

“People like me” in social media: Visibility, representation, and plus-size fashion vloggers on YouTube

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Introduction and Literature Review: Fat and fatness are seen as extremely undesirable in mainstream U. S. society. It is not unusual for fat people to experience exclusion and a sense of invisibility because of the social stigma surrounding their body size (Carbonell, 2016; Sobal & Maurer, 1999). This exclusion certainly has been reflected in fashion; for many years plus-size consumer desires for a varied selection of apparel that fit and was on-trend were unmet, particularly for women. Exclusion also is found in the dearth of representation of the non-thin body in mass media, the fashion press, and on the runways, except for a very few exceptions (Jung, 2006; Kim & Lennon, 2007).

The apparel industry has slowly increased its production of plus-size fashion (see, for example, Chowdhary & Beale, 1988; Hopfinger, 2014; Wright, 2017; York, 2007), but depiction of fat people in mainstream media overall and fashion-focused media in particular has remained minimal, with only a handful of plus-size women becoming well-known models or celebrities. This lack of visibility, along with the longstanding aversion of some famous arbiters of fashion, such as the late Karl Lagerfeld to model bodies bigger than size 00-2, speaks to fashion’s continuing disdain for larger bodies (Jennings, 2019). The effect of this underrepresentation of all but the most “perfect” bodies in media was described by Bordo (1993) as a *de facto* legislation of what should be considered good, beautiful, and worthy of being seen. Thus the invisibility of fat bodies is more than a simple lack of presence but has far-reaching impacts throughout society on both those who are plus-size and those who are not.

Is social media a venue in which visibility could be employed to fight the current narrow beauty ideal? Does it currently offer an alternative to mass media in the case of larger bodies? To explore these questions, it was decided to explore the visually oriented platform of YouTube to see what types of videos were being made about women’s plus-size fashion.

Method: Because there is little scholarship about fashion and fat bodies on social media, especially YouTube, the research was an exploratory study. With IRB approval, YouTube was searched for channels and video titles related to plus-size or fat fashion, from which a list of potential interviewees was assembled. These individuals were then contacted by email. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online through videoconferencing software with 13 people who identified as plus-size (or a similar description, such as fat or curvy) and who regularly made fashion-oriented videos posted on YouTube. All participants identified as female or presented on YouTube in female apparel. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded; data were analyzed using the grounded theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings and Discussion: For interviewees, creating YouTube videos has not only been instrumental in giving them a space to talk about fashion styles and trends but has also profoundly enabled them to be visible, represent fatness to the wider world, and connect with others. The simple fact that these vloggers have taken the risk of putting their clothed plus-size bodies on display in a public forum while knowing that anonymous strangers (“trolls”) could ridicule them in the video comments section speaks to their desire and courage to be seen. Interviewee participants also noted that they were able to find plus-size role models much more easily through social media than other forms of media. In turn, interviewees were also committed to serve as role models for others, especially their viewers. Kiara¹ noted that she was “so grateful... for social media, because we do see ourselves in the world now. So we know that we don't have a limit that we may have felt we had before.”

Claire connected her self-esteem to her childhood and adolescence immersed in mass media that only rarely depicted people like her:

Society, media reinforcing the idea that you're not good enough, you're not pretty, you're a friend. Men won't find you attractive. I mean those were things that I really struggled with and like am still working through in therapy, of like am I good enough? And I think that was really indicative of growing up in a society where I was not reflected in mass media.

She specifically gave credit to social media for increasing the visibility and representation of fat people:

I've been fat, plus size, whatever, my whole entire life, and from going from not having any representation, except for like the sad, body-hating, nobody-likes-her fat girl, to now with new media and YouTube and everything, and not just one form ... Yeah, it's really grown.

The search for representations of other plus-size individuals and the desire to find a community was often referred to by interviewees with a phrase akin to “people like me.” Tabitha summarized the goals for her YouTube channel by saying, “I just want people like me to find me, basically.” Bess discussed why she had created her channel by noting, “I thought I would be able to connect with others who were like myself. . . . Just finding my own community and people that I could relate to.” Other interviewees spoke similarly when they described their motivations and hopes for their YouTube channels. Lauren simply noted,

I want to be one of those people that somebody can look up to. That's why I follow those who can also be people for someone else to look up to. *Because we need that....*The whole reason I decided to be a fashion major is because I wanted to represent plus-size women. I stood by that since I was in elementary school.

Conclusion: This study suggests that, while not a panacea, participatory media like YouTube can be and has been used by plus-size people to fulfill several requirements: to share their love of fashion with others; to find others who are like them in some way, typically in relation to body size; and to serve as a representation of plus-size bodies in spaces – fashion and media – that have long relegated them to invisibility.

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¹ All names used are pseudonyms.