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## FROM #BODYPOSITIVE TO #WEIGHTLOSSJOURNEY – EXPLORING WEIGHT LOSS NARRATIVES WITHIN THE FAT COMMUNITY

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### Introduction

As Ozempic and other glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1) agonists (originally developed for diabetes management) have gained popularity as a weight loss drug (e.g. Oswald, 2024), weight loss talk has also infiltrated social media spaces that were once dedicated to promoting body positivity. In the United States, content creators are announcing their departure from the body positive community in the pursuit of weight loss (e.g. Baker, 2024). In the Nordics, however, some content creators are attempting to position their weight loss journeys as body positive instead of fully turning their backs on the movement.

This study, situated in the field of fat studies, explores the conflict between intentional weight loss and body positivity in Nordic body positive content creators' weight loss narratives on Instagram and TikTok. As Christiansen (2024) points out, fat studies has been “dominated by Anglo-American academia” (p. 1), and there is a need for studies that address the unique dynamics of the European context.

More specifically, through four case studies, including two content creators from Norway, one from Sweden, and one from Finland, I examine how the content creators position their weight loss narratives in relation to master narratives of fatness, the dominant weight loss narrative, as well as the body positive counter-narrative. I apply positioning analysis (Bamberg, 2020; Giaxoglou & Georgakopoulou, 2021) and theory on master and counter narratives (Bamberg, 2004; Hochman & Spector-Mersel, 2020; McLean & Syed, 2015; Ronai & Cross, 1998).

The positioning analysis of the four cases shows that aspects of the dominant weight loss narrative are often intertwined with elements from the body positive one. I argue that the body positive weight loss narratives represent a change in how body positivity is understood.

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## **Narratives of fatness**

Master narratives are the “culturally shared stories” (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 320) that frame individuals’ identity and self-perceptions (Hochman & Spector-Mersel, 2020, p. 1045). They provide guidance for “how life should unfold” (Hochman & Spector-Mersel, 2020, p. 1046), and represent shared knowledge of “frames” that events can be plotted against (Bamberg, 2004).

The master narratives position fatness as a temporary, liminal state (e.g. Harjunen, 2009; Maor, 2014), as unhealthy and immoral, and a matter of individual responsibility (e.g. Harjunen, 2009). Weight loss is presented as the only solution to the “problem” of fatness (e.g. Harjunen, 2009), promising a more successful and confident future (Fox, 2018), and social and self-acceptance (e.g. Harjunen, 2009).

Body positive and fat activist counter narratives are positioned against the stigmatizing master narrative. These counter narratives argue that changing one’s body should not be needed to accept or love it and reject weight loss as the only way to improve health (Meleo-Erwin, 2011, p. 195). However, as Fox (2018) argues, rejecting weight loss goes “against the temporal current of our entire society” (p. 224), making it hard to resist the expectation to lose weight.

Social media platforms are used by the body positive community as “emancipatory platforms” (Zavattaro, 2021, p. 282) to tell stories about fatness in their own terms. Instagram and TikTok are often favored because of their audiovisual nature (Hedegaard Heiselberg & Raun, 2024). However, some versions of body positivity that spread on social media have been accused of being “defanged fat activism” (Cwynar-Horta, 2016, p. 40), and a manifestation of post-feminism (e.g. Darwin & Miller, 2021).

In the Nordics, body positivity is a relatively new social movement (Harjunen, 2023; Hynnä-Granberg, 2023; Sveningsson et al., 2022). There is still negotiation about who is allowed to participate (Sveningsson et al., 2022), and the movement is still taking shape. Harjunen (2023) argues that in Finland body positivity is increasingly being used outside of its original political context and the term has become an “empty signifier” (p. 37) that can be used in almost any context related to the body, including weight loss.

## **Method**

This study is a part of a larger ethnographic study of Nordic body positive social media narratives. Over a six-month observation period from January to June 2024, I identified several body positive content creators from the Nordic countries on Instagram and TikTok. The sample includes four content creators who to self-identify as body positive (through hashtags like #bodypositive or #bodyacceptance or profile bio texts) and fat or plus size, and regularly post content related to weight loss or lifestyle change. The 34 posts, including Instagram posts and reels, as well as TikTok-videos, selected for

analysis discussed weight loss or lifestyle change and body positivity or body acceptance.

Even though the content is publicly available, the four content creators were anonymized, and any details that could be used to identify the creators, such as names, usernames, specific location information or dates, were removed. All participants gave informed consent.

The Instagram and TikTok posts, including visual, audio and textual elements, were analyzed as narratives, applying Bamberg's (2020) positioning analysis and the narrative practice approach. The narrative practice approach analyzes "storytelling as a process of navigating and managing identities" (Bamberg, 2020, p. 244), and highlights that "identities and narratives are processual" (p. 250).

### **Body positive weight loss narratives**

The four content creators position their weight loss as different from dominant weight loss narratives, aligning themselves with the body positive narrative. The body positive narrative is present in how they frame their weight loss motivation and talk about their bodies.

In the narratives the temporal order of achieving body acceptance through weight loss has been reversed: instead, they claim that accepting their bodies first is what enabled them to lose weight. For example, one of the content creators claims she is "not doing this [losing weight] to become "perfect" or thin", and another claims she learned to "take care" of herself through self-acceptance.

Furthermore, some of the content creators subvert the traditional before and after element of hegemonic weight loss narratives. Instead of the classic before pictures, where the "old me" is depicted as a miserable figure (Levy-Navarro, 2012), they use imagery that represents their "before" bodies in a neutral or positive way.

The content creators seem to be aware of the conflict between weight loss and body positivity, and attempt to manage responses from their followers by actively positioning their narratives as body positive. For example, one of the cases addresses her lifestyle change in a 10-image Instagram post where she explains how her goals are in line with body acceptance.

Despite the clash between weight loss and body positivity, the response from the content creators' followers is mostly positive. The content creators are rarely called out for their weight loss, instead, most comments are supportive. This points towards a change in how body positivity is understood: instead of seeing weight loss as something outside of the frames of body positivity, the boundaries are being pushed to include weight loss.

## Conclusion

The four cases represent a change in how weight loss is talked about, but also a change in how body positivity is understood. In line with previous fat studies research, the findings demonstrate how body positivity is increasingly being used outside of its original context, moving it away from its political origins (e.g. Harjunen, 2023), which has the potential of further fragmenting the movement (e.g. Darwin & Miller, 2021).

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