

## Educate yourself!

Exploring feminist politics and self-development in Danish online fat activism.

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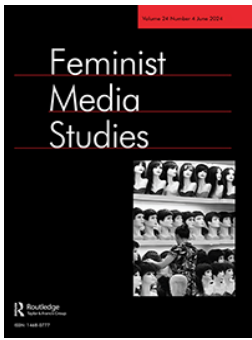
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# Educate yourself! Exploring feminist politics and self-development in Danish online fat activism

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores Danish fat activism and feminist politics on Instagram. Based on a 6-months ethnographic and digital fieldwork among Danish fat activists on Instagram, the article investigates the social implications of challenging normative body ideals online. Through ethnographic examples, the article illustrates how learning about fat acceptance through a fat accepting community is a liberating, deeply personal and transformative process. It is however also a social process taking place within a particular digital community with certain expectations on how to enlighten, educate, and understand oneself as a political subject. In the process of becoming a fat activist online, one is encouraged to appropriate new knowledge on feminist body politics and a feminist language for the social oppression of, among others, fat bodies. We argue that, contrary to popular transformation journeys on TV and social media, the goal for Danish fat activists is not outward bodily change but instead to develop the abilities to recognize social injustice and translate it into a social and feminist critique. Ironically, this inwards process towards feminist enlightenment simultaneously situate the Danish fat acceptance movement within an individualized neoliberal cultural logic of self-development as imperative.

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## Introduction

I am a fat woman  
I have been fat almost my entire life.  
I have spent so many years fighting my body  
Until one day I was fed up.  
Fed up with being mad at myself.  
Fed up with worrying what other people think of me.  
I am so much more than my body.  
My body is badass and lovely  
I have insecurities, I am human

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But I get wiser every day, and I have come to peace with myself,  
 and I wish that for everyone who has felt like me♥  
 I am what I am, and I accept that♥

*Instagram post, @linereiff 2020*

The social media Instagram is floated with photos of conventionally beautiful, young, able-bodied, thin women (Banet-Weiser 2012, 86; 2018, 13). Often these photos are edited to hide “flaws” like cellulite, double chins or unwanted bumps and fat rolls disturbing the slender idealized female figure. Even when minority women appear on social media platforms, they are called upon to make themselves recognizable within normative beauty logics in order to gain visibility and circulation (Tobias Raun and Maria Christensen-Strynøe 2022). This polished and modified Instagram landscape of “perfect” bodies, accentuates and amplifies a longer cultural tradition where consumer culture has ingrained in us that the human body is a dangerous enemy that constantly must be disciplined and modified (Susan Bordo 1995; Mike Featherstone 1982). Especially the fat body is feared as it represents a form of uncontrolled chaos, a taint of matter and flesh, which the promotion of the fit and thin body acts as a bolster against (Bordo 1995, 147–148). With digital media, a hereto unprecedented variety of devices, apps and representations surface that offers tools, tips and tricks on how to monitor and manage body weight, size and shape (Deborah Lupton 2017, 128). The so-called perfection culture thriving in the filtered world of social media, not least Instagram, has significant consequences for (especially young) women who in their daily lives experience the physical and mental burden of conforming to the—literally—narrow ideals of the female body (Banet-Weiser 2012; Angela McRobbie 2017). As a response to a still growing pressure to live up to the “thin female ideal” cultivated and praised on social media, a counter movement has emerged of women who reclaim their bodies. As a strategy of resistance to the gendered fatphobia of westernized societies (Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco 2001; Amy; Amy Erdman Farrell 2011; Jeannine A. Gailey and Hannele Harjunen 2019; Aubrey Gordon 2020), women from various parts of the world now take part in shaping an online and international fat acceptance movement<sup>1</sup> through the sharing of hashtags such as #body-positivity, #fatacceptance and #fatactivism.

This article is based on a study among Danish fat activists and their engagement on Instagram. With some exceptions—attending to for instance the growing online fat acceptance movement in Scandinavia, e.g., in Sweden (Malin Svenningsson, Alva Vestberg and Johanna Hedström 2022) and in Finland (Kaisu Hynnä and Katariina Kyrölä 2019)—the growing body of research is dominated by English speaking case material, speaking to and from a primarily U.S. context. The article, thus, supplements existing research by zooming in on the Danish fat accepting community on Instagram, analyzing the governing narratives within this particular community, and how these connects to broader cultural tropes. Within the online fat accepting movement, being fat and standing up for one’s fat body are considered acts of appraisal, courage and necessity. Some of the women in the Danish fat accepting community consider themselves activists and part of a broader feminist and social movement claiming rights for “othered” bodies and an end to discrimination against fat people (Susan Orbach 1978). Others find the digital sphere of Instagram to be a personal space for practicing self-love and body positivity in a community of like-minded people (Gemma Gibson 2023).

