"I'm Fat as Fuck:" Fat Black Women's Self-Perception and Modes of Resistance

Savannah Henderson

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“I’m Fat As Fuck:”

Fat Black Women’s Self-Perception and Modes of Resistance

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Senior Honors Thesis submitted to

Washington University in St. Louis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts in Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies
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This thesis is dedicated to:

my mom, my partner, my research mentors, and to the WashU Mellon Mays Undergraduate Research Fellowship. Thank you for your unrelenting support over the past two years.

I also dedicate this project to fat Black women everywhere. I hope this work validates your experiences and encourages you to speak more freely about body image and self-perception. I hope you find healing and restoration in this project, in the same way that I did over these past two years.

You are loved. You are valued. You are beautiful.

*In memory of my nana, Cynthia Louise Hunt, and my best friend, Aria Keona Jackson. You are missed beyond articulation. I hope this makes you proud.*
Abstract

While many past scholars have positioned Black women as not having significant body image anxieties, Black women’s experiences with racism, sexism, and fatphobia is deeply rooted in historical narratives of the “acceptable body.” As a result, body image anxieties are prominent among Black women of size. My project investigates the historical and contemporary positioning of self-defined fat Black women and thoroughly interrogates the assumption that they do not have significant body image anxieties. Through the employment of 14 interviews, my project explores how fat Black women perceive their bodies and navigate the world. Additionally, using Lizzo’s media presence as a case study on fat Black women celebrities, I analyze interviews, social media posts, and song lyrics to give insight into the role of status and visibility in shaping fat Black women’s perception of their bodies. The overarching goal of this project is to locate the ways in which fat Black women resist racialized and gendered fatphobia and claim agency within different environments.
Introduction

“No one will love you until you lose three thousand pounds.” I was eight when a classmate uttered this to me at an after school program. I had a crush on a boy in my class so I befriended his friends. He, his friends, and I sat around the table playing a board game. I wore a cute pair of jean shorts with a yellow top decorated in a white floral pattern. I felt beautiful.

You can imagine my surprise when I realized that other people did not think I looked as beautiful as I felt. As the comment left my peer’s lips, my jaw and heart dropped. I looked around the table heartbroken as everyone laughed at me. Running off to the bathroom, the tears failed to stop themselves. This was not the first time my crush had been parallel to hurtful commentary directed at me. He previously told me he could not date people who “looked like me”—which was code for not wanting to be romantically associated with a Black girl.

I looked in the bathroom mirror and began to notice where my stomach stuck out too far, my legs jiggled, my chubby cheeks made my face look a little too childish for my liking, and the ways that my dark skin and my fat rolls made me feel unlovable. I promised myself that I would lose weight, a decision which served as the catalyst for a long-standing struggle with body acceptance. Looking in the mirror, tears falling down my cheeks, I learned what it meant for me to exist as a fat Black girl—ridiculed, taking up too much space, and loving those who refused to love me back.

As a result of personal anecdotes like this one, I went into college intending to center the experiences of Black women in my work. However, centering Black women, especially plus-sized Black women, was more difficult than expected. As I read existing literature on Black women and body image, I realized there was a lack of sufficient exploration into how these two experiences intersect. Often Black women were disregarded in the conversation on body
insecurity. Work on Black women’s experiences rarely mentioned the way fatphobia influenced their lived realities. Thus, I came to my research to encourage other scholars to think through the intersections of size, race, and gender, and provide analytical, yet accessible, representations of fat Black women’s experiences in the development of their self-perception and body image. In this paper, I explore the intersections of misogynoir, which I define as the systemic discrimination/hatred of Black women, and fatphobia, defined as systemic discrimination against the perceived fat body, in the lives of fat Black women. Situating my project in modern 21st-century understandings of fatphobia, racial discrimination, and sexism, I investigate the link between self-perception of body size among Black women and resistance in its many forms. Resistance is widely employed but very rarely defined in body and race literature; however, I argue that theories of resistance must be grounded in specific identities and experiences that are historically constructed, and I, therefore, look to the specificities of its definition for fat Black women within white Euro-American spaces.

My analysis includes a historical analysis of Euro-American treatment of the Black female body, interviews of 14 Black women of various sizes (Appendix A), and a case study on Lizzo’s public image as a fat Black woman celebrity. By historically situating how the Black female body has been represented within public discourse, I set the framework for understanding modern experiences of the fat Black female body. Through interviews, I center the women’s voices and provide an anecdotal analysis of their body image that connects to questions of (un)comfortability in spaces and social media’s influence on self-perception. For this project, I utilize self-perception, self-image, and body image interchangeably, and define these terms as “a person’s view of his or her self or of any of the mental or physical attributes that constitute the self. Such a view may involve genuine self-knowledge or varying degrees of distortion” (APA
Dictionary of Psychology). In this project, the physical attribute that I explore is body size. I also employ a digital analysis of Lizzo, a celebrity well known for proudly representing fat Black womanhood, to explore what resistance can look like within the digital sphere and its connection to image curation, visibility, and status. How fat Black women choose to showcase or accentuate their bodies and emotions on social media becomes a vessel for defining resistance in virtual spaces. Rooting my project in the belief that self-perception and self-image curation are valuable forms of knowledge production, my research questions are 1) what relationships, experiences, conversations, and spaces have influenced fat Black women's relationships with their bodies?, 2) how does Lizzo use her (social) media following to resist racialized and gendered fatphobia?, and 3) how do fat Black women's relationships with social media influence how they view their bodies?

I. Literature Review

   a. Racialized and Fat bodies as Degenerate

   Media depictions of Black bodies characterize them as degenerate and undesirable. Garland-Thompson (2002) explores the role of the racialized body within *Integrating Disability* (2002), arguing that the beautiful body within the 21st century is “non-disabled, deracialized, and de-ethnicized” (12). Those who fall into the categories of the “beautiful, healthy, normal, fit, competent, intelligent” are afforded cultural capital whereas those who do not fall into said categories are largely excluded (Garland-Thompson, 2002, 5). Cultural capital can include increased access to employment, medical care, and social networks (Berry, 2016). Such access to cultural capital, or lack thereof, based on appearance invokes what Thompson calls the ability/disability system, as it places people into broader binary categories of able (worthy) vs. disabled (unworthy) (Garland-Thompson, 2002). Because the “de-racialized” body is perceived
as the “beautiful body”, racialized bodies fall into the disabled/unworthy category. Black bodies are marked as undesirable and labeled as “abnormal” within society (Garland-Thompson, 2002). Labeling Black bodies as abnormal marks them as undesirable and degenerate (Garland-Thompson, 2002).

For Black women, the markings of exotic, undesirable, and degenerate are nothing new. Black women have consistently throughout history been viewed as embodying deviance and grotesqueness, especially as it related to their body shape and size (Hobson, 2003). Slavery and colonialism in particular encouraged rhetoric around the Black female body as “grotesque,” “strange,” “unfeminine,” “lascivious,” and “obscene” (Hobson, 2003, 87). Contemporary literature and digital analyses showcase that Black women’s bodies are still held to be representative of a sort of exotic, primal, asexual, unappealing aesthetic that should be avoided, thereby standing as the “antithesis” to white femininity’s beauty (Shaw, 2006).

These labels about Black women’s bodies parallel the labels used for fat women’s bodies (of any race/ethnic background) as well (Shaw, 2006). Fat bodies have come to represent that which is to be avoided (Kent, 2001). Within popular culture, fat people are portrayed as being in transition, never content with their size, and always looking to shrink themselves (Losano and Risch, 2001). In the same way that racialized bodies fall into the category of unworthy, so do fat bodies. Within mainstream American culture, fat bodies represent the antithesis of health and are therefore most times relegated to the margins, if present at all (Kent, 2001). Relegation to the margins can lead to less access to employment, healthcare, and social networks, which can have severe effects on fat people’s physical and mental well-being (Berry, 2016). The similarities in the discourse surrounding fat bodies and Black bodies are amplified when gender is considered as well. In the same way as Black bodies are, fat female bodies are both hyper and invisible,
sexual and asexual (Braziel, 2001). The similarities in the public discourse and perception of Blackness, Black womanhood in particular, and fatness serve as perceived representations of degeneration and undesirability.

Not only do racism and fatphobia have similar discourses surrounding them, but they are also inextricably linked through the historical ties between the two. Because Black women’s bodies have historically been marked as overweight throughout history, the imaginary links the two together, in constant conversation with each other (Strings, 2019). Black women have held the weight of being considered dually degenerate-- both because of their Blackness and the shape and size of their bodies (Shaw, 2006). Unable to break the historical ties that bind both racism and fatphobia together, Black female bodies are continuously evaluated and connected to fatness through capitalism (Berry 2016). Capitalist culture evaluates bodies on their ability to do work (Stearns, 1997), and the ability/disability paradigm that Garland-Thompson (2002) described characterizes both fatness and Blackness as disabled. Because of this, Black female bodies, especially fat Black women, are often perceived as unproductive, lazy members of society (Shaw, 2006). Thus, the idea that fat Black women need to be thin and white to be valued members of a capitalist society reinforces the connections between fatness and Blackness as intertwined and inseparable from Black women’s, fat women’s, and fat Black women’s labeling as degenerate and undesirable, both sexually and as workers.

b. Body Image Anxieties

Despite the long history of labeling Black and fat female bodies as degenerate and undesirable, until recently, researchers believed that Black women did not experience body image anxiety as often as white women (Stearns, 1997; Berry, 2016). Therefore, Black women’s body image and body image anxiety went understudied. Stemming from white populations’
control over determining the needs and experiences of Black women, some researchers still believe in the lack of Black female body image anxiety. Stearns, in his book *Fat History* (1997), argues that “African Americans worried far less about their bodies than did their generally more anxious white counterparts” (91). Another common theory is that Black women were comfortable with bigger bodies, simply because it symbolized physical labor capabilities that white women did not need to have since they were not typically the primary breadwinners in their households in the same way that Black women were (Stearns, 1997).

Positioning whiteness and white bodies as the “norm,” these assumptions are rooted in white supremacy and fail to account for the complex experiences with racism, sexism, and fatphobia that fat Black women experience. New research does account for the specificities of Black women’s experiences and directly contradicts these problematic assumptions, clarifying that “contrary to theories that present Black women as immune to mainstream cultural preferences for thinness, these women do present the thin ideal as a standard to which they are expected to adhere” (Poran, 2006, 744). Poran posits that Black women are aware of the expectation to adhere to societal ideals of thinness, but many actively choose to resist succumbing to these body expectations (Poran, 2006). This does not negate any anxieties that they might face about their appearance. It simply means that they are more aware than most white people of the systems of white supremacy, fatphobia, and sexism that enforce these rigid beauty standards (Poran, 2006).

Not only do many Black women acknowledge how systems of white supremacy, patriarchy, and fatphobia harm them and enforce beauty standards, they have firsthand experiences with the ways that racism, sexism, and fatphobia overlap to form more compounding manifestations of oppression (Berry, 2016). Black women, like other women, are aware that
upward social mobility is more common among slim women (Berry, 2016). This upward mobility also translates into comfortability in places such as the workplace, something that many larger Black women do not have (Adleman and Faulker, 1995). Fat Black women have described feeling “sexless” because of the ways that coworkers touched their bodies at work (Adleman and Faulkner, 1995). Black women of size still face cultural bodily expectations, and if they fall outside of them they are seen as unworthy of respect by people in power, which naturally increases anxieties among Black women about their size (Adlemen and Faulker 1995). While many fat Black women may push back against white supremacist understandings of beauty and often find community with each other, they are still forced to navigate a society in which “the ‘good body’ is a thin body” (Lelwica, 2006, 6-7) and where most media representations of attractive Black women are those that are “very thin, light-skinned women with European features” (Poran, 2006, 752). This is a very isolating experience, one that accompanies body image anxieties that are overlooked in much of the past and present research on body image, which I aim to explore in this project.

c. Lacking Definitions of Resistance

Scholars like Poran make known that fat Black women have found ways to foster resistance to body expectations (Poran, 2006). However, many scholars who explore Black women’s resistance strategies lack robust, solution-oriented descriptions of what Black women are resisting and how. Even within political and social frameworks such as Black Feminism and Black Feminist Theory, a working definition of resistance is often lacking in substantive explanations or completely missing. The expectation, it seems, has become that ‘resistance’ is a universally understood concept that does not require definition; however, I argue against this.
Resistance is contextual and needs to be framed within each environment in which it is being explored.

Black feminist scholars like Kimberle Crenshaw and Andrea Shaw, for example, do not adequately explore their definitions of resistance. Crenshaw (1991) argues that “identity continues to be a site of resistance for members of different subordinated groups” without further exploration of who exactly is resisting what and how (1297). For academic work to be its most accessible, especially dense and immensely important theoretical contributions like Crenshaw’s, defining terms is incredibly important. As an intellectual entrepreneur of the term intersectionality, Crenshaw creates a definition that has become a leading framework within Black Feminist studies. She understands the importance of defining terms, especially ones that impact how white academics perceive Black women. Without fully defining resistance, its interpretation is left up to the reader, which can become incredibly problematic in a predominantly white academic environment.

Another example of this recurring, but insufficient, conversation about resistance occurs in Shaw’s (2006) *The Embodiment of Disobedience*, where she explores the intersections of fatphobia and racism in the experiences of fat Black women, asserting that the embodiment of “these fat black women (both literary and real) is also a symbolic form of resistance to their negotiation from Western history and culture, and the site of their fat black bodies affirm that whiteness and slenderness are not the ideal states of embodiment” (131). As Crenshaw did before, Shaw is calling on the importance of identity, arguing that the marginal status of fat Black women functions as a “site of resistance.” In this example, Shaw does define what the women are resisting. However, she does not define how the women resist, a trend among fat studies scholars. To fill this gap and define modes of resistance, I argue that there are both active and
passive modes of resistance. Active resistance against a white supremacist, patriarchal, and fatphobic society for fat Black women is an intentional engagement in resistant activities, such as through online activism, self-image curation, and continued bold fashion choices despite negative feedback. Passive resistance are unintentional acts of defiance, such as simply existing within a fat Black body and taking up more space. Shaw’s lack of explanation once again signals a problematically vague and universalizing use of the term “resistance” within Black feminist studies. Thus, my project defines what fat Black women are resisting and how by exploring both the active and passive modes of resistance that they engage in.

d. Digital Resistance

One way in which fat Black women actively resist systems of white supremacist and fatphobic domination and oppression, and the main form of active resistance that this project will explore, is through cultivating spaces of online community and engaging in digital image curation. Digital Media and Feminist scholars have located the modalities of digital resistance among Black women through the exploration of social media’s role in creating community. Lopez & Maragh-Lloyd (2020) conceptualizes Black Twitter as a semi-enclave, arguing that, while open to public engagement, Twitter promotes community by highlighting the racist experiences among Black people, sharing ‘memes’\(^1\) which discuss Black culture and cultivating a space for Black joy. In creating memes/posts that illustrate the cultural experiences of Black communities, Black people create a viral Blackness on social media, placing Black experiences at the center of mainstream conversations (Greene-Wade, 2017).

For Black women specifically, using technology is in and of itself an act of resistance, since society labels Black women as unable to keep up with advanced technological innovation.

\(^1\) Defined as “an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations” (Oxford languages).
(Knight Steele, 2022). In reality, Knight Steele argues that Black women have led the charge on technological innovation, from haircare and braiding practices during slavery to social media use today (Knight Steele, 2022). With current technology, Black women’s online presence is an opportunity to recenter themselves in public discourse, showcase our intellect when it comes to technology usage, identify ourselves as both individual and part of a collective, and cultivate community with other Black women (Knight Steele, 2022). By using hashtags such as #BlackGirlMagic for example, Black women can connect to each other and acknowledge common experiences with inequality, creating “intimate publics” (Chen, 2018). Ultimately, there is the possibility of liberation in the ability to self-identify online as a Black woman and engage in self-image curation, despite how society perceives Black womanhood. Within these digital modes of resistance, Black women continue to initiate and add to conversations on the misogynoir that they experience (Knight Steele, 2022).

Fat people also use the internet to promote body positivity. The body positivity movement was created by fat Black women and is an umbrella movement that encapsulates “fat positivity to empower and protect fat bodies, disability empowerment and justice, empowerment, and protection of trans and gender-nonconforming bodies, reproductive justice, an end to colorism and empowerment of dark-skin bodies, the empowerment and protection of non-straight-identifying folks AND an overall end to anti-blackness” (Shackleford, 2016, bolding in original text). Online platforms have been created for fat people of color to find a community, such as on Tumblr (Williams, 2017). These online spaces acknowledge how fat people are missing within the media and how fatness is positioned as unacceptable, providing space for people to work to resist this and normalize fat bodies as beautiful (Williams, 2017).

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2 Defined as “a collective digital space where women who share viewpoints come together virtually” (Chen et al, 2018, 198).
Online spaces for fat people of color “facilitate discourse with strangers, eliminating geographical boundaries, allowing the intergenerational and cross-racial sharing of experiences” (Williams, 2017, 6). These online spaces act as active sites of resistance where fat people of color can engage in intentional conversations and post images of their bodies with the goal of combatting racist and fatphobic understandings of the “beautiful body” (Garland-Thompson, 2002).

While the body positivity movement and those who engage with it online are typically well-intentioned, over time the movement has been commodified by corporations and co-opted into a space for capitalistic gain by encouraging the posting of promotional material by popular accounts (Brathwaite, 2022). These posts undermine the movement by commodifying “social issues for corporate profit” (Brathwaite, 2022, 29). Promotional posts connect specific companies to the body positivity campaign in hopes of garnering more support from fat people and therefore profiting off of their oppression (Brathwaite, 2022). However, the version of the body positivity movement that has been co-opted by corporations also continues to encourage the thin, white body as the most appealing. Studies analyzing body positivity posts on Instagram show that the majority of the posts under #bodypositivity were predominantly white and in the “normal” weight range (Lazuka, 2020). These data illustrate that social media activism can be a difficult terrain to navigate and can have both positive and negative effects on those utilizing the space for community building and activism.

With a holistic view of the implications of the digital sphere in mind as a space for coalition building, activism, and resistance, I argue that fat Black women contribute to these activities through their use of social media. Fat Black women use social media to position themselves as fashionable, beautiful, and worthy of being seen at any size. Thus, social media is

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3 This will be further explored in Chapter 3.
a mode of expressing a desire for community, belonging, and a chance at self-identification among fat Black women.

II. Methodology, Key Frameworks & Terms, and My “Why”

This project employs three methodologies: historical analysis, semi-structured interviews, and digital content analysis. I root all three in intersectional and Black feminist analyses, centering Black women as valid and profound knowledge producers and agentic beings. Expressing Black women as agentic beings deconstructs and “unsettles the idea that anyone can determine who you are better than you can” (Knight Steele, 72). By centering fat Black women’s agency within all three of my methodologies through intersectional and Black feminist frameworks, I give space for them to define their own realities as it relates to their experiences with their body image and fatphobia.

a. Intersectionality, Black Feminism, and Racialized and Gendered Fatphobia

For this project, I am drawing on legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw’s coining of the term intersectionality and its original definition. Crenshaw (1991) coined intersectionality to describe the ways that systems of power and oppression compound to form specific experiences for Black women. In her article, “Toward a field of intersectionality studies,” Crenshaw posits that:

[w]hat makes an analysis intersectional…. is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power. This framing—conceiving of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power—emphasizes what intersectionality does rather than what intersectionality is. (795)

Although Crenshaw originally intended for intersectionality to describe the particular experiences of Black women, she explores how intersectional frameworks can be employed to make conclusions about power, hierarchies, and the fluid nature of identity categories. As I draw on Crenshaw’s understanding of an intersectional framework within my project, I look to the
ways in which fatness, womanhood, and Blackness intertwine to form particular experiences for fat Black women. This particular intersection of race, gender, and size I am calling racialized and gendered fatphobia. Racialized and gendered fatphobia is not simply a descriptor but a mode of analysis, a framework that is both historical and contemporary in nature. It explores how past ways of understanding and conceptualizing bodies are inextricable from the modern perception of body size. It is intersectional in that it positions fat Black women at the nexus of racism, sexism, and fatphobia and locates their particular experiences within these compounding and intersecting localities of oppression and exploitation. Racialized and gendered fatphobia forms the backbone of and informs the methodologies I employ within this project.

