

**Body Positivity or Body Surveillance? An Analysis of Twitter Reactions to
Lizzo's Positive Presentation of Her Fat, Black Body**

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Abstract

On October 11, 2021, Grammy award-winning artist Lizzo attended Cardi-B's dancehall-themed 29th birthday party in a sheer Matthew Reisman dress, thong, and pasties. Even though Lizzo is no stranger to displaying her body and sparking controversy, this appearance sparked a major debate on social media about the fit and appropriateness of her attire because of her weight. However, other celebrities attended the party in scantily clad outfits, but Lizzo was the only celebrity who was heavily criticized and endured heavy body surveillance. This research analyzed the reception of her proud display of her fat, Black body. To examine and highlight various reactions to Lizzo's display of her body, a textual analysis was conducted on a sample of tweets about Lizzo's appearance at Cardi B's birthday party. Four themes were discovered during the textual analysis: representation, beauty standards, controversy, and freedom of expression.

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Introduction

On June 23, 2019 at the BET Awards, a fat, Black woman named Melissa Viviane Jefferson, better known as Lizzo, performed her hit song *Truth Hurts*. As the high-energy performance went on, Lizzo was handed a flute and began to play the instrument while twerking simultaneously captivating the audience as they cheered her on (*BET Networks*, 2019). Not long after that performance, Lizzo became a household name. In 2019, Lizzo topped the charts with such hits as *Tempo*, *Good as Hell*, and *Juice*. Her musicality and popularity have earned her several awards in 2019 and 2020, including three Grammy Awards, two Soul Train Music Awards, a Billboard Music Award, and a BET Award (*IMDB*, 2021). As a plus-size Black woman who has reached mainstream success, Lizzo has become a face of the body positivity movement even though she has recently argued that body positivity has become “commercialized and appropriated to the point where it's simply cool, even complacent, which is not a space that promotes transformation” (*Vogue*, 2020). As Lizzo continues to flaunt her musical talents and her body, the public continues to give both positive and negative comments about her and her fat, Black body (*Essence*, 2021).

Born on April 27, 1988 in Detroit, Michigan and raised in Houston, Texas, Lizzo always had a love for music and even played and studied the flute since she was 10 years old. She later joined a marching band and majored in classical flute performance while attending the University of Houston; Lizzo’s father passed away during her junior year, which forced her to drop out of college due to the financial strain that was caused by his death. In 2011, Lizzo moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota to connect with other musicians and break into the music industry (*Cheat Sheet*, 2020). Before becoming a mainstream artist in 2019, Lizzo was an underground artist who performed in independent hip-hop groups including Lizzo and the Larva and The

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Chalice (*Washington Post*, 2019). In 2013, she released her debut album *Lizzobangers* and released her sophomore album *Big GRRRL Small World* in 2015. She even had the opportunity to collaborate with Prince for his 2014 album *Plectrumelectrum* (*Pop Buzz*, 2021). In 2019, Lizzo released *Cuz I Love You*, which spawned a few hit singles such as *Juice*, *Tempo*, *Good as Hell*, *Boys*, *Truth Hurts*, and *Cuz I Love You*.

After reaching massive success, Lizzo has become a pop phenomenon and a body positivity advocate. Her proud display of her fat, Black body through her clothing has received mixed reviews from fans and non-fans alike (*Women's Health Mag*, 2021). While growing up, Lizzo learned to accept her body and wrote songs about loving herself. She recently presented a TEDTalk about the history of twerking and how twerking has helped her become comfortable with her body (*TED*, 2021). On December 8, 2019, Lizzo attended the Los Angeles Lakers versus Minnesota Timberwolves game in a T-shirt dress with a cutout exposing the thong she was wearing underneath. As the announcer was playing her song *Juice*, Lizzo began to twerk and show her bare buttocks to the crowd. This caused a massive uproar on social media and critics said Lizzo's outfit and twerking were not appropriate (*Billboard*, 2019). Lizzo is no stranger to displaying her body despite it making some people uncomfortable. On October 11, 2021, she appeared at Cardi B's dancehall-themed 29th birthday party with a sheer Matthew Reisman dress with only a thong and pasties (*Marie Claire*, 2021). Even though the party was a private affair, the paparazzi waited outside to capture pictures and videos of the guests as they arrived and left the party. As a result, pictures of Lizzo surfaced online and she posted pictures on her social media accounts. This appearance sparked a massive debate on social media about fit and appropriateness for her body type. This leads to the purpose of this research, which is to explore how Twitter users react to Lizzo's positive presentation of her fat, Black body using social

