

The Body Positivity Movement

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The Body Positivity Movement: A Story of 'Acceptable' Fatness

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*For Mum and Dad
You were right, I did quite like university.*

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About the Author

Gemma Lucy Gibson is a feminist researcher and writer who also teaches in universities. Her research focuses on the social constructions of the body and the embedded stigma within institutions. *The Body Positivity Movement* is her first monograph and is based on her PhD thesis, which she completed at the Centre for Women's Studies, University of York.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Making Sense of Body Positivity

‘Body positivity? Aren’t we all bored with that by now?’ an acquaintance said to me at a gathering recently. Body positivity, the phenomenon I have spent over a decade researching, is a movement that is characterised by its coincidence with the rise of influencer culture and social media. Consisting of ‘positive’ messaging about body-love and demands for more diverse body representation in fashion, body positivity hurtled into popular consciousness in the 2010s and was met with joy, passion and much critique. In the 2020s, though, activists and influencers are discarding body positive rhetoric in favour of seemingly newer and more enticing narratives of ‘neutrality’, ‘respect’ and ‘acceptance’. Simultaneously, in the West, we are witnessing a significant rise in the use of weight loss technologies, including GLP-1 injections and bariatric surgeries. Body positivity, as my acquaintance suggests, may have had its heyday, and the uptick in alternative methods of resistance to body regulation and even engagement in methods of body control could represent that cultural shift. And yet, I am not quite sure I can co-sign its death. Body positive practices remain a powerful tool for resistance, especially for people at the beginning point of their body liberation and feminist activist journeys. My interest in body positivity, for example, is not just academic; it is also personal. Body positivity and I have been together since the early 2010s, I witnessed its rise and, as some may argue, its fall. I am also fat. I have been fatter, I have been smaller. And despite my passion for body positivity, I have been made to feel both celebrated and alienated by the popular movement. Without it, though, I would not have fallen in love with fashion, I would not have had the courage to advocate for my health, and I would not have found the confidence or cause to write this book.

Body positivity, in the way I will discuss and examine in this book, is best recognised in a Western Anglophone cultural environment. While the movement can and has expanded beyond the United States and United Kingdom, the iteration explored here also accompanies the rise of everyday social media usage. In no small part because of its proximity to social media and its Western focus, body positivity can be quite complex and incredibly problematic. Its issues will be a

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significant focus of this book; body positivity has made me and many others feel alienated through its focus on specific representations of communities, advertising and social media. However, it is also important to acknowledge its advancements that, at times, spoke to an agenda for social progress – fuzzy and sometimes misguided as its aligned ideology can be. At times in my life, I have been a passionate defender and advocate of body positivity, I have also experienced feelings of shame and revulsion for the movement and become an almost equally passionate critic. As I write this book, due to a variation of personal, cultural and political circumstances, I sit in an empathetic position. Since the beginning of this project in 2014, the world has experienced a global pandemic. In the United Kingdom, where I live, the prime minister at the time publicly advocated for weight loss as a course of action and defence against COVID-19. Fat people throughout the pandemic lockdowns were reminded that they were at higher risk for complications from the virus, and age-old neoliberal anti-fat bias ran rampant and unchecked through the broadsheets and tabloids in the United Kingdom (Pausé et al., 2021). The pandemic reminded me that people need to feel connected to their bodies to advocate for themselves in healthcare settings and beyond. For this reason, body positivity seems as good a starting point as any. Body positivity, as I will demonstrate, has been accused of focusing too heavily on the individual, and although it is hard to argue with that critique, *The Body Positivity Movement* focuses on the community. I concentrate on our triumphs and our mistakes, and the people who embraced and needed body positivity in a multitude of cultural moments that happened against the backdrop of institutionalised anti-fat bias. In this book, I will articulate the complex public and personal history of body positivity while making a passionate plea for future progress where I hope to see body-related movements expand as many of us are encouraged to shrink.

Why Body Positivity?