However, shared amongst an otherwise (relatively) diverse group of (primarily) women seems to be a desire and a need to distance themselves from society's norms and expectations towards their bodies. Living in a westernized culture where fatphobia is dominating the cultural, social and public world, insisting on living in a fat body is a radical and controversial "choice," and one that often leads to marginalization and social condemnation (Charlotte Cooper 2016). Moreover, in a Danish context where public healthcare services are provided by the Danish state, fatness is considered a collective problem to an even greater extent than in many other national and cultural contexts (Jackie Wykes 2014, 2).<sup>2</sup> Thus, for many of the people who identify with the fat acceptance movement, finding an online community that challenges normative beauty standards has been life altering (Carolyn Kost and Kimberly Jamie 2022).

Stepping into the digital world of fat acceptance was described as an "existential experience" by the women in this study, leaving them somehow changed, different, and with a new perspective on life. This new outlook on the fat body is by most of them experienced as liberating, however, it is also an ambivalent discovery, demanding that the women recognize and actively start working against society's and their own internalized fatphobia. In this article, we therefore ask; what happens in the process of challenging the normative ideal of the thin female body? How do fat activists navigate in this "new" social terrain and which role do feminist perspectives on body politics circulating in online communities play in this process? And, furthermore, how can we understand the process and practices of fat liberation in a broader cultural and social context? In the article's analysis, we demonstrate how fatphobic norms of liberalization through bodily transformation vis-a-vis weight loss are replaced by new norms of liberalization through enlightenment and consciousness-raising. While recognizing that practicing feminist body politics on social media offer an important social and political critique of sizeist culture as well as hold potential for individual emancipation, we argue that it simultaneously situate the fat activist movement within a broader cultural and neoliberal logic of self-development as imperative.

### **Fat activism on social media**

The fat acceptance movement originally started in the US and Canada in the 1950s as a response to anti-fat discourses and the medicalization of fat bodies (Adowa Afful and Ricciardelly Rose 2015). In the early days of the Internet, fat activists started using blogs, listservs, and online discussion boards to communicate and mobilize. Later, Facebook community pages and Twitter groups were used (Lupton 2017, 122). Now, fat activists are using Instagram<sup>3</sup> as their preferred media, which offers greater opportunities for attracting attention and followers via the use of specific hashtags. Hashtags enable people and groups to find each other, to form ad-hoc or more lasting communities or movements, and to challenge, provoke or overthrow prevailing power structures (Simon Lindgren 2022, 97–98, 174). Contrary to for instance #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, the online fat accepting movement is not a hashtag movement as such although hashtags do play an important role in community building and awareness raising. The fat acceptance movement present on Instagram is organized around *connective action*, based on people's personalized sharing of content on or across media networks, but without a formal organizational management and coordination of action (Lance Bennet and Alexandra

Segerberg 2014, 47). As such, the fat accepting movement could be categorized as a form of political engagement where conventional group ties are replaced by networked individualism (Lindgren 2022, 190). From this perspective, online fat activism is exemplary of the new forms of *issue politics* that are on the rise, where people mobilize around things they care about personally, rather than engage in conventional politics (Bennet and Segerberg 2014, 23). The personal action frames are, however, rooted in collective identifications and feelings of discrimination (Lindgren 2022, 188; Lene Bull Christiansen and Maj Hedegaard Heiselberg 2021). As we will demonstrate, the Danish case illustrates how collective ideas about fat politics and fat liberation do indeed circulate and shape an otherwise individualized movement from within, consequently nuancing, the notion of a networked individualism.

On Instagram, images play an essential role and audiovisual communication is *the* modus operandi. Fat activists use audiovisuals to highlight, explore and challenge the relationality between fatness and visibility. The mere presence of fat bodies on Instagram counteracts the lack of fat (positive) representations in mainstream media, and the broad reach of this platform also challenges the power position of mainstream media in terms of defining beauty standards and disseminating knowledge. Furthermore, social media users engage in self-affirming and self-exploring acts of self-representation, where they unapologetically reclaim visibility, and emphasize that not only the thin body but also the fat body deserves to be shown, to be sexually active and desirable, to enjoy, and to be nurtured. Social media platforms, however, do also exercise power over individuals by moderating user content through algorithms (David Kaye 2019) and by “shadowbans;” “a form of light and secret censorship targeting what Instagram defines as borderline content, particularly affecting posts depicting women’s bodies, nudity and sexuality” (Carolina Are 2022). Consequently, fat activists must constantly navigate a social media landscape that both enable and regulate their online visibility. Moreover, Danish fat activists do experience both online harassment and trolling as well as the risk of being publicly ridiculed when insisting on addressing fat as a political and feminist issue on social media.

