them think being obese
5. is amazing, healthy and perfectly fine.

This comment begins with a clear assertion about what matters to the user. In lines 1 and 2, the user declares, “I don’t care if she [Tess] dies because of her own poor lifestyle choices.” The implication here is that if Tess dies it will be due to her weight and the presumed food and exercise choices she is making. This automatic assumption is rooted in widespread obesity rhetoric which states that if a person is obese or even overweight, they must not eat healthy or exercise, so it is their fault.

For the author of the comment, Tess does not matter due to both her failure to adhere to normative body standards as well as her perceived responsibility for her choices. Instead, the user is concerned about the contagious nature of Tess’s body and what people who view her body—particularly people who are susceptible to her influence—are potentially infected with. Lines 3 to 5 explains, “I care about her influencing gullible people, making them think being obese is amazing, healthy and perfectly fine.” The use of the word “influence” implies a forced change in thought process or beliefs of those who view Tess’s body. Because Tess
influences them by convincing them that “being obese is amazing, healthy, and perfectly fine,” the individuals who see her become ready victims for infection. These lines describe not only beliefs about what is contagious about fat bodies, but also who is susceptible to this influence. It is only the “gullible people” who would be infected with the message Tess’s body sends out, especially when it is in a visual space like Instagram. In fact, these gullible people do not seem to have a choice in whether or not they accept the alleged message of Tess’s body. In line 4, the author accuses Tess of “making them think” that obesity is acceptable. The use of the word “make” implies not only force, but also control. The accusation, then, is that by being visually present Tess is forcing gullible people to think obesity is healthy.

With fat black bodies, however, there is a crucial difference from the contagious nature of fat white bodies. In the comments posted in response to Lizzo’s images, there is a distinct lack of content implying her body is also contagious as compared to Tess and Eugenia. This lack of blame ties back to the previous chapter which highlighted a lack of accusations that Lizzo is promoting obesity and the dehumanization that removes agency from the non-normative individual. Specifically, the tie is that the fat black non-normative body lacks agency in either promoting or infecting others with obesity. Instead, the blame is placed on Lizzo’s followers and fans as they are the ones who spread the message that obesity is acceptable. Out of the total 1731 comments posted to Lizzo’s account, there are 36 comments that place blame on Lizzo’s followers and fans. This placement of blame is clearly demonstrated in Excerpt 5 (Lizzo, data set #1):

EXCERPT 5

1. You’re complimenting someone [Lizzo] who is proud
2. of treating her body like a garbage disposal
3. in turn bringing on all types of health complications.
4. It sends the message that it’s OK to treat your body like this.
5. Her fans should be begging her to
6. live a healthier lifestyle rather than cheering her on
7. like she’s not shaving years off of her life.
8. Do you know how disgusting it is that
9. there are young overweight girls that see her
10. and hear people like you cheer her on
11. and will now do nothing about their health
12. because they think it’s OK.
13. Come on man stop living in a fantasy world.
14. The wrong message is being sent to the youth here

For this commentor, both Lizzo’s body and those who support her are the problem. The unspoken assumption in this excerpt is that by supporting Lizzo’s body, the message that obesity is acceptable or healthy is spread to viewers and readers. In line 9, the commentor specifically points out “young overweight girls that see [Lizzo].” This takes the potentially infected population from Instagram users to anyone who sees Lizzo whether that be online or offline. In lines 1 through 3, the commentor sets up what they see as the major issue, which is “complimenting someone who is proud of treating [their] body like a garbage disposal.” By using the pronoun “you” in these lines, the commentor is speaking directly to those who are complimenting Lizzo and not to Lizzo herself, highlighting her lack of presence and importance for this user.
The issue for this commentor is the alleged consequences of such compliments, which is outlined and made clear in lines 7 through 12. As noted, the compliments reinforce that Lizzo’s body can and does infect others. The user explains, “Do you know how disgusting it is that there are young overweight girls that see her and hear people like you cheer her on and will now do nothing about their health because they think it’s OK.” In these lines, not only are we told about the consequences of the compliments, but we are also told who is susceptible to them, specifically “young overweight girls.” These young girls, because of the compliments, will “do nothing about their health,” implying that they are already ill due to their size. These young girls are not necessarily already infected but are in the perfect position to be due to the fact they are overweight but not obese like Lizzo is. In this sense, the overweight girls are susceptible to Lizzo’s and her promoters’ contagion and are not already infected because they can and should be trying to lose weight and therefore get healthy. Because there are positive reactions to the fat black body, in this case Lizzo’s body, people who are overweight will come to think that fatness is acceptable and will either cease to or avoid getting healthy completely. In other words, when people stop viewing fatness as unhealthy or unacceptable, they will infect others with this viewpoint, resulting in an increase in obesity and a lack of effort to get healthy (or thin) as well as another dimension to the issue of infection.

Can’t Have One Without the Other: The Hierarchy of Physical and Mental Health

In the last few decades there has been a distinct shift in how fat bodies are publicly discussed. There is an increasing movement that aims to create a division between the stigmas and stereotypes associated with fat bodies and the actual fat body. There are
numerous methods being employed by nonprofits, social media movements, and even companies to change the way people view fat bodies, whether it be their own body or someone else’s. It is from this collective effort that mental health has been intertwined with physical health, notably from online movements such as “Love Your Body,” “Body Acceptance,” and “Body Positivity.” The Centers for Disease Control defines mental health as emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing while the World Health Organization has a similar definition except with the addition of productivity as an indicator of mental health. Despite this slight difference, both organizations argue that mental health and physical health are connected. Within this framework, mental health comes from loving or accepting one’s body no matter the size. In other words, body acceptance and body positivity have become different names for positive mental health despite the fact that this is an oversimplified construction of mental health. Instead, in this instance, positive mental health is not directly related to established mental illnesses, but is instead more socially constructed.

However, despite these movements’ overall mission that people accept or love their bodies without any stipulations, the comments posted to Tess and Lizzo appear to imply that there are specific expectations for fat bodies in order for them to accept their bodies. Indeed, within the data, to love one’s body is to be emotionally and/or psychologically well. Physical health, however, is defined as being thin, which is automatically connected to being healthy. Specifically, physical health is considered the ability to move around without overexertion, to run, and to touch one’s toes, to name a few examples in the data. The acceptance or love of one’s body comes with the expectation that the fat individual will work towards physical health, which is defined as weight loss. Indeed, it is implied that mental health, depicted
through body acceptance and love, is only possible through physical health or the journey towards physical health, which is defined by thinness.

The intertwined nature of physical and mental health is clearly outlined in the comments posted in response to Tess’s images. In the 1268 total comments, there are 115 that mention or refer to both mental and physical health, which were identified through instances of words such as physical health, mental health, self love, body care. In Excerpt 6, the commentor explains the connection between self-love and physical health, arguing that the two cannot be separated from one another. Excerpt 6 (Tess, data set #1) states,

**EXCERPT 6**

1. If you wanna stay alive,
2. Self-love is also important.
3. All caring for the body
4. Stems from self love.

Despite the comment beginning as an announcement supporting self-love, it quickly argues that self-love and physical health are one and the same. In lines 1 and 2, the user explains, “If you wanna stay alive, self-love is also important.” The use of “also” in line 2 calls attention to the overarching theme in the comments, which is that obesity kills and losing weight is vital to longevity. The issue of weight is compounded in line 3 when the user explains that “all caring for the body” comes from self-love. Here there is a direct reference to the body as a focus of this post. This theme is in line with dominant discourses and social standards concerning fat bodies. Indeed, fatness as a medical category is understood “as an illness, and the fat body as a non-normative body confirms the social stigma of fatness and ensures that more often than not, the fat body is seen as diseased and as a sign of an individual’s failure—
moral or otherwise (Harjunen, 2017, p.10). The beginning of Excerpt 6, then, is commenting on this very discussion and seems to be denouncing it by arguing self-love (or mental health) is just as crucial to longevity.