Racialized and gendered fatphobia is also undergirded with Black Feminist epistemology. The best way to fully conceptualize the experiences of fat Black women is through reimagining the modes in which we engage with “intellectual discourse” (Collins, 1990, 15). Reimagining intellectual discourse within my project means positioning fat Black women as not just interviewees or participants, but scholars and knowledge producers of their own. Centering the voices of fat Black women within this work enforces the idea that they are capable of defining their realities for themselves and are credible sources for discourses around racialized and gendered fatphobia (Collins, 1990). Allowing fat Black women to assert agency in their self-definitional capabilities is, for me, an act of utmost respect. I approach this project with the understanding that no one knows the realities of fat Black womanhood as well as fat Black women themselves, and because of this, I position the women I am in conversation with on an equal level, if not higher, than the scholarly voices I engage with and label them as co-collaborators within this project. In this, I maintain that fat Black women remain at the center of this work.
While I acknowledge the positive implications of my positionality as a fat Black woman as a guiding force in my project, such as my ability to empathize and understand the co-collaborators' experiences, I am also aware of the shortcomings of such a position. Beginning this work from the position of fat Black womanhood, I originally approached this project with an expectation of the answers I would receive in interviews, what I would find in my digital analysis, and a particular point that I wanted to make about fat Black womanhood. Over time, I was forced to separate my expected responses from the lived realities of my co-collaborators and acknowledge that my experiences were not universal. In this, I was able to take into account more fully the plethora of different perspectives and approaches to resistance among fat Black women.

b. Chapter and Methodological Organization

i. Chapter 1: Historical Analysis

For the first chapter, I have created a chronologically attuned historical analysis that explores the emergence of the fat Black woman as a trope. As a highly fetishized, commodified being rising to popular consciousness alongside the slave trade, Protestantism, the hypersexualization of Black bodies, and capitalism, the fat Black woman trope remains a stereotypical depiction of Black women within the media. Accompanying this trope is the equation of fatness, Blackness, disability, and abjection. To fully comprehend why fat Black women need to be studied and their perspectives need to be considered, I felt it necessary to explore why this stereotype exists in the first place. I posit that this is an inherently feminist historical analysis, and more specifically Black feminist, as it explores the historical exploitation of fat Black women who have been typically relegated to the margins, recentering them in the
historical narrative (Collins, 1990). In doing this, I aim to reshape how people think about the history of Black women in relation to Euro-American ideas of race, gender, and body size.

Undergirding raced and gendered fatphobia is the idea that the historical is imperative in understanding the contemporary. I trace the fat Black women from as far back as the 17th century to modern times in an attempt to show the connections between the two. As a precursor to my interview and digital analysis chapters, the first chapter, in the most cliche terms, “sets the stage” for the women to tell their stories and share their experiences with racism, sexism, and fatphobia.

ii. Chapter 2: Interviews

Chapter 2 is the introduction to semi-structured interviews with my co-collaborators. The recruitment, interviews, and analytic procedures used in this study were approved by the Washington University in St. Louis Institutional Review Board. For this project, I interview fourteen Black women of different sizes, shapes, and ages. The youngest co-collaborator is 19 and the oldest is 38. The smallest in weight is 125 pounds and the largest is 330 pounds. Some are second-generation immigrants to America with deep connections to their African culture, while others come from a long line of American citizenship. Some are mixed (half Black, half white), some are adopted, some are married, some are single, and some are mothers. These women are a product of different cultures, religions, classes, and family lives. While they are all vastly different, they all are college educated. This similarity stems from my word-of-mouth recruiting technique. Therefore, I understand that my co-collaborators’ perspectives may not be representative of all fat Black women and recognize that education level may impact self-perception. However, I do believe that their perspectives provide a great starting point for researching fat Black women’s self-perception, body image, and modes of resistance.
While some of the women included in this study may not be stereotypically labeled as “fat,” I chose to utilize the term to desensitize its meaning within popular media and academic settings. Pulling from the words of Fiona, one of my co-collaborators:

I just want to desensitize people around the word fat. You can be fat and pretty, you can be fat and healthy. Being fat is really no different than being skinny… I think that there are slurs for fatness, but I do not see fat as a bad thing. I do not see it as anything other than a classification of a body in the same way that skinny is.

By using the term fat, I hope to reconstruct fatness into a neutral term. However, in no way am I attempting to offend my co-collaborators. For this reason, if an individual expressed disdain for the word fat, I will use plus-size when speaking about them. My goal is to help construct a reality in which fatness is not shamed nor venerated, but simply accepted as a “classification of a body” that is equally worthy of respect.

Prior to the interview, a questionnaire was required to determine eligibility. This questionnaire asked a series of questions including hometown, age, weight, race and gender, and education level. The point of these questions was to simply get a broad picture of who I would be speaking with and understand where their positionality would stem from. I had them choose which body type from the Female Body Image Instrument shown below best represents how they perceive themselves (Pulvers, 2004) (Figure 1). While this chart gave me the opportunity to situate my co-collaborators on a spectrum of body sizes I would be engaging with and begin to understand how the women view their body size, there were a few downfalls. Firstly, some women found their bodies to be between two sizes, and therefore the chart proved not to be representative of all Black women’s body types. Some of the women expressed having body dysmorphia and were unable to conceptualize the difference between how they saw themselves and how others saw them. The question, which read “Which of these images represents your body size and shape best?”, proved difficult for some of the women to choose the best image and
they grappled with whether to pick the one that they perceived themselves to be or the one that their peers told them they were. If I were to complete this study again, I would rephrase the question to read “Which of these images represents how you view your body size and shape best?” and add “Select the picture that best depicts how you believe others see you” to ensure a more accurate representation of their self-perception.

![Female Body Image Instrument](image)

Figure 1: Female Body Image Instrument developed by Pulvers et al.

The interviews took a semi-structured approach with twenty formal questions and follow-up, clarification, and elaboration questions included as needed. They were coded with QDA Miner Lite, a free coding software. To ensure the privacy and safety, both physical and emotional, of my co-collaborators, all of their names have been changed. Any identifying factors, such as family members' or friends' names, workplaces, etc. have been taken out or changed. Chapter 2 investigates how fat Black women perceive themselves and navigate the world around them.

The interviews draw on and are analyzed through the frameworks of Black feminist traditions of turning “the voice into a revolutionary survival technology of resistance and healing” (Knight Steele, 2022, 33) and employs Collins’ “ethic of caring,” which posits that “personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation
process.” (Collins, 1990, 215). Approaching the interviews in a conversational manner, one between two fat Black women who understand and validate each other’s experiences, was at the heart of my interview technique. Connection preceded data collection. By creating a space for fat Black women to talk about the experiences that shaped how they view their bodies, I emphasized the importance of knowledge production in the community, which is foundational to Black feminist thinking (Collins, 1990).

The interviews were then analyzed through a combination of narrative analysis, which explores “how research participants construct story and narrative from their own personal experience” (delvetool.com), and close reading, which posits that “no details are present in a text by ‘accident’” (bucks.edu). As I pull out pieces from the interviews, I analyze them with the understanding that the narratives of personal experience are deeply personal to each interviewee. I acknowledge that each piece of information offered to me is inextricable from their broader story of self-perception. With this in mind, although I do focus on particular passages within a larger story, I attempt to contextualize each interview quote to provide the reader with a better understanding of the situation in which something was said.

**iii. Chapter 3: Digital/Content Analysis**

Chapter 3 explores how the nexus of status, image curation, and visibility in media impacts how fat Black women position themselves and resist racialized and gendered fatphobia. To do this, I conducted a case study on Lizzo, a self-proclaimed fat Black woman celebrity. I am aware that Lizzo is not representative of all wealthy fat Black women or fat Black women celebrities. However, I chose to center Lizzo due to her pride and the vocality surrounding her size. She also is very active on social media and has been incredibly involved in media
interviews. Focusing on Lizzo was a way of allowing a fat Black woman to speak for herself in how she perceives her body.

This chapter draws on Knight Steele’s (2022) digital Black feminist approach to viewing how Black women engage with technology. She posits that “Black American women have a technological capability built on the legacy of enslavement, rebellion, and resilience in the U.S. context. It was from this legacy that Black American women learned the skills to craft intentional discourses of resistance online” (10). This chapter expands on the ways that Black women have constructed community online as a way of sharing similar experiences. Through interviews, social media posts, and lyrics, which were chosen through online searches of the themes I wanted to explore further (online vulnerability, fashion, body positivity/normativity, and her shapewear brand Yitty) I analyze how Lizzo uses her public position to share the experiences of and connect with other fat Black women. In this, I begin to position online image curation as a strategy of resistance for fat Black women of any status. However, I circle back to the role of status that separates Lizzo from the women I interviewed to dissect how self-commodification has allowed Lizzo to profit off of her size and shape in a way that my co-collaborators cannot.

iv. Chapter 4: Interviews

For my last chapter, I conclude by returning to the interviews to explore how my co-collaborators construct their image and find modes of resistance against racialized and gendered fatphobia in digital spaces. I am exploring how women of average status and visibility still engage in intentional forms of online image curation and community building to resist societal body size expectations. I showcase how strategically fat Black women utilize media, particularly through Instagram, to promote particular ideas about themselves and the world. It also exemplifies that fat Black women are technological and agentic innovators and self-image
curators. This chapter reflects on how social media can be a site of positive self-image creation and positions Instagram more specifically as a productive space for resistance against racialized and gendered fatphobia.

c. My “Why”

I continue to go back to the role of Black feminism in the development of this project. Its epistemological and ontological frameworks provide indispensable insight into my role as a fat Black woman researcher conducting research on fat Black women. I draw on the Combahee River Collective’s (1986) awareness of the role self and communal love plays in the fight for liberation: “We realize that the only people who care enough to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work” (18). This project has provided me and my co-collaborators with moments of healing, understanding, and connection that are rooted in a deep, both conscious and subconscious, love for ourselves and our community. Each woman that was interviewed spoke of yearning for more research on how fatness and body image struggles impact Black women’s lives. Their participation in this work as well as my development of this project is inextricable from our personal ties to the topic. With that, this work is a collective purging of trauma, sadness, humor, anger, fear, and every other emotion that has followed us throughout our lives. It is a compilation of stories from 14 different women with different stories longing for their voices to be heard, longing to be accepted as they are. This work is the embodiment of joyful, cathartic healing.
Chapter One: The Genesis of the ‘Fat Black Woman’

Prior to showcasing and analyzing fat Black women’s experiences with racialized and gendered fatphobia, it is first important to situate her within her proper historical context. The fat Black woman as a western trope connects to four major historical events between the 16th and 19th centuries: the hypersexualization of Black women, the expansion of the slave trade, the rise of western Protestantism, and the capitalist definition of the “good body” (Strings, 2019) (Stearns, 1997). Together these four events contribute to the societal perception of the fat Black woman as hypersexual, hyper-independent, gluttonous, and unproductive.

I. The Hypersexualization of Black Women during the 16th-19th Centuries

In the 16th and 17th centuries fat bodies were revered and seen as revealing “something of the beauty and mystery of divinity” (Strings, 2019, 16). This appreciation for voluptuousness translated into a greater appreciation of African women. Sociologist Sabrina Strings explains this appreciation as due to their “well-proportioned and plump” bodies, which were deemed “physically appealing” (Strings, 2019, 17). But while their bodies were revered as desirable representations of beauty, African women's facial features represented unattractiveness (Strings, 2019, 17). The sexual interest in Black women’s bodies while simultaneously labeling them as ugly and undesirable elucidates the ways in which Black women were seen as sexual beings to be objectified in western societies. The public attraction to African body features in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries catalyzed the hypersexualization of the fat Black woman in the 19th century. Black women’s presence in European cities, according to Strings, made them a “hot commodity” with their presence signaling “the Europeans' conquest of said lands.” Within European society, “they were typically rendered as the physically alluring social inferiors to white women” (Strings, 2019, 33). Black women were never seen as comparable to white
women in attractiveness and/or allure; their bodies were seen as objects to conquer. By the nineteenth century, European populations were overtly sexualizing Black women’s bodies through discourse and physical relations.

The most well-known example of hypersexualization emerges in the story of Sarah Baartman or the Hottentot Venus, a Black woman from the early 19th century who was placed on display in London and France to showcase her buttocks. After her death in 1815 at the age of 25, her body was examined and classified as an anomaly, one that illustrated how “blacks were a separate (and, needless to say, lesser) race, as different from the European as the proverbial orangutan” (Gilman, 1985, 216). This analysis of Baartman signified to the European public that Black women’s bodies were biologically inferior to white women’s. Baartman, and Black women more broadly, were “reduced to [their] sexual parts” (Gilman, 1985, 213). Disability activist and author Rosemarie Garland-Thompson explores the role that the Hottentot Venus played in the establishment of the hypersexualized fat Black female body. She argues that Bartmann’s treatment has come to represent the most egregious form of racial and gendered degradation. What goes unmarked in studies of Bartmann’s display, however, are the ways that the language and assumptions of the ability/disability system were implemented to pathologize and exoticize Bartmann. Her display invoked disability by presenting as deformities or abnormalities that marked her as raced and gendered… concepts of disability discourse framed her presentation to the Western eye. (Garland-Thompson, 2002, 7)

Garland-Thompson explores the historical connection between the 19th-century representations of Black women and modern understandings of the ability/disability paradigm. She argues that there is a cyclical nature to the paralleled discourse between Baartman’s racialized womanhood and understandings of disability. Baartman’s bodily “abnormalities,” such as her buttocks and genitals, represented the Black female body as abnormal and deviant (Garland-Thompson, 2002, 7) (Hobson, 2003, 92). Classifying her body as abnormal and deviant placed her in the
metaphorical disability category, which rendered her, and Black women more broadly, less attractive than white bodies (Garland-Thompson, 2002). Garland-Thompson’s analysis of fat Black womanhood as a disability illustrates how their bodily “abnormalities” were used as justification for medical racism and the slave trade. Because slavery was fundamentally rooted in the idea of Black bodies as biologically and intellectually inferior, the hypersexualization of Baartman’s body explained the exploitation of Black women’s physical and reproductive labor. The Europeans' hypersexualization of Black women’s bodies indicated racial and sexual inferiority, rendering them disabled, degenerate, and solely valuable for physical and sexual labor.

While the hypersexualization of Black women is primarily understood as a historical phenomenon, it is still present within current representations of Black women and girls within the media. As a present-day example, UCLA Professor Safiya Umoja Noble’s *Algorithms of Oppression* explores the results of a quick google search, claiming that when she looked up “Black girls” the results showed that “Black girls were still the fodder of porn sites, dehumanizing them as commodities, as products, and as objects of sexual gratification” (Noble, 2018, 18). Noble’s example illustrates how the digital sphere upholds and expands on the historical misrepresentations of Black women as inherently sexual and uncontrollable. These misrepresentations are now reproduced on more widely accessible platforms like Google. While digital spaces have the capacity to alter their algorithms to avoid showing these harmful, sexualized images of Black women and girls, they instead reinforce long-standing tropes by connecting Black women to porn (Noble, 2018). Modern-day hypersexualized images, such as the google search example, showcase the continued influence of 16-18th century European obsession with medicalizing Black women’s bodies prevalent during the time of Sarah
Baartman’s exploitation. The medicalization that occurred during the 16-18th centuries rendered fat Black women hypersexual through race and size. Professor Andrea Shaw explores the simultaneity of fatness and Blackness in relationship to Black women’s perceived hypersexuality:

The dominant perspective on fatness in Western culture replicates the view of what blackness is already understood as denoting: bodily indiscipline and rebellion... Within the parameters of Western hegemonic culture, black and fat women are incapable of sexual modesty because their very bodies, sexually active or not, are poignant sexual signifiers, permanently situating the women who bear these features as sexually uninhabited, lacking sexual/bodily control. (Shaw, 2006, 50)

Shaw elucidates how both fatness and Blackness are symbolic of untamed hypersexuality. Western white society utilizes the symbolic interpretation of Blackness and fatness as indicative of a lack of self-control to amplify the trope of Black women as indulgent and sexual by nature. Because this hypersexuality is considered by western society to be inherent and uncontrollable, the fat Black woman’s body is always available for voyeuristic commentary and overt sexualization. Shaw’s analysis applies to Noble’s google search of “Black girls” leading to porn sites. Synonymizing their fatness and hypersexuality, western white society justifies sexualized media representations of Black women. By placing blame on the individual Black girls for sexual behavior, rather than on society’s sexualization of them, western white society evades accountability for sexualizing Black women and girls, continuously reinforcing the ideology of the fat Black woman as hypersexual.

II. The Rise of the Slave Trade and the Strong Black Woman Ideology from the 17th-mid-19th Centuries

The rise of slavery in the 17th-19th centuries accompanied the western European idea of Black people, specifically Black women, only being valued for their labor. Because slavery became reliant on the notion of the biological inferiority of Black people over time, Western societies began to use scientific racism, including the aforementioned belief in Black women’s
hypersexuality and indulgent nature, as a justification for the exploitation of Black bodies.

Accompanying the rise of the slave trade was, as Sabrina Strings emphasizes, “the sudden and proliferating presence of black people” that “sparked a simmering and often vocal discomfort” (Strings, 2019, 42). She claims that this widespread discomfort with Black bodies led to “a ‘proto-racist’ discourse [which] marked black women and men as unattractive, hypersexual, and diminutive in size and social status” (Strings, 2019, 42). Medical racism institutionally documented all of the ways in which Black people were culturally and physically inferior, one way of justifying slavery. For Black women, this manifested in a cultural narrative of an inhuman physical and emotional strength known as the Strong Black Woman ideology (Harrington et al, 2010, 469). The Strong Black Woman (SBW) ideology perpetuated the idea within western society that Black women were destined to be enslaved due to a psychological and physical strength that surpassed that of white women (Harrington et al, 2010, 469). Both the hypersexualization of Black women and the proliferation of the Strong Black Woman ideology prior to and into slavery positioned Black women as aesthetically inferior and physically and emotionally stronger than white women. This positioning justified the physical, sexual, and emotional violence that Black women encountered during enslavement and formed the foundation for how white, western society would perceive Black women in modern times.

The SBW ideology remains relevant to the creation of the modern fat Black woman trope for the same reasons that it was popular during slavery: it justifies Black women’s institutional exploitation and oppression. The SBW narrative continues to harm Black women, convincing them and western society that they do not need nor deserve mental health support for racial trauma (hooks, 2003). Instead, they are left to process traumatic experiences on their own. Clinical psychologists Ellen Harrington, Janis Crowther, and Jillian Shipherd (2010) investigated
how the combination of racial trauma and imposition of the SBW onto Black women manifests through binge eating disorders. They found that from a young age, Black girls are “raised to strive for SBW ideals and to believe strength is imperative” (Harrington et al, 2010, 470). In embodying the SBW ideology, Black women and girls are taught that they should not need a medical outlet for trauma. In addition to not needing an outlet, Harrington et al discovered “that emotion regulation difficulties and using eating to fulfill psychological needs are crucial mechanisms through which SBW ideology impacts African American trauma survivors’ binge eating” (Harrington et al, 2010, 470). While it would be reductive to assume that all Black women coping with racial trauma resort to binging, the relationship between the two illustrates the SBW ideology’s role in creating the fat Black woman stereotype. Both SBW and the fat Black woman stereotype perpetuate the idea that Black women should not need help grappling with the emotional trauma that western society causes them-- including but not limited to racism, sexism, and fatphobia. If and when Black women turn to food for comfort, the blame is placed on the individual for over-indulgence rather than on systems of continued physical and emotional violence inflicted upon them. The Strong Black Woman ideology, which was used as justification for Black women’s enslavement, continues to impact their experiences with trauma and racialized and gendered fatphobia today as they are expected to be capable of handling distress without help.