## Media representations: Transforming the fat body

Media images give access to various kinds of bodies that the audience can engage and identify with in complex ways. As feminist media research shows us, these representations offer social imaginaries that deem certain bodies desirable and acceptable and others threatening and shameful (Bordo 1995; Rosalind Gill 2007; Brenda R. Weber 2009). The slim and the fat body, with their gendered, racialized and sexualized markers, are prime examples of bodies that are associated with and inscribed in oppositional meanings as well as in very different “affective economies” (Sara Ahmed 2004). The representation of slim and fat bodies invites the audience to feel or attach different kinds of emotions to them, and they hereby call for different kinds of body politics (Kariina Kyrölä 2021, 106). The slim and the fat body co-constitute each other, although they appear in media images with very different frequency and in very different ways. As Kyrölä states: “[T]he categories of ‘normal’ or ‘desirable’ are at least as much produced through what constitutes their outside, what is understood as ‘excessive,’ ‘too much,’ or ‘over’ – all things that fat is claimed to be” (Kyrölä 2021, 105). The slim body is the dominant body that is present

everywhere in the entertainment industry (e.g., TV series, films, commercials), and which therefore masquerades as the “normal” and idealized body. The fat body appears far less frequently and primarily as an extreme form of embodiment: “popular media represent fat bodies as grotesque, uncontained, destined for ill-health and an early death, and a burden on the public purse” (Lupton 2017, 120). Hence, the fat body is bound by various kinds of representational tropes, and it primarily resurfaces within particular “genres and modalities,” as Kyrölä labels it (Kyrölä 2021, 105). Kyrölä highlights how fat bodies tend to be restricted to comedy or news discourses and reality TV, where they serve either as a comic relief, a health problem or as part of a transformation narrative (Kyrölä 2021).

Particularly relevant for the argument in this article is the transformation narrative that often accompanies the visibility of the fat body. In different ways, news discourse and reality TV both showcase fat bodies mainly to require their self-transformation through the removal of fat. News representations typically portray fatness as a threat to the health and economy of various western nations, in need of urgent intervention, dehumanized or abstracted through the so-called ‘headless fatty;’ the representational act of decapitating anonymous fat people to illustrate the “obesity epidemic” (Harjunen 2017; Kyrölä 2021, 107). Reality TV programs such as “The Biggest Loser” also portray fat as unequivocally unhealthy and unwanted, and make claims of health and happiness through weight loss. As argued by Kyrölä, reality TV dieting shows are built on promise, not explicitly on threat, enabling the transformation of the fat body from being a body marked by shame and disgust into a body marked by pride and happiness, but only if and when they lose weight (Kariina Kyrölä 2016, 69–84).

The overarching plot drive of these reality shows are transformation, showcasing a “before” and “after” body, which is altered through plastic surgery, weight loss or styling. The transformation, thus, involves different kinds of technologies and guidance, although it typically includes weight loss and/or training/toning of the body as a default mode. The transformation itself is about change and improvement; unblocking barriers (including the body itself) that have led to sadness and self-ridicule, and allowing for happiness, self-esteem and confidence (Weber 2009, 29). There is an assumed correspondence between the negative feelings and experiences of the contestants and their bodies/appearance, which symbolically manifest itself as “the blubbery and cellulited body” (Weber 2009, 16). The transformation is portrayed as teleological and unidirectional: “Before-bodies become After-bodies, end of story” (Weber 2009, 15). While the Before-body connotes misery, the After-body connotes success and upward mobility (Weber 2009, 43). Fatness is thus “the necessary starting point for heroic transformations into proud and happy slimness” (Kyrölä 2016, 2). Or to paraphrase Weber, after-bodies presuppose before-bodies as visual truths or testimonies of transformative success, highlighting both the dreadfulness of the “before,” but also the triumph of the “after” (Weber 2009, 83). As Weber argues, these makeover shows signal a broader and more extensive preoccupation with transformation, and the hope and fear that is attached hereto, such as the ability to regulate and protect the vulnerable social body through the control of “real” physical bodies (Weber 2009, 20–21). These makeover shows are, however, a form of exploitation, where salvation is granted through submission, thus the contestants need to subject themselves to pathologization and abjection, that travels through the dissecting and shaming gaze of the camera and the proclaimed experts (Weber 2009, 6, 20, 33–34). It is a combined gesture of “humiliation and care” (Weber 2009, 30).