In the autumn of 2010, I was experiencing life as a university student for the first time, and I was struggling. Experiencing life as a fat person and carrying the social burdens that come with that had made assimilating into student culture difficult. Everything about me seemed different because of my fat body. My clothes were different, my experiences were different and, as a result, my confidence and ability to make friends were impacted. Consequently, I spent a lot of time in my university accommodation on the Internet. There, I stumbled upon the LiveJournal site Fatshionista – a portmanteau of fat and fashionista – which was filled with pictures and pieces of writing by women I did not regularly encounter in my ‘real life’. They were fat, really fat, not just Hollywood not-quite-size-8 fat. Lots of them even used the term ‘death fat’¹ to describe their bodies. Although I had seen people who were fat like me before, these people were different. They embraced their fatness and wore clothes that celebrated their bodies rather than attempting to hide them away in shame. People on

¹A jab at the over-prescribed usage of ‘morbidly obese’.

Fatshionista wore sparkles and mini-dresses and played with their femininity in a way I had never seen before. I looked at Fatshionista every day during my first year of university, and by Christmas, I had started wearing outfits inspired by what I had seen there. During my exploration of Fatshionista, I came across many written posts that explored the trials and triumphs of being fat, and this was my first introduction to body positivity and, by extension, fat activism. Body positivity is not a term I remember being used often on Fatshionista. It was not until I began this research in 2014 that I began to see body positivity as a term appear increasingly on social media and in popular advertising. As the buzz for body positivity began to grow and social media accounts touting the newest way to ‘love yourself’ became commonplace in spaces like Instagram, Tumblr and Twitter (now X), it seemed at one point around 2015 that body positivity was about to change the Western media landscape for good. I remember feeling excited and affirmed by having bodies like mine represented in media that had previously only featured thin, homogeneous-looking women. And this story, although mine, is not a unique one. By the mid-2010s, body positivity was garnering significant public attention, but it was perhaps through this public attention that cracks began to show, and the poorly laid foundations of the movement fell apart under its success.

In 2014, when I began this research, I was not even sure what to term what was happening. I remember a conversation with my PhD supervisor where we settled on the vague term ‘fat beauty’ as a working title. ‘Fat beauty’ was quickly disregarded as Tess Holliday was signed to MiLK model management in 2015 and became known as the ‘world’s first plus-size supermodel’² (Ferrier, 2015; Leal, 2015; Lynch, 2015; Olya, 2015; Saul, 2016; Weisman, 2015). Headlines and articles were written about Holliday’s success in abundance, and with the social media buzz came the newly popularised term ‘body positivity’. Holliday played a central role in the popularisation of body positivity, and while she has, at times, been a contentious figure in the movement, the impact of her work is undeniable. Holliday’s elevation to ‘plus-size supermodel’ stood alongside several other markers of body positivity’s popularity: Ashley Nell Tipton as the first plus-size winner of *Project Runway* (Feldman, 2015), Gabourey Sidibe’s sex scene in the popular US television show *Empire* (Verdier, 2015), the premier of Whitney Way Thore’s reality television show and rapper Drake’s use of the term ‘BBW’³ in his single *Hotline Bling* (Tonic, 2015). Together, these media stories meant that 2015 earned the title of ‘the year of body positivity’ in several online magazines (Kabas, 2015; Murray, 2015; Ospina, 2015; Surface, 2015).

²A statement that has been contested considering the success of Emme, Amy Lemons, Angellika Morton, Mia Tyler, Allegra Doherty, Ashley Graham and Velvet D’Amour prior to Holliday’s signing (Gilbert, 2018; Hargrove, 2018; Ospina, 2013; Waller, 2016). It is worth noting, however, that none achieved quite the same commercial success as Holliday.

³BBW is an acronym for big beautiful woman which is a term often associated with pornography featuring fat women.

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Although 2015, in terms of the Internet, is ancient history, it is important to note the period in which body positivity evolved into a mainstream movement to understand both how it got there and where it is going next. *The Body Positivity Movement* is an exploration into the knotty, recent history of body positivity. I aim to untangle what body positivity has the power to mean to different people in late-stage capitalism and examine the power and intentions of the movement. Commercial and popular body positivity, along with fat activism, has been accused of prioritising the celebration and representation of specific embodied identities, and that is an unavoidable truth that I will examine here. This book explores the growing ‘acceptability’ of *some* fat bodies – specifically, cis fat white women’s bodies. Therefore, I focus on women in the recent past and present who engage in body positive acts through their writing and who are deployed in body positive representation on social media, blogs and more traditional online media such as online magazines and newspapers. While a further exploration of body positivity could include thin women who identify with the movement, this book focuses on bloggers, journalists, authors, social media personas and television stars who have received traction representing themselves as fat body positive advocates or, in some cases, fat activists who engage in, what I recognise as, body positive practices. I also want to note that when I discuss women throughout this book, unless stated otherwise, I use a trans-inclusive definition of woman. The issues I discuss in this book, femininity, compulsory heterosexuality, whiteness, healthism and the pressure to engage in neoliberal self-love, impact all women. However, while trans-specific readings of body positivity are distinctly lacking in Fat Studies, this book, as I will go on to explain, focuses on dominant and popular representations of body positivity that mimic normatively gendered representations of women.