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learning theory. By using a sample of tweets about her recent appearance at Cardi B's birthday party on October 11, 2021. This research analyzed the reception of her body positivity message and physical presentation. This subject is important in today's society because of more fat representation in the media, the emergence of the body positivity movement, and Lizzo becoming a major topic for her fat body.

Literature Review

The review of literature centers on four main concepts: social learning theory, fat representation in the media, body positivity and health at every size, and body surveillance, body shaming, and anti-fat bias. Through social learning theory, what people see in the media becomes the standard and anything opposite of that is often criticized. In early years, fat representation in mainstream media was slim to none; if there was any representation of overweight or obese people, it was often negative and portrayed stereotypes. The body positivity movement was created to encourage women to love their bodies regardless of shape and size. Because weight is not a protected class, being overweight or obese is often seen as negative, which leads to body shaming and anti-fat bias. Also, overweight or obese bodies endure heavy body surveillance.

Social Learning Theory

The media can influence people's thoughts and behaviors about various things including body image. This is a caveat of social learning theory, which is defined as observers acquiring symbolic representations of behaviors; the visuals provide them with information to base their behavior and ideas on (Baran & Davis, 2021). What people see in the media becomes the standard for what is considered normal. For example, thinner bodies are considered normal

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because of the portrayal of thinner bodies in the media. As a result, overweight or obese people are not considered to be normal or acceptable. If the public sees more people in the media who are overweight or obese, then they assume that they are normal. Some people become uncomfortable seeing fat people like Lizzo proudly displaying their bodies because it does not fit a narrative that they already have in mind about fat people, which is that fat people are not normal, acceptable, or desirable.

Developed by Albert Bandura in 1977, social learning theory argues that the audience learns from the behavior that is modeled for us including what we see in the media. With social learning theory, the audience goes through a four-step process: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. First, if the content is interesting, the audience will pay attention. Second, the audience must be able to store information and recall it. Next, practicing the learned behavior improves the audience's retention. Finally, reinforcement and punishment motivate the audience to practice learned behaviors (Baran & Davis, 2021). The media teaches people what's normal or abnormal through their portrayal of situations and people groups. For example, the media includes more images of smaller people than people who are overweight or obese. Whenever the media does portray people with larger bodies, they are seen in a negative light or portrayed as the funny sidekick to the smaller character. Examples in the media include Professor Sherman Clump from *The Nutty Professor* and *The Nutty Professor II: The Clumps*, Rasputia from *Norbit*, "Fat Monica" from *Friends*, and

Fat Representation in the Media

Representation of fat bodies in the media has been slim to none in the early years. In most movies and television shows such as *The Nutty Professor*, *Shallow Hal*, *Just Friends*, and *Friends* fat actors and actresses were not normally cast in roles. Instead, smaller-sized actors and

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actresses wore fat suits to portray fat people. In mainstream media, fat people have also been portrayed stereotypically and are often portrayed as lazy, glutinous, and having little to no self-esteem (Obesity Action Coalition, 2010). In the past five years, there has been more representation of fat people, particularly fat women in shows such as *Insecure*, *Shrill*, and *This Is Us*. Entertainers such as Lizzo, Missy Elliott, Mo’Nique, Gabourey Sidibe, Adele, Melissa McCartney, and Rebel Wilson have reached mainstream success, giving more representation for fat women in music, movies, and television.