III. Protestantism, Temperance, Gluttony, and Black Women’s Divine Inferiority

The rise of Protestantism in the 16th and 17th centuries also influenced the creation of the fat Black woman trope by situating temperance as a signifier of holiness. Strings (2019) argues that one of the main tenets of Protestantism was self-control and restriction against indulgence. Focusing specifically on food and body size, the rise of western Protestantism led to a
“Christian-derived concern about the control of eating as a means of combating sin” (Stearns, 1997, 6). The western focus on self-control was a means of reinforcing the inferiority of Black bodies in comparison to white ones (Strings, 2019). Protestants thought that white women’s intense food restriction signified self-restraint that Black women apparently lacked (Strings, 2019). As a result, protestant thinkers believed “indulging in food… bespoke an inborn, race-specific propensity for laziness and ease, an unbridled desire to meet the demands of the flesh at the expense of cultivating higher pursuits” (Strings, 2019, 84). Black people’s perceived gluttony when it came to food represented a supposed lack of religiosity and signified giving up a chance at eternal life for an over-indulgent lifestyle. Comparatively, white protestant women’s intense eating restrictions showcased an apparent desire for divinity. This restriction illustrated a cultural superiority among white women in comparison to Black women. These beliefs were rooted in racist ideologies about Black women’s eating habits and indulgence, which would be employed later within modern 21st-century society to problematize Black women’s bodies and signify their inferiority.

This societal perception of Black women’s biological and cultural inferiority coupled with their perceived lack of cultural divinity pervades modern society. The Harrington article, discussed in the previous section, provides useful information for contextualizing the Strong Black woman ideology in modern society. However, the article also elucidates the problems of modern western conceptualizations of Black women’s eating habits. Harrington et al suggests that binge eating is a way of coping with the trauma for both Black and white women (Harrington et al, 2010, 475). They also point to how Black women’s particular cultural circumstances (including racial trauma and grappling with the SBW ideology) may lead to binge eating (Harrington et al, 2010, 475). Within the article, Harrington et al wrongfully assume that
Black women’s weight is a direct reflection of their eating habits and vice versa. This is far from reality. This assumption promotes a problematic narrative that exists within white, western society: that Black women’s eating habits are gluttonous and over indulgent, contradicting the restriction that western Protestantism promotes. By using Christianity as a scapegoat for racist perceptions of Black women’s size and eating habits, white protestants made wrongful and harmful assumptions that still impact the societal perception of Black women. These perceptions contribute to the fat Black woman stereotype by further labeling fat Black women as over-indulgent and gluttonous.

IV. Capitalist Definitions of the ‘Good Body’ and the Rise of Diet Culture

The fat Black woman trope, particularly as it relates to which bodies are valued within society, was influenced and perpetuated by twentieth-century capitalism. For the purposes of this project, I define capitalism as “an economic system based on market competition and the pursuit of profit, in which the means of production or capital are privately owned by individuals or corporations” (Bell, 2023). This definition acknowledges the role of competition, which places people into hierarchical categories based on productivity, and that the means of production are “owned,” meaning that laborers do not own their labor. In Peter Stearns’ *Fat History* (1997), he explores capitalism’s role in historical and contemporary western fatphobia. Stearns argues that “capitalist culture cannot be ruled out as a tremendous force in influencing people to do everything they can to appear socially desirable, in order to gain economic and social advantages” (Stearns, 1997, 28). These social and economic advantages, such as employment, medical care, and social networks, are examples of appearance bias, where people seen as attractive within capitalist bounds receive societal benefits (Berry, 2016, 2). Appearance bias influences which bodies are seen as desirable and is regulated by how capitalism defines the
‘good body’ (Berry, 2016). Fundamental to a capitalist definition of the good body is productivity (Stearns, 1997). Because of capitalism’s reliance on productivity and self-regulation, anthropologist Michelle Lelwica argues that “the ‘good body’ is a thin body because slenderness is seen to be the physical manifestation of a self that has exercised the virtue of self-control” (Lelwica, 2006, 6-7). Although the definition of thinness has shifted over time, the thin body is characterized as the “good body” within a capitalist society because of its productive capabilities (Stearns, 1997). This emphasis on productivity led to the societal perception that “fat people and work did not mix well,” as fatness is perceived as inefficient and untimely (Stearns, 1997, 115). Therefore, within a capitalist lens, the ‘good body’ is a thin body due to the cultural narrative of thin bodies as more productive, capable, and laborious than fat bodies.

As western capitalist societies began defining the ‘good’ body as thin and capable of disciplined laborious activity, the medical field began to target fat as a health issue. What Stearns calls the “medicalization” of fatness can be defined as the process by which “doctors seized on new information and used it to browbeat an innocent public into novel anxieties the treatment of which, not surprisingly, extended physicians’ power and profit” (Stearns, 1997, 43). Derived as a move to increase the profit and power of the medical field, the public began to believe the medicalized narrative that fat could be equated with unhealthiness (Stearns, 1997). Equating fatness with unhealthiness was imperative to labeling it as abject. When it came to women, fatness meant something was wrong with their body and that it was in need of restoration (Stearns, 1997). Until this restoration occurred, fat women were considered unhealthy, ugly, and undesirable (Stearns, 1997). Black women were especially targeted by this narrative of fatness as ugly. Labeling Black women as biologically inferior for their perceived bodily differences
contributed to and exacerbated the equation of fatness to ugliness and was employed to position Black women as the antithesis of the good body. Fat Black women are perceived as in opposition to the thin white body rendered beautiful under capitalism (Garland-Thompson, 2002). In opposition to the thin white body, the fat Black female body “functions as an opposing identity anchor— an image that affirms ‘legitimate’ identity as different from what the image represents” (Shaw, 2006, 19). With fat Black women as the opposing identity anchor, they are the embodiment of what white women fear becoming (Strings, 2019). Thus, fat Black women have a ‘bad body’ within capitalist society. The comparison between thin white female bodies and fat Black female bodies did not emerge alongside capitalist ideas of the good body, but the emphasis on productivity, self-regulation, capability, and discipline cemented the hierarchical positioning of fat Black women as inferior to white women and contributed to the persistent stereotype of the unproductive fat Black woman.

V. Conclusion

This chapter positions the stereotype of the fat Black woman within her proper historical context. I trace its development through the hypersexualization of Black women, the transatlantic slave trade, the rise of Protestantism, and 20th-century capitalism. These phenomena are each connected to historical and contemporary examples as they add to, compound, and overlap with each other over the span of five centuries. As a collective, they position the fat Black woman trope as embodying hypersexuality, hyper-independence, gluttony, and unproductiveness. Going forward, I move away from historical analysis and focus on contemporary self-perceptions of fat Black women.
Chapter 2: How Fat Black Women Perceive Themselves & Navigate the World

This chapter explores numerous influencers in fat Black women’s body image from childhood to adulthood. In doing so, I resist the idea that Black women do not have body insecurities and are immune to the thinness ideal presented as the American standard of beauty. This chapter reinforces Capodilupo & Kim’s (2014) claim that fat Black women speak “about their body image not only in their own eyes but also in the eyes of others—those known to them, such as family members, as well as society at large and the media” (41). I also claim that although my co-collaborators exhibit concerns about their self-image more so than others’ perceptions of their bodies, the commentary and actions they have experienced from others have led to an overall decreased self-esteem. Starting during childhood and continuing into adulthood, these women are concerned about their size as it relates to clothing, their relationship with food, comparison to others, weight fluctuations, body expectations, and interactions with men. Despite these concrete themes, their self-perception is not static. It is fluid based on their environment, clothing, conversations, relationships, and even the day. While many of them struggle with things like eating disorders, weight gain, sexual harassment, health issues, and past regrets, they continue to look towards a future of body contentment.

I. Childhood to Young Adulthood

Childhood memories were significant influencers in how my co-collaborators currently perceive their bodies. Following the trend of existing literature, all of the women addressed how different childhood elements were important in positioning their self-perception. In a previous focus group study with fat Black women, Adleman and Faulkner (1995) found the women all agreed that they “had fond body-image memories until about age seven or eight. Several winced, recalling the negative responses at that age from most of the adults and children in their lives.
They had moved from being fat babies to being fat little girls” (273). Similarly, my co-collaborators’ negative memories began around the age of seven, when they started gaining weight. It was around this age when they began feeling uncomfortable in their bodies. Marie, a 22-year-old woman, spoke about the beginning of her body image insecurities: “I’ve been self-conscious of my weight, I want to say, since I was maybe seven years old, and just my body in general.” The interviews follow existing themes of a rising body awareness that follows them into puberty. During this time, my co-collaborators learned how to navigate being a Black girl in a white supremacist, patriarchal, and fatphobic world and their weight fluctuations posed stressful in that environment. As hooks (2003) posits, “when fat is added to the picture in a culture where thinness is seen as both a sign of beauty and a sign of well-being, then children suffer” (137). These women grappled with their identity as fat Black girls beginning around age seven, and have been navigating experiences with racialized and gendered fatphobia since. Because of these overlapping and compounding identities, their experiences from childhood onward cannot be separated from their identities as Black in a white supremacist world, female in a patriarchal world, and fat in a fatphobic world.

Following the women through childhood narratives, I provide four themes for analysis: familial/self-comparison and critique, clothing, food, and weight fluctuations. Although discussing particular themes, I want to be cautious not to homogenize the women’s experiences. As Collins (1990) reminds us, “The existence of core themes does not mean that African-American women respond to these themes in the same way. Diversity among Black women produces different concrete experiences that in turn shape various reactions to the core themes” (23). As you will see, the women focus on divergent aspects within each section while still maintaining the themes’ influence on their self-esteem. These four categories, while not
fully exhaustive, encapsulate the principal sectors of discomfort during their childhood years. Positioning how these women navigate their current relationships with their bodies as influenced by their childhood years, we see their main insecurities’ genesis and impact.

A. “I can’t be loved because I’m huge”: Comparison, Critique, & Confidence

Comparison and critique, whether internally or outwardly imposed, had a notable impact on the co-collaborators' confidence during childhood. 10 out of the 14 women spoke about how comparison and critique impacted their body image. Some of the major themes explored in the interviews include, but are not limited to, being bigger than family members, comparison to peers’ body size and development, and body comparisons among female family members. These themes illustrate the importance of both internal and external comparison and critique of fat Black girls’ body image development.

A recurring theme is how self-comparison to peer’s body size and development affected the young girls’ confidence levels. For example, Marie gives voice to the difficulties of being bigger than her classmates, stating that “I never felt skinny or appeared skinny… Comparing myself to classmates who were skinny and I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, I’m like this huge person and I can’t be loved because I’m huge.’ And I felt that way.” While Marie chooses to focus on body size comparisons, Aria focuses on the developmental differences between her and her classmates, delineating being “the second girl in school with breasts… all the people were like ‘oh my gosh she has boobs’… Everybody’s excited. Then we got this one kid… He’s like ‘that's not breast, that’s fat’… Then I started going home like ‘Is this really boobs or…”” Focusing on two distinct elements of self-comparison among peers, the women illuminate different realities of the same theme. These different realities lead to similar questions of self-worth, beauty, and comfortability in classroom/school settings and in their bodies. These connections between
comparison and self-worth indicate that “one’s self-image is experienced as delicate and shifting in relation to those who are judging one’s body or who are perceived as forcing a comparison that fosters a negative judgment of one’s self” (Poran, 2006, 747). Prior to the conflation of her breasts with fat, Aria claimed everybody was “excited” about her development. However, a peer’s comments sparked insecurity which transferred into a negative relationship with her body, particularly her breasts. Aria’s self-esteem embodies the fluid nature Poran writes about as it shifts with her experiences. While one can have an already complex self-image, Aria illustrates how comparison can exacerbate the discomfort in their body. Marie’s story also indicates the delicate nature of body image, as she believes “I can’t be loved because I’m huge.” Her story showcases how the instability of self-image can cause conflations of body size and lovability. Although these two self-comparison examples diverge in perspective, they have similar impacts on self-perception and body image that affect how these fat Black girls view their bodies.

Another recurrent theme was body comparison and critique among female family members, particularly mothers, grandmothers, and sisters. One of the women, 24-year-old Chelsea, was constantly compared to her thinner sister. She chronicles how her mom told her “[your sister] is going to do modeling. Or, [your sister], oh, her frame is so pretty.” Resulting from this commentary, she internalized feeling like “I don’t look like [my sister], so is my frame not pretty?” Speaking on how her female family members have body image insecurities, 20-year-old Danielle claims that “seeing both my [mom and my grandma] growing up, they would always make comments about their body and I think that was something that I ended up being hyper-aware about [and] every single change that my body had was something that I ended up picking on.” Both women, while speaking about different family members and different sites of critique and comparison, were negatively impacted by the critique and comparison between
female family members. Although Danielle’s family’s critiques were not necessarily directed at her, she adopted the same self-critical lens that her mother and grandmother had. Chelsea, on the other hand, became more insecure from constant comparison to her thinner sister. Analyzing how Poran’s (2006) focus group showcased the ways judgment impacts self-image, she notes that “these young women did not discuss being insulated from any judgments; instead they discussed becoming confused by so many conflicting judgments” (746). These fat Black girls are navigating judgment, comparison, and critique from others and themselves while simultaneously developing their own self-image. These girls attempted to navigate conflicting judgments and opinions about their body size and became confused about their self-perception apart from their female family members. The apparent interconnectedness of self and family comparison had a noteworthy impact on fat Black girls’ body image development. Female family members’ judgments, whether directed at them or not, were internalized and influenced how my co-collaborators viewed their bodies from childhood onward.

This section explores how comparison and critique, whether internally or externally sourced, impacts how fat Black girls develop their body image during childhood. While the individual stories differ, the impact remains similar, illustrating how critique and/or comparison during childhood has negative impacts on fat Black girls’ self-perception.

B. “All these cute clothes, I can’t fit them”: Childhood Clothing’s Influence on Fat Black Women’s Body Image

During the interviews, half of the women declared that clothing and shopping impacted their childhood body image development. Themes uncovered in these interviews were difficulty finding clothes that fit, having to shop in adult stores as a child, trying on/wearing clothes in
“I’m Fat As Fuck”

front of family, using shapewear to shrink their stomachs, buying smaller sizes as motivation for losing weight, and needing bigger sizes than their peers.

Difficulty in finding clothing that fits comfortably and were representative of their style and having to shop in adult stores are two recurrent themes. 22-year-old Ophelia details shopping for clothes as a fat Black girl:

Like I said, I’ve been fat since, I would say, second grade. So shopping for fat kid clothes, fat girl clothes, was horrible because there wasn’t any. So my mom would try to take me to the store, and we’re walking around, and all these cute clothes, I can’t fit them. So she’ll take me to Lane Bryant… And I’m wearing these old women clothes. That’s the only shit that fit me.

This passage elucidates two very pertinent points about clothes shopping, 1) she could never find clothes in the children’s section that fit her and 2) she resorted to shopping in plus-size women’s stores. Beginning during adolescence and following them into adulthood, clothing sizes have always been a struggle. bell hooks (2003) explicates the impact of ignoring an identity group within a culture: “once you publicly pronounce that a people are culturally gone, no longer there to be looked at, gazed upon, or talked about, then you rid yourself of the issue of accountability” (ix). If we understand the culture to be a white supremacist patriarchal and fatphobic society, not having larger children’s clothing renders fat children non-existent and/or unimportant. When stores fail to carry larger clothing, young girls are socialized to believe that their body is too big. These shopping experiences transfer into their adult habits. Ophelia professes that due to childhood shopping experiences, she became a “passive” shopper, approaching it as a daunting and stressful task. Growing up not seeing her size reflected in the children’s clothing stores negatively affected how Ophelia experienced shopping and her body size during adulthood.

Trying on clothes and needing to conceal fat were also deeply traumatizing experiences for my co-collaborators during their childhoods. The women detail needing bigger school
uniforms and casual clothing sizes. Chelsea communicates her experience going homecoming shopping with her mother:

I was homecoming shopping [with my mom]. We were trying [dresses] on. I [tried one on and] was like, this is fine. It's like a plain black dress… It wasn't even a cute black dress. And when we were getting ready to check out... she asked the person at the counter if they had a bigger size in it. Keep in mind, I had already tried it on. It already fit. And so she got it, and she was like, "That way they won't be able to see your rolls. It'll fit better." And until in reflection, I didn't realize how much those things affected me or made me feel a way about my body until getting older and trying on dresses and wanting to take a picture of the back like, "Oh, how does my back look?" Or, "Can you see?" And I don't wear tight things because I don't want you to see, and it really changes your outlook on your body. Chelsea chronicles her embarrassment trying clothes on in front of her family and the shame of buying a bigger size. Although the smaller dress fit her, her mother felt she needed a bigger dress to hide the fat on her back. As noted in the prior chapter, the similar rhetoric surrounding fatness and disease involves, as Garland-Thompson (2002) notes, “changing bodies imagined as abnormal rather than on changing exclusionary attitudinal, environmental, and economic barriers” (14). Chelsea’s narrative elucidates the attitudinal barriers that Garland-Thompson analyzes. Because society pushes hiding fatness, girls are taught to conceal their fat through additional clothing. Rather than adjusting these attitudinal barriers on a societal level, the individual is blamed and instructed to hide their body. The pressure to conceal fat is also seen through shapewear exposure. Ophelia recounts how her mother taught her about shapewear: “Oh my gosh, wearing shapewear. That is so uncomfortable… My mom said, ‘Oh when you put up the shapewear, your stomach will go to sleep.’” Both Chelsea and Ophelia’s stories display how fat girls are socialized by their mothers to cover their bodies and conceal their fat to make others more comfortable. In this, they are subjected to the attitudinal barriers that Garland-Thompson writes about. The fact that both of their mothers were fat cannot be understated. The necessity to cover their fat was generational. Chelsea disclosed how difficult it was to hear the person who
looked most like her instruct her to cover her body. As seen through the emotional impact of these narratives, experiences with finding clothes that concealed their fat were deeply influential in how these girls viewed their bodies.

Fat Black girls are taught that their clothing sizes are too big for the popular children’s stores. They are also socialized to cover their bodies and obscure their fatness. These stories are not individual experiences, but trends among the women’s childhood experiences with clothing. While many of my co-collaborators reclaim fashion as they age, which will be explored further in the chapter, clothing is a powerful force in fat Black girls’ self-perceptions.

C. “What is she going to put on her plate?”: Food and Childhood Body Image

Eight of the women how food influenced their self-perception during their adolescence. Similar themes of family judgment of eating patterns, experiences with nutritionists and diets, controlled food consumption, and disordered eating (bulimia, starving, binging, micromanaging food and calories) emerged.

Family judgment and forced diets were influential on fat Black girls’ body image. Many women recall having their plates monitored as young girls, especially at family gatherings. Aria recounts her experiences at family dinners: “There has definitely been times from my childhood that I would be at a family member’s house and as soon as I get up to go make my plate, I’m being looked at like ‘Okay what is she going to put on her plate?’” 21-year-old Penny narrates how her family, particularly her white, thin mom, closely monitored her food at all times and forced diets and nutritionists upon her:

My mom is a size 6, I think, so I think this was a lot for her because it was like, she felt like she was doing something wrong by not having me be a skinny kid. So I think I did everything under the sun with diets. We had books on books… I think I went to four nutritionists in the span of six years. It was just constant. And don’t get me wrong, at the time, I guess, I didn’t care. But looking back, it’s like, I would never have done that to my kid, ever.
Penny then vocalizes that she wishes she had been allowed to just be a kid. While both Aria and Penny acknowledge that their families’ concerns came from a place of love, they detail how familial monitoring deeply impacted their relationships with food and their bodies. Penny in particular wishes she had been more supported, instead of pressured to diet and lose weight. These girls experienced the pressure of healthism from a young age. Healthism refers to the medicalization of the fat body and the assumption that thinner bodies are “healthier” and more ideal (Hughes, 2021, 317). Healthism’s ideologies are promoted through individual pressure to shrink your body to maintain your health. This individual pressure “ignores the impact of sociocultural realities on overweight and obese peoples, causing even more pronounced stratification between mainstream society and fat black women” (Patterson-Faye, 2016, 934).