Yet, this endorsement of self-love as only being about self-love is countered in lines 3 and 4. Instead, these lines tie mental health and physical together, arguing that in order to have one type of health, an individual must have the other. The user writes in lines 3 and 4, “All caring for the body stems from self love.” There is an all-encompassing message in this comment, which is articulated through the use of “all.” Physical and mental health both “stem” or originate from self-love, tying the two types of health together. This equation of mental and physical health is in line with dominate research into body positive and acceptance movements, demonstrating that this is not a unique perspective. Cohen’s research “suggests that positive body image is related to health promoting behaviors, including intuitive eating, physical activity, and health-seeking behavior, and is negatively associated with health compromising behaviors, such as dieting, alcohol, and cigarette use” (2019, p.54). By generating and maintaining a positive body image, individuals then engage in physical health promoting activities, suggesting that by improving one type of health (mental health) the other is also improved.

The tie between mental and physical health is repeated in numerous comments with some comments expressing a subtle reference while others make overt declarations. Despite this difference in approach, the pervasiveness of this rhetoric demonstrates its concrete nature within societal ideologies. In Excerpt 7 (Tess, data set #1), the user asserts,

EXCERPT 7

1. Whoever told you physical health
2. is more important than self love is def [definitely] wrong.

3. Self love is not more important

4. than physical health either.

5. Self love is physical health.

6. Physical health is self love.

7. I totally get your message

8. but these two terms are on the same boat and not separate.

The overarching message of this comment is that physical and mental health are not two separate entities; instead, they are one and the same. The majority of the comment, notably lines 1 through 6, is simply restating the same idea—physical and mental health (self-love) are the same. In the first two lines, a binary is set up with physical health and self-love. This binary has allegedly been told to Tess by an unknown entity, whether it is a person or company, as shown in the first line: “whoever told you.” However, in lines 3 and 4, the commentor addresses the other side, explaining, “self-love is not more important than physical health either.” By ending the comment with the word “either” the comment creates a tie to the first two lines, implying that is also a lie told by some unknown entity. At this point, the commentor makes it clear that self love (mental health) is the same as physical health (lines 5 and 6). The commentor then reasserts their argument by stating that mental health and physical health are in the same boat. In other words, for the white fat body, both must be present for either of them to be present. Because Tess is fat she cannot truly have mental health or self-love. The rhetoric in this moment is that fat bodies are not capable of mental health in their current state. Only once the body has thinned down and the individual has become healthy are they able to have any self-love or mental health.
However, there is a discrepancy in relation to who is part of this health dynamic between mental and physical health. While for Tess, the comments illustrate that mental and physical health are inextricably tied, for Lizzo they are both distinct and unrelated. This distinction is made clear in Excerpt 8 (Lizzo, data set #1):

1. Obesity will hurt you more then
2. someone’s word ab [about] it
3. this shouldn’t b a
4. body positive candidate bc [because]
5. she didn’t work for that body.
6. she just let it come into her life
7. and people love her for it?
8. there’s skinny girls all over the
9. world who can’t gain weight
10. and feel shamed for it.
11. overweight people are not victims.

In this excerpt, not only does Lizzo seem to deserve the obesity-related attacks, but she also does not deserve any of the praise, love, or support she is getting from the public. In lines 1 and 2, the commentor is defending not only their upcoming comment but also every other comment that has attacked Lizzo and/or her weight. The user justifies their comment with, “Obesity will hurt you more than someone’s word ab [about] it.” Despite acknowledging that the words in the attack comments can be emotionally and psychologically damaging, obesity is cited as being the more dangerous of the two. Obesity comes with the Western stigmas and stereotypes of being unhealthy and potentially ill, which are positioned as the greater issue or
threat. This dynamic then is the opposite of what is expressed in comments for Tess. While the white fat body needs to be and should be both mentally and physically healthy, the fat black body should only be concerned with physical health. Indeed, the fat black body should accept the harsh attacks and degrading comments because their obesity is worse. In other words, the fat black body needs to ignore mental health in favor of physical health, presenting them as two distinct categories that are not interdependent.

Once this justification has been established, the user can express their viewpoint about Lizzo’s body and the public nature of showing it on social media. In lines 3 to 7, the user states that Lizzo is not worthy of being a body positive candidate: “this shouldn’t b a body positive candidate bc [because] she didn’t work for that body she just let it come into her life and people love her for it?” The comment begins with a dehumanization tactic with the use of “this,” which is referring to Lizzo’s body and makes her body a thing that is separate from who she is as a person or entertainer. From here, the implication is that the fat, black body does not qualify for body positivity, which is a component of mental health. The only way an individual is worthy of body positivity and mental health is if they work for the body that they have. The underlying argument is that fat bodies are not the result of work, but of laziness as Lizzo “just let it [the fat body] come into her life.” This is contrary to what is stated in response to white fat bodies, as seen in comments posted about Tess. For the white fat body, body positivity and mental health go hand-in-hand with physical health, whether the individual has reached the ideal body size and weight. Indeed, fat white bodies are allowed mental health before reaching the ideal (as long as they are working toward it) while fat black bodies must demonstrate their work to counter common stereotypes about laziness and gluttony.
For the white fat body, physical and mental health are one and the same. In order to be physically healthy or to work towards being physically healthy, the fat individual must have a positive mindset. Indeed, as shown with Tess, mental health isn’t just body acceptance or body positivity; instead, it is the actual process of physical health. This does not seem to be the case with emaciated bodies. While mental and physical health are connected, physical health and the actual physical body is viewed as more important, making the emaciated body the focus. Out of 1107 comments, there are 77 references to the body with only 6 references to mental health. The references to the body were identified through the terms skinny, thin, and physical health. In Excerpt 9 (Eugenia, data set #1), the user states,

**EXCERPT 9**

1. Alright im just gonna say it
2. cuz no one else has the balls to say it,
3. this aint pretty, its just sad,
4. u need help (and a sandwich.
5. You clearly suffer from anorexia.
6. You need to see a doctor and a psychiatrist.

The commentor for this excerpt focuses primarily on Eugenia’s physical body. In line 2, they state, “this aint pretty, its just sad,” which demonstrates a focus on her physical health and not on her mental health. The user then explains Eugenia needs help and a sandwich. By placing help and sandwich together with a conjunction, both a direct link and distinction between the two words are created. The link itself implies that the help Eugenia needs includes food in order to “help” her physical body. Once again, the focus is placed on body size and physical health rather than mental health. Indeed, there isn’t a mention of mental
health or mental illness until line 5 where the commentor states Eugenia “clearly suffer[s] from anorexia.” Even with the mention of the mental illness, the focus reverts back to the physical with the assertion, “you need to see a doctor and a psychiatrist.” Help that could be received from a “doctor” is made distinct from help received from a psychiatrist. This distinction is crucial because while both types of doctors are presented simultaneously, the word that came to mind first was a physical health doctor. This does not illustrate a hierarchy between the two medical fields, but instead possibly shows the commentor’s train of thought while writing the comment. In this comment, a medical doctor came first, implying that the commentor’s first thought was for Eugenia’s physical health.

The focus on not only physical health but also physical beauty is reiterated in Excerpt 10 (Eugenia, data set #1). In this excerpt, physical health is vital only because it is tied to and dictated by the presence of physical beauty.

EXCERPT 10

1. Stop laying to her becouse
2. she is not beautiful with this body
3. its awful and unhealthy
4. pls you have to make yourself better
5. you have to gain weight
6. that will make you beautiful and healthy

The repeated rhetoric that the emaciated body, such as Eugenia’s, is not beautiful due to its size is very much the opposite of common pro-ana discourse. Pro-ana rhetoric is rooted in “western cultural understandings that a slim, attractive body is ‘a healthy, normal body’ have primed this normalization” (Cobb, 2017, 109). For this commentor and others like them, the
emaciated body is not beautiful but does have the potential to become so through gaining weight, not becoming psychologically healthy.

The focus on beauty and the body ignores both the physical and mental health consequences. In line 2, the commentor makes the connection between beauty and body size clear by stating “she is not beautiful with this body” (emphasis added). The implication here is that Eugenia could be beautiful with another body, as demonstrated by use of the phrase “with this body.” The use of “this” is referring directly to the current body that is on display in the Instagram image, which is direct opposition to the “lies” being told by other commentors. In line 3 the commentor clarifies exactly what is wrong with Eugenia’s current body, explaining “its awful and unhealthy.” The health of the body only comes after the description of it being “awful,” demonstrating a secondary place in the hierarchy established in this line.