Yang and other researchers explored how social media and smartphones use negatively affect body esteem in female adolescents. By constantly being exposed to appearance-related media content, the adolescents develop an idea of what types are more desirable, foster appearance-based comparison, and increase fear of external evaluation (Yang, et al., 2020). The body positivity movement and celebrities such as Lizzo show female adolescents that their bodies are okay and that they should love their bodies regardless of shape and size (*Verywell Mind*, 2020).

Amato offered a critical content analysis of how fat female bodies are portrayed in young adult literature. She explored both prose and graphic novels *Gabi*, *A Girl in Pieces*, *Dumplin’*, *In Real Life*, and *This One Summer*. Using several themes such as critical fat studies, feminist criticism, and reader-response theory, Amato discovered several themes that occurred throughout the texts: fatness defined in relation to other bodies, the conflation of weight and desire, young women’s body surveillance by adult women, and precarious relationships with food. The conclusion for this study is that the fat female protagonists demonstrate the ability to disrupt the narratives of fatness that is rooted in shame (Amato, 2019). Going back to social learning theory, the media only showed thin people which set in the public’s mind that to look beautiful

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meant to be thin. Therefore, when more fat people are being portrayed in the media, the public views it as abnormal and becomes uncomfortable.

Body Positivity & Health at Every Size

In society and social media, there are two prominent appearance ideas: thinspiration and fitspiration. Body positivity is a response to both thinspiration and fitspiration messaging. Since the late 2010s, body positivity has now become a very popularized topic on social media and there have been celebrities that promote body positivity including Lizzo, Ashley Graham, Tabria Majors, Mo’Nique, and Stella Williams. Health at Every Size is another response to thinspiration and fitspiration and is a latest public health approach that de-emphasizes weight loss as a health goal and reduces weight stigma.

Cohen, Irwin, Newton-John, and Slater argued that appearance ideals on social media impact women’s views of their bodies. There are two predominant appearance ideals presented on social media: thinspiration and fitspiration (Cohen, et. al., 2019). Thinspiration includes visual or textual images that are intended to inspire weight loss. Fitspiration includes motivational images and text that are designed to inspire people to attain fitness goals. Both thinspiration and fitspiration include guilt-inducing messaging regarding weight and promote diet culture and fat-shaming (Cohen, et. al., 2019). The body positivity movement or body positivity was introduced in 1960 as a response to thinspiration and fitspiration messaging to show more representation of different body types that are not thin or fit. Body positivity is defined as “accepting the body you have as well as the changes in shape, size, and ability it may undergo due to nature, age, or your personal choices throughout your lifetime,” (*Psychology Today*, 2016).

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Cohen and his fellow researchers also discussed the potential benefits and disadvantages of body positivity messages on social media. On the positive side, the body positivity movement has inspired women of all shapes and sizes to embrace their bodies. It has also encouraged fashion brands such as Ivy Park, Nike, and Old Navy to expand sizes for their clothes (Cohen, et. al., 2021). The #bodypositivity hashtag has even been used for numerous social media campaigns along with #healthateverysize and #haes, #effyourbeautystandards, and #fatspiration. On the flip side, body positivity creates a new pressure on women to love their bodies, which makes them feel worse about themselves when they don't. Also, most body positive messages on social media display women in revealing clothing and sexually suggestive clothing, which indirectly tells women that they must dress and act scandalously to love their bodies. There have also been concerns that body positivity encourages obesity and unhealthy habits (Muttarak, 2018).

Body Surveillance, Body-Shaming & Anti-Fat Bias

Unlike race and gender, weight is not a protected class, so fat people often experience body shaming, anti-fat bias, and the social stigma of obesity in their daily lives. Body shaming is defined as making negative or inappropriate comments about a person's body regardless of size and shape. Body shaming can lead to harmful effects such as low self-esteem, body image issues, and eating disorders. Anti-fat bias is defined as discrimination or bias against overweight or obese people. Examples of this include, but are not limited to, limited to no access to quality healthcare, lack of adequate seating, lack of clothes of various sizes especially for overweight or obese people, receiving a lower salary, and a person not being hired or promoted because of their weight (*Forbes*, 2019).