What Is Body Positivity and Where Did it Come from?

It would be extremely satisfying to give a neat and definite explanation of what body positivity is and has been, but if that were possible, there may be no need to write this book at all. Aubrey Gordon (2020, p. 5) suggests body positivity focuses on building self-esteem and positive body image while giving space for people to talk about their bodies and their insecurities. She also notes that body positivity has been an important lifeline for survivors of eating disorders and body dysmorphic disorder. Body positivity in this definition, as Gordon goes on to argue, is deeply internal and does not look to grapple with issues of power and oppression. Descriptions like this are often offered for body positivity, and while they have a place, they do very little to engage with the complex and storied history that came before the social media and advertising focused era of the movement.

In 1996, Connie Sobczak and Elizabeth Scott founded an organisation they named The Body Positive. While this organisation does share common ground with the body positivity movement, the focus of this book is located in the stories of current and former body positive advocates and fat activists engaged in body positive practices. These stories are often rich and written in ‘real-time’ as the

popularity of body positivity (and to some extent, fat activism) developed. I cover explanations and explorations of body positivity that are often decades old and therefore may seem old-fashioned or outdated in terms of how social justice is approached in the 2020s. However, stories are used as a reflection of body positivity at the time rather than as an opportunity to judge the people engaged in body positive practices. The body positivity I discuss refers to acts that may be deemed affirmative of women's physicality and draws on Charlotte Cooper's (2016) theory of body positivity as a fat activist proxy. I agree with Gordon (2020) that popularised notions of body positivity often prioritise a 'self-love' agenda and a demand for bodily representation that differs from normative thin standards of beauty. Tovar (2018b, p. 125) argues that body positivity is a mainstream movement that is an 'assimilationist offshoot of the fat liberation movement' and acknowledges that there is significant contention between fat feminists about what the 'real' body positivity movement is. Some, she states, argue that body positivity fights for the liberation of non-normative bodies but is not just restricted to fat bodies and may include trans and disabled people too. Many people involved in body positivity align themselves with resistance against weight stigma and advocate for positive body image. It is this iteration of body positivity, Tovar argues, that has been easily commercialised by brands seeking to make money on a feel-good movement. Body positivity, if viewed in this way, can be regarded as a movement very focused on consumerism and individual solutions to structural problems.

The result of a movement that is popularised through commercialisation has rendered body positivity vulnerable to some very valid critiques. Stephanie Yeboah (2020a, p. 28), who was an early adopter of online body positivity, claims that body positivity is now a 'free-for-all' movement that is prone to monetisation and politicisation by brands and public figures who ultimately alienate more 'unacceptable' bodies. Yeboah is not alone in her critique of body positivity, and as the movement became more popular in the 2010s, the critiques also became more visible. Although some criticisms may follow the ideology one may expect during the era of the 'obesity epidemic', others focused on body positivity's 'dilution' of fat activism and its repackaging of a formerly activist movement as something more palatable for the mainstream advertising and media (Brown, 2019; Dastagir, 2017; Faircloth, 2013; Ferguson, 2019; Greenall, 2019; Greene, 2019; Motz, 2018; Prins, 2017; Rutter, 2017; Severson, 2019; Shackelford, 2015; Tinsley, 2019; VanKoot, 2017).