In the next section of the comment the intended audience of the comment switches. While the first three lines were aimed at other commentors on Eugenia’s Instagram images, the intended audience switches to Eugenia, illustrated through the use of “you” in line 4. From here, the user tells Eugenia that in order to “make” herself better, she needs to gain weight. The implication here is that the control is in Eugenia’s hands, and she only needs to gain weight to be better. When the term “better” is used in relation to beautiful in the previous lines, it is clear that “better” is specifically referring to beauty. Therefore, the argument is that by getting better, Eugenia will be beautiful, which is deemed more important than any type of treatment for the actual eating disorder. The argument is then cemented in the final two lines where the commentor asserts, “that [gaining weight] will make you
beautiful and healthy.” Once again, beauty in the form of weight gain takes precedence over health in any other form.

CONCLUSION

As demonstrated, the ideologies present in the comments reveal a crucial layer in understanding the discourse concerning non-normative bodies. The expressed rhetoric is that non-normative bodies are contagious and that simply viewing them or reading positive comments about them can infect others. This rhetoric is consistent with dominant ideologies concerning fat bodies in general. Aubrey Gordon (2020) explains, “No fat person, it seemed, could be as healthy as any thin person, regardless of our mental health, reproductive health, blood pressure, blood sugar, T-cell count, or any other measure of health” (p.37). Fat bodies are believed to be unhealthy despite any facts to the contrary. The concept of infectious fatness is also in line with what has been termed the obesity epidemic as the word epidemic specifically refers to the spread of illness. The same can be said of emaciated bodies, which are also automatically connected with eating disorders along with pro-eating disorder communities.

Additionally, there are stipulations placed on health for non-normative bodies in which none of the three individuals are able to claim both mental and physical health at one time. In line with dominant beliefs concerning non-normative bodies, “cultural meanings are attached to physical differences, so that the body provides a foundation for oppression based on gender, class, ethnicity, and age—all social characteristics that are deeply embodied” (Gimlin, 2001, p.141). Non-normative bodies have specific cultural meanings assigned depending on size. In other words, emaciated bodies have different cultural meanings than fat
bodies do. This distinction demonstrates not only how both non-normative body types are denied the co-existence of mental and physical health, but also the rhetoric used to deny them that co-existence.

In the next chapter, I discuss and analyze the instances of positivity in the data. Amidst the negative comments and rhetoric, there are multiple examples of both successful and unsuccessful support. However, the positivity and support are problematized depending on who the comment is aimed towards. In addition, I analyze the use of hedging in the comments, arguing that the use of hedging directly impacts and influences what body is accepted and to what extent.
CHAPTER FIVE

Resistance and Progress:

The Complex Nature of Support for Non-Normative Bodies

Despite the commercialization of the body positive/acceptance movement working towards making more body types acceptable, there is a separate campaign to include non-normative bodies, such as the Eff Your Beauty Standards movement. Considering the fact that it was non-normative bodies that were the original focus of these movements (i.e. morbid obese bodies), this campaign has come to a halt in the inclusion of non-normative bodies. As more and more companies picked up on the body positive movements, the parameters of whose body is acceptable got narrower from the initial body positive goals. For example, businesses that were using the body positive movement as a marketing strategy, such as Dove, used bigger but still normative bodies in the name of body positivity. It is in this dynamic that the complex nature of support is most clearly illustrated. Support and positivity are prevalent on social media just as negativity and hate are. Instagram as a platform “offers body positive advocates a global platform to reframe the prevailing discourse on body image, beauty, and health in the media to be more inclusive and affirmative” (Cohen, 2019, p.48). However, as the commercialization of body positivity has shown, support rhetoric is complex and not always as it seems to be.

In all nine data samples (Instagram comments left on Eugenia, Tess, and Lizzo’s photos) I identified an ongoing theme of positivity and support for Lizzo, Eugenia, and Tess. While many of these comments were clear declarations of support, other comments were hedged with language such as “but” or “if”, or they were complicated by what exactly was being supported as it revealed that the commentors were not fully supporting non-normative
bodies. Hedging, in this instance, is defined by a lack of full commitment in what is being expressed. In this chapter, I argue that the positivity exhibited in all nine data sets is undermined by what is being praised. While commentors on Eugenia’s images announce that they want a body like her and are inspired by her—which shows support for ______, commentors on Tess and Lizzo express a desire to have their confidence and self-esteem, but do not express support for their bodies. For Eugenia, the inspiration is for physical change while for Tess and Lizzo it is for psychological and emotional change. Additionally, the positive comments are further complicated by the use of hedging. Commentors on Lizzo’s images automatically accept and internalize her alleged message of body acceptance, confidence, and self-love as demonstrated by the lack of hedging, for example comments that simply state, “I love you” and “Beautiful.” Even the negative comments are overt and do not hedge their critique and insults. However, comments for both Tess and Eugenia exhibit a high frequency of hedging. Their messages are not automatically supportive and will only be supportive with certain changes to Tess and Eugenia’s bodies. For example one comment posted to Eugenia asserts, “You could be beautiful if you gained weight” (emphasis added). Due to this crucial difference, I argue that Lizzo functions more as a symbol of body acceptance for her followers and fans as she becomes what she promotes through her visibility. In Lizzo’s case, she is rendered down to her body and what it means: a visible black non-normative body is the representation of body positivity. Tess and Eugenia, however, are seen as humans who require assistance in order to better themselves and therefore their message.
“Yas Queen”: The Complications of Internalizing the Body’s Message

Positivity is a crucial component of the body acceptance movement as there is a reliance on not only viewing your own body positively, but also responding to other bodies in the same way. The theme of positivity throughout the data is complicated by the focus of that positivity. For Eugenia, the commentors focus on her body as a source of inspiration and/or thinspiration. Alternatively, for Tess and Lizzo the commentors focus on their confidence. This results in an interesting dynamic when studied in parallel. Eugenia’s followers want to look like her, but do not express any desire to have an eating disorder or being like her psychologically. With Eugenia, there is a complexity in the support of the body size as supporters specifically distance themselves from her psychological state due to the potential consequences. By focusing their support on Eugenia’s body, they retain the room to deny accusations that they are or want to become anorexic, which is considered a requirement to achieve that body size. In contrast, Tess and Lizzo’s followers are inspired to be confident like the two women but do not express any desire to look like them physically. In this, the ideologies concerning ideal female body size are reinforced through positive rhetoric (Eugenia) and is undermined through a focus on ideal mindsets (Lizzo and Tess), thereby reinforcing the ideologies that focus on and privilege thinness.

The positive comments towards Eugenia focus specifically on not only her body size but also how it makes her look and her relation to beauty ideals. In this, the ideal female form and the relation to beauty and control are rhetorically reinforced through the use of support. In Excerpt 1 (Eugenia, data set #1), the commentor writes:

EXCERPT 1

1. Haters are just mad
2. They aren’t 23 pounds

3. Like you skinny queen [heart eye emoji]

In line 1, the commentor establishes two camps: those who support Eugenia and those who do not (the haters). These haters are not truly concerned for Eugenia’s health or the health of her followers who may potentially have or develop an eating disorder. Instead, the alleged haters are accused of being jealous of Eugenia’s weight, despite any claim they may state to the contrary. This distinction brings the focus back to the physical body and its size instead of health. For this specific user, health is not a concern when it comes to Eugenia’s body or others like it. All that matters is weight and size, exemplified by the specific reference to “23 pounds” in line 2. The specific weight reference combined with the title of “skinny queen” in line 3 illustrates a desire to look like Eugenia but to not actually have her illness, especially since the commentor uses the word “skinny” and not “anorexic.” While it is possible that these commentors who react in this way have an eating disorder, it does not change how this comment and Eugenia function, which is as thinspiration. For this commentor and others like them, they are supporting Eugenia because she functions as thinspiration. This term “refers to the photographs of thin models and celebrities that are posted to the site. They are seen as a source of inspiration and punishment” (Ward, 2007, p.2). For this user and others like them, Eugenia’s body is the ideal female body, highlighting the complexity of the support for Eugenia. Indeed, the heart eye emojis demonstrate that it is the ideal body to both look at and have despite the general agreement among commentors that Eugenia has an eating disorder and therefore, this body comes with said eating disorder. It seems that the eating disorder, or at least engagement in the pro-eating disorder lifestyle, is the price to pay in order to achieve Eugenia’s body size.
The comments towards Eugenia that express a desire for her body are problematic due to the actual illness at play. Eugenia has come out and admitted that she has an eating disorder and has actively sought treatment, therefore there are grounds to take her disease into account. While Excerpt 1 does not directly state an active interest in Anorexia Nervosa behaviors, the comment in Excerpt 2 (Eugenia, data set #1) does. This user writes:

**EXCERPT 2**

1. i wanna look like u.
2. Havent [have not] eaten yesterday
3. and the day before
4. (today yes cuz [because] i was
5. going to pass out if i didn’t [did not] i think)

In this excerpt, the user’s support highlights the established binary of anorexia as a disease and anorexia as a lifestyle. Within this binary when anorexia is purported to be a lifestyle choice, then the individual is not viewed as sick or as having an eating disorder. The reason for this is the belief that the individual is able to make active choices about whether or not to eat and/or lose weight, which is highlighted in the excerpt above when they explain they stopped eating but were able to start eating again. In order words, the body is the focus here since the commentor’s language implies a lifestyle choice in an effort to look like Eugenia without necessarily developing an eating disorder.