As we shall see, social media offer opportunities to resist fat shaming and social media is used to challenge the neoliberal, hegemonic discourse around health and thinness, where especially women tend to be subjects and objects of both ends of the spectrum (Lupton 2017, 120; Staci Zavattaro 2021, 285). However, social media simultaneously encourages body performances that align with thin-privileged social norms. In contemporary digital media culture, weight loss figures as a powerful narrative trope in numerous personal profiles, following some of the overall patterns described above, not least the juxtaposition of before and after images, communicating the idea that weight loss is a gateway to improved “quality of life,” “inner strength” and “happiness.” Making the decision to care for one self by slimming the body is described as an individual and active choice to improve one’s life quality. Following this rhetoric in a Danish context, dieting is typically referred to as a lifestyle change [livsstilsændring] and the weightloss journey as acts of self-love [selvkærlighed]

### **(Digital) ethnographic fieldwork in the Danish fatosphere**

The article is based on empirical data from an ethnographic fieldwork carried out by Maj Heiselberg in 2020 among Danish fat activists. The fieldwork is part of the larger research project FAT (Feminist Activism in Transition) focusing on the changing Danish media landscape in relation to fat bodies. Digital platforms have over the past decades come to shape and define social practice. Understanding the complexity of social life in a digital age, thus, means that the researcher must move beyond the dichotomy of online/offline worlds (Sarah Pink 2016). This fieldwork was designed as a mix of online ethnography and traditional ethnographic methods such as interviews and participant observation (Karen O’Reilly 2012, 86–141). Heiselberg has systematically followed the online practices of 30 Danish fat activists for a period of 6 months as well as carried out semi-structured interviews (Raymond Madden 2010) with ten of the, at the time, most active members of the Danish fat accepting community. A majority of the interlocutors were white, middle-class, heterosexual women, however with a few exceptions in the intersection of gender/sexuality/class/ethnicity. With the aim to explore fat lives on and off the screen, Heiselberg has furthermore pursued ongoing collaboration with fat activists throughout the research project. Our knowledge of fat activism and, thus, also stems from e.g., writing, teaching, performing, and debating with fat activists in different settings (Davis Dána-Ain and Crista Craven 2016; Christina Hee Pedersen 2021). The data presented in this paper is a combination of written statements posted by Danish fat activists on Instagram and quotes or conversations from interviews and participant observation. All quotes are, as far as possible, anonymized and permission has been granted to use interlocutors’ statements/posts for research purposes. However, studying fat activism and fat lives in a social and cultural context saturated by medicalized and stereotypical views on fatness demands a note on positioning. The personal life stories, intimate details, and ambivalent feelings shared by the fat women participating in this study emerged in conversation and interviews formed by the researcher’s position as a fat woman herself. Having personal experiences with fat embodiment granted Heiselberg access to an often closed off field where people’s fear of fatphobic comments or assumptions made them cautious about what to share and with whom. Identification with one’s interlocutors, or writing from an “insider” perspective (Narmala Halstead 2001), entails in this case



a particular form of commitment to and investment in the people being studied. As pointed out by Tobias Raun (2014), this raises ethical questions concerning the responsibility of representation and the power relations between interlocutor and researcher. One such ethical question relates to the analytical findings presented in this article. As we will demonstrate later, fat activists are often well versed within feminist theory (Jenny Ellison 2020) and many overlaps exist between the analytical frameworks used by fat activists and fat studies scholars. Nonetheless, this does not guarantee that the women represented in this article will agree with the analytical arguments presented. It is our hope, still, that our attempt to situate the Danish fat acceptance community within a broader cultural context will inspire to further the debate and social critique of normative body ideals and politics.

### **An “Existential” Experience: Discovering the fatosphere**

The fat activists in this study described discovering the “fatosphere” (Kathy Charmaz and Dana Rosenfeld 2010) as a life changing experience. Witnessing other fat people celebrating their bodies on screen pushed the fat activists to confront life trajectories of bodily insecurity, countless failed attempts of dieting and years of self-loathing. As described in by Tina, a young woman in her late twenties:

You know, if you have this very narrow view on what the body can look like then of course everything will be hard work and you will push yourself to the extreme - constantly being on a diet, counting your calories, working out. It takes over everything and your quality of life becomes so small, right? Then, it’s like, getting a new perspective that, you know, here are some fat women, and some of them are even really fat, and they just walk around in a bikini and feel good about themselves, and do things with their lives. The same things that you have been sitting at home saying “when I become thin, then I am going to do all of that,” you know, things like that. They are actually doing that. That was a complete revelation.