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According to Chesnee Daye, body surveillance is defined as “constantly monitoring one’s body and being preoccupied with worry over how one’s body appears in the eyes of others,” (Daye, et al., 2014). Women are under constant body surveillance, which leads to negative body images and possibly eating disorders. Body surveillance is normally associated with body shaming because when a body type is not considered desirable, it is normally shamed. Since the beginning of her career, Lizzo has been under constant body surveillance especially when she makes appearances at events and posts on social media.

Nath explored whether there is a reasoned basis for stigmatizing fatness and what forms of stigmatization are justified. One form is consequentialist, which seeks to justify stigmatizing fatness based on public health benefits. The second form is stigmatizing fatness based on failure to slim down exhibited by fat persons. Upon research, both attempts to justify the stigmatization of fatness fail (Nath, 2020). With Lizzo, the public sees that people attempt to stigmatize her fatness based on these two arguments.

Freeman explained how the public should understand fatness and how fat people are treated in a society that is anti-fat, fat-phobic, and weight-centric. Regardless of what a fat person does, their body is often a topic of conversation with family, friends, and strangers. Fat people are also treated differently by health care providers in comparison to their slimmer counterparts (Freeman, 2020). Regardless of what Lizzo does in entertainment, her weight is always the topic of conversation.

Strings offered a historical narrative about the history of fat-phobia and its racial origin. The obesity epidemic among poor Black women is often stigmatized as diseased and a burden of the public health care system. Strings also argue that the ideal of slenderness is often rooted in

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racism (Strings, 2019). In comparison to her white counterparts such as Rebel Wilson and Adele, Lizzo is often stigmatized and ridiculed for her fatness as a fat, Black woman in mainstream pop culture.

In a recent article for *The Grio*, Telusma talked about how artist Chlöe Bailey is celebrated for her open sexuality and her being comfortable with her body and why the public is not showing this same adoration for Lizzo's liberation of her body and sexuality. While Lizzo is not doing anything different from Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion, or Chlöe Bailey, she often receives backlash for showing off her body and being sexually liberated (*The Grio*, 2021).

A recent 2020 *Harper's Bazaar* article explored how Lizzo is the face of body positivity and how Black women are often pressured to have a certain body type to be considered desirable. Cotton argues that Lizzo's body is a "theater for our culture's appetite for a Black woman image that will assuage our deep disgust with actual Black women's bodies." People often use Lizzo as an example to express their disgusts with fat bodies (*Harper's Bazaar*, 2020).

MacKay argued that some public health messages are unjust and unethical, and she uses feminist analyses of oppression and autonomy to explain why. She examined anti-obesity campaigns to explore their messaging and how these campaigns oppress the same audience that they are trying to reach (MacKay, 2017). Even though Lizzo is vegan and exercises regularly, people argue that she is not healthy because of her weight, and she promotes obesity. She was also brutally criticized for doing a 10-day smoothie cleanses and was accused of doing it to lose weight even though she explained that she was doing the cleanse to detox her body. This shows the negative side of body positivity and body surveillance because a lot of body positivity enthusiasts, particularly plus-sized White women, felt that she was promoting diet culture and

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betraying the community by wanting to live a healthier lifestyle, while other people were either praising her or felt that the smoothie cleanse was not a safe way to lose weight (*Shape*, 2020).

Offman explored intersectionality and fatness. She talked about how she often feels “othered” and shamed because of her weight in comparison to her friend Emily who recently lost more than 100 pounds. She also explained how shaming and shame are linked with “social inequality, frequently deployed to control and regulate those who exist outside of pervasive societal norms (Offman, 2020). Lizzo is often fat-shamed because she does not fit societal norms regarding her body.

Ravary, Baldwin, and Bartz explored the effects of transient, yet salient cultural messages involving celebrity fat shaming. The researchers explored 20 fat-shaming events in the media and obtained data from participants who completed the Weight Implicit Association Test. The researchers concluded that fat-shaming can lead to a spike in women’s implicit anti-fat attitudes. Often, fat women are fat-shamed or witness fat-shaming, and as a result have issues with their fatness or other people’s fatness (Ravary, et al., 2019).