In line 1, the user announces, “I wanna look like [you]” in order to automatically demonstrate support in their comment, setting them apart from the other comments that may attack Eugenia or ask her to get help. This user expresses a desire to look like Eugenia through their declaration that they have not eaten. While this excerpt and excerpt 1 both
imply a body ideal, it is line 2 in Excerpt 2 that makes the crucial distinction between the two comments. In lines 2 and 3, the user reveals, “Havent eaten yesterday/ and the day before.” The focus of this excerpt shifts here from Eugenia to the commentor. By focusing on their actions and hunger, the commentor outlines two crucial assumptions. The first assumptions is that Eugenia’s body is the result of starving or abstaining from food. The second is that if the commentor follows this same strategy, they will eventually look like Eugenia. These lines illustrate that the user desires to physically look like Eugenia, specifically how small her body is, and they are willing to not eat in order to do so. The user’s support of Eugenia is purely based on Eugenia’s body and weight as these are sources of inspiration. While the user does assert their starvation efforts, there is no mention of anorexia or any other associated mental health illness. Indeed, one possible interpretation of this comment is that the admission that the user had not eaten that day, but also stopped eating only recently demonstrates that it is Eugenia’s body that acts as motivation and from this comes support.

With Tess and Lizzo on the other hand, the focus is entirely on the emotional and psychological side. There is no expressed desire or inspiration concerning their physical bodies. Out of 658 positive comments between both Tess and Lizzo, 0 of them indicate that the commenter desired to look like Tess or Lizzo or compliment their body itself. Instead, the comments focus on Tess and Lizzo providing inspiration to love their own body at whatever stage or size it may be. Similar to Eugenia, health is also not a concern or focus of these comments. In Excerpt 3 (Tess, data set #1), a commentor on Tess’s profile states,

EXCERPT 3

1. You are amazing...

2. And the love u [you] have for your body is truly inspiring...
3. I love your confidence and

4. honestly, u [you] inspire me to embrace my body...

5. Keep it up, no matter the haters

The comment begins with a statement about Tess being “amazing” and then continues in line 2 with “and the love u [you] have for your body is truly inspiring.” By beginning with the word “awesome” and no evidence to imply sarcasm, the commentor starting in a supportive and positive manner. In line 2, the focus is on what Tess feels about herself, not what the commentor is feeling or experiencing. This focus changes in lines 3 and 4, which state, “I love your confidence and/ honestly, u inspire me to embrace my body.” Here, the pronoun “I” is used, resulting in the commentor being the focus of the comment. It is now about what the commentor experiences or thinks about Tess and her posted images. The use of the word “and” in line 3 implies there is a distinction being made between being “amazing” and being inspirational. It is distinctly Tess’s love for her body that is inspiring while “amazing” is generally and vaguely applied to Tess overall. While the commentor may love Tess’s confidence, they do not state that they love her body. Line 4 marks a distinct shift from what Tess does to what the commentor is gaining. The commentor explains that Tess inspires them to embrace their body, which is a psychological goal. The focus is on the commentor’s own body, not Tess’s, demonstrating that the desire does not extend to the physical fat body. Instead, it is the unspoken size of the commentor’s body that is the issue, implying that they are not happy with their current body. Because of this, the commentor is in need of the support Tess’s online presence provides and a model of self-acceptance and body positivity.
The discourse of inspiration is also present in comments on Lizzo’s images. However, while comments on Tess’s images focused on what Tess does for them, comments on Lizzo’s images also focus on what Lizzo does for society. In Excerpt 4 (Lizzo, data set #2), the user explains,

EXCERPT 4

1. There are millions of young women who look like her,
2. She is proving to them that
3. they don't need to feel shame for not
4. fitting into the normal size 6 box

The focus of excerpt 3 isn’t aimed towards Lizzo as the intended recipient. Instead, this comment is aimed at the other commentors, particularly the ones who are posting negative material. Excerpt 4 opens with a statement asserting the need for photos such as Lizzo’s on public platforms. The need for photos like Lizzo’s comes from her non-normativity as expressed in line 4. In this line, the commentor asserts that a size 6 in clothing is normative. With this being explicitly stated, the commentor is acknowledging that Lizzo’s body is outside the boundaries of normativity. As a result, the “millions of young women who look like her” are also outside the boundaries of normativity.

In lines 2 and 3, the commentor reaches their underlining argument: “She is proving to them that/ they don’t need to feel shame.” By “they” the commentor is referring to the “millions of young women who look like [Lizzo]” (line 1). For this commentor, Lizzo is a symbol for body positivity and whose position inspires others to not feel shame about their body size. By placing herself in a visible position online where Lizzo’s images stand by themselves, she functions as a symbol. Posting the images is not actively working towards
changing the public’s mind or teaching young women how to feel about themselves. Lizzo’s pictures are passive artifacts that do not automatically function as activism. However, as with Tess, there is no expressed desire to look like Lizzo. In fact, the commentor removes themselves completely from the comment itself, never using personal pronouns or referring to themselves. The comment is entirely focused on other unnamed individuals and Lizzo.

A crucial distinction between Excerpts 3 and 4 is the pronouns used in identifying the subject, primarily the use of you versus her. With the comment left on Lizzo’s image, the commentor also does not speak to Lizzo. Instead, as is illustrated by the use of her, the commentor is speaking to everyone, placing Lizzo in the position of being a passive subject to be talked about and not talked to. With Tess, the commentor does the exact opposite. As is shown by the use of you, the commentor is speaking to Tess and not just about her. This distinction between the two comments illustrates that it is Lizzo’s body that is the focus and not her as an individual. In this sense, there is a trend in which Lizzo becomes a symbol for body positivity and not simply a person who supports body acceptance which is demonstrated through the use of “she” pronouns. In other words, Lizzo is being talked about instead of talked to. Tess, however, is an individual who is an activist for body positivity, giving her agency.

These patterns, when considered alongside dominant ideologies of body normativity as well the rhetoric of body acceptance illustrates that body positivity or acceptance is limited. Despite the commercialization of body positivity and acceptance, there are still strict parameters or boundaries in terms of what kind of body is ideal and/or desired. The notion of the ideal body plays a crucial role in what is referenced and desired by the commentors. A thin body, even one as thin and emaciated as Eugenia’s, is still desired over being fat. In
regard to fat bodies, it is their mindset or confidence that is desired, not their body size. The fact that thin bodies are the desired body despite any health risks demonstrates that dominant body ideology is still focused on the ideal thin body.

**You’re Pretty but . . . : Hedging as Undermining Positivity**

The complexity of the positive messages continues beyond comments that are overt in their support. While some comments focus on asserting their desire to either have the same mind-set or the same physical body, there are other comments that express a form of support that comes with requirements or demands. These demands appear in the form of hedging with comments beginning with positive affirmations and quickly turning around to demand a more pleasing visual or health improvement. The hedging that speaks to health are usually posted by users who are considered “concern trolls.” Aubrey Gordon explains what a concern troll is and what they accomplish in her book *What We Don’t Talk About When We Talk About Fat*:

Concern trolling is defined more by its impact than its intent—many concern trolls would balk as being described as trolls at all. Rather than ‘playing devil’s advocate’ or directly provoking marginalized people, concern trolls position themselves as sympathetic supporters who ‘just have a few concerns.’ Concern trolls are experts at erecting strawmen, insisting that they want to be supportive, as if their support is a vote a marginalized person needs to win.