These girls were socialized to believe that their health was dependent on their body size and that it was their (and their families) problem to “fix,” contradicting prior studies arguing that Black women did not feel pressure to diet and lose weight (Stearns, 1997). Aria and Penny’s stories indicate that body size was equated to health and did matter to Black girls and their families. Trips to nutritionists and familial diet monitoring suggest that healthism and diet culture did impact and influence fat Black girls’ self-perceptions.

Disordered eating stands out as a primary body image influencer among fat Black girls. It is defined by psychology scholars as engaging in “rigid exercise routines, calorie restriction, chronic dieting, binging and purging, and the use of laxatives and diuretics to control their weight” without manifesting “the full range of psychological traits usually associated with clinical cases of an eating disorder—i.e. interpersonal distrust and perfectionism” (Biber et al., 2006, 211). While some of the women categorized their food habits as eating disorders, many did not. Instead, they recount their disordered eating habits as spontaneous accidents. 19-year-old
Jasmine details how she attempted to alter her body as a child, claiming that starving was “one of the worst things that I’ve done.” She also recalls other harmful eating habits:

A bit of binging here and there. That one started kind of awkwardly. I was getting food poisoning from school… I was throwing up and someone had said, “wow you look way better and skinnier after you threw up.” It’s not something I did often, but I guess I felt better because I thought I looked pretty. Everybody associated skinny with pretty, so if I was skinny when I threw up, I felt a bit better even if I was weak on the inside. Addressing Black girls’ awareness of the thin ideal, she elucidates self-induced pressure to achieve it. Jasmine’s story explores how outside commentary can modify food habits. After collecting data on trauma’s role in the development of the Strong Black Women ideology and binge eating habits, Harrington et al. (2010) contend that “the results suggest that emotion regulation difficulties and using eating to fulfill psychological needs are crucial mechanisms through which SBW ideology impacts African American trauma survivors’ binge eating” (474). Harrington et al.’s data collection results illustrate that emotional expression can be difficult for Black girls due to societal expectations of invulnerability. Many times Black girls utilize food as a trauma coping mechanism. Acknowledging food as a coping mechanism, Lelwica (2006) positions consumption as a means of negotiating a “larger sense of freedom and purpose” (8). Jasmine turns to her body to feel more in control of her life. While I would be cautious to claim that disordered eating habits give them feelings of “purpose” or “freedom” due to the long-lasting trauma that can result, I argue that the feeling of control over their image/body may provide momentary relief from negative commentary and other sources of body image distress. For Jasmine, disordered eating habits, whether that be starving herself or binging, momentarily alleviated insecurity about her body size. Because of comments that she looked “way better and skinner” after throwing up, food became a means of coping and control. By starving herself and/or binging, she felt she had more control over her image, even if it caused more distress in
the process. By providing fat Black girls with an unhealthy coping strategy for trauma, distress, and/or lack of control, disordered eating shapes how fat Black girls view their bodies.

This section situates the connection between my co-collaborators' childhood relationships with food and their body image. Food was interwoven with control in many ways. Families attempted to control their child’s health (which they equated to body size) by monitoring their daughters’ food. Young girls searched for a sense of control over their bodies through disordered eating. Whether the mode of control practiced was internally or externally sourced, food remained a point of contention in fat Black girls' body image development.

D. “You may love me but you think I’m less now”: Weight Fluctuations and Self-Perception

Weight fluctuations were the most discussed theme regarding childhood body image, with thirteen women mentioning gaining or losing weight. Many of my co-collaborators recounted how others treated them after weight fluctuations. Peer and family response to weight fluctuations was the most recurrent conversation topic.

Family response to weight fluctuations had a pertinent impact on self-perception. 21-year-old Georgia recalls growing up thin and facing backlash for not gaining weight:

When I was younger, I was always super gangly and skinny and I was tall so I always used to get comments about ‘oh you need to put meat on your bones. Oh, you need to do this, this, and this.’ And then in middle school, high school it was always like, ‘You don’t have an ass or you don’t have big boobs.’ Georgia was embarrassed by and struggled with her inability to gain weight, being a thinner girl, and not developing curves. Georgia, who is mixed (half Black, half white) had difficulty connecting to her Blackness because of her thin size and “gangly” shape. Family and peer commentary deeply impacts body image. Oftentimes, thin Black girls would “gain accolades from White friends but were picked on by [their] family of origin” (Capodilupo & Kim, 2014,
44). The naturally thin participant in Capodilupo & Kim’s study struggled to balance the thin ideal within white society alongside family commentary about needing to gain weight. Georgia dealt with similar conflicting opinions regarding her weight, especially because half of her family is white and half is Black. Because she could not simply gain weight and appease her Black family members and peers, Georgia developed insecurities around her body size and struggled to connect to her Blackness. She still battles self-doubt about her weight fluctuations due to past familial and peer commentary.

Similarly, 21-year-old Kamila also struggles with weight fluctuations due to familial reactions when she lost weight during the pandemic⁴:

I think everyone goes through this, especially in Black families. But whenever you go home for the holidays, the go-to thing that your family or relatives want to do is comment on your weight. I remember I had lost so much weight during the pandemic and my grandma… she praised me so much about me losing so much weight. Even though the way it happened was because I was starving myself, I was literally eating apples and popcorn for two months… That also just made me feel a certain way because then I was just like, “Oh, so if I gain the weight back, is your love, is your perception of me going to change? You may love me but you think I’m just less now?” Praised for adhering to the thin ideal, Kamila’s weight loss was celebrated among their family, which she found harmful. Due to the praise she received, she began questioning if their family’s love was contingent on her size. Kamila admits that how they lost weight was unhealthy, but that it was admired by her family members. Seeking to explain how people develop their understanding of the world, Cameron et al. (2018) posit that, primarily through language analysis, “individuals rationalize their experiences in the social world through their own conceptions and understanding of this social world” (1244). Kamila attempts to understand her body image through the cues she receives from the social world. As her family praises her for her weight loss, she is socialized to associate thinness with praise. Although her family is unaware of her unhealthy weight loss process, Kamila learns that her family is more positively vocal about

⁴ The pandemic referred to is the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.
her appearance when she is thin and she constructs her idea of her body around the thinness ideal. As she navigates fat Black womanhood, her self-perception is deeply tied to her post-weight loss familial praise. Georgia and Kamila’s stories elucidate opposing weight fluctuation experiences. While Georgia was ridiculed for thinness, Kamila was praised. Yet, the impact of family response to weight fluctuations cannot be understated as both events were important factors in Georgia and Kamila’s body image development.

Peer response to weight fluctuations also had a pertinent influence on fat Black girls’ body image development. Peer treatment post-weight loss altered how Danielle viewed her body. She recounts that “the biggest thing that made me realize how peers look at me differently was junior year when I lost weight, everyone was so much nicer and not as avoidant in terms of invisibility and just being weird about it.” Detailing how her social life changed post-weight loss, Danielle explains how she became more visible to peers post-weight loss. These peers were also far nicer to her. She describes an important phenomenon in which “our bodies are being judged and arranged hierarchically according to some culturally formed composite picture that reflects more of an unachievable ideal than an average” (Berry, 2016, 21). In this case, the unachievable ideal was being of a certain, smaller, and thinner body size. This quote describes how people are judged based on appearance. Danielle’s weight loss was perceived as adherence to the thin ideal and as a result, she received better treatment from her classmates. While peer response was not the only experience that socialized her to view smaller bodies as more appealing, it was a crucial moment that solidified thinness as the ideal and contributed to Danielle’s self-image.

These narratives all highlight different elements of weight fluctuations and their influence on childhood body image. External responses to weight fluctuations, while all different in nature and intention, had a notable negative impact on childhood body image.
II. Adulthood

All of my co-collaborators spoke of the present factors that influence their relationship with their bodies. These factors include but are not limited to food, body expectations, interactions with men, and weight fluctuations. My analysis of the women’s relationships with food and weight fluctuations is a continuation of the concerns that existed during their childhood, illustrating how body image factors compound and expand over time. While food relationships and weight fluctuations manifested during childhood, some of my co-collaborators’ outlooks have changed, demonstrating better coping and resistance mechanisms against racialized and gendered fatphobia. Others have continued to struggle with these themes in relation to their self-perception.

I analyze two new categories within this section, body expectations and interactions with men. These themes showcase the women’s evolution into adulthood. While clothing and comparison remained factors in their self-image, the severity and intensity with which they manifested changed. When comparison and clothing were brought up, they were spoken about in the context of societal body expectations for Black women and how they influence their interactions with men. I chose to center body expectations and their relationship/interactions with men to elucidate that although similar themes emerge in childhood and adulthood, they manifest differently over time.

a. “Healthy foods shouldn’t be a punishment”: Fat Black Women’s Relationship with Food

The overarching theme that emerged when exploring my co-collaborators’ relationship with food was a newfound awareness of how their eating habits affect their self-perception. This awareness developed from their childhood eating habits. Lily, for instance, who suffered during childhood and young adulthood with eating disorders and is currently a recovering bulimic
discloses how eating disorders are marketed and how it causes Black girls and women to be overlooked:

I think that there’s a stigma around eating disorders where it’s a ‘white girls disease.’ And it’s only for teenage girls. When I notice that a lot of my friends, though, are doing some of the same things I used to do but [they] just call it a diet or you gotta make up for the weekend or all of these other things… I do definitely notice that a lot of us are struggling and since we don’t call it what it is we don’t necessarily get the right help that we need.

Lily argues that dieting and eating disorders are discussed as mostly impacting white women. Reflected in the literature on Black women’s body image, when Black women have disordered eating patterns, scholars have attributed it to identifying closer with white culture than Black culture (Capodilupo & Kim, 2014). However, Lily does not associate herself with white culture. She was raised in a traditional Nigerian household and feels incredibly connected to her Blackness. Assuming that all Black women with disordered eating patterns associate themselves with whiteness obscures the Black women that are struggling and need help. Lily addresses how many of the Black women that she knows are struggling with restrictive or harmful eating habits but are not given the help they need to recover or to even recognize their eating habits as disordered. Although she has this awareness, Lily still struggles some days with her eating patterns, and her story calls us to take Black women’s eating disorders as seriously as we take white women’s. By doing so, we may be able to help some women recognize their disordered eating patterns and receive the help they need.

Within the interviews, my co-collaborators also show an understanding of how the diet industry perpetuates the thinness ideal and standards for health. With “a growing portion of the $78 million that diet companies spend on advertising now targeting Black and Latina women,” the diet industry continues to exploit marginalized communities, perpetuating a standard of thinness that is not representative of fat Black women's bodies. While these women compared themselves to others during childhood, some have found peace in their bodies and utilize their
awareness of the diet industry as a negotiation space for both their body image and their definitions of health. Ophelia elaborates on this negotiation:

I realized that healthy foods shouldn’t be a punishment... people who go onto the Biggest Loser, and they do those extreme diets, only a small percentage of them maintain that weight, their new small, slim waist because it wasn’t a healthy relationship to begin with... Now, just once again having a healthy relationship with food. Yes, I can eat healthier. I’ve been eating healthier. I’m not a stick, but I feel better. That is health.

Ophelia is aware of the societal pressure to lose weight, however, she acknowledges that it is an unfair and unrealistic expectation exacerbated by the diet industry. Instead of restricting herself, she emphasizes feeling healthier through the foods she eats and locates what she considers to be a healthy balance. Reflective of past studies on Black women’s body image, which found that health to Black women is a holistic balance between physical and other factors, Ophelia indicates that health to her is about feeling better rather than shrinking her body (Cameron et al., 2018, 1246). She now focuses on regulating her sleep and eating healthy foods, taking the pressure off of weight loss. As a result of her mindset shift, she has been able to acknowledge the diet industry’s harmful expectations and find peace within her body by emphasizing nutrition rather than restriction.

While the women were aware of diet culture’s perpetuation of the thinness ideal, some of them still struggle with their eating habits:

So I have eating disorders that really have impacted me. And so sometimes I don’t eat because I just have no appetite. Sometimes I don’t eat and it’s just a test to myself to see how long I can go because I want to achieve this goal of losing weight... So that’s something I’ve been working through.

Kimberly struggles with the pressure to lose weight, which she understands is something to “work through.” But her primary modes of goal achievement are restriction and starvation. She represents how fat Black women understand the pressure to adhere to the norm and struggle to detach themselves from those expectations. They know responsibility falls on the individual for being fat, rather than on the diet industry for perpetuating the thin ideal. My co-collaborators,
illustrated by Kimberly’s reflections, indicate an awareness that dieting is both “rigorously individual” and “socially enforced” (Stearns, 1997, 60). For some of them, this awareness aids in separating themselves from disordered eating. For others like Kimberly, it seems to be an added pressure, something that they know is unhealthy but cannot seem to quit. The contrasts between Ophelia’s experience finding a balanced definition of health and Kimberly’s experience with disordered eating elucidate varied responses to the same awareness of the diet industry's influence.

Another frustration that emerged among my co-collaborators was the assumption that Black women, especially fat Black women, are unhealthy eaters due to their culture. Past literature suggests that Black cultural foods stand in opposition to more healthy food and eating patterns (Cameron et al, 2018). However, Chelsea resists this assumption, arguing that “it’s assumed that because I culturally eat these types of foods, oh, that’s the reason why this person is shaped in this way or just assuming there’s an unhealthier lifestyle or access to fresh foods or anything, which is not true. People’s bodies are just their bodies.” Chelsea contradicts scholars’ presumptions about Black cuisine and dietary practices. Her contention begets frustration that if her body is not thin and white, she is associated with unhealthy eating habits that she does not have. It also characterizes the association of Black “cultural” foods with fried, salty foods as a problematic assumption. While her quote can be seen as an attempt to distance herself from Black culture, I perceive Chelsea’s commentary as an act of resistance against racialized perceptions of Black women’s bodies as she distances herself from problematic assumptions about Black culture. She contests and destabilizes the narrative that all fat Black women only eat unhealthy foods and are therefore unhealthy, nuancing the conversation around fat Black women’s bodies.
Chelsea also analyzed motherhood’s impact on her body image, explaining that having a baby compelled her to become more health conscious. She remarks that “being intentional about [my child’s] nutrition made me evaluate my nutrition.” Her baby’s health encouraged her to research food intake and nutritional needs. Also wanting to aid in her baby’s development, Lily recounts the fear that her baby would experience similar disordered eating habits and insecurities that she did:

Throughout my pregnancy, I was horrified that I would somehow transfer my body image issues to my daughter…And then, knowing that I would have a daughter, I was also like “okay, well, you know, when she’s here, I know that I need to, whatever my issues are, I can definitely, or I will need to, learn to control them with her and know how I’m going to do introducing solids and meal times and things that I’ll need to teach others who are feeding her. To say, you know, she doesn’t have to clean her plate, she can eat til she’s full, all of these things. Don’t comment on her body.” Lily also researched how to properly nourish her child, particularly by introducing solid foods. Her relationship with food has improved her relationship as a result. Chelsea and Lily’s anecdotes contest the idea that Black women do nothing to improve their relationship with food (hooks, 2003), demonstrating that there are particular motivators, like children, that will encourage the women to seek medical advice on food. Both Chelsea and Lily are aware of their disordered eating habits and acknowledge the need to change for their babies. For them, motherhood accompanied recognition of how food addiction and disordered eating can be generational. Both women negotiated their interpersonal body image and eating habits for their children’s sake.

This section surveys my co-collaborators’ present relationships with food. I critiqued the presumption that eating disorders are a white woman’s disease and the diet industry’s harmful influence in perpetuating the thinness ideal. I then investigated the assumption that all Black women are unhealthy eaters and examined how motherhood influenced fat Black women’s relationship with food. In continuity from childhood, the women still worry about their
relationship with food. However, the concerns evolved with age. Rather than emphasizing familial and peer reactions to eating habits, as explored during the childhood section of this chapter, my co-collaborators focus on defining health, cultivating better eating habits, resisting stereotypes about fat Black women’s food consumption, and aiding their children’s development. Food and eating habits still concern them, but for many of them, their awareness of societal influence aids in self-perception navigation.

b. “I don’t know what to tell you because it’s not there”: Body expectations during Adulthood

A leading contention among the women was body expectations, or societal perceptions of how Black women’s bodies should look. All of the women reflect an awareness of body shape expectations. Danielle details media images of Black women as having “a big butt and thighs” with “no waist.” She acknowledges that “that’s not what most people’s bodies look like.” Despite this awareness among all of the women, most struggle with body comfortability due to this body shape expectation. Georgia explores how this societal body expectation weighs on her:

People would comment on how thin I was and things like that Black woman image because regardless if I’m mixed or not, the first thing people see is Black. And they have this expectation of the curvy Black girl with the butt and big boobs and I’m definitely not that… I definitely feel like I embodied more of the white characteristics of body type. Speaking about white bodies as if they are the antithesis to Black bodies, if Black women’s bodies are heavier and curvier with a big butt and big breasts, then white bodies are smaller and thinner with smaller features. In past studies on Black women’s body expectations, the women expressed feeling “discouraged and disappointed by the media’s consistent depiction of Black women as light-skinned and also connected this phenomenon to a desire to see Black women looking ‘more White’ (Capodilupo & Kim, 2014, 42). Meanwhile, “others talked about an entirely different standard that they felt pressure to meet: one where they had large breasts,
shapely hips, and a full backside” (42-43). There also was a consensus that curvier bodies were the more ideal body shape for Black women (43). Capodilupo & Kim’s (2014) study suggests that my co-collaborators are not alone in positioning Black and white women’s body expectations on opposite ends of the spectrum. Among Black women, there seems to be an understanding of the curvy body expectation. For Georgia, her smaller, thinner body is perceived as an embodiment of white characteristics and she still faces criticism from peers and Black family members as a result. This criticism led to insecurity about her current body shape. When asked what she thinks most people notice about her body, she answers, “I got no boobs which is something I think about sometimes.” Because she does not embody the idealized depiction of Black womanhood, with larger breasts and butt, she feels her body is more associated with whiteness than Blackness. Georgia’s story elucidates the problematic dichotomous thinking about body shapes and sizes that impact Black women’s self-perception.

Other co-collaborators discuss not living up to the curvy Black woman stereotype as well. Danielle asserts the expectation to have “most of your body weight be on the lower half of your body.” She details how, even when people don’t outwardly make comments about her body shape, she notices them “look [at my butt] to see and it’s like, ‘I don’t know what to tell you because it’s not there.’” Danielle documents how she is perceived in public spaces. She notices that people investigate her butt size, which makes her feel uncomfortable. Unlike Georgia who is light-skinned and naturally thin, Danielle is darker-skinned and curvier. Danielle’s darker skin exposes her to colorism or discrimination where those with lighter skin are treated more favorably than those with darker skin (NCCJ). In the past, Danielle has experienced pressure to adhere to the thin ideal. This past pressure could be representative of an attempt to “avoid further discrimination due to skin tone…rather than to simply meet a thin ideal” (Capodilupo & Kim,
People with darker skin tend to be viewed as less attractive than those with lighter skin (Maddox & Grey, 2002). As a result, darker-skinned Black women may feel more pressure to adhere to the thin ideal to minimize judgment placed on their bodies. Danielle’s discomfort at people staring at and judging her is linked to colorist expectations and perceptions of her body. She may be particularly sensitive to people looking towards particular features Black women are expected to have (larger butt and breasts). Because she feels she does not embody what is expected of her, noticing people staring can trigger her insecurity. Danielle engages in both active and passive resistance against racialized and gendered fatphobia by neither embodying the curvy body shape expectation nor conforming to the thinness ideal. Despite her resistance, her body image and self-perception are still negatively impacted, which explains why, when asked about how she views her body she replied “it goes up and down depending on the day.”