*Interview extract, 23.9.2020*

At the time of the interview, Tina had practiced fat acceptance for a couple of years as part of her recovery from an eating disorder. Like most of the women in this study, she had found a community of like-minded people on Instagram. In the beginning, the online fat acceptance community primarily consisted of fat activists in U.S. and U.K. but as the fat accepting movement expanded, more Danish voices joined and Tina slowly witnessed a Danish fraction of the movement emerge. Being part of a fat accepting community provided her with a new sense of worth and entitlement. Kost and Jamie (2022) argue that forming friendships and mutual support networks among other fat people online can be a “lifesaver” when weight discrimination, fatphobia, and marginalization have resulted in poor mental health and low self-esteem. At the same time, as Tina’s quote illustrates, the process of realizing that one is capable of living a full life as a fat person, also meant looking back at years wasted waiting for life to begin. This did indeed create emotional turmoil, generating feelings such as anger, resentment and sorrow as well as new hopeful questions to the life waiting ahead. In Denmark, fatness is often represented as a synonym for self-inflicted poor health putting extra pressure on a strained welfare society (Camilla Bruun Eriksen 2017). Hence, by being fat one is considered a potential burden to the collective resources and the healthcare system which might explain the deeply rooted internalized fatphobia that women, like Tina are confronted with when encountering the

fat acceptance movement. In the quote below, another woman in this study, Katrine, reflects on her first encounter with a fat activist blog. She describes it as an “existential experience” of self-discovery:

I remember very specifically stumbling across a blog called “The Militant Baker” who is a body positive blogger in Arizona in the US, if I remember correctly. It was the first time someone telling me in writing that “What if you are not wrong?” I broke down crying. It was the most crazy revelation because it was such a deep-rooted truth and a universal truth, if you should quote Jane Austen; that fatness is the worst and something that you need to avoid at all costs in order to be an acceptable human being. It was a truth that I had never questioned and here was the first voice asking that question; “What if you are not wrong? What if you are allowed to be as you are right now? What if you are allowed to do all the things that you have been waiting for?” It was a huge emotional experience because it was such a gigantic blind spot that was revealed to me. Because who even said that I needed to change? Who even said that my way of being is wrong? Because I am not feeling particularly bad about my body, I have just always been told that I should. So where does that reality come from? It became philosophical and existential. But also just, you know, heartbreaking, because I was grieving all these years where I had just bought into that reality. I have thought that this is just the way it is and I deserve less. I can’t achieve good things in life as long as my body looks like this. It was a very defining night for me, and I was just sitting taking it all in (. . .).

*Interview extract, 21.08.2020*

The confrontation with an alternative view on fat bodies that questions deep-rooted “truths,” as Katrine phrases it, may best be described by Clare Hemmings’ term “affective dissonance” (Clare Hemmings 2012). Drawing from Probyn, Hemmings introduces affective dissonance as a way of conceptualizing the point in life when a feminist consciousness or reflexivity arise; when one experiences “the dissonance between [one’s] sense of self and the possibilities for its expression and validation” (ibid: 154), and when consequently feelings of otherness occur. Hemmings further explains:

(. . .) in order to know differently we have to feel differently. Feeling that something is amiss in how one is recognised, feeling an ill fit with social descriptions, feeling undervalued, feeling that same sense in considering others; all these feelings can produce a politicised impetus to change that foregrounds the relationship between ontology and epistemology precisely because of the experience of their dissonance (Hemmings 2012, 150)

Following moments of affective dissonance, one might continue life as before, “content with one’s lot” to paraphrase Hemmings, or one might be moved or compelled to take action; insist on using one’s new found perspective to change things (ibid, 156). The latter holds true for Tina and Katrine as well as the other fat activists participating in this study. In different ways, as we will return to later, the encounter with the fat accepting movement online led the fat activists to speak up against the normative and restrictive body ideals of contemporary society. For this purpose, Instagram was considered the obvious choice, as the social media platform allowed for a “female gaze” on one’s body, as one activist explained it (See also Lupton 2017, 123). Posting confident photos of their fat bodies and/or voicing their concerns over the stigmatization of fatness in society, became a way for the Danish fat activists to react to their experience of dissonance in ways that fostered affective solidarity across a fat accepting community (Hemmings 2012; see also Christiansen and Hedegaard Heiselberg 2021). In that sense, encountering an online fat accepting community not only gave the women a much welcomed opportunity to

distance themselves from internalized fatphobia, it likewise provided them with support, inspiration and ideas for how to confront social body norms and challenge stereotypical representations of the fat body.