(p.76)

Concern trolling is ultimately a control technique, a way to reinforce dominant ideologies and punish non-normative bodies.
Throughout this section as well as my analysis, I am using the term hedging in a broad manner. Scholarship into the use and function of hedging has expanded the definition and understanding of this term and rhetorical strategy. In my analysis, hedging did not just include direct signal words or phrases, such as *but* or *yet*. Instead, my use of the term originates from a broader definition in which a commentor “signals a lack of a full commitment to either the full category membership of a term or expression” (Fraser, 2010, p.201). This broader understanding provides a framework that allows for the identification and analysis of a greater amount of hedging.

In the data, there are differences in the hedging that occurs in relation to Tess, Eugenia, and Lizzo. For hedged comments surrounding Eugenia and Tess, there are conditions placed on the acceptance of their bodies. These conditions are expressed through comments aimed towards Eugenia and Tess which focus on the possibility of greater beauty for Eugenia and the dangers of obesity for Tess. In regard to Lizzo, while there are comments that have hedged support, they are in the minority. Instead, comments on Lizzo’s images reveal a noticeably lower frequency of hedging with only three total hedged comments, implying that commentors are more ready to accept her messages.

Across the data sets from both Tess and Eugenia, the most common forms of hedging used were the conjunction “but.” Otherwise, the hedging was vague or masked by concern or support. For example, one comment to Tess’s image was “Excited to see you get healthy.” The subtext for this comment is that Tess is not healthy but is working towards it. This is in line with the subject matter of the image, which is of Tess sitting in front of a mirror in what looks like a gym. The assumption that Tess is working towards health adds a fragment of acceptance to the post overall. Within the context of fat bodies, health is synonymous with
losing weight. In other words, a fat person becomes healthy when they become thin (Taylor, 2017; Boero, 2012; LeBasco, 2004; Harjunen, 2017). Because it appears Tess is trying to get healthy her body can be visible on public platforms. The highest frequency of hedging was found in the data for Eugenia at 35 total hedged comments, or 3%, through the three data sets. Tess was the second most frequent at 18 (1%) and Lizzo had the least at 6 hedged comments, which was less than 1%.

Hedged comments aimed at Lizzo, despite being few in number, take two forms with the first being health and the other being the actual visual of Lizzo’s body on Instagram. In Excerpt 5 (Lizzo, data set #2) the user focuses on health as the reason for the hedged comment:

EXCEPRT 5

1. I love you but
2. please just lose weight a little,
3. I'm scare[d] that something
4. [Is] Ganna [going to] happening [happen] to you
5. couse [because] being fat
6. it's [it is] not really good for healthy [your health]

The user starts the comment with their hedging by explaining, “I love you but.” The declaration of love that starts this comment acts as a defense and rationale for the rest of the comment. By stating that they love Lizzo everything that comes after is viewed as coming from a place of concern rather than critique. In lines 2 through 4, the user asks Lizzo to lose weight because they are scared something will happen to her. The implication here is that Lizzo’s weight makes her unhealthy and therefore at risk for illness, death, or something else
that could hinder her celebrity status. Lines 5 and 6 directly state that it is Lizzo’s fatness and therefore her health that are the issue. Despite comments that focus on health being common throughout the data taken from Lizzo’s account, the majority of those comments actively attack Lizzo and make no effort to hedge their content. However, this user does hedge their comment in order to separate themselves from those who are attacking Lizzo and place themselves in a space of simply being concerned.

The other form of hedging focuses on the visual and creates the argument that an individual can be a fan of Lizzo but can also attempt to control the images she puts on her profile. For example, one user explains that they like Lizzo but “don’t like the visual” before asserting that this division should “be OK from one person to another.” For this user, the hedging attempts to defend their position that they do not like seeing Lizzo’s body while declaring that this aversion is acceptable. Indeed, by beginning with a statement that they like Lizzo, the user is attempting to not just defend themselves, but also place themselves within the group who support her. This place of support would separate them from those who are posting negative comments. The comment, however, is not positive despite the user’s use of hedging to make it so. By including the hedged positivity, they are attempting to separate themselves but are unsuccessful due to the fact the comment ends with a justification to discriminate against and control Lizzo for the way her body looks.

A longer comment that uses this same approach can be seen in Excerpt 6 (Lizzo, data set #1):

EXCERPT 6

1. She's very beautiful,

2. but just needs to cover up just a little.
3. This picture would be amazing
4. with a beautiful long lace gown
5. or goddess inspired cream colored gown

With this excerpt, the intended audience is the other commentors who may or may not read this specific comment. The author uses “she” instead of “you,” illustrating that they are not speaking to Lizzo. Instead, the user is explaining to others what would make this image acceptable and more palatable. The commentor’s use of “she” creates a dynamic in which Lizzo becomes something to be discussed and critiqued, which ties back to the issue of dehumanization discussed in chapter three.

As with other examples of hedging, the user starts out with a compliment, stating that Lizzo is beautiful. This is directly followed by “but just needs to cover up just a little.” In this line, there is another example of hedging by explaining that Lizzo only needs to cover up a little. The user is defending themselves using two methods: declaring that the user thinks Lizzo is beautiful and explaining that Lizzo only needs to cover up a little bit. In lines 3 to 5, the user explains exactly what they mean by covering up--a gown of some type. While a gown leaves room for Lizzo’s body to be visible, the majority of her body would be covered, notably her entire torso and legs. Therefore, the user is explaining that Lizzo’s body is visually acceptable as long as her fat is hidden behind something beautiful, in this case a gown. In addition, the use of the gown as a bodily cover up highlights the actual conditions that are required for this commenter’s support. However, hedged comments such as Excerpts 5 and 6 are few. The vast majority of the comments, whether attacks or statements of support, are not hedged because of the dehumanization that occurs in regards to Lizzo.
The use of hedging in the data from Tess’s profile appears in both long and short comments with the longer comments providing more of an appeal to Tess directly. The shorter comments, however, focus specifically on Tess’s weight and positive encouragement. For example, one such comment states, “Excited to see you lose all that weight” while another comment reads, “Glad to see you’re trying to be healthy! Mentally and physically!” These two comments both open with a statement of how the commentor is feeling towards Tess and her posted image with one stating they are “excited” and the other stating they are “glad.” However, these positive expressions are followed by comments about losing weight or being healthy.

The combination between expressions of happiness at losing weight creates an underlying hedging because the commentors are only happy because Tess is exercising and getting healthy by losing weight, which is in line with dominant body ideologies. They are not supporting Tess but are supporting her alleged efforts towards becoming thin. This strategy suggests that the focus on health is false, a form of concern trolling. Weight, not health, is the issue. Fat bodies should be attempting to lose weight and not necessarily get healthy. Individuals, such as those commenting on Tess’s images, presume that fat people are “primarily engaging in efforts to exercise and eat nutritious foods in order to lose weight rather than to improve health and well-being in the absence of significant weight loss” (Webb et al., 2017, pp. 61–62). The fat body can only be in public if it is attempting to better itself by coming into line with the dominant ideologies that control female bodies and fat female bodies in particular.

Longer comments provide more context for the use of hedging, but still focus on the condition that Tess become healthy and/or lose weight. Excerpt 7 (Tess, data set #2) provides
an example of a longer comment that also begins on a positive note before the use of hedging. The commentor writes:

EXCERPT 7

1. U have such a pretty face
2. why you let your body suffering ?
3. One day when u decide to loose weight ,
4. your tattoos are going change the place ...
5. why do you think 300 lbs is healthy ?!