Not all women feel negatively about body expectations. Penny is aware of the curvy expectation but claims that it “helped me own my body more.” She notices that Black women also embrace the curves more. I’ve felt more support from Black women I think than I do with white women just with owning my body. I feel like I’ve gotten more compliments when I’m out from Black women than I ever have from white women… I feel more supported by them.

Past research depicts a unanimous perception of curvy and thin expectations as ideal body types (Hughes, 2021) (Capodilupo & Kim, 2014) (Poran, 2006). Penny adds to this conversation, arguing that being curvier has helped her find self-love through community support. Other fat Black women’s compliments and confidence has given her the courage to “own my body.” Researchers typically position the curvy ideal for Black women as reflective of what men want (Capodilupo & Kim, 2014), however, I argue that these expectations may provide a way to cultivate community and foster emotional support among fat Black women. The desire for curviness functions as resistance against the white supremacist, patriarchal thinness ideal as it
recenters Black women’s natural body shapes as beautiful. While I acknowledge that this could be harmful to Black women who do not adhere to either the thin ideal or the curvy ideal, the comfort and protection that it provides to fat Black women are undeniable. While we should look to this curvy ideal with caution, we cannot simply categorize it as harmful, as it can have both positive and negative impacts on fat Black women’s self-esteem.

All of the women were aware of both the curvy and thin expectations, however, its impacts on self-image varied. Some of my co-collaborators have self-esteem concerns due to these expectations, while others’ confidence increased. I positioned the curvy body expectations as both harmful and beneficial, arguing that they can function as a hindrance to or catalyst for positive body image and self-perception.

c. “If I could only be the size I was five years ago”: Weight Fluctuations and Self-Perception

Weight fluctuations, as in childhood, also have notable impacts on fat Black women’s body image. I specifically explore how external reactions to weight changes indicate self-perception. Most women felt that weight gain has or would negatively impact(ed) their self-esteem, while still giving themselves grace. Aria reflects on her weight during her young adult years:

It’s funny because let’s say five years ago, I was shaming on my body then. I’m just too big. I need to lose some weight. Where now I’m like if I could only be the size I was five years ago. I would say it’s a catch-22. I’m definitely not happy where I am, but I’m also taking into consideration that I’m still beating depression. I just had a baby a year ago. I went through some serious health challenges. Taking into consideration those things and not beating up on myself as much.

Aria details why she should be kinder to herself despite her weight gain. While the women did not need a reason for gaining weight, they tended to recount specific life events that caused the fluctuations. For Aria, the catalysts were mental health conditions, a new baby, and health issues.
These life events, and the women’s reactions to them, reflect the expectation that Black women be perpetually resilient. Reflecting the Strong Black Woman Ideology (SBW), past research suggests that “the more weight women tacked on, it further reinforced the cultural assumption that Black women can handle anything” (Hughes, 2021, 323-4). The SBW Ideology clearly impacted Aria’s weight fluctuations. She claims that her weight increased as a direct result of stressful life events. While she is unhappy with her weight, she gives herself grace for all that she has overcome. This intrapersonal grace is imperative for Black women, especially as they navigate life events alongside racialized and gendered fatphobia. Without this grace, Aria admits that she would feel worse about her weight fluctuations. Still looking to a future where she has lost weight, she is grateful for her body’s resilience. Aria’s anecdote highlights how weight fluctuations can negatively impact plus-sized women’s body image and self-perception.

While most of the women had a negative response to the prospect of gaining weight, Ophelia had a more positive outlook. Speaking about what weight gain would mean to her, she claims that she's been gaining weight her whole life, so “it'd just be the new normal to me.” As previously mentioned, Ophelia has been focusing on implementing healthy habits into her life such as eating nutritious foods and regulating sleep. As a result of these habits she has realized that “if I integrate all of the healthy habits that I want to integrate into my life, and I gain more weight, then it is meant to be, you know?” Ophelia employs a holistic view of health, which does not equate her weight fluctuations and body size to her health status. By separating health from weight, Ophelia resists the rhetoric within the medical community that fat is inherently unhealthy. This narrative perpetuates and “naturalizes” social inequalities, reinforcing the stereotype that Black women’s bodies are naturally larger and more unhealthy (Hughes, 2021, 5

Defined in the introduction as a cultural narrative that Black women have inhuman physical and emotional strength.
320-21). In opposition to this narrative, when Ophelia argues that her health is more dependent on her daily habits rather than her weight, she resists racialized and gendered fatphobia by centering her perspective on her body image as paramount. Elucidating how weight fluctuations do not always have to be negative, Ophelia reframes how we perceive body alterations and displays how self-esteem does not have to decrease due to weight gain.

Weight loss surgery as a mode of weight fluctuation was also explored. Fiona received gastritis bypass surgery, a weight loss procedure that “involves creating a small pouch from the stomach and connecting the newly created pouch directly to the small intestine,” making it nearly impossible to eat large quantities of food (MayoClinic.org). Fiona reflects on this decision approximately two years post-operation, detailing her reasoning for surgery and why she would not recommend it to others:

I very much regret it because, at the time, I genuinely thought like ‘oh, I’ll full throttle love myself if I just lose 150 pounds.’ You still have to spend so much time working on how to love yourself. Weight and your body image really isn’t just an effect of that from my interpretation. Getting weight loss surgery kind of reminded me that I rely so heavily on outside confirmation… I regret it because I did not love myself because I was fat. The world didn’t love me because I was fat. And there’s a flip side to being catcalled all the time where it’s like a daily reminder that I’m only acknowledged [now] because I’m in a skinny body because this is not the attention I was receiving when I was in a fat body to any extent. Since her surgery, Fiona has lost around 140 pounds and claims she still does not love herself as much as she thought she would. The societal expectation placed on fat women to “surgically erase” what is “imagined as excess body fat” pressured Fiona into receiving surgery (Garland-Thompson, 2002, 11). The goal of weight loss surgery is to “produce an unmarked body” that adheres to American beauty standards. Fiona’s surgery highlights the harm that American beauty standards can cause. She recalls fatphobic comments she received and how she feels more “respected” in a skinny body, calling existing in a fat body “inherently violent.” Her
decision to receive gastric bypass surgery, which was pushed onto her by her doctor, was “purely societal.” Recounting all the elements of fatness that led her to surgery, she declares, “I hated not being able to go into stores and find clothes, I hated being stared at, I hated being laughed at, I hated not fitting into airplane seats or not being able to ride roller coasters. And I was always so mad at myself like, oh, how did I get to be this way?” Now, she never struggles to find clothes, people are kinder, and she fits into seats easily. While her life is easier in a thin body, she regrets that she was unable to love her body when she was fat and wishes that she had not chosen surgery solely because of others’ perceptions of her. Weight loss can seem like the easiest way to reduce discrimination for fat Black women encountering racialized and gendered fatphobia. However, Fiona elucidates how weight loss, and surgery in particular, does not solve one’s self-esteem issues. Fiona’s experience may be a cautionary tale about how important weight fluctuations (whether losing or gaining) can be to someone.

These three stories and perspectives, while vastly different, position weight fluctuations as a pertinent factor in fat Black women’s self-perception. Regardless of whether they have gained weight they wish to lose, have found peace in their weight gain, or went as far as to get weight loss surgery to lose weight, my co-collaborators analyze how weight fluctuations and external responses impact their body image.

d. “It’s 3:00 PM, in a grocery store, and I’m getting my ass slapped”: Fat Black Women’s Relationships and Interactions with men

Fat Black women’s relationships with men also have a profound impact on their self-perceptions. Hartley (2001) posits that “because the male gaze is always present, even when it is physically absent, women must continually produce bodies that are acceptable to that gaze. Thus a woman’s own gaze becomes a substitute for a man’s gaze, and she evaluates her own
body as ruthlessly as she expects it to be evaluated by him” (62). Suggesting that the male gaze explains why the thinness ideal is perpetuated, Hartley argues that women are ruthless to their bodies because of this pressure. While I steadfastly agree that the male gaze is always present, I resist the reductive notion that women utilize it against themselves as a compulsion to shrink or alter their bodies. My interviews suggest that it is not the employment of the male gaze, but men’s uncomfortable actions themselves against fat Black women’s bodies that can impact their desire to lose weight. The women’s stories of sexualization illustrate the pervasiveness of sexual assault and harassment toward fat Black women. Fiona details being chased down in the streets and grabbed by men in grocery stores:

I’ve had men chase me down, I’ve had men smack me on my ass, grab my boobs. I'm 26 being grabbed by 47-year-old men… And these are things that are happening while I'm going grocery shopping… It's 3:00 PM in a grocery store and I'm getting my ass slapped. Chelsea describes being sexualized by her boss when she first started at her current place of employment:

So it was right around when I started working at [my job]. I’d never worn an apron in my life. Getting used to the apron, getting used to my uniform, and I remember it would always go in between my breasts… I was training to be a supervisor at that point, so I was in the back. And [my boss was] like ‘oh, put those away’ or something. It was such a random thing to say… I felt so embarrassed. Fiona and Cheleas’s accounts indicate a trend of hypersexualizing fat Black women. Rooted in the historical treatment of fat Black women,⁶ men feel entitled to touch and comment on their bodies in any place and under any circumstances. In a previous focus group study, a group of fat Black women described “the intrusive way many of their coworkers and bosses would touch their bodies. In general, they expressed anger about being expected to always be in a jovial mood, open to dirty stories, and available for compassion on demand” (Adelman & Faulkner, 1995, 278). Fiona and Chelsea’s stories do not stand on their own. Sexual harassment is common among my co-collaborators. This harassment makes them feel uncomfortable, not just in a

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⁶ This is explored in the first chapter.
particular space, but in their bodies. Neither Chelsea nor Fiona employed the male gaze to criticize their bodies, instead, it was the trauma caused by older men that impacted their self-perceptions. Many of these hypersexualized experiences are in unavoidable spaces, such as work or the grocery store. They are unwanted, unsolicited violations of personal space. Using the male gaze as justification for why fat women are so critical of themselves obscures how men’s actions and commentary cause legitimate trauma that then impacts their self-esteem. Holding men accountable is a fundamental element of making fat Black women feel safe in public spaces and improving their self-perception.

While most of the women spoke negatively of their relationships and experiences with men, Aria explores how her relationship with her husband actually increases her self-esteem. She gushed that “he’s always my biggest fan as far as weight is concerned or how I’m looking… if I’m going out with him, I already feel like a million bucks no matter what I have on.” Similar to Fiona and Chelsea’s anecdotes, Aria’s commentary on her romantic relationship exhibits how it is not the employment of the male gaze, but men’s interactions themselves that have a profound impact on plus-sized Black women’s self-esteem. While other co-collaborators detail the traumatic side of men’s interactions, Aria shows how men’s commentary and presence can be beneficial. By feeling “like a million bucks” with her husband, regardless of what she is wearing or her size, she pushes past her personal insecurity and sees herself through the eyes of someone who loves her. She finds comfort, confidence, and peace being by his side, where compliments are welcome and solicited. Aria’s experience adds nuance to a conversation about fat Black women’s male interactions.

While most of the women’s self-esteem was negatively impacted or even harmed by men, some of them were boosted by interactions with the right men at the right time. I do not argue
that men always have a negative impact on their self-esteem nor that fat Black women utilize the male gaze for self-critique. Instead, I posit that men’s actions have a direct impact on my co-collaborators’ self-esteem.

III. Conclusion

This chapter explores how fat Black women perceive their bodies and how they navigate the world. I explore how childhood and adulthood influence how they presently view their bodies. During childhood, fat Black girls are exposed to concerns such as internal and external comparison and critique, clothing concerns, disordered and/or unhealthy relationships with food, and weight fluctuations. While still grappling with their eating habits and weight fluctuations during adulthood, fat Black women have a newfound concern about societal body expectations and their interactions with men. As the chapter explores both inter- and intra-communal body standards and expectations, I posit that any and all expectations for body size and shape are harmful. It is not simply about the thinness ideal or curvy body expectations, but society’s continued pressure for women’s bodies to adhere to a socially constructed norm. These norms cause unnecessary added pressure as they attempt to navigate their self-perception.

My co-collaborators demonstrate increased self- and societal awareness during adulthood, however, all of the aforementioned factors compound and impact their self-perception over time. Positioning the women as engaging in everyday acts of resistance, such as rejecting cultural narratives around food and health, I argue that fat Black women are in constant negotiation with internal strife, societal expectations, and interpersonal responses to their bodies. This negotiation illustrates how fat Black women simultaneously adhere to and resist racialized and gendered fatphobia.

In the next chapter, I compare the resistance modes among my co-collaborators and fat Black women celebrities. To do this, I investigate how public image curation and visibility
impact fat Black women’s resistance strategies through a case study on Lizzo’s (social) media persona. By inserting Lizzo into my analysis of racialized and gendered fatphobia’s impact on self-image, I interrogate questions of status, visibility, and wealth, adding nuance to the experiences of fat Black women.
Chapter 3: “Our Bodies are None of Your Fucking Business”: Lizzo, Digital Image Curation, Hypervisibility, and Resistance

What happens when a fat Black woman is given the power and visibility of celebrity status? How does this alter her perception of her body, especially as it relates to her relationship with (social) media and image curation? Using Lizzo as a case study, I explore the potential ways in which fat Black women utilize (social) media as a site for resistance. While I acknowledge that Lizzo is not representative of all fat Black women, she is arguably the most vocal and well-known self-defined “fat Black woman” celebrity (Sengoya & Luna, 2021). My decision to focus on Lizzo for this case study stems from how her public persona is so deeply rooted in and connected to her body, her pride in her fatness, and her encouragement of body positivity/normalization. This case study provides insight into how fat Black women celebrities can use their power, status/status, and visibility to enrich the discourse around body positivity and encourage different forms of digital resistance to racialized and gendered fatphobia through (social) media.

Melissa Jefferson, more widely known as Lizzo, is a 34-year-old singer, rapper, and advocate against racism, sexism, and fatphobia, particularly against Black women. She rose to global fame after the release of her 2019 hit song “Truth Hurts” and album Cuz I Love You (Biography.com). Alongside her worldwide recognition for her musical talent, she promotes radical self-love on her social media accounts, in interviews, and through her music. To investigate how Lizzo publicly discusses her body in physical and digital spaces, I gathered and analyzed fourteen social media posts, news articles, interviews, song lyrics, and acceptance speeches from 2020 to the present. Acknowledging that her public presence is always changing, I chose to focus on the past two years (2020-2022) to ensure the relevance and accuracy of her

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7 This contention between positivity and normalization will be explored further in the chapter.
current opinions. Four main themes continued to emerge within the analysis: vulnerability as agency, fashion as self-expression, the contentious language surrounding body positivity vs. body neutrality, and her shapewear line, Yitty’s role within these movements.

1. “Is it just because I’m Black and heavy?:” Vulnerability as Agency

Lizzo illustrates how vulnerability, defined as a “willingness to show emotion or to allow one’s weaknesses to be seen or known,” on social media platforms can be a site of agency and resistance (Dictionary.com). Having previously spoken about how her relationship with social media has changed over time, in a 2021 interview, despite “abusive” comments, Lizzo told BBC that “social media was an important tool in getting her messages out and making sure she wasn’t ‘erased’” (BBC, 2021). In 2022, she also stated that she has “developed a healthier relationship with social media” through therapy, which “help[s] her navigate the hurtful comments” (DeMichiel, 2022). Despite her improved relationship with social media, she exposes how social media can be a mentally draining environment, especially when it comes to body positivity. In her song Special, Lizzo sings,

Woke up this morning to somebody in a video,
Talking about something I posted in a video.
If it wasn’t me then would you even get offended or
Is it just because I’m Black and heavy? Y’all don't hear me though. (Lizzo, 2022)

These lyrics elucidate the ample criticism she experiences for everything she says and does on social media. Seemingly attributing this criticism to her appearance, she suggests a contentious relationship with social media where she feels hypervisible. This hypervisibility keeps her relevant, spreads her positive message, and keeps her fans informed, while simultaneously exposing her to the abuse that she addresses. Author Iona Hancock (2022) discusses how when fat Black women become associated with the body positivity movement, they are open to the stereotyping as the “angry Black woman.” In other words, fat Black women “taking the same
unabashed and unapologetic stance risks being interpreted through racialized stereotyping, casting them as sassy, arrogant, and angry” (Hancock, 2022). Lizzo’s experiences with social media, as she makes clear in her lyrics, are inextricably tied to her experiences as a fat Black woman, and her vocal expression of self-love and positivity is interpreted through a racialized lens. Adding to the level of visibility and reach that Lizzo possesses as a celebrity, with 41.4 million followers combined on Instagram, Tiktok, and Twitter, she experiences hypervisibility as her life is put on display for all to comment on and interpret (Meyers, 2009). Because of the racialized and gendered fatphobia that influences how people interact with her on social media, she feels her social commentary is often misinterpreted, making it so “y’all don’t hear [her] though.” Social media, and media more broadly, can alter the message that Lizzo is trying to promote by leaving her commentary up to the (mis)interpretation of the general public. The (il)legibility of her message can ultimately make the media a mentally draining environment, increasing the difficulty of resisting racialized and gendered fatphobia.

Despite her celebrity status, Lizzo is not immune to the toll that social media can take on her body perception. In 2020, she took a hiatus from Twitter after an author wrote that her success was “the result of an obesity epidemic in America” (DeMichiel, 2022). To announce her hiatus, she tweeted “Yeah, I can’t do this shit no more. Too many trolls. I’ll be back when I feel like it” (DeMichiel, 2022). While this may seem on the surface to be a capitulation to existing structures of power, Lizzo’s honesty and vulnerability regarding her emotional limits and experiences with abusive comments on social media is an assertion of agency and resistance to racialized and gendered fatphobia. By stating she will be back when she feels like it, she reshapes the experience to be within her control, giving herself time to heal away from mainstream public watch. Taking herself out of the spotlight for a period of time is particularly
“I’m Fat As Fuck”

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agentic for Lizzo because she is constantly blurring the lines between her public and private lives. Meyers (2009) argues that “although many celebrities bemoan the fact that their private lives are offered up for public consumption by celebrity media… the blurring of the private/public distinction that occurs in celebrity media is essential for the maintenance of their star power” (892). While celebrities attempt to separate their public and private life, those whose private lives are more public are often more intriguing to the general public (Meyers, 2009, 894). Because the media mainly controls the images of celebrities’ private lives that are shared, Lizzo sharing aspects of her private life on social media, such as moments when she is struggling with her body image or dealing with a hurtful comment by reporters, gives the media less to “expose.” In this way, her social media creates less of a separation between public and private spheres. By blurring these boundaries on social media and sharing her emotions with her fans, she retains control of her own narrative and resists making space for racialized and gendered fatphobic interpretations of her life.