### **Knowledge obliges – Acquiring a new language and defining a community**

Learning to look at one's own and others' fat bodies without passing judgment was, however, a challenging one-step-forward-two-steps back process. A young woman, for instance, described how she repeatedly followed and unfollowed a Danish fat activist organization until she was ready to watch fat people in her feed without feeling provoked despite (or maybe because of) her own fat body. In a similar manner, the women explained how feelings of bodily shame and disgust would still creep in on them from time to time, causing insecurity and vulnerability. Such recurring emotions and bodily reactions of internalized anti-fat attitudes resides in the minds and bodies of most fat people (Alexandra Brewis 2014). For the same reasons, moving in and out of the fatosphere was often described as a transformative process of self-development. For some, the transformation process involved a nascent ability to practice self-love and offer as well as receive compassion in a space that felt somewhat safe, and which comprised other fat allies. For others, the real transformative self-development took place as they began to understand their bodies as part of a gendered power hierarchy placing fatness at the bottom, along with other marginalized bodies. That is, when they began thinking of fatness as a feminist issue (Janna L. Fikkan and D. Rothblum Esther 2011; Orbach 1978).

Not all interlocutors in this study would describe themselves as feminists, or even fat activists. In fact, to many the word "activist" seemed to promise a particular kind of resistance rooted in theoretical/feminist knowledge and the ability to "go to the barricades," as one interlocutor put it.<sup>4</sup> Among those that openly identified as fat activists, the convergence between fat activism and feminist knowledge shined through when they described their encounter with the fat accepting movement as a first step in a long and ongoing educational process. One example is Marie, a young Indigenous/Danish woman in her late twenties who describes how Instagram became a place to learn about activism, feminism and intersectionality. When asked what Instagram means to her, she says:

It is a lot of things (...). It's also a place I go to find inspiration, and it has definitely been a source of development for me. Because I think that I have also used Instagram as a ... all of a sudden, I started following some feminists and then I found some body activists and then some anti-racists and you know, all of a sudden you are down this rabbit hole of activism (laughs). In the best possible way, right? And I think, it has really been an educational space for me and it still is, and I really think that that is what it [Instagram] is. It has some potential for learning that you didn't have when I was a teenager.

*Interview extract, 31.11.2020*

Like most of the activists in this study, Marie had longed for the critical interpretations of societal structures that she met on Instagram: "I have been hungry [for it] because it was already inside of me, I just didn't have the language to put it into words," she explains. Other feminists and activists, thus, offered explanations to the injustices and stigmatization she had experienced as a fat indigenous woman, and she "devoured it like a ferocious

wolf." The new knowledge made accessible by various fat, queer, crib, anti-racist, and intersectional activists and feminists online helped the activists in this study articulate their embodied experiences as fat women as well as situate their struggles within a broader cultural frame. In a Danish and predominantly white and middleclass fat activist community, turning to international resources helped them access knowledge about the cultural history of fatness and its connection to race (Sabrina Strings 2019), class (Frances Hatherley 2015) and gender (Bordo 1995). Reading through their profile content, a clear pattern emerges in the women's vocabulary. Words such as "privilege," "societal structures," "patriarchy" and "intersectionality" begin to occur as the activists become familiar with feminist critiques and perspectives on inequality. Further educating oneself and sharing the new knowledge acquired are pertinent elements in recognizing oneself and being recognized as a member of a fat activist community. As Katrine amplifies:

Katrine: You have to read about the structural systems that make us all hate fatness and believe that fatness is wrong.

Maj: So, you need to educate yourself somehow?

Katrine: Very much so. I have tried to put up some resources on my Instagram. I haven't been good at doing it very systematically, but I would like to improve. That's also because I am not very good at reading all the articles that are published, but I always refer to Dina Amlund [Danish fat activist and researcher] and Lindo Bacon [fat studies researcher] (. . .). Because there are a lot of pretty good and accessible resources for normal people where you don't have to read heavy academic articles.

*Interview extact, 21.9.2020*

Katrine suggests an obligation not only to educate herself but also to help her followers become more knowledgeable regarding fatness. By stating that she "would like to improve," Katrine furthermore indicates that she (still) feels inadequate, and obligated to contribute even more to the community and to her own personal development by enlightening herself and communicating that knowledge. In a similar vein, Marie describes how she tries not to blame herself for being incapable of living up to her own convictions or not having the energy to stand up for herself in compromising situations. Learning about fat activism "is a process," she reminds herself, and "although I speak up against the structure, I am still part of it, and to be honest, sometimes it's just fucking hard."