As with the previous two examples, this comment begins on a positive note, specifically a complimentary one. In the first line, the user states that Tess has a pretty face. The use of “you” demonstrates that they are speaking directly to Tess and not to the other commentors. However, after the compliment in line 1, the comment takes a turn with a [vague] hedging. In line 2, the user asks, “Why [do] you let your body suffering [suffer]? ” The hedging here relies heavily on the formula “you have such a pretty face,” which function as a form of concern trolling. In addition, there are two assumptions that appear after the hedging, which helps to reinforce the shift in the comments. The first is line 2 when the use asserts that Tess is allowing her body to suffer. Here, it is automatically assumed that Tess’s body is suffering, either by being in pain, by being unhealthy, or both. This draws directly on dominant obesity rhetoric that argues the fat body is automatically unhealthy. The second is the use of the word “when” in line 3: “one day when you decide to lose weight.” The word “when” implies that it isn’t a matter of if Tess decides to get healthy and lose weight. Instead, it is guaranteed and is simply a matter of when that happens. This line also asserts that getting healthy is just inevitable but is also a choice Tess will make when she “decides” to get healthy.
Nevertheless, the commentor starts by complimenting Tess, but then instantly moves to criticizing her body in two different ways. The first is the critique that focuses on her tattoos with the commentor declaring that once Tess gets healthy (thin) her tattoos will be distorted and change location on her body. This predication of distorted tattoos ties to the issue of aesthetics, beauty, and the fat body. By asking why Tess lets her body suffer, the writer creates a dynamic in which only Tess’s face is pretty but not her body. In fact, the assumption is that her body is suffering due to her weight. The hedging that occurs in this comment, when considered in relation to obesity rhetoric, reinforces that fat bodies are not only unhealthy, but not desired. By beginning with statement that she is pretty, which acts as a form of concern trolling when combined with the rest of the comment, the user can then demand that she lose weight and become healthy eventually through the use of “when” and “decide.” Therefore, these non-normative bodies are being suppressed by attempting to force them to become normative.

Another example cites Tess’s health as the primary rationale for hedging their support. Excerpt 8 (Tess, data set #1) states:

EXCERPT 8

1. Loving yourself and dieing [dying]
2. due to the health risks of obesity
3. is [are] two very different things.
4. although there is no reason for people
5. to message you saying horrible things like that.
6. You’re beautiful and
7. I’m sure you’re a lovely person.
8. But that will not ever change the fact

9. that being that obese will kill you.

In the first lines, the user outlines their viewpoint on not only obesity, but also on the self-love mindset with the argument that they cannot co-exist. In line 4, the user shifts and hedges the previous three lines through the use of the word “although.” The user begins with asserting the health issues that are believed to be directly tied to obesity, but then declares that the “horrible things” other people say and/or send to Tess are going too far. By switching focuses through the word “although,” they establish a standpoint for themselves, which is that the commentor agrees with the content of those negative comments, but not with how the information was delivered. There is also a smaller instance of hedging in line 7 when the commentor states, “I’m sure you’re a lovely person.” The use of “sure” denotes a lack of knowing as in the commentor does not know whether or not Tess is an actual “lovely person,” however the commentor qualifies that. While Tess as a person is undefined, her appearance is not.

The most crucial instance of hedging in this comment comes in lines 7 through 9, signaled by the word “but.” Prior to these lines, the user attempts to illustrate what they view as the difference between “loving yourself” and “dying due to the health risks of obesity.” The user is illustrating the difference between the love yourself movements and obesity directly in relation to Tess, as demonstrated by the use of “you.” Because the user is addressing Tess specifically, the user is utilizing hedging to make their comment more palatable.

With Tess, the assumption is that only her face can be pretty and to be fully accepted and viewed as beautiful she must lose weight. Similarly, with Eugenia, there is hedging being
used to convince Eugenia to get healthy by gaining weight. In Excerpt 9 (Eugenia, data set #2), the user states,

EXCERPT 9

1. Eat plis [please] you have to eat
2. you are beautiful [,]
3. but if you eat more food
4. you would be perfect [,]
5. [It] is for your life and
6. You[r] happiness and health [,]

The commentor begins with a plea to Eugenia to eat, implying that they know Eugenia does not eat presently. It is implied through the use of “you” that the user is speaking directly to Eugenia. In lines 2 through 4 the user hedges their support and compliment: “you are beautiful/but if you eat more food/ you would be perfect.” Eugenia is beautiful as is, but by eating she could achieve perfection. The reference to perfection is problematic considering Eugenia’s eating disorder. Discourses concerning perfection are a key part of the pro-ana community. In this sense, the commentor is relying on the common discourse among the eating disorder community, specifically the pro-eating disorder community. By using the word “perfection,” the user is placing conditions on accepting Eugenia’s body in a public visual space, which then reinforces ideologies of female bodies.

The patterns identified and discussed in this section highlight the complex nature of positive reactions and responses to non-normative bodies. While on the surface many of them express support for these bodies, the comments actually feed into non-normative body ideologies. By hedging the support and placing conditions on that support, the comments
reinforce the ideologies that non-normative bodies should be hidden thus suppressing and oppressing them.

**Conclusion:**

The support and positive comments aimed at Lizzo, Tess, and Eugenia illustrate the complexity of discourse surrounding non-normative bodies. It also illustrates the ways that dominant ideologies concerning women and the non-normative female body are reinforced. Due to the expectations and stereotypes concerning fat bodies, positivity is hedged as a way to express support for loving oneself while also avoiding the accusation of advocating obesity. As explored in chapter 3, any discourse that appears as anything other than criticism is understood as support for obesity as a medical category and the health issues that come with obesity. In this way, the commentors can reinforce ideologies that oppress female bodies without being harsh or being seen as fatphobic.

In my final chapter, I will discuss the implications for the patterns discussed in chapters 3 to 5. Numerous fields and disciplines from within academia will be addressed as will public and societal fields, such as discrimination in the medical field. I will also discuss future directions for my research, both for my own research agenda as well as how my research impacts other disciplines.
CHAPTER SIX:

Why this Matters: Implications and Future Directions

Throughout the previous chapters, I have discussed the various rhetorical strategies that were identified in the comments left on Instagram images of non-normative bodies. These strategies vary from overt accusations of promoting harm to subtle concerns hidden behind support. I identified these rhetorical strategies using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis as an analytical framework to code and analyze comments left on photos posted to three different Instagram accounts: Tess Holliday, Eugenia Cooney, and Lizzo. All three individuals fall outside the boundaries of body normativity as Tess and Lizzo are fat, and Eugenia is emaciated. My goal for this project was to investigate and answer the following research questions: how are non-normative cis-gender female bodies reacted to and discussed within Instagram comments? How do the comments construct normativity in relation to gender norms? How do the comments control normativity in relation to racialized gender norms?

In chapter 3, I identified the ways in which normativity is rhetorically constructed and where the barriers lie between normative and non-normativity. I outlined the first of the rhetorical strategies which puts forward accusations that posting the image of the non-normative body in a public space is promoting not only that body, but also the alleged associated diseases and health issues. However, there is a crucial difference in the discourse around white fat bodies and black fat bodies, specifically that the strategy of dehumanization is used for fat black bodies. In chapter 4, I move on from the clearly stated discourse discussed in chapter 3 to what is being implied in the Instagram comments. When reading between the lines, the comments are implying that non-normative bodies are contagious.
Indeed, it is the mental and physical health associated with these bodies that illustrate the rhetorical strategies being used. While mental health is possible through improved physical health for white fat bodies, it is not for black fat bodies. Additionally, for white thin bodies, health in general is tied to beauty. Finally, in chapter 5, the complexity of support and positivity is identified and discussed. The rhetorical strategy used in relation to positivity is hedging, which is used to appear supportive while still implying that non-normative bodies should not be present in public social media spaces. In addition, the positivity is focused on not only body type (emaciated versus fat), but also by certain mindsets. Fat bodies elicit support and positivity in relation to the mindset and expression of confidence. On the other hand the support for emaciated bodies is about the size of the body, not the mindset associated with it. However, this becomes more complex when identifying the strategy used for white non-normative bodies versus black fat bodies. A crucial difference is that white emaciated bodies are accepted in ways that fat bodies are not and it is only with a positive mindset that emaciated bodies are accepted.

The implications for the findings vary widely and include implications for the larger discussion of rhetoric and non-normative bodies along with gender roles and non-normative female bodies. In turn, these rhetoric-based implications are connected to social dynamics and dominant stereotypes about non-normative bodies and the discrimination that occurs as a result. As a closing to this chapter, I will also discuss the limitations of this project along with the future directions for both my own research agenda and potential research focuses as well.
IMPLICATIONS

Research Question 1

My first research question asks how non-normative cis-gender female bodies are reacted to and discussed within Instagram comments. Instagram as a platform provides an interesting space to investigate this question due to the agency that is expressed by users on the social media site. All users have control over their accounts, which includes what image is posted, what caption accompanies it, and what comments are left on each image since the user has the power to delete them. This means that while users do not have control over the actual comments posted, they do have control over what is visible on their platform, providing them with agency over both their account and image.