Lizzo asserts her agency by refusing to separate her public and private life in traditional ways and creating her own narrative, which allows her to better connect with her fanbase. In creating her own narrative, Lizzo controls when and how she will express her emotional vulnerability. Lizzo’s social media presence creates an image of authenticity around her persona that represents her personal life in the way that she desires and ensures she is not “erased” (Meyers, 2009). In this, she contradicts the typical experiences of celebrity life, attempting to hide their personal life from the public. Instead, she narrates her life on social media, giving the tabloids less to write about. By controlling her own narrative, Lizzo resists the media’s racialized and gendered fatphobic interpretations of her life and asserts her ability to tell her own story as agentic vulnerability.
II. “Couture off the runway:” Empowerment Through Fashion

Lizzo uses fashion as a mode of empowerment as a fat Black woman. Lizzo is known for her eccentric fashion choices, especially at awards shows. While she does not often address her fashion choices in the media, her social media exposes her fashion choices as agentic, as she continues to take up space and demand attention in predominantly white spaces. At the 2022 Emmy Awards, for instance, she wore a red dress with multiple sheer layers and a long train (Figure 1). Additionally, she attended the 2022 Video Music Awards (VMAs) in a puffy navy blue dress that spread multiple feet in each direction (Figure 2). While many of the comments on both posts were celebratory and uplifting, I center my analysis on the negative comments made about her body on her Instagram posts to showcase how she uses fashion to assert agency and intentionally take up space. Comments on her Emmys dress read “If you could go back and tell little Lizzo one thing it should’ve been slow down on the food” (Figure 3) and “This… whale looks like a used tampon” followed by multiple pig and disgusted face emojis (Figure 4). On the VMAs post, comments read “That's the biggest trash bag I've ever seen,” (Figure 5), “well, no more of that material left,” (Figure 6), and “she huge huge” with a skull emoji, similar to a laughing emoji (Figure 7). These comments all refer to Lizzo’s body size, the space she is taking up, and their discomfort with her appearance in these spaces as a fat Black woman. These comments cannot be separated from racialized discourses about the body. Looking at scholars who have analyzed Lizzo’s online presence, Stewart and Breedan (2021) argue that “politics of the body (and fatness specifically) are steeped in white supremacist racial politics revolving around beauty, desire, and the ultimate quest for defining each” (222). Because of the inseparability of her fatness and Blackness, Lizzo’s comment section - which mainly addresses her size - is a representation of anti-Blackness as well. By labeling Lizzo as overindulgent in
food, a “whale,” and the “biggest trash bag,” these comments simultaneously mark her as undesirable and contribute to the racialized and gendered fatphobia that fat Black women experience.

Lizzo is well aware of the negative comments made about her. In a 2021 Instagram live, she discussed the difficulty of seeing comments like those previously discussed, calling them “racist, fatphobic, and hurtful” (Hendricks, 2021). Additionally, she said that while most of the time the comments do not affect her mood, “what [she] won’t accept is y’all doing this to Black women over and over and over again, especially us big Black girls” (BBC, 2021). In this, she makes a statement on the ways in which these comments are rooted in and perpetuated by systemic violence and oppression that accompanies racialized and gendered fatphobia. Because Lizzo sees the hurtful comments on her posts, and they do sometimes bother her, it is important to analyze why she continues to make eccentric fashion choices such as those from the Emmys and VMAs to understand how fat Black women celebrities engage in resistance.

Lizzo continues to make fashion choices that make the public uncomfortable as a method of embracing her body rather than hiding it. In a New York Times interview about her shapewear line Yitty, Lizzo elaborates on her journey to self-love, stating that she learned to “have fun with my body, creating shapes and allowing my body to be curvaceous, loving the rolls that you’re supposed to hide, and exploring through fashion” (Friedman, 2022). Lizzo’s interview elucidates how her self-love journey meant learning to be okay with and proud of the space she takes up. By not avoiding clothing based solely on how big it will make her look, she utilizes fashion to outwardly emulate her pride in her body. Lizzo’s comfortability wearing clothing regardless of its size is in and of itself an “act of defiance” as she positions “larger bodies as attractive and desirable” and “defies beauty standards of thinness” (Williams, 2017). Her very existence in this

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8 Lizzo’s Yitty shapewear line will be explored in greater detail later in the chapter.
clothing and her comfortability wearing outfits like those from the Emmys and VMAs in public is not only an ode to her self-love journey and pride in her body but also functions as resistance against the racialized and gendered fatphobia that she experiences daily - within and outside of her comments section.

Lizzo’s choice to post pictures on her social media accounts wearing these outfits adds to the role of fashion as resistance. When she attends an award show in a gown like the ones in Figures 1 and 2, she makes multiple Instagram posts showing it off (Figures 8 and 9). By posting pictures of herself in these outfits, she is also engaging in a form of active resistance, positioning herself as worthy of couture clothing. While investigating how online platforms for fat people of color on Tumblr act as safe spaces for a doubly marginalized group, media scholar Apryl Williams argues that posting pictures in outfits acts as an assertion of agency and resistance:

> Fat bodies have a harder time finding clothing in stores because retailers refuse to make them in sizes outside of the “normal” range…When clothing fits well and is enjoyable, sharing the outfit not only helps others to find clothes, wearing the item encourages retailers to continue expanding clothing sizes. (Williams, 2017)

Williams argues that when fat people unapologetically wear and post their outfits online, they are engaging in a public assertion of what it means for fat people of color to wear comfortable, stylish clothing. Importantly, because fat people have a difficult time finding stores that carry their sizes, finding and posting clothes that fit them can encourage other fat people to shop at particular places and encourage other designers, companies, and stores to be more size-inclusive. As someone of high status and follower count, posting pictures in her outfits is an indirect call for brands to consider size inclusivity. It also acknowledges how impactful clothing can be in one’s self-love and confidence journey. When Lizzo posts something she feels proud to wear despite the negative comments calling her a whale or telling her to scale back on her food, she
embraces wearing clothing that makes her feel comfortable, stylish, and beautiful, which is in
and of itself an assertion of agency.

Another important way fashion functions as a site of resistance for Lizzo is in her
unapologetic ability to take up as much space as she desires. While many of the negative
comments surrounding her VMAs dress were comparing her to a trash bag, TikToker and fashion
writer Mandy Lee spoke on the power of wearing a large dress as a fat Black woman:

[Lizzo] has consistently set trends and pushed boundaries on the red carpet and in her
street style that I think a lot of people just aren’t ready for because a lot of the critique I
see is that “this dress is too big.” But there’s so much power in taking up space,
especially for a plus-size woman where you’re constantly told “you need to shrink
yourself and compensate for your size by being smaller, especially in the clothes that you
wear.” And throughout Lizzo’s public appearances and even in her own art, she’s
continuously saying f*ck you to that and just kinda like wearing whatever she wants.
(Tiktok, 2022)

Lizzo saw this video and duetted it, nodding and pointing to the video in approval as Lee argues
that there is power in wearing a big dress as a fat Black woman in a society that tells them to
shrink themselves. Lee continues on to say that although the VMAs are typically a more casual
award show, Lizzo attended in a “massive couture gown” and encourages the viewers to “dissect
your preconceived notions” about fat women in fashion (TikTok, 2022). In this, she persuades
viewers to confront their fatphobic biases that contribute to the negative commentary on Lizzo’s
gown. Lee addresses how wearing a “massive couture gown” to a casual event and taking up
space serves as a way of saying “f*ck you” to the racialized and gendered fatphobia Lizzo
encounters within her career. By comfortably taking up space in a large gown that demands
acknowledgment, Lizzo asserts herself as worthy of attention despite her size. In asserting her
worth through fashion, Lizzo resists societal expectations for her to shrink her body, whether
through consuming less food as previous comments suggested, or through fashion. Instead, she
commands the space that she takes up, asserting her agency and deservingness to be there, and
claiming her power.

Lizzo uses fashion to express her agency and resist racialized and gendered fatphobia by
unapologetically wearing clothing that takes up ample amounts of space and posting pictures of
said outfits to show her pride in her body. In this, Lizzo claims her power as a fat Black woman
despite the negative comments she receives about stylistic choices, and more broadly, her body
size.

III. Body Positivity or Body Normativity: Defining the Difference through Lizzo’s Eyes

While Lizzo’s name has become parallel with the body positivity movement over the past
few years, her language and beliefs surrounding the movement have shifted over time. As far
back as September 2020, Lizzo has stated that she thinks calling herself body positive is “lazy”
at this point. Instead, she pushes for body normativity and says she wants to “normalize my
body” (Van Paris, 2020). Lizzo claims that the body positivity movement has been co-opted by
“all bodies,” “medium and small girls” in particular (Tannenbaum, 2021). In this, fat women are
getting erased from the conversation of body positivity (Tannenbaum, 2021). She then goes on to
argue that

The people who created [body positivity]: Big women, big Brown women, and Black
women, queer women are not benefiting from the mainstream success of it. Our bodies
are none of your f*cking business, our health is none of your f*cking business. All we
ask is that you keep that same energy with these medium girls that you praise, keep the
same f*cking energy. (Tannenbaum, 2021)

Lizzo describes the co-optation of the body positivity movement by thin white women as a way
of showcasing their bodies, promoting fitness and thinness, and reinforcing the same European
beauty standards that she stands in opposition to. Calling on society to hold thinner women to the
same expectations that fat women are held to, especially when it comes to preconceived notions
of health, she addresses how fat women are automatically labeled as unhealthy by virtue of their size, while thinner bodies are not. Ultimately, Lizzo believes that the body positivity movement does not reflect the women that it was originally intended for, and instead has been co-opted. She argues that this can be seen on Instagram, where the hashtag ‘body positive’ shows “smaller-framed girls” (BBC, 2021). Lizzo makes an important point about the co-optation of the body positivity movement on social media, which is supported by recent scholarship. An investigation into the body positivity movement on Instagram showed that out of 235 posts, 67% were white, 55% were of “normal” weight, and 78% represented culturally constructed European beauty standards (Lazuka, 2020). Themes of “weight loss, exercising, or dieting as a means of changing one’s appearance” were common as well (Lazuka, 2020). In consideration of these statistics, Lizzo’s commentary about the co-optation of the body positivity movement on social media holds true and her disassociation from the movement is understandable, as she does not see herself reflected in its popular representations.

Lizzo’s resistance against co-optations of the body positivity movement illustrates her position on white supremacy, fatphobia, and social media’s functionality. In an interview, she discusses the commercialization of the body positivity movement as well as her experience with hurtful social media comments, stating that her job as an artist is to “reflect the times” and claiming that “racist” and “fatphobic” comments “should not fly” (BBC, 2021). Lizzo’s commentary on how her celebrity status and activism reflects the social environment in which she lives is illustrative of Erin Meyer’s (2009) argument that “who we think the star ‘really’ is, then, tells us something about who we are or who we ought to be” (895). If fan values reflect a celebrity’s values, Lizzo’s pushback of the movement’s co-optation encourages her fans to recognize the harm in the version of body positivity that is portrayed on social media. To be a fan

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9 This is, of course, subjective and open to interpretation.
of Lizzo is to acknowledge the racialized and gendered fatphobia she experiences and how the body positivity movement has continued to reflect prominent systems of domination, including white supremacy and fatphobia.

This section explores Lizzo’s contentions with the co-optation of the body positivity movement and how she has used her media presence to resist the racialized and gendered fatphobia present within it. By speaking out against the co-optation of the movement to reflect European beauty standards, Lizzo positions herself as anti-white supremacy and fatphobia.

IV. Itty, Bitty, Yitty: Reinventing shapewear or profiting off insecurity?

While Lizzo has spoken out in opposition to the co-optation of the body positivity movement, she plays into the imagery and messaging of the movement for her new shapewear line, Yitty. Established in early 2022, Yitty is Lizzo’s shapewear line, which was designed to “celebrate, hug, and love every single body” (Yitty, 2022). The brand pushes for people to “tell your story with your body” (Yitty, 2022). Similar to Yitty’s rhetoric, Braithwaite et al. (2022) define the body positivity movement as seeking “to challenge narrow appearance ideals by encouraging acceptance of bodies of any age, shape, size, color, or ability” (25, italics added for emphasis). Williams (2017) argues that the body positivity movement “dictates that people should be proud of and embrace their bodies” (3). The official website for the movement states that the organization was founded to allow people to share “their unique experiences,” and “made a commitment to honestly telling our stories and offering a space for others to do the same without fear of judgment, comparison, or criticism” (thebodypositive.org, italics added for emphasis). The language used to define the body positivity movement by both scholars and body-positive activists closely parallels Lizzo’s rhetoric on the Yitty website. Despite pushing back against the body positivity movement, she employs the rhetoric within her company to sell
her shapewear line. The parallel in language between *Yitty* and the body positivity movement is indicative of a trend that scholars call the “commodification of the body positivity movement” (Lazuka, 2020). This commodification has arisen alongside companies’ recognition of the power of the movement and their ability to capitalize off of its imagery and messaging (Lazuka, 2020). Two particular ways companies align themselves with the body positivity movement is through “launching plus-size clothing lines and including plus-sized models in advertising campaigns” (Braithwaite, 2022, 27). In addition to the paralleled rhetoric, Lizzo utilizes both of these tactics in the advertisement of her shapewear brand, *Yitty*. She often models for the clothing brand herself as a fat Black woman and employs plus-size and diverse women in the ad campaigns as well. She also reverses the sizing, to read “6x to XS,” compared to the traditional sizing method (XS to 6x) to push her message of size inclusivity (*Yitty*, 2022). Looking at *Yitty*’s size-inclusive and diverse advertising campaigns and the parallels in language between *Yitty* and the body positivity movement, it becomes clear that even if Lizzo herself does not align with the movement, she has encouraged her brand to do so.

Another way *Yitty* aligns itself with the body positivity movement is through the imagery used for the advertising campaigns. On the “Meet Yitty” website, the image at the top of the page shows five women of different races, heights, and sizes in the shapewear, one of which is Lizzo herself (Figure 10) (*Yitty*, 2022). These posed images with diverse groups of women are found throughout the website and again parallel popular body positivity imagery. Upon a “body positivity” google search, similar images of diverse groups of women in lingerie/ shapewear style clothing appear (Google, 2022). Even down to the number of women in the images, these pictures parallel the ones on the Yitty website (Figures 11, 12, and 13) (Young, 2020) (Cole, 2020) (Swami, 2022). Yitty’s use of body positivity imagery continues to align the company with
the movement that Lizzo claims to not agree with. However, I argue that Lizzo’s alignment with the movement through her brand *Yitty* is a conscious, strategic choice-- one that both recenters Black women in the conversation of body positivity and reflects the capitalist nature of celebrity culture.

Lizzo uses her brand *Yitty* to recenter Black women in the body positivity conversation by creating a body-positive clothing line as a fat Black woman. The commodification of the body positivity movement has centered on fat *white* women as a marketing technique for the public (Hancock, 2022). In this, the body positivity movement has turned into an “echo chamber of whiteness, advocating for and uplifting the few ‘acceptable’ white voices via brands boosting profits and marketing themselves as progressive” (Hancock, 2022). Because the body positivity movement has been commodified by corporations, fat Black women are ignored in the public discourse surrounding the movement (Hancock, 2022). Lizzo has acknowledged this trend publicly, which is why she has (attempted to) detach(ed) herself from the movement (Tannenbaum, 2021). However, her brand *Yitty* has reattached Lizzo to the body positivity movement as she plays into the commodification of the movement and profits off of the imagery. In doing this, Lizzo shows how fat Black women can remain centered in the body positivity discourse while still making the movement into a capitalist venture. Her brand recenters the “Black, brown, queer big women, my girls in the 16 plus” that she feels have been excluded from the co-optation and commodification of the body positivity movement (Friedman, 2022). In doing this, while still creating a brand that profits off of the movement, she attempts to alter the public discourse to be inclusive of the women she claims began the movement in the first place: fat Black women.
It is important to also acknowledge the pitfalls of Lizzo’s tactic to recenter fat Black women in the body positivity movement through the creation of and alignment with corporations (specifically Fabletics, the workout clothing corporation that owns her shapewear line). Firstly, Lizzo decided to sell shapewear, which has historically been used to alter women’s bodies “via external means to make it more acceptable to the eyes of various beholders, most of them men” (Friedman, 2022). In this, shapewear has been a way of “achieving society’s definition of beauty” (Friedman, 2022). Despite what shapewear has previously meant for women, Lizzo argues that she is trying to reinvent what shapewear means and alter its relationship to women’s bodies (Friedman, 2022). Ultimately, Lizzo’s goal is to allow women “to speak for themselves when it comes to how their body should look and how they should feel in their body” (Friedman, 2022). While this is Lizzo’s goal, it is hard to imagine that the people purchasing Yitty will view the shapewear differently than other shapewear brands. Even if buyers understand Lizzo’s message, it is impractical to believe that their perception of their bodies, their relationship with shapewear, and their reasons for buying it will be instantly altered simply because Lizzo is promoting self-love. Additionally, the rhetoric of giving women the opportunity to decide how their bodies “should look” still reinforces the idea that there is a correct way for their bodies to look, even if that decision is up to the buyer. In this interpretation, Yitty does not particularly challenge societal beauty standards of thinness, but in a way encourages women to continue to buy products that can alter their bodies. Even if Lizzo’s goal is to “revolutionize” shapewear in a positive way, the ramifications of creating a shapewear line with body-positive imagery may be that people only feel worthy of loving their bodies if and when they are doing everything they can to shrink it.
One of Lizzo’s self-proclaimed main goals throughout her career has been “helping her fans who don’t have an outlet, support system, or financial freedom” (DeMichiel, 2022). However, the pricing for Yitty is not necessarily reflective of that goal. When the shapewear line launched, its starting price for leggings was $70 while bras started at $50 (Friedman, 2022). That means to buy a matching set from Yitty, one would have to pay $120 outright. For low-income Black and brown women and those without financial freedom, this may not be a feasible amount of money, meaning that the people that Lizzo is supporting and recentering with her brand may not be able to buy her clothing. Thus, there may be a way in which Lizzo is reinforcing how the movement centers white women by pricing her shapewear so high.

Lizzo’s association with the body positivity movement has given her the space to align with and profit off of influencer culture. When writing about Black women’s relationship with social media, Knight Steele (2022) argues that Black women are “not immune from influencer and celebrity culture or the demands of digital technology. Within a digital ecosystem, followers, engagement, and self-promotion are paramount” (155). Lizzo illustrates what happens to fat Black women celebrities when they use their celebrity status and visibility to create profitable brands. Not only does she use social media as the main promotional tool for her brand Yitty, but her Instagram has also become riddled with advertisements. Out of her last 12 posts, almost half of them (5) were used in some way to promote Yitty.10 Importantly, her use of social media, which she previously used to “help her fans” and “provide them with an outlet” has become the antithesis of what she claimed she would use her platform for. On stage, Lizzo claimed that she was “not gonna sell you the commercialized self-love. I’m not gonna sell you the hashtag self-care. I’m not into that. I feel a responsibility as a pioneer in this wave of body positivity to push the narrative further” (Senyoga & Luna, 2021, 276). This quote illustrates Lizzo’s promises

10 This was calculated on 10/9/2022.
to her fans not to contribute to the commodification of the body positivity movement. However, *Yitty*, and her use of social media to continuously promote it, contradicts this promise. While I do not believe she intentionally contributes to the commodification, her brand continues to profit off of people who look up to her confidence as a fat Black woman.

While I believe that Lizzo’s creation of *Yitty* was well-intentioned as a way of recentering fat Black women in the movement and encouraging more size-inclusivity, I consider the brand both problematic and valuable. In an attempt to create a “multibillion-dollar opportunity” for herself, Lizzo has come to represent what she so proudly speaks out against, a commodified body positivity movement that centers whiteness and profits off of women’s attempts to love their bodies. Lizzo attempts to “revolutionize” shapewear, a product that has previously been used to alter the size and shape of a woman’s body, to recenter Black women and ultimately, alter the landscape of the body positivity movement (Friedman, 2022). While well-intentioned, no structural change is being made to improve the lives of fat women. Instead, there is a way in which she is profiting off of women’s insecurities and desire to shrink or alter their bodies, which she claims to be against. Thus, *Yitty* contributes to the problem of the commodification of the movement that Lizzo claims to be against.

However, her brand is not entirely harmful. Lizzo illustrates a tradition of digital Black feminism by refusing “to choose between branding and revolution, deploying their branded images to pursue business and in the service of others” (Knight Steele, 2022, 132-3). Intending to redefine shapewear, Lizzo utilizes technology to merge her identity and her brand in the hopes of supporting and recentering fat Black women. While the problematic tenants of her brand should be considered, we must also question if not her, then who? Lizzo is aware of the need for plus-size clothing as a fat woman and has the monetary resources and social connections to
provide for her audience. Profiting from her innovation may prevent other corporations from exploiting the market for plus-size shapewear and exploiting fat Black women to do so. By combining her public persona and her brand, she speaks with fat Black women instead of for them. Using her celebrity status to create a brand may be a better option than the corporate commodification and exploitation of fat Black women’s needs that could have emerged.