## **Self-development as a neoliberal cultural logic**

Instagram, as other online spaces, enable dispersed individuals to gather and be part of a larger collective by posting and commenting, hereby serving an important function in terms of identification and community building (Svenningson, Vestberg, and Hedström 2022, 41). However, as illustrated above, being part of the Danish fat acceptance community on Instagram demands that one puts in the work and continuously educate oneself on critical feminist theory. When "flaunting" (Jenny Lee 2014) their fat and critical perspectives on Instagram, the Danish fat activists challenge the common cultural trope, that the self is "discovered or developed through transformations of the flesh" (Cressida J. Heyes 2007, 4). As outlined previously, in makeover programs and lifestyle transformation blogs/posts the overall narrative is that salvation goes through the transformed body, thus the body becomes "the gateway to the self" (Weber 2009, 5). The assumption and promise is, that

a true and happy self is hidden within the fat body, and different layers of flesh/fat therefore needs to be peeled off in order to find the core self underneath: “Fat is thus only ‘surface,’ not an identity, and dieting is seen more as a revelation of the ‘true’ self in all its glory, slimness, and moral redemption” (Kyrölä 2021, 109). The fat activists on Instagram confront and challenge the promise of bodily transformation and weight loss as prerequisites for happiness and self-empowerment. For these fat activist, the gateway to a more authentic and happier self is by dismissing the eternal pursuit of the thin “after body.” It is crucial for the fat activists to leave behind the idea that one’s body needs to transform in order to be recognized as a “valid subject” (Weber 2009, 13), both for one’s mental and physical well-being as well as for one’s ability to develop a social critique of dieting culture. As we saw in the quote by Tina above, rejecting the idea of an “after” body is crucial not only for the fat activists to “do things with their lives,” but also to locate a more true sense of self, liberated from the toxic interpellation and heavy burden of fatphobia.

For the Danish fat activists, the source of salvation has, thus, taken a 360-degree turn. Salvation is what occurs when they gain a feminist consciousness, that is, when they realize and react to the experienced dissonance (Hemmings 2012) between their sense of self and societal norms and structures. “You have to read about the structural systems,” as Katrine stresses. For the fat activists in this study, transforming one’s body does not hold the key to salvation, however transforming one’s mind might. Instead of a “before” and “after” body, we argue that the fat activists touch or call upon a “before” and “after” mind; that is, a mind enlightened and conscious. The celebrated change in mindset is not the hollow, “commercial body confidence messages” (Susan Orgad and Roselind Gill 2022, 40) as outlined above through the work of McRobbie (2020) and Ana Elias, Roselind Gill and Chistina Scharff (2017), but is instead a full frontal attack on the overall system that taught these fat people to hate their bodies in the first place. Gaining a feminist consciousness means creating awareness about how individual thoughts, feelings and experiences are the product of larger social forces and therefore are political issues. Instead of blaming oneself and attempting to improve one’s individual life, consciousness raising promotes collective action to address the social roots of women’s circumstances” (Nancy Whittier 2017, 377). Working on one’s “after” mind, one could argue, holds a promising potential for individual as well as collective emancipation from the narrow body ideals of society.

As demonstrated in particularly Katrine and Marie’s quotes above, however, as soon as the pressure to lose weight releases, another concern arises; Am I a good fat activist? Should I read more, know more? Should I share more content/resources with my followers? The pursuit for the after body might have loosened its grip, but the self-development imperative—that is, the existing cultural logic of continuously and deliberately working on one’s personal development (Rosalind Gill 2008; Nicolas Rose 1999)—lives on in Danish fat activists’ pursuit for a conscious and reflective “after” mind. Looking at media discourses of self-development in both Norway and Turkey, Salman Türken (2016), Hilde Eileen Nafstad, Rolv Mikkel Blakar and Katrina Roen argue that the growing popularity of “expert” advice on how to become the best version of oneself, from for example life-coaches, contributes to the creation of neoliberal subjects endlessly working to increase their value as bearers of human capital (2016, 35) “Neoliberalism demands a constant reworking of the self” the authors argue, “a continual self-improvement to fit the demands of the advanced liberal society.” From this perspective, replacing the pursuit for the “after body” with a “lifelong learning” path to a conscious “after mind,” one transformation of the self, we argue, has