While it has been suggested that fat activism has been about surrendering the concept of the physical body as a project of 'self-improvement' (LeBesco, 2004, p. 63), body positivity puts self-improvement of self-esteem and confidence at the forefront. As a result, some fat activists became concerned about body positivity eclipsing fat activism and defanging a movement that had once been regarded as radical in its fight for social justice for all bodies, not just those deemed palatable and acceptable enough to be included on the covers of magazines (Gordon, 2020, p. 156; Greenall, 2020, p. 45; Hagen, 2020, p. 11; Tovar, 2018b, p. 93). Discussions in popular publications that came post-2015 and Holliday's 'explosion' into the mainstream press all follow a similar mode of critique. For example, Dionne (2017) for *Bitch* wrote that body positivity is 'fragile' and has 'overtaken'

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the radical roots of fat activism; Rutter (2017) argued ‘the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was snatching body positivity out of the hands of fat women and then convincing them it was never theirs in the first place’, and Sherman (2019) wrote for *Jezebel* that the ‘end game’ for body positivity is more ‘mindless consumerism’. These critiques all focus on the concept of ‘theft’ from fat activism. They suggest that body positivity was built on a more radical foundation of resistance in the form of fat activism and body positivity’s popularity with a consumerist culture has meant that the movement and its proponents have been allowed to forget its fat-focused roots, allowing for a refocus on more ‘normative’ and ‘acceptable’ bodies.

My own introduction to fat activism was through practices that could be closely associated with body positivity. I found a freedom of expression that had been denied to me before, and I felt emboldened to pursue and analyse ideas that had previously felt out of reach. As I learnt more about fat activism and feminism, I began to understand that unified social movements – that is, single-issue movements solidified in agreement among fellow activists – are not necessarily possible in the perfect form I had once envisioned. So, when body positivity is accused of depoliticising fat activism, it begs questions about how or why this happened. Many critiques of body positivity assume it is a separate phenomenon from fat activism with different goals, but the reality is much more complex than that. Political movements are often much more divisive among their proponents than people outside the movements are aware of. In conversation Cooper and Murray (2012, p. 132) suggest that while fat activism in many ways is ‘undertaken by groups of people as community’, that is only a small snapshot of what fat activism is. Fat activism can also exist in ‘much smaller’ ways too, ‘through conversations, friendships, in the passing moments between strangers’ (p. 134). Cooper argues that fat activism operates without a ‘sense of group regulation’ and people may call on fat activism without understanding what it really means. In this way, fat activism can be treated as a concept relative to a specific moment or person. Cooper (2016), quite literally wrote ‘the book’ on fat activism, but there are other definitions and understandings too. Tovar (2018a) argues that the ‘differences’ between fat activism and body positivity are very noticeable and defines them easily; she argues that ‘body positivity has eclipsed fat activism’ and that, in contradiction to fat activism, body positivity is not a political movement since it does not have a clear focus, aim or purpose. These two contradictory viewpoints demonstrate that, just like body positivity, clearly defining fat activism is not a simple task.

At the beginning of the millennium, bell hooks (2000, p. 6) wrote that feminist politics were losing momentum because the feminist movement had lost clear definitions of its goals for social progress and change. In response, she wondered what popularity could do for feminism: ‘T-shirts and bumper stickers and postcards and hip-hop music, television and radio commercials, ads everywhere and billboards, and all manner of printed material that tells the world about feminism’. In the 2010s, feminism experienced mainstream popularity alongside body positivity with the two movements influencing one another. *The Body Positivity Movement* explores the idea that body positivity made fat activism ‘popular’, if

only for a brief amount of time. Fat people were able to recognise themselves in mainstream media and, as a result, younger generations were introduced to not just fat activism but feminism too. Just as there has been a cultural turn back towards body regulation in the West, there has been unrest in feminist communities and public backlash against feminist political ideology. In these circumstances, accusations that body positivity and its proponents are to blame for its lack of aim, direction and impact become more complicated. Social justice communities are vulnerable to the impacts of neoliberal societies that benefit from suffocating and depoliticising movements while happily capitalising on their identities. I write this book in 2025 with the benefit of hindsight, but when I look back at the achievements of the body positivity movement, it is difficult to agree with critiques that suggest it manifested its own downfall.

A Brief Exploration of Fat Studies and Epistemology

Fat Studies is a relatively new field, but it is a lens through which it is important to observe the contemporary body positivity movement. The field of Fat Studies is growing constantly, and important contributions at the outset were the *Fat Studies Journal* and the publication of *The Fat Studies Reader* (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). According to Rothblum (2011, p. 173), Marilyn Wann was one of the first activists to use the term ‘Fat Studies’. Wann (2009) asserted, ‘Unlike traditional approaches to weight, a fat studies approach offers no opposition to the simple fact of human weight diversity, but instead looks at what people and societies make of this reality’ (p. X). While Fat Studies ‘critically examines societal attitudes about body weight and appearance’ (Rothblum, 2011, p. 173), there is an acknowledgement among Fat Studies scholars that women suffer more from weight stigma than men, as they tend to be more concerned with their weight and report that weight has interfered with employment, relationship and social options (Rothblum, 2011; Tiggemann & Rothblum, 1988).