While I am not fully aware of Lizzo’s exact motivations for her company, whether it be for profit, for bettering the lives of other fat Black women, or a combination of both, analyzing the positive and negative implications of Yitty provides insight into how fat Black women celebrities navigate racialized and gendered fatphobia. Lizzo’s determination to create lasting change through her company cannot be separated from her struggles as a fat Black woman. The limitations of the company illustrate how capitalism and wealth can create a gray area where such change occurs. Taken together, the positives and negatives of the brand Yitty are worth exploring to situate Lizzo’s, and fat Black women celebrities’, self-perception and body image when wealth, status, and visibility are added to the conversation.

V. Conclusion

Lizzo is known as the fat Black woman celebrity of this generation and as the public image of the body positivity movement due to her vulnerability around her body image struggles and her encouragement for self-love. However, she still struggles extensively with the racialized and gendered fatphobia that accompanies being a fat Black woman in the media. To mitigate the effects of this fatphobia and resist it, she controls her image through her engagement with her fans and expression of vulnerability within her music and on her social media. Lizzo utilizes fashion as a mode of expressing agency and resisting the fatphobia that she experiences by continuing to take up space within a society that continuously tells her to shrink herself. She also
pushes back against the co-opted body positivity movement and advocates for body normalization instead.

However, despite pushing against the body positivity movement, her shapewear brand *Yitty* uses similar rhetoric and advertising techniques employed to profit from the commercialization of the movement. Her brand mirrors the imagery and messaging of the movement, reinforces the idea that bodies should look a particular way, and profits off of women’s attempts to shrink their bodies. *Yitty* illustrates both the positive and negative impacts of wealth and visibility on fat Black women’s experiences with their body image. While Lizzo does create space for fat Black women to be recentered within the movement and possibly prevents other corporations from exploiting fat Black women’s clothing needs, she also exploits her status and public image to sell expensive shapewear that has the possibility of excluding or alienating those she aims to center. Thus, to an extent, her status disconnects her from other fat Black women who look up to Lizzo as inspiration.

In many ways, Lizzo shows similar patterns of resistance in comparison to other fat Black women, such as through her use of fashion as agentic resistance. But her ability to profit off of her body size and shape, as well as her role within the media as a self-proclaimed fat Black woman celebrity, can not be understated. Status, class, and visibility combine to form a unique experience for Lizzo that other fat Black women may not have, one that includes a mass following, image curation, and profitability and commercialization.

Moving into my final chapter, I locate how everyday fat Black women engage in the process of digital image curation and resistance, including what they consider inspiring and toxic, where they speak about Lizzo’s influence on their self-image, as well as her negative
comment section. I also look at the pressure to present as their best selves, body alteration expectations, and what, how, and why they post on their social media accounts.
“I’m Fat As Fuck”

Henderson 82

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4
“I’m Fat As Fuck”

Figure 5

That's the biggest trashbag I've ever seen

Figure 6

well, no more of that material left.

Figure 7

she huge huge 😞
“I’m Fat As Fuck”

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10
“I’m Fat As Fuck” Henderson 85

Figure 11

Figure 12
Figure 13
Chapter 4: Fat Black Women, Social Media, & Digital Resistance Strategies

Utilizing co-collaborators’ anecdotal evidence, I distinguish between different modes of digital resistance for fat Black women. Focusing on their social media usage, I aim to recenter Black women in technological conversations. Knight Steele (2022) posits that “the absence of Black women in our understanding of technology is an intentional practice of erasure doing further violence to an already oft violated group” (24). Supplementary to this assertion, I interrogate how fat Black women adapt to technological shifts and resist racialized and gendered fatphobia digitally. I draw on Greene-Wade’s (2017) concept of the virtual-physical assemblage, which is defined as a connection between the physical and virtual realms which “subverts social hierarchies by placing the needs and desires of Black bodies at the center” (40), to elucidate how fat Black women construct “alternate languages and modes of expression. These alternate ways of being… present multiple ways of knowing, experiencing, and embodying multiple truths” (41). The virtual-physical assemblage recenters Black people in discussions around technological capability by locating communication and collectivity strategies that transcend the bounds of the solely physical or solely virtual (Greene-Wade, 2017). Functioning as an analytical framework within this chapter, I deploy the virtual-physical assemblage to highlight how fat Black women utilize social media in their self-perception development while simultaneously resisting digital manifestations of racialized and gendered fatphobia. I investigate four recurrent themes among my co-collaborators: social media’s inspiration and toxicity, presentation of best self, body alterations, and post motivations.

I. “Why not me?:” Social Media Platforms as Inspiring and Harmful

Navigating when social media is inspiring and when it is harmful proved to be a major contention among my co-collaborators. Gray areas within the overlap of these two binary
categorizations were arduous to navigate. There were similar threads among many of the women as they deciphered finding the “right” balance of social media usage.

Black women celebrities' social media accounts, namely Lizzo’s, are inspirational for many of the women. Kimberly summarizes how Lizzo aided in their self-love journey: “I follow Lizzo on Instagram. And seeing her and her non-toxic body positivity, her true acceptance of who she is, has really helped me because although I’m not the same figure as her, it’s very refreshing to see someone just love their body.”

Similar to Kimberly, Georgia expresses how inspirational Lizzo’s social media is to her:

Of course, I follow Lizzo as well. And I have conversations about Lizzo and seeing people so comfortable as themselves makes you think ‘why not me?’ Especially those people who have a huge platform and have a billion eyes on them. Why can’t I be more comfortable in my little space?

Both Kimberly and Georgia detail the importance of seeing Lizzo, a self-proclaimed fat Black woman, unapologetically love and embrace her own body. Lizzo’s impenitent self-acceptance “is part of a lineage of Black fat women performers who have pushed back against the limiting paradigms of acceptable fat embodiment to express sexual desires and bodily autonomy” (Sengoya & Luna, 2021, 274). As one of the most popular fat Black woman performers of this generation, Lizzo embodies a self-love and confidence that young fat Black women celebrate and find inspiration in. Not only is she an advocate for self-love, but Lizzo also vocalizes the experiences of fat Black women, which fat white women or thin Black women celebrities can not (Sengoya & Luna, 2021). Regardless of whether my co-collaborators have Lizzo’s body shape, her social media platforms encourage confidence among them. Understanding how difficult self-love is without millions of followers, the women view Lizzo’s body positivity as impactful for their self-perceptions. Lizzo and other fat Black women celebrities cultivate more positive self-perceptions among fat Black women.
While the women found fat Black women celebrities inspiring, they agree that social media is harmful to their mental health. Kimberly expresses that the comments on Lizzo’s posts can be disheartening. Recounting Lizzo’s workout posts during the pandemic, she narrates how “a lot of people were like, ‘oh, but I thought you were about body positivity and things like that.’ And I just remember thinking, ‘Let the woman do what she wants.’” Celebrities can inspire self-love and a healthier body image, but reading the comments reminds Kimberly of their experiences with racialized and gendered fatphobia. Lizzo defies unhealthiness expectations that all fat Black women face by posting her workout videos. Comments on the posts suggest that Lizzo is incapable of both promoting body positivity and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Kimberly’s anecdote hints at the extensive backlash that fat Black women face when they assert autonomy over their bodies. While fat Black women celebrities’ social media profiles can be inspiring, they can also be harmful by exposing them to racialized and gendered fatphobia within the comments.

The promotion of the thin ideal on social media is harmful to fat Black women as well. Penny discusses her encounters with weight loss posts:

I’m also like, where’s maybe a fat girl trying to lose weight? Where’s her videos? But of course, they don’t make it on the main page, because then it’s like, “well, no.” I don’t think I’ve found an actual social media personality that I would follow for weight loss that’s a fat girl.

Speaking to the thin ideal on social media Lily articulates: “So a lot of things that I avoid are like too many social media things, where it’s just like modelesque pictures or unrealistic tall and lanky women. I’m never gonna be tall and lanky. So I avoid actively seeking those out cause that’s something I used to do.” Cynthia recounts having to do a “social media cleanse,” which involves “not only taking a break but changing who I follow. What do I want to see on my timeline? Which I think in this whole algorithm thing has infuriated me because I curated my
following… And now Instagram slides in all the sponsored stuff.” Promotion of the thin ideal on social media, whether through restricting fat people’s posts, highlighting thin women’s accounts, or sponsoring diet products can be difficult to navigate, especially when you cannot control what sponsored material appears on your feed. These hidden and/or promoted images can lead to “internalization of the thin ideal, body dissatisfaction, and eating pathology,” as “social media users actively engage with the material” (Lazuka, 2020, 85). Many of the women find it arduous to maneuver between and avoid thinness-promoting material. Self-restriction has become necessary for some co-collaborators to protect their mental health. By restricting their social media usage, fat Black women resist racialized and gendered fatphobia in digital spaces by filtering out what they do or do not see and taking necessary hiatuses. As a result, they protect and preserve their mental health in a space that can be harmful.

This section explores when social media is inspirational and when it is harmful to fat Black women’s self-image. While fat Black women celebrities cultivate spaces for confidence and self-love, the comment sections can be a harmful arena. Imagery and products promoting the thinness ideal are also damaging to body image. As a consequence of these negative social media encounters, fat Black women often restrict their consumption for self-preservation purposes, resisting white supremacist expectations for thinness and remaining in control of their well-being.

II. “That’s you competing with you right now:” The Pressure to be Your Best Self
Some research on digital self-image suggests that “the tendency to portray a character different from oneself can generally be seen as an exception” and that how people view themselves offline is a direct representation of how they present themselves online (Kramer & Haferkamp, 2011, 131). Other research posits that “people regularly monitor their impact on others and try to gauge the impressions other people form of them. Often, they do this without
any attempt to create a particular impression, but simply to ensure that their public persona is intact” (Leary & Kowalski, 1990, 35). Leary and Kowalski (1991) describe instances where people attempt to create a particular impression on their audience, which they call impression construction:

Once motivated to create certain impressions, people may alter their behaviors to affect others' impressions of them. This involves not only choosing the kind of impression to create, but deciding precisely how they will go about doing so (such as deciding whether to create the desired impression via self-description, nonverbal behavior, or props, for example). (36)

My co-collaborators understand social media as a continuous mode of impression construction. They express a pressure to present their best selves by highlighting idealized versions of their physical appearance and social and economic circumstances. Acknowledging that people place emphasis on presenting their best selves online accompanies awareness that social media “is a production, it’s very fake” (Jade). Jade discusses how people she knows in person look different on their social media accounts than in real life: “if you post a picture, you look good, I’m going to like it. But I know girl, I seen you two days ago, and I’m seeing your edits, but it’s not my business. If you wanted to edit your picture, you edit your picture, and I would still like it.” Understanding the falsities of social media aids the women in navigating the negative impacts on their self-esteem that social media can cause. Jade also articulates that “I know what it takes for me to post something. So I know for a fact how produced and how really planned and thought-out other people’s posts are. That’s why I’m like, ‘that’s you competing with you right now. That’s not my business at all.’” Prior to adulthood, Jade, alongside many of the women, valued social media appearance. With age and digital experience came an awareness of how produced it is. Because of this awareness, Jade has less of an investment in social media and separates her self-perception from others’ posts. Instead of aiming to compete with the people she follows on social media, she positions them as competing with themselves and rejects the
social expectation to present her best self. Jade illustrates one mode of digital resistance for fat Black women, separation, by emotionally removing herself from the interpersonal competition that social media encourages.

Intentionally posting what they want to post rather than only posting their best selves is another mode of digital resistance through separation. Ophelia recounts how “before, I tried posting the pictures [thinking] what would give me the most likes? Which pictures make me the most flattering? What will people enjoy? Then I realized, this is my medium to express myself.” Ophelia’s quote elucidates how self-presentation on social media is tied to others’ perceptions. These constant perceptions can cause anxiety. She recalls previously posting for likes and only sharing pictures where she thought she looked her best. When she realized she could post what she wanted without adhering to pressure, a shift occurred for her. Now, she presents her social media as a site of self-expression. Ophelia has separated herself from what she thinks people want to see and posts what she desires, rejecting the idea that fat Black women have to remain palatable for others’ consumption, even in digital spaces.

Positioning social media as a mode of claiming agency over her image, Ophelia embodies a primary tenant of digital Black feminism. Knight Steele (2022) argues that Black women can utilize digital spaces to cultivate and express agency: “Rather than being trapped by the gaze, controlling images, or oversexualizing the Black female body, digital Black feminists suggest that controlling their bodies and images online is transformative and transgressive, no matter who is watching” (72). Fat Black women have the opportunity through social media to separate themselves from the white supremacist “gaze” and controlling beauty standards. Ophelia suggests that she has chosen this separation and as a result, has transgressed expectations for fat Black women to alter their image to appease white audiences. With this separation, she now uses
social media to cultivate an image of herself that feels authentic and self-expressive and resists digital racialized and gendered fatphobia.

Fat Black women also resist racialized and gendered fatphobia in a digital sphere through self-image curation. For Jade and Ophelia, image curation occurred through separation from expectations, however, compliance with the aforementioned expectations is another mode of digital resistance. Chelsea’s narrative illustrates compliance as resistance: “[Me and my sister] went out on Halloween together. Halloween, we were dressed skimpy, okay? And she was like, 'Oh, we don't look good', or said something like that, but she looked fine so I knew she wasn't talking about her. And I took the picture down.” Illustrating compliance by deleting a picture where she was perceived negatively, Chelsea demonstrates how the pressure to only show the best version of oneself can impact fat Black women’s social media usage. While this anecdote seems like an adherence to racialized and gendered fatphobia, I argue that this careful curation of her public image is an intentional mode of self-protection and preservation. By deleting the picture, Chelsea prevents others from seeing her body in a way that she is not comfortable with and shields herself from further commentary on her size and shape. While technically complying with the societal expectation of filtering body presentation, I believe she does so with self-preservation in mind and therefore, still resists racialized and gendered fatphobia through self-protection from criticism.

This section illustrates two different modes of digital resistance for fat Black women: separation from and compliance with societal image curation expectations. While seemingly on two opposite ends of a spectrum for online self-image curation, these resistance modes function with a similar goal of self-expression and preservation. Both social media approaches are
imperative for understanding how fat Black women navigate public online platforms and are valid modes of resisting racialized and gendered fatphobia online.

**III. “Everybody go get a BBL is the new thing:” The Impacts of Body Alteration Surgery**

Body alterations was among the co-collaborators' most discussed social media issue. They explored how trending body alteration surgeries impact their self-esteem. In detailing how fat bodies are perceived on social media, many of the women spoke about “BBL bodies,” where a person’s curves are surgically augmented. For those unfamiliar with the term, a BBL (or Brazilian Butt Lift) procedure is when “excess fat is removed from the hips, abdomen, lower back, or thighs with liposuction, and a portion of this fat is then strategically injected into the buttocks” (American Board of Cosmetic Surgery). Many of the women expound on the societal equation of BBLs with the curvy body ideal on social media, specifically citing how their size and shape compare:

I feel like nowadays curvy means something different than it has meant. And so, I think now when people are like ‘Oh, curvy’ they mean BBL bodies, and I definitely don’t have that. (Marie)

I struggle with body image and the way that I look, especially the people that are perceived as beautiful and BBLs are the thing now. I don’t have a fat ass and I’m curvy where it matters, where it counts. (Fiona)

I think there's a lot of pressure for women to fit this idea of what's the trendy body type. And the idea that there are certain body types that are in right now and then certain body types that are out is honestly really disgusting… People talking about the BBL and it’s not everybody’s body, why can’t we all just exist? So I think that people project the idea of what they think your body should look like and when you don’t fit that mold, it’s like they treat you like you’re subhuman. (Danielle)

You can look at some of these women and be like, man, everybody’s getting their butts done and my butt’s not that size. It’s going to vary for every person differently based on what they’re dealing with at home or in their environment. I don’t live in an environment where I have to have the biggest butt or the biggest breasts or the smallest waist or this or that. That’s not something that really triggers me. (Aria)

Now it's just surgery. Everybody go get a BBL is the new thing. Just go to Miami. Or just go to Columbia. Or let's go wherever and make these body alterations where everybody's
body looks the same is just very, very unrealistic. I am grounded in the fact that I have a real person's body, and I am absolutely healthy. (Cynthia)

Let’s be honest, people would get BBLs and liposuction and tummy tucks completely lying about what they did to get their body and then try to sell you a workout plan… That’s an awful thing to do to other women knowing that they’re insecure and you’re taking advantage of that. (Jasmine)

The women interrogate how body alteration pressure on social media impacts their self-image. Often causing frustration among my co-collaborators, online BBL bodies lead to comparison and self-critique. Seeing these bodies can be triggering for my co-collaborators as they notice where they feel they are lacking (a bigger butt or breasts and/or smaller waist). Collectively, they seem to struggle with the idea of a “trendy” body type and the comparison to their own bodies can be difficult to process. Jasmine expounds on how encountering women's body alterations online impacted her self-perception. She posits that women with BBLs seemed to profit off of targeting insecure women by selling fitness plans. These fitness plans, she claims, were lies, as women with BBLs would suggest the guides were how they achieved their body shape and failed to mention surgery. As women with BBLs profit off of their body shape, they reflect the notion that “as the body positivity movement has gained traction online and subsequently become one of the most popular social movements, it has been commodified and become a capitalist venture for many” (Hancock, 2022). Those posting their body alterations and selling fitness plans may not outwardly call themselves body positive, but this phenomenon reflects how “desirable” bodies are lucrative and profitable ventures. People “sell” their body shape at the expense of other women’s self-confidence and in turn, continue to promote the thin ideal. With the increased awareness of BBL bodies, some of the women suggest that they reinforce a narrative of natural bodies as untrendy. Therefore by engaging in the surgery, you
were adhering to the ideal body. By reinforcing hierarchies of body desirability, BBL bodies online had a negative impact on some fat Black women.

While BBL bodies are triggering for some of my co-collaborators, for others, it does not impact them. Aria references the social environment’s role in self-esteem. She did not feel she was around people who pressured her into having a particular body shape. As a result of a supportive social environment, she is unphased by people who underwent body alterations. Cynthia references her body as “real,” implying that those who undergo surgery have fake bodies. By referencing her body as real, she establishes the legitimacy of and takes pride in her body as unique and opposite of those who undergo surgery who all “look the same.” Thus, we see that awareness of the BBL body trend produces different impacts on self-esteem among the women.

This section interrogates how the “trendy” BBL body on social media impacts my co-collaborators' self-esteem. For some, these bodies and their profitability are triggering, whereas for others they are not, illustrating once again that fat Black women do not have monolithic self-perceptions. Although differences in impact exist, all of the women acknowledge the harm of promoting a “trendy” body on social media.

IV. “More likes equals more validation: ”Social Media Post Motivation

All of the previous influencers impact why and how the women choose to post on social media. Conversations regarding post motivation include the meaning of likes, what they post on social media, and how the platform impacts what, how often, and why they post.

When detailing why they choose to post on social media, my co-collaborators provided several different reasons. For Kimberly, “the desire to post comes from myself. I’m like, ‘this is a cool picture. This is a pretty picture of me. This is me at this place and I want people to see it.’”
For Kamila, likes play a role in what they post: “More likes equals more validation, pretty much… Likes do still have a hold or a grip on me. Or not a grip on me, but they still hold some value to me.” Both Kimberly and Kamila post on Instagram for some semblance of validation, whether internal or external. Kimberly utilizes social media by posting pictures they feel attractive in, while Kamila posts partly for likes. Positioning social media as a mode for validation is an assertion of agency and an act of resistance against racialized and gendered fatphobia. Knight Steele (2022) describes how posting pictures of oneself on social media as an act of agency: “selfies and self-capture provide a semblance of agency, regardless of whether they provide material and consequential shifts in the balance of social, economic, or political power” (103). She posits that pictures are powerful communication tools and effective modes of agency assertion in the digital realm. Selfies and self-captures are resistance tools for fat Black women as they dismiss the sociocultural messaging that labels them as undesirable. By taking and sharing images in which they feel beautiful, receiving either internal or external validation, they assert that they deserve to take up space, even if just in the Instagram feed. They also position themselves as worthy of desired validation. Taking up space is a profound assertion of agency, self-definition, and digital resistance against racialized and gendered fatphobia for fat Black women.