Throughout the data, the comments construct gender normativity very much in line with dominant body-related rhetoric. Fat bodies are unacceptable, or non-normative, due to their size. The size of fat bodies and the response to that size reinforces cultural ideologies that fat is the opposite of beauty. Considering that beauty and femininity are social expectations for women, this means that fat women are not in compliance with body-related gender norms and not desirable either sexually or in terms of inspiration. It is this connection to ideal body size that places anorexic bodies in a type of liminal space. The connection between gender norms and body size is discussed by Hannele Harjunen (2017), who explains, “The intense sexualization of women’s bodies and the exclusive conflation of the slender body with desirability (and social success) in the patriarchal context contributed to women’s perceived duty to monitor themselves and govern their bodies. Biopolitical monitoring and control of body weight and size is thus combined with gendered body norms for women” (p.46). Anorexic bodies are thin, which would suggest that these bodies fit in
with gender norms. However, these bodies go too far in the other direction. What is interesting is that this transgression does not result in exclusion from gender norms. Instead, it places these bodies in a space where they are adhering to gender norms in terms of body size but are risking physical beauty which is another feminine gender requirement.

The notion of health and who has potential to become healthy is crucial to understanding the implications. The very use of the word health in actually coded language that allows people to engage in discussions about body size without appearing to be fat-shaming or body-shaming in general. Health, then, becomes coded language that provides protection for the individual who is using it, whether they recognize it was a shield or not. For white non-normative bodies, the focus is on health-based rhetoric as these bodies have the potential to improve and meet normative body standards. However, this idea of potential is not commonly applied to black non-normative bodies since the predominate focus is the physical appeal of black bodies and not their health-based potential. Black non-normative bodies are then judged based on physical appearance, which is fraught with ideological rhetoric. Sabrina Strings explains that the thin-ideal for white women is directly tied to racism and the positioning of black bodies by white men. String explains that the image of the fat, or non-normative, black woman was “used to both degrade black women and discipline white women” (2019, p.211). As a result, black non-normative bodies are placed below white non-normative bodies in terms of hierarchy and health.

Instead, the discourses surrounding non-normative black bodies reveals that black fat bodies draw more dehumanization tactics than white non-normative bodies. The dehumanization varies from general animal references to racialized animals and stereotyped fictional characters. The focus on aesthetic and dehumanization is directly tied to both anti-
fatness and anti-blackness. Da’Shaun Harrison argues, “the world has normalized the teachings that fat Black people are not Desirable and, thus, fat and Black bodies are deserving of the abuse they endure” (2021, p.30, original capitalizing). Due to this crucial difference, the implication is that normativity and therefore non-normativity is not just a scale, but also a hierarchy in which race is an organizer and focus. Indeed, Roxane Gay has expressed in her memoir *Hunger* that fat black bodies are abused in both subtle and overt ways. For example, Gay explains, “my fat body empowers people to erase my gender. I am a woman, but they do not see me as a woman. I am often mistaken for a man” (p.256). In this moment, Gay is expressing a first-hand account of Harrison’s argument: Gay’s black non-normative body is undeserving of identity and instead that identity is erased as a type of punishment for the transgression of her body. Gay’s account also connects to the comparisons of Lizzo to characters played by male actors, which work to remove her womanhood.

The connection between black non-normative bodies and aesthetics is also present in discourse around normative black bodies and bodies of color. Beauty is associated with not only thinness but also whiteness, leaving out black individuals. Mikki Kendell explains in *HoodFeminism* (2020), that as a culture, we “reward thinness in general, we specifically reward any beauty aesthetic that prioritizes assimilation. For young people of color who are developing bodies that can never actually assimilate into the mythical monochrome of middle America, there’s very little validation available in media or anywhere else” (p.114). People of color, specifically women, are denied any sense of beauty due to not only the color of their skin, but also their body size and/or type.
Research Question 2:

My second research question aimed to identify any discursive strategies of control within the data by asking *how do the comments control normativity in relation to racialized gender norms?*. In each of my results chapters, I identified key strategies that are used to reinforce normativity, in relation to both gender and race. One such strategy is the use of the rhetoric of concern, as shown in chapter 5. Concern trolling, to use Gordon’s term, becomes a way to control non-normative bodies. Gordon explains, “But the truth is that concern and choice are cover for a convenient and tempting set of stories that establish a hierarchy of people by establishing a hierarchy of bodies. They are judge and jury so that every thin person may play executioner for any fat person” (p.89). By using this rhetoric of concern, the commentors are able to reinforce normativity and its visible presence in digital spaces. Gay provides an example of what this looks like for fat people in everyday life in her memoir *Hunger: A Memoir of my Body*. Gay explains that fat bodies are “always the subject of public discourse with family, friends, and strangers alike. [. . .] People are quick to offer you statistics and information about the dangers of obesity, as if you are not only fat but also stupid, unaware, delusional about the realities of your body” (2017, 120-121). According to Gay, these offers of advice and statistics are given under the disguise of concern, or are an example of concern trolling in real time.

While Gordon discussed this term in relation to fatphobia, my research illustrates that the strategy of expressing concern is also used in response to emaciated non-normative bodies. While it would seem that these bodies do not experience the same amount of concern trolling or even simple attacks, my research shows that this is not the case. As with fat non-normative bodies, thin non-normative bodies also transgress the body expectations by
becoming too much of a good thing, or too thin, which I discuss in more detail in the next section.

Each of these strategies that were identified are grounded in not only anti-fatness, but also anti-blackness. Race, gender, and body size are all components of the strategies used to reinforce dominant body rhetoric. The data for this project show that despite there being a discrepancy in regard to strategies with black non-normative bodies being dehumanized, anti-blackness (i.e. racism) is not openly used as a control technique for black non-normative bodies. In general, overtly racist discourse or rhetoric is not used because racism usually elicits negative reactions, including being reported to Instagram and potentially suspended from the site. Anti-fatness, on the other hand, is more acceptable. Indeed, due to the prominent obesity rhetoric anti-fatness is expected and anticipated. In this way, anti-fatness is used as a shield and strategy to attack black non-normative bodies, thereby reinforcing the body normativity hierarchy. By focusing on concern and health, dominate discourse tells “Black fat people who and what they are, but they are also used to tell white people who they should not want to become. When they [white people] fail to model that, it can be deadly for them, too” (Harrison, 2021, p.37). In other words, black non-normative bodies become a rhetorical strategy that is used to keep white bodies, both normative and non-normative, in line with social expectations.

Big Picture Implications

The findings from my study builds on and reinforces scholarship concerning pervasive ideologies about sex, physical appearance, and desire in regard to women. Indeed, normativity for women, and arguably for femme-presenting individuals, is always about
sex—looking sexy, making men desire them, etc. In other words, the normative body is one that elicits desire, and the non-normative body does not. Numerous feminist scholars have discussed and critiqued the expectation that women make themselves appealing for the men around them (Bordo, 2003; Wolf, 2002; Nudson, 2021). Susan Bordo investigated this social expectation, arguing Western culture has taught both women and men how to see the female body. My work builds on this foundation, reinforcing that there is indeed still an expectation that women appear attractive in order to meet social expectations. This implies that despite the work and resistance of the expectation for women to be attractive in order to be normative has not changed since Bordo’s original scholarship.

Yet, from my data, it becomes clear that it is not just fat bodies that fail to elicit desire, it is also emaciated bodies. My results counters scholarship that argues skinny or waif-like bodies are the ideal and therefore desired by Western culture (Brumberg, 2000; Hartley, 2001; Bordo, 2003; Wykes and Gunter, 2005). This scholarship also argues that the waif-like body is required for a person to have any worth or be seen as attractive (Brumberg, 2000; Gimlin, 2001; Bordo, 2003; Wykes and Gunter, 2005; Taylor 2017). Despite thin bodies being viewed as ideal, there is a limit in which thin is no longer attractive, which we can see in the comments left on Eugenia’s images. Just as there is a point where bodies become too fat to be viewed as attractive, bodies can become too thin. At this point, both bodies lose their worth as they are no longer ideal and do not have sex appeal for men who see them, which shows the narrow standards that women and femme presenting people should adhere to.