Despite swathes of Fat Studies research being influenced by feminist theory and methodology, Fat Studies is not an inherently feminist field, and historically, there has been a divide between the fat activist work that is produced within a feminist framework and that which is not. Fat Studies can explore the institutionalised impact and lived experiences of fat people without necessarily engaging with feminism. But, as Cooper (2010a) argues, Feminist Fat Studies is often associated with what she refers to as the ‘Holy Trinity of academic discourse on fat in social sciences’ – Susie Orbach, Kim Chernin and Susan Bordo. The Holy Trinity produces feminist psychoanalytic accounts and explorations of fat women in the early 1980s, which focus on eating disorders and treatment. Cooper argues that the work of the Holy Trinity is often cited as evidence of feminism’s good understanding of fat-related issues, and yet, it is not necessarily the feminism that influenced the development of Fat Studies. Although Orbach, Chernin and Bordo are recognised as fat feminist canon, they are rarely drawn upon in *The Body Positivity Movement*. Their work does not represent explorations or explanations of fat women and their experiences that I recognise – either in my research or in my own experience. As Cooper (2010a) claims, the work that is produced

from the Holy Trinity is often a proxy for fat activism, the ‘real’ focus being on ‘slenderness, dieting, body image and eating disorders’.

Fat Feminism that informs Fat Studies prioritises a fat epistemology which centralises fat people as experts on their own lived experiences. While scholarly work produced on fat is important, Fat Studies highlights the importance of knowledges beyond the academy. Cat Pausé (2012b, n.p.) asks who gets to be the ‘knower’; she argues that ‘authority figures’ such as physicians and politicians are often happy to talk about the dangers and implications of fat without having any empirical evidence behind their ideas. Pausé (2012b, n.p.) asserts that ‘the bottom line’ is that fat people know best about their own lives, behaviours and experiences and should therefore be the producers of knowledge around fat. Even if, or especially if, what fat people report contradicts mainstream understandings or ‘common sense’ notions surrounding issues related to fatness. Pausé was a fat woman who identified with both a scholarly and activist identity. Those distinctions are important. Throughout *The Body Positivity Movement*, I draw heavily on an alternative ‘Holy Trinity’: the work of Charlotte Cooper, Kathleen LeBesco and Samantha Murray, whose work informs a theoretical framework that has a basis in both academia and activism. Each of these scholars have experiences of being fat women, and they are either currently involved or have previously been involved in fat activism. As Teresa de Lauretis (1990) argues, feminism is built on the foundation of women talking to each other about their experiences, and in this way, Cooper, Murray and LeBesco’s approaches to research are inherently feminist. While each scholar has a different perspective on what it means to be engaged with fat activism, their research within the field of Fat Studies regularly demonstrates an understanding of gender alongside the complexities of existing as a fat woman while writing about fat.

When I began this work, there was very little published about body positivity, but as I began to immerse myself in the field of Fat Studies, it became clear that body positive practices existed long before the terminology did. Contemporary body positivity, for example, clearly echoes LeBesco’s (2004, p. 42) work on fat assimilationist activism, where she argues that the aim for assimilationist activists was to ‘secure tolerance’ for fat people. Murray’s (2008) perspective is shaped by being a fat woman, passionate about fat politics but uncomfortable with her own body and explores her concern for the politics of what she calls the ‘Size Acceptance’ movement. Murray engages with the problematics of ‘simply’ identifying as fat and questions the integrity of a movement which focuses on ‘changing one’s own mind about one’s own body’, which echoes the 2010 critiques of body positivity. And Cooper’s (2016) work on fat activist proxies posits the idea that there are many ‘assumptions’ made about fat activism that do not reflect her experiences as a fat activist. Cooper (2016, p. 11) names these ‘assumptions’ proxies, which are stand-ins or ‘something authorised to represent something else’ and which often only give a limited view of the idea they are supposedly representing. Cooper suggests that body positivity, even before it became popular, was a proxy for fat activism. It is from Cooper’s (2016) work that I take and develop my definition of body positivity as a concept and set of practices that are neither entirely separate nor entirely cohesive with fat activism.