Some of the women also display fashion on social media to exert agency and resist racialized and gendered fatphobia. Ophelia frames how her posting style has shifted over time, saying that she recently “started posting more full body pictures… You get to see what I pulled up in. You get to see the whole shebang. Because, once again, people gon know I’m fat. They got to at least see the fit and know I’m fat instead of see my forehead and know I’m fat.” Instead of employing selfies to hide her body, she posts full-body pictures to showcase her outfits and
embodies the idea of “fatshionistas,” where fat women showcase fashion online to “resist normative ideals of thinness and beauty” (Williams, 2017). As Ophelia utilizes fashion to present her body on social media, she asserts fat Black women as fashionable, stylish, and beautiful. Inherent within this assertion is resistance to the fatphobic rhetoric that attempts to diminish fat Black women’s agency. By posting outfits online, fat Black women resist racialized and gendered fatphobia in the digital sphere.

On social media, one is constantly navigating the omnipotent “gaze,” which is both a physical audience and a sociocultural expectation of what will be posted. Analyzing how the women navigate the gaze is imperative because it “better situates for whom, how, and why a particular action is taken” (Stewart & Breedan, 2021, 227). One way the women navigate this gaze is by altering what they post based on the platform. Cynthia details who is on each of her social media pages: “On the scale it is, Facebook is family… Then Instagram is a few family but no coworkers… On my Instagram stories is where I do the most posting… And then the next level is Twitter where I’m just sayin’ random thoughts. And then on Snapchat, I’m posting whatever.” Cynthia elucidates how fat Black women compartmentalize different social media sites for different audiences. With these divergent audiences come altered posting styles. Posting on social media as a fat Black woman requires analyzing the digital spaces where the women feel most comfortable and how the audience influences their comfortability. By keeping family on Facebook, and friends on Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, Cynthia alters her posting style to find comfort on each platform. In creating these compartmentalized spaces of comfortability online, fat Black women cultivate an uplifting community that helps them navigate the racialized and gendered fatphobia they face.
Knight Steele explains that Black women are not perceived by mainstream white society to be technologically advanced but argues that they have always adapted to technology for survival purposes (Knight Steele, 2022). The ability to adapt to their digital environment is a resistance tool as it dismisses the proposition that Black women are not technologically advanced and creates spaces of sanctuary and community. By being aware of the “gaze,” whether consciously or not, Cynthia alters her posts to better reflect the image she wants to portray to a particular group of people. The ability to alter posting styles based on audiences is one of the many ways fat Black women resist racialized and gendered fatphobia.

The last significant mode of digital resistance for fat Black women returns to the idea of social media restriction. Diverging from previous explorations of social media restriction, which emphasized how consumption of content can be harmful to fat Black women’s well-being, this section locates how the women restrict what personal information they share on social media. While the previous description of restriction locates external causes for restriction (promotion of the thin ideal, for example), this section influences the internal need for self-image curation. Jasmine details being uncomfortable showing a lot of her body on social media, stating that “there has to be a limit, and I don’t want to seem like I’m sharing myself with the whole world because I’ll lose myself in that.” Jasmine explains how self-image curation influences her approach to social media. Restricting what people have access to in regard to their bodies and lives, fat Black women project a particular, intricately curated self-image that reflects their comfort level in the online space in which they are posting. This form of restriction positions these women as agentic, self-aware individuals capable of making analytical decisions about audience, perception, and comfortability and indicate online resistance to racialized and gendered fatphobia.
This section analyzes how, why, and for whom the women post on social media. Diving into different modes of resistance revolving around audience and image curation, I position fat Black women as technologically savvy and agentic individuals who find different pathways to navigate racialized and gendered fatphobia in the digital sphere.

V. Conclusion

This chapter analyzed how fat Black women navigate social media. In looking at what they consider inspiring, I found that fat Black women celebrities remained an important place for identifying and cultivating self-love. In regards to what the women found harmful, I located comment sections on fat Black women celebrities’ profiles as well as thinness promoting imagery and products as sites of contention for the women. Within this conversation of harmfulness on social media, I found that many of my co-collaborators use restrictive practices to preserve their well-being.

I also discussed the pressure to present their best selves on social media and how that influences the ways they interact with the platforms. Many of them acknowledged how curated social media is. With this acknowledgment, some of the women chose to disengage from this expectation. However, a few of my co-collaborators complied with this expectation in a self-preserving way. Both pathways, I argue, are resistance strategies that promote their well-being and aid in their online image curation.

The conversation of body alterations on social media explored how the idea of a “trendy” BBL body impacts the women’s self-esteem. My goal in this section is to showcase the harm that online trends can cause to fat Black women’s self-image and experiences on social media.

Lastly, I analyzed the women’s own approach to posting on social media. I look at why, how, and to whom they post. Multiple different modes of digital resistance emerged in this section, including taking up space, sharing selfies and whole-body images, posting outfits,
compartmentalizing social media platforms and audiences, and restricting what they share. This section positions fat Black women as technologically skillful individuals who cultivate community, find comfort within themselves and others, and create a self-image that they feel is authentic yet self-preserving on social media.

The goal of this chapter was to illustrate how fat Black women utilize social media in the development of their self-perception and how their self-perception influences their social media usage. This happens in multiple ways, whether through comparison, restriction, image curation, or (dis)engagement. None of these women use just one tactic. They are constantly adjusting their approach to the sociocultural circumstances which emerge. In this way, fat Black women are technological chameleons, continuously innovating new modes of self-preservation within the digital sphere. This chapter attempts to capture a fraction of the innovation and brilliance with which fat Black women approach social media.

Following this chapter, the conclusion will detail the women’s hope for the future, reiterating the significance of this study as well as my findings, discussing the ethical dilemmas I encountered along the way, and proposing future research opportunities in this field.
Conclusion

I. This Study’s Main Goals and Findings

The main goal of this project was to locate what influences fat Black women’s self-perception and modes of resistance. To do so, I interviewed 14 Black women of various body sizes and asked questions about self and body image, comfortability in spaces and relationships, past experiences with racialized and gendered fatphobia, and personal social media usage.

A historical analysis in the first chapter locates the genesis of the fat Black woman stereotype. I analyze four sites of emergence: the hypersexualization of Black women, the slave trade, the rise of Protestantism, and capitalism. Within the hypersexualization of Black women section, I compared Sarah Baartman’s treatment and sexualization to contemporary Black women’s. I positioned the hypersexualization of fat Black women as a continuous phenomenon through the lens of perceived bodily deviance and abnormalities. Looking at the slave trade, I investigated how medical racism led to the Strong Black Woman ideology, which positions Black women as physically and mentally stronger yet morally inferior to white women and justifies slavery. I examined how the SBW ideology has transferred to contemporary expectations of how Black women handle trauma. I also examined Protestant ideologies of temperance, which labeled fat Black women as over-indulgent, gluttonous, and inferior within the eyes of God. Translating to modern society, Black women are still perceived as over-indulgent, particularly in food consumption, which obscures harmful conceptualizations about fat Black women’s eating habits. Lastly, I interrogated capitalist definitions of the “good body” as thin and productive. I also explored how diet culture was adopted by doctors as a capitalist venture which further positioned fat Black women as abject beings.
Centering the interviews with my co-collaborators, chapter two located different factors during childhood and adulthood that impact fat Black women’s self-perception. Childhood influencers included comparison and critique, clothing, food, and weight fluctuations. Comparison and critique explored both internal and external commentary between family and peers that influenced their body image. Clothing discussions were about fit, shopping in adult stores, concealing fat, and trying on clothes. The food section emphasized disordered eating, family judgments, and forced diets. Weight fluctuation concerns detailed family and peer responses to thinness and weight loss. All four childhood factors, comparison and critique, clothing, food, and weight fluctuations, seemingly had negative impacts on my co-collaborators’ self-perception and body image.

The adulthood analysis elements included: food relationships, body expectations, weight fluctuations, and interactions with men. Food relationships during adulthood explored the perception of eating disorders as a white woman’s disease, an awareness of the diet industry’s perpetuation of the thinness ideal, and assumptions of Black cultural foods as unhealthy. Body expectations emphasized the pressure for fat Black women to be curvy and how this pressure alters their self-perception. Weight fluctuation concerns included the impact of weight gain on body image and weight loss surgery expectations and results. Interactions with men, both positive and negative, illustrated the influence that hypersexualization, unsolicited touching, and compliments have on the women’s self-esteem. For some women, these four factors negatively impacted their self-esteem, but for many, the newfound societal awareness and self-respect that emerged during adulthood positively impacted their self-esteem in one or more of the four categories.
The third chapter analyzed Lizzo’s media influence and image curation. Positioning Lizzo as a representation of highly visible and wealthy fat Black women, I explored how emotional vulnerability is agentic by analyzing song lyrics about her status as a fat Black woman and her response to hurtful social media commentary. One mode of digital resistance in this section is the blurred boundaries between Lizzo’s public and private life. I also positioned fashion as empowering by interrogating Lizzo’s clothing choices and her employment of social media to showcase outfits despite negative feedback. I argued that Lizzo resists racialized and gendered fatphobia by situating fat Black women as fashionable and agentic individuals. I also explored her contention with body positivity as she describes its co-optation by thin white women and explained that her separation from the movement is an important resistance strategy among fat Black women. Lastly, I complicate her separation from the body positivity movement by comparing the movement’s rhetoric and imagery to that of her shapewear line *Yitty*. I also located how her brand recenters fat Black women in the body positivity movement and interrogated the ethical implications of using shapewear to do so. My intention within this chapter was to illustrate how class and visibility complicate fat Black women’s self-perception and modes of resistance against racialized and gendered fatphobia.

In the last chapter, I returned to the interviews with my co-collaborators to explore how they digitally resist racialized and gendered fatphobia. I located four sites of analysis within this chapter: social media platforms as simultaneously inspiring and harmful, the pressure to present as your best self, body alteration surgery’s impact on self-perception, and the women’s motivation for and approach to posting on social media. Social media is both inspiring, particularly through fat Black women celebrities like Lizzo’s profiles, and harmful through the comment sections and promotion of the thin ideal, for fat Black women. The women resist
racialized and gendered fatphobia by restricting their social media usage to limit seeing harmful aspects. The pressure to present as their best selves emerges through an awareness of social media’s falsities. While some comply with this pressure, others push against it and both are resistance strategies in their own rights. Body alterations, specifically the BBL trend, are a site of comparison for many of the women. They position their bodies as different from BBL bodies. Some find this trend harmful, while others are unaffected by it. Some even suggest the value of their own bodies in comparison to the BBL body. I utilized this section to locate how social media can impact body image for fat Black women. Lastly, I interrogated the women's reasoning and methods for posting on social media. In this section, I found different resistance strategies including self-definition and agency, taking up space, sharing outfits, cultivating community, and altering posting styles based on audience. All of these resistance strategies are self-preservation and image curation mechanisms.

This project, as a whole, locates and interrogates the factors that influence fat Black women’s self-perception and methods of resistance against racialized and gendered fatphobia. It also, more simply, shares the stories of fourteen Black women of various sizes. By sharing their stories and experiences, I highlight the importance of fat Black women’s inclusion in body image research.

II. Ethical Implications

I struggled with navigating my personal code of ethics during this study. I often felt that, as I chose quotes, I had to pick certain stories and traumas over others to best supplement my argument. This was incredibly difficult for me, as these interviews were sacred spaces of healing for me and my co-collaborators. Many of them voiced the importance of this work and how happy they were to be a part of it. I worried about prioritizing certain women’s voices over others
and often found it hard to decide whose voices should be heard and when. I did make an active effort to utilize all fourteen women’s experiences at least once throughout the project. There were some women’s stories that I used more than others, and I want to clarify that this was not intentional. If I were to conduct this study again, I would be even more mindful of equalizing the women’s voices.

III. Future Research Propositions

Because of the small sample size and limited scope of this project, future research on fat Black women’s self-perception should include and nuance the impact of other social identities. Investigations of sexuality, age, gender expression, nationality, ability, etc. could elucidate further resistance strategies and self-perception trends among fat Black women. I also want to highlight issues that impact self-perception that were not discussed in detail within this project but were mentioned by the women and could use further exploration. These include hormones and menstruation, interracial relationships, morning routines, daily fluctuations in body image, gender dysmorphia, body dysmorphia, exercise as both anxiety-inducing and calming, religious influence, childhood vs adulthood sports and activity levels, the healthcare system and dismissal by doctors, and feelings of isolation. All of these topics deserve their own recognition and projects, and as literature on fat Black women’s self-perception expands, I hope we can include my co-collaborators’ concerns in the conversation.

IV. Fat Black Women’s Future Aspirations

As a final interview question, I asked my co-collaborators “looking to the future, where do you see your body 10 years from now?” Without elaborating, I allowed the women to answer the question however they chose. I have included the responses of all 14 women to equalize the importance of their dreams, regardless of what they may be. I do not analyze the quotes in depth.
I allow the women’s aspirations to stand on their own to reiterate what I detail in the introduction: that fat Black women are knowledge producers and theorists who deserve to be recognized as such. My hope is that you feel the women’s positive and hopeful energy radiating through their words and see the significance of hope in navigating experiences with racialized and gendered fatphobia.

Some co-collaborators emphasize varied weight loss goals and reasonings:

Okay, I’m always going to say this. I think one day, I’m going to lose weight. (Chelsea)

I’d probably be in the best shape of my life because I honestly feel like right now is a turning point for me… I feel very self-aware but because I’m willing to do something just for me and not for an Instagram aesthetic, not for a man who told me I need to be a certain size to be with him, and not for my mom. (Cynthia)

I’m manifesting a smaller size, at least back to 200, and healthier. I just want to be healthier because you can be small and super unhealthy. Yeah, I think that’s my goal in my weight journey is to be a smaller size where I can still run around, move around, and not be so tired and exhausted from just throwing the Frisbee and going to pick it up. (Aria)

I still hold on to what my goal weight is and what my goal body would look like. It’s still a struggle to have a realistic view of what my body can look like… But I still have a view, now whether it’s healthy or not, of what my body could look like and I’m hoping that I will at least get close to what that goal is for myself within the next 10 years. (Lily)

A couple of women articulate that they would be comfortable maintaining their current size and/or the possibility of gaining weight:

I could definitely see myself getting a bit bigger than this, but staying in that constant area… I like to eat. I just put on weight very easily and I also overeat… As I get older and my metabolism slows down, and if I don’t develop a good workout routine now, I definitely could see myself gaining weight. But I could also see myself being very happy as well. If someone thinks I’m fucking ugly because I’m fat now or fatter, I’ll find someone who doesn’t. (Kamila)

I feel like I’d be around this size. Cool. Could be bigger. I don’t know. Depends on if I have kids. I don’t know. (Marie)
Jade focuses solely on her career and social aspirations while Penny details her career and mindset goals:

Taking my LSAT, passing it, getting into law school, passing, taking the bar, passing, and then finding a job after all of that. I think that’s a dream that I’ve had since I was a little girl. And I always felt like I really had a village in my whole life. I have friends that I know will be in my life till the end of our lives. (Jade)

The future, I want to go to law school. We’ll see if I actually apply this cycle… But I think I’m hoping my relationship with the undereating and the overeating, I get some sort of grip on it. Because I think there will definitely be stressors throughout my life and it will never be healthy for me to do that for the rest of my life. I hope as time goes on I become more comfortable with my anxiety, and hopefully, with that in 10 years, I don’t really have that problem. (Penny)

Some women framed their responses around mindset shifts and healthier habits:

I am really saddened at the fact that I didn’t get to be a child, so I’m really trying to get into health, like skin care, trying to be in the gym, trying to eat properly… I still want to be found attractive. I still want to be accepted for my beauty in the way that I am presenting it to you, not how you impose it on me. I guess in the next 10 years, I just want to be one of those aunties who really look young… Because I never got to live out my youth, then it’s going to be lived out here. Kids, it's not happening anytime soon, so I’m going to be as childish and delusional as I can be while still being an adult because they’ve put this title on me and I’m responsible for my future. (Jasmine)

I don’t know what the future holds. I know that if I continue to make healthy decisions in terms of sleeping more, drinking more water, eating three times a day with a little snack in between, eating more vegetables, then my body will turn out the way it turns out. I hope I’m healthy. I hope I’m going secure with myself. I hope I can walk up a flight of stairs and my chest isn’t caving in. I hope for that. (Ophelia)

I would hope to be in a body shape, maybe not so much focus on the number, but be in a shape that I feel comfortable with… What I see for myself is me growing into myself even more and following the trajectory of the reality of the life that I live. So whether that be I gain weight because I don’t do certain things, or for whatever reason, whether it be health reasons or anything like that. I see myself to be where I’m at at the time. But I hope that I’m at the body shape I want regardless of if that’s what I want now. It could change. (Kimberly)

While maintaining an emphasis on mindset, Fiona and Georgia explore how motherhood may influence their self-perception:
My ideal would be this size. I guess more so focusing on continuing… yoga, going to the gym. I don’t do those things to lose weight… I want to enjoy food without throwing it up every time [because of the surgery]. I wonder how much motherhood would have an effect on that as well. The experiences were really different post giving birth in those first two years. But if I chose to have another child, what kind of effect that would have on my body image post-surgery… It’s more so that I don’t really have an ideal body type, but rather an ideal of how I feel about my body. And I want to consistently feel good, and I want to be the person that makes myself feel good. (Fiona)

I think that’ll definitely be a big difference, that if we do have kids together, that’s how I’ll view my body. That’s something that definitely scares me. I foresee there’s probably going to be a lot of change between now and 10 years from now, but I’m going to try my best to maintain the mindset that I’m at now where your body’s doing a bunch of amazing things every day. Just appreciate the process it’s going through. (Georgia)

Lastly, Danielle envisions herself as going through a “second puberty:”

I know you go through a second puberty in your 20s, people talk about grown woman weight. I’m assuming that’s what it’s going to give. 30-year-old Danielle is going to give grown woman. She’s got a mortgage and bills. (Danielle)

I include quotes from all of my co-collaborators to reiterate the diversity in perspective and priorities among them. Fat Black women are not a monolith. Their goals and aspirations emphasize different elements of life and possible self-perception influencers over the next 10 years, such as motherhood, mental health, career success, and weight fluctuations, but all remain hopeful. Including their goals for the future feels like a perfect illustration of their positivity, brilliance, and self-awareness. As more scholarship on body image and self-perception emerges, I hope we continue to center fat Black women’s aspirations, intellect, and agency in the conversations.
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Appendix A

This appendix documents the names\textsuperscript{11}, pronouns, ages, and approximate weights of the fourteen co-collaborators.

- Kimberly (she/they), 21 years old, 165 pounds
- Kamila (she/they), 21 years old, 200 pounds
- Marie (she/her), 22 years old, 185 pounds
- Cynthia (she/her), 38 years old, 200 pounds
- Lily (she/her), 34 years old, 230 pounds
- Jade (she/her), 22 years old, 125 pounds
- Georgia (she/her), 21 years old, 150 pounds
- Chelsea (she/her), 24 years old, 180 pounds
- Jasmine (she/her), 19 years old, 195 pounds
- Ophelia (she/her), 22 years old, 330 pounds
- Aria (she/her), 33 years old, 245 pounds
- Danielle (she/her), 20 years old, 175 pounds
- Penny (she/her), 21 years old, 280 pounds
- Fiona (she/her), 26 years old, 150 pounds post-surgery, 280 before

\textsuperscript{11} All names have been changed for anonymity reasons.