In addition, normativity as sex and desire becomes complicated when discussing bodies of color, as we see in the comments posted to Lizzo. Health is used as a cover in the
critiques of white non-normative bodies with physical appearance as an underlying rhetoric. With black non-normative bodies there is no use of a disguise; instead, the aesthetic aspect and whether or not these bodies are sexy is placed front and center. This is tied to the connection between fatness, blackness, and sexuality as fat black bodies are acceptable under certain conditions. For example, the black fat matriarch stereotype figure provides a context in which being black and fat is acceptable. However, when sexuality comes into play, the fat black body is no longer acceptable. In other words, fat black women are not allowed to demonstrate any type of sexuality, which is one of the ways that Lizzo transgresses black body norms. These findings are in line with previous scholarship on black bodies, body image, and the white ideal. White beauty and body standards are considered normative, which places black bodies and black women in non-normative positions automatically (Patton, 2006; Harper, 2019; String, 2019; Avery, 2021). Additionally, because of this focus on white standards, “Black women’s bodies and beauty have largely been devalued and rejected by mainstream culture” (Awad et al, 2015, p.541). My research reinforces this while also identifying the ways that non-normative (or un-sexy) black bodies are responded to and the rhetorical control strategies that are employed.

Being outside the boundaries of normativity does not only mean that non-normative bodies and individuals become unattractive. In addition to the lack of attraction, the worth of non-normative bodies also falls tremendously. Previous scholarship has investigated bodies, body image, and worth with fairly cohesive results and arguments. The majority of research shows that negative body image stemming from an alleged non-normative body is directly related to the worth of an individual, both in terms of social and individual worth (Gimlin, 2001; Hartley, 2001; Satinskya et al, 2013; Harjumen, 2017; Meeuf, 2017). A non-normative
body seems to not only have little to no worth in terms of attractiveness, but it also extends to who is worthy of health, which we saw in chapter 4. This finding extends the previous scholarship on issues of worth. Not only are non-normative bodies deemed socially unworthy, but they are also deemed medically unworthy. Non-normative bodies have not earned the privilege of having mental and/or physical health while individuals who discriminate in the name of health are able to deny accusations of discrimination. Indeed, fat bodies are denied physical health altogether since the rhetoric of obesity is built on the argument that all fat bodies are unhealthy, which hasn’t been previously researched to my knowledge. As for thin non-normative bodies, my research illustrates the struggle between emaciated bodies as both physically and mentally unhealthy as well as an extreme version of the feminine body ideal. Despite viewing the emaciated body as unhealthy, there is a seemingly automatic tie back to beauty or female ideals, notably thin but not too thin bodies.

The implications for both research questions discussed in the previous section highlight the discrepancies in how white non-normative bodies and black non-normative bodies are reacted to as well as the strategies used to control and contain said bodies. These discrepancies, however, have real world consequences as they are ingrained in not only social ideologies, but everyday policy and practices. Multiple books and memoirs provide us with the experiences of fat people or people with non-normative bodies in general. Gay explains in her memoir, “the bigger you are the smaller your world becomes” (2017, p.210). This is true in multiple ways, from air travel to dining out to shopping. The limitations for fat non-normative bodies are also experienced by thin non-normative bodies, albeit in different ways. Because of the focus on thin bodies as a sign of moral and physical beauty adherence, non-normative thin bodies become a contested cultural site, acting as both an ideal and also a
disease. In other words, the fact that thin bodies are held up as ideal, emaciated bodies are not always seen as damaging or are overlooked in research about body rhetoric and normativity.

One area where non-normative bodies, specifically fat bodies, experience discrimination is within the medical field. Women who fall into the obese category can experience neglectful care, especially when any illness is automatically and potentially incorrectly attributed to weight. There are multiple studies that reveal that doctors and other healthcare professionals view their fat or obese patients as lazy, stupid, worthless, and even disgusting (Brown, 2015). My findings show that this is not just true of healthcare professionals, but also the general social media community as well. As such, my research builds on the strategy proposed by Adwoa Afful and Rose Ricciarfelli (2015), which proposes that society “must interrogate how fatness has become so strongly associated with morbidity, mortality, and ill health and therefore unattractiveness” (p.467). By investigating and identifying the roots of the connection between fatness and the associated ideologies, work can be done to begin disconnecting the two areas.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Limitations

As with any project there are limitations to the research and results and this project is no different. One of the limitations is the data itself, regarding both the amount of data and the collection time period. The comments that act as the data for this project were collected on specific days and times, providing only a snapshot of the responses posted to non-normative bodies. This snapshot provides a limited view of the responses. For example, at the time of collection image 1 from Eugenia’s account had roughly 2000 comments and as of
February 2022 there are 2,298 comments. The increase in comments demonstrates that there are comments and discourse that was not taken into account during analysis, especially as this increase is present in each of the Instagram images used as data sources.

Another limitation is the number of accounts and images that data was taken from. I used 3 images each from 3 different Instagram accounts, resulting in my data coming from comments posted to 9 different images. While focusing on the 9 images yielded 1,268 of total comments, this still provided a limited view of the discourse around non-normative bodies. In addition, the number of accounts focused on is also a limitation. The selected accounts for this project do not include black emaciated bodies, which results in a missing piece of the full analysis. In addition, the fact that Lizzo is a world wide public figure and celebrity makes her position as the only black woman in the study adds another layer to the overall limitations and provides a crucial future direction at the same time. The results from the current project show that there are distinct differences between white non-normative bodies and black non-normative bodies. Due to this finding, including comments posted to black emaciated bodies would provide a crucial layer to the overall implications of this project.

Extensions of Current Research and Potential Projects

A crucial take-away for both rhetoric and CDA from my research lies within potential research focuses and data sources. As discussed in chapter 1, there is little research that uses Instagram comments as a data source. There is, however, research that uses social media comments as data sources, but in these cases those comments are in response to Facebook news articles or on various review websites. Instagram comments provides a new data source
that could be used in a variety of projects and disciplines. The comments from this particular site are posted as a response to an image posted by anyone as long as they have a public account, meaning that the variety of voices in those comments is immense. The anonymity also creates a space in which people would be more willing to express problematic viewpoints which is then available for analysis. This provides insight into the rhetoric and language used in response to various individuals from various backgrounds. From this, there is room to research ageism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and gender roles just to name a few possibilities.

The majority of research investigating non-normative bodies, whether fat or emaciated bodies, has focused on how these bodies are presented and used by the individual. This provides only one side to the discourse and rhetoric of non-normative bodies as this approach is limited to how the person presents their non-normativity. While this research focus is crucial in understanding how people are resisting or absorbing body norms, investigating the responses to the bodies illuminates how people are responding to these bodies and what strategies are being employed in those responses.

This research also adds to the scholarship that looks into discursive productions of normativity, health, and beauty. From the language used to control the non-normative bodies in this study, we can see that language and rhetoric is a key factor in not only controlling norms, but also maintaining them. An extension of this work is to not only look at more examples of reactions to non-normative bodies, specifically in terms of size, but also to use FCDA to analyze health programs, news stories, and even medical documentation.

In light of the limitations discussed above, it is clear that there are extensions of the current research that could build upon rhetoric of non-normative bodies. One such extension
is using FCDA to analyze comments left on a wider selection of Instagram accounts and images, such as accounts belonging to trans and non-binary individuals. This would allow for the investigation of the reactions to these types of bodies, either as a single analytical focus or in comparison to other non-normative bodies. For example, a future project could investigate if non-binary bodies are reacted to differently than female non-normative, which would add to the overall understanding non-normative body rhetoric. A similar project focused on discourses surrounding trans bodies is another future research direction.

The availability of multiple types of social media also opens more scholarship directions in terms of both data types as well as discursive content. The recent social media application TikTok, for example, would provide both comment-based data as well as video-based data in the form of “duetting” and “stitching,” both of which are forms of comments and responses. The different options for responding provides not only more data for analysis, but also another dimension in which a face and name can be assigned for the video responses.

CONCLUSION

Through my study, I identified not only the construction of normativity and the boundaries of that normativity, but also the rhetorical strategies used in order to assert and reinforce normativity and race and gender ideologies. Non-normative bodies are denied the same association as normative bodies, namely the issue of health and authentic visibility. For non-normative bodies, as my chapters demonstrate, the rhetoric states that they are not allowed to be in public spaces without certain conditions and are denied health in that non-normative bodies are automatically assumed to be unhealthy. From my research and my
findings, it becomes clear that non-normative bodies are not worth as much as normative bodies, leaving them in the space of second-class citizens.
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