Vogel explained how fat-shaming is harmful to fat people and leads to weight gain. Some healthcare providers often fat-shame patients to encourage them to lose weight. However, this makes their patients sicker and triggers physiological and behavioral changes which are linked to poor metabolic health and weight gain. While some people believe that they are encouraging fat people to lose weight, this often has an adverse effect (Vogel, 2019).

Felkins talked about her experience with living in a fat body her entire life and how she sees her fatness as failing her parents, other family members, and herself. She also talked about how she views herself as a bad person because of her weight because the privileged class in the

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US often views weight as a measure of one's character. Over time, the researcher has expressed that she is on the journey to loving her body (Felkins, 2019). During her career, Lizzo has often expressed how she has grown to love her body and during a recent TedTalk event, she explains how twerking helped her gain confidence with her body (*TEDTalk*, 2021).

SturtzSreetharan and fellow researchers explored how fat stigmas are expressed in both Osaka, Japan, and north Georgia. They identified four themes in their narratives about fat people: expressed pity or concern for fat people, reported experiences of indirect stigma in public settings, reported experiences of direct stigma in private settings, and robust and repeated associations between fat and other conditions that had locally relevant negative connotations in each site (SturtzSreetharan, 2021). Famous personal trainer Jillian Michaels sparked controversy when she recently made comments about Lizzo's weight stating that "it isn't going to be awesome if Lizzo gets diabetes," (*VOX*, 2021) This is an example of how people use polite concern for one's concern to fat shame Lizzo and other fat people. This leads to research questions about how the public through the use of social media platform Twitter reflects public opinion on the issue of Lizzo and her promotion of body positivity through her appearance at Cardi B's birthday party.

Research Questions

RQ1: How did Twitter users talk about Lizzo after her appearance at Cardi B's birthday party on October 11, 2021?

RQ2: In what ways are those conversations centered on body surveillance?

Method

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To examine and highlight various reactions to Lizzo's display of her body, a textual analysis was conducted. This method will be used to describe, interpret, and understand the public's reactions to Lizzo's body and how it relates to body surveillance. Even though Lizzo is active and is talked about on various social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, Twitter was chosen for this study. Twitter was selected because the platform offers real-time reactions and conversations about current events and topics. Through Twitter, there was a good mixture of positive and negative sentiments on Lizzo and her appearance at Cardi B's birthday party based on the research that was presented in the aforementioned articles. Also, the textual analysis method focuses on the public's views on Lizzo's body.

The study focuses on how Twitter users react to Lizzo's appearance at the party and how the reactions relate to body surveillance. The tweets that were explored were top tweets from and over 100 tweets were analyzed. To answer the research questions, the search query "lizzo cardi b birthday" was used.

The textual analysis explored how Twitter users react to Lizzo's body and how the public participates in body surveillance when it comes to Lizzo. During the time in which this research was conducted, Lizzo sparked more controversy when she wore a sheer Matthew Reisman dress with only a thong and pasties to Cardi B's dancehall-themed 29th birthday party; this sparked a massive debate on social media about fit and appropriateness for Lizzo's body type.

Findings & Discussion

After coding tweets that included the keywords "Lizzo," "fat," "body," and "nude," several themes were discovered: representation, beauty standards, controversy, and freedom of expression. Discussed below are the findings and presentation of examples within the text of the

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themes. This will include how Lizzo contributes representation of fat, Black women in mainstream media. Next, an overview of beauty standards and how Lizzo disrupts the status quo when it comes to normative beauty standards. Next, an overview of how Lizzo's expression of her fat, Black body causes controversy. The final theme that will be discussed is freedom of expression and how Lizzo expresses herself with music, fashion, and social media.

Representation

Lizzo's mainstream success fills a void of positive representation of fat, Black women in media. Based on the research findings, many women find Lizzo's display of her body to be inspiring and a catalyst for women to love themselves and have self-confidence. However, other people considered Lizzo's display of body to be inappropriate, unacceptable, promoting unhealthy lifestyles and obesity, and perpetuating the "mammy" stereotype.