been replaced by another. Self-development, in this case in the shape of consciousness-raising, becomes a source of value creation worth pursuing for fat activists, as it offers a promise of self-acceptance and happiness as well as contributes to communal appraisal. Continuously working on the self is a social process taking place in an online environment where other activists might like, re-post, and share fat activists content, or they might judge or call them out for not adhering to the implicit rules within the community. In her study of feminism on social media platforms, Cat Mahoney, argues that “the politics of looking” on visual platforms, such as Instagram, has implications in terms of “accountability” and the risk of “failing to adequately evidence feminist practice” (Cat Mahoney 2020, 3). Instagram becomes a “tool of neoliberal self-regulation,” she continues, where followers can call each other out for not performing as proper feminists online. Although not all the women in this study followed the same educational path as illustrated through Tina, Katrine and Marie’s examples above, they nonetheless recognize the expectations within the fat accepting community to become knowledgeable and practice fat feminist politics. Failing to demonstrate a “proper” self-development within the fat activist community, one might risk exclusion or social condemnation. One woman explained how she experienced a “divide” in the fat accepting community between self-identified fat activists and other fat accepting Instagrammers. She herself ended up withdrawing from the community during the period of fieldwork because she had been called out for being “fatphobic” when trying to nuance the debate regarding weigh loss.<sup>5</sup> In this case, feminist body politics became a tool not only for widening one’s perspective but likewise for calling out those “that can’t be bothered” to get acquainted with fat feminist body politics, as one interlocutor phrased it. The “female gaze” enabled by Instagram and depicted by the interlocutors of this article as a positive alternative to the problematic sexualizing “male gaze,” could thus also be experienced as an example of “peer surveillance,” where especially young women experience “being subject to a ‘checkbox gaze’” (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017, 16). In their introduction to anthology *Aesthetic Labor* (2017), Elias, Gill and Scharff further mention Alison Winch’s (2013) concept of “girlfriendgaze,” described as “a modality of looking in which women and girls police each other’s looks and behaviors. (16).” As the example above illustrates, performing one’s fatness in the “right way” on Instagram was indeed a concern among the fat activists, underscoring the double meaning of the “female gaze.”

## Concluding discussion

The process of becoming a fat activist in an online fat accepting community suggests navigating conflicting social terrains and contradictory cultural logics. On the one hand, becoming familiar with feminist body politics was a liberating experience for the fat activists in this study. Gaining new perspectives on fat as a political and social issue helped the women reconcile with their own bodies as well as articulate a cultural critique in a public forum for the world to see and listen. Simultaneously, however, being part of a community online means adhering to implicit rules of conduct and—following a cultural neoliberal logic of self-development—to work on oneself in a particular way. In that sense, Danish fat activists are at once subverting normative body ideals through collective action, support and encouragement from a fat accepting community online, whilst ensuring continuous individual growth and development. The fat accepting movement is indeed life altering for fat women who have spent a lifetime hating their bodies. Nonetheless, it is impossible for fat

activists to escape neoliberal logics when advocating for fat acceptance on a platform like Instagram with “an architecture whose core is controlled by (U.S.) tech giants pushing economic values and corporate interests, often at the expense of a (European) focus on social values and collective interests” (José Van Dijck, Thomas Poell and Martijn De Waal 2018). Like everyone else, fat activists must optimize themselves. If not their bodies, then their minds. The self-development imperative is experienced as a burning need to educate oneself, as when Marie devours feminist and anti-racist literature. Or it shows when fat activists differentiate between those that educate themselves on feminist body politics and those that don’t. The structural critique of fatphobia can seem incompatible with wanting to lose weight, feeling ashamed or appalled by one’s body, which are all feelings and wishes that can make the fat activists feel as if they are not enlightened enough, that they are bad activists, or that they are not a proper member of the activist community. However, as with other minority groups, the question is how and if a structural critique of governing norms and practices and their discriminatory effects necessarily have to be incarnated and incorporated by the minority individual into their inner feelings, longings and desires. As pinpointed by Raun in relation to trans-people, it is a difficult if not impossible task for the trans-individual to carry the burden of overthrowing the binary gender system (Raun 2014). In the same manner, it is not possible for fat activists to practice fat acceptance in a social world saturated by neoliberal logics without playing the game themselves. The interesting part, and the focus of this article, has been to shed light on the ways that neoliberal logics of self-development and systemic critique exist simultaneously.

## Notes

1. In this article we use the term “Fat acceptance movement” to refer to an international movement taking place primarily on social media and cutting across national, geographical, and social boundaries. When talking about more local fractions of this movement, such as the Danish one, we use the term “fat accepting community”
2. After conducting fieldwork, the Danish medical company Novo Nordisk introduced the weight loss product “Wegovy” in 2023. “Wegovy” promises a “cure” to fatness thereby saving the Danish healthcare sector the expenses of the so-called “obesity epidemic,” whilst securing Novo Nordisk the biggest financial success to date. The launch of “Wegovy” has caused heated debate in Danish society regarding health and beauty standards.
3. Over the past years, TikTok has grown to become an equally important communication platform for the fat acceptance movement. The data collected for this article is, however, only from Instagram, and the focus of this article is therefore on content created and shared on this social media platform.
4. In this article, we take a different approach to “activism” when referring to our interlocutors’ norm critical practices as “fat activism.” With reference to Cooper (2016), even just carving out space (metaphorically as well as literally) as a fat person in a fatphobic world can be viewed as activism.
5. The “divide” mentioned by the women in this study refers to a recurring debate within fat accepting communities between “fat activism” and “body positivity.” We will not go into details with the many nuances of this discussion here (see e.g., Anna Puhakka 2023; Svenningson, Vestberg, and Hedström 2022)

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