This is an example of social learning theory because many of the Twitter users expressed that they are used to seeing plus-size women in the media who are demure and lack self-esteem. Therefore, seeing women like Lizzo proudly and confidently displaying their fat bodies is abnormal to Twitter users who are used to seeing smaller women displaying their bodies.

Figure 1

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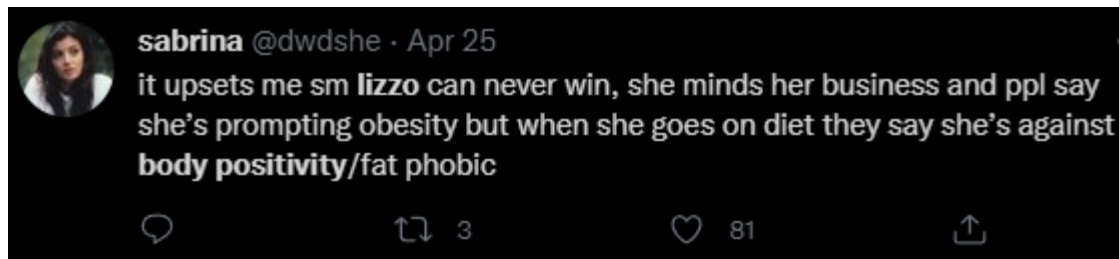
Beauty Standards

Societal standards of beauty are usually dependent on the white or male gaze. As said before, body positivity is the act of loving your body regardless of its shape and size. Because of Lizzo's size, many people believe that Lizzo is not as confident as she says she is or that her unconventional way of displaying her body is a sign that she is insecure or over-compensating for her weight.

Through social learning theory, the audience learns about standards of beauty through the media. Because of their portrayal in the media, White or lighter-skinned Black women with slim or curvy body types are seen as the standard of beauty; the Kardashians, Instagram models, and supermodels are examples of women who exhibit favorable beauty standards. Women who are overweight or obese are not seen as the standard of beauty, Therefore, some people do find women such as Lizzo attractive.

Figure 2

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Controversy

Besides her fat body, Lizzo's dancing and clothing, or nudity cause major uproar on traditional and social media leading to debates and discussions. History tells us that whenever women express their sexuality, controversy will follow; more controversy arises whenever it is a fat, Black woman expressing herself. According to the research findings, whenever Lizzo wears or does something that is not considered appropriate, it sparks a debate on Twitter about respectability politics and what's considered flattering or appropriate for fat women.

Figure 3



Freedom of Expression

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A person to express his or herself comes up through their creative works including music. Lizzo exercises her freedom of expression through her music, performances, fashions, and her photos and videos of her displaying her body. Her latest song *Rumors* is a form of expressing herself while addressing rumors regarding her weight and music career. Upon the research findings, while some Twitter users view Lizzo's freedom of expression as inspiring, others view it as her promoting obesity and being a gimmick.

Figure 4



Conclusion

In conclusion, this research aimed to discuss Lizzo and how her display of her fat, Black body impacts pop culture, fat representation in media, and the body positivity movement. The

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literature used for this research highlighted four themes: social learning theory, fat representation in the media, body positivity and health at every size, and body surveillance, and body shaming, and anti-fat bias. To answer the research questions, textual analysis on Twitter was conducted about Lizzo's appearance at Cardi B's birthday party. Only original tweets were analyzed for this study.

The findings included a mixture of positive, negative, and neutral sentiments from Twitter and answered both research questions regarding Lizzo's body. The findings were organized into four themes: representation, beauty standards, controversy, and Freedom of Expression. Overall, the literature review and textual analysis show that Lizzo and women of her body type endure heavy body surveillance due to their weight, and body positivity is a way for women of all body types to love themselves. The findings also show that social learning theory plays into how the audience views people of various body types due to media content. Viewing various media content including movies and television shows that include overweight or obese people and conducting further textual analysis will further advance this research. Future research may be conducted to understand Twitter reactions of fat women of different body types.

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