

# **LEVERAGING NEW MEDIA TOWARDS POSITIVE BODY IMAGE**

By

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## **Abstract**

Contemporary Western consumer culture frequently promotes monolithic and unrealistic body standards for women. Traditional and mainstream beauty and fashion industries advertise the “ideal” body type as very thin, white, young and able-bodied. Consequently, many issues surrounding body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating in women have often been connected to such exclusive and narrow ideals. This thesis will argue that new media landscapes present new and promising options for women to send and receive alternative and positive knowledge about their bodies.

In the first chapter, I outline my personal experiences with disordered eating, in order to provide the reader with insight into the conditions that guide my research, before I review literature regarding disordered eating, the thin ideal and the shift from traditional sources of media to new media landscapes. The body of this thesis surrounds two case studies that work to demonstrate my argument about the possibilities new media presents for women’s body image. In the second chapter, I analyze the first case study, *Beauty Redefined*, an online media-literacy based brand that highlights conditions and consequences of mainstream beauty ideals and encourages awareness and resistance to them. In the third chapter, I examine the second case study, *GabiFresh*, a plus size fashion blog by Gabi Gregg that promotes body acceptance and encourages style regardless of size, seemingly in line with fat activism. In the last chapter, I outline possible future research directions, inspiration for a personal project and conclusions about my analysis on the two case studies and new media landscapes. As a feminist, and because of my experiences with

disordered eating, I use both feminist media analysis and auto-ethnography as my primary methodologies throughout this piece.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Experience

My research is about the relationship between media representation and body image issues for women, and how this relationship is changing in the new media landscape. This research is important to me because of my experience with disordered eating; and it is important to me that I relate memories of my experience to the reader in an effort to communicate the stakes and scope of the conditions that guide my research.

As a white, female and middle-class teenager, I suffered from full-blown anorexia and bulimia nervosa. I say full-blown because I met the “medical standards” for the disorders. By definition, anorexia nervosa “is a deeply perplexing illness that ravages both mind and body” (Bulik et al. 2). Those with anorexia “obsess about weight gain, remain dissatisfied with the perceived largeness of their bodies, and engage in an array of behaviors designed to perpetuate weight loss” (Bulik et al. 2). They also “place central importance on their shape and weight as their self-esteem is deeply entwined with their body-esteem” (Bulik et al. 2). Bulimia is a very similar disorder, but the main difference between it and anorexia “is that attempts to restrict food intake are punctuated by repeated binges (episodes of eating during which there is an aversive sense of loss of control and an unusually large amount of food is eaten)” (Fairburn and Harrison 408). These bingeing episodes are usually followed by purges meant to compensate for calories consumed, such as “self-induced vomiting or laxative misuse” (Fairburn and Harrison 408).

In my case, anorexia turned into bulimia. The span of my illness, in its full-blown state, lasted approximately two years. This is fortunate, as many women suffer from these disorders for decades, or worse, their entire lives. Nonetheless, this was a frightening period of my life. One of the most daunting things I faced was not feeling as though what I was doing was wrong despite knowing that some of the things I did had to be kept private. On the contrary, I was determined, committed and hopelessly devoted to destroying my body and mind. Of course, I did not see it that way at the time. This is precisely because those with anorexia “tend to view their low weight as an accomplishment rather than an affliction” (Vitousek et al. as cited in Fairburn and Harrison 407) and, “as a consequence, they have limited motivation to change” (Fairburn and Harrison 407).

### **Memories of Disordered Eating**

I was in high school when I developed anorexia. I had started to become self-conscious about my body and the amounts of food I was consuming in grade 10, but it was not until grade 12, however, that I was completely consumed by the disorder. The early days of this illness were spent starving myself. I would record the amount of calories I consumed, determined to ensure that I would not consume over 1000 a day. There were many days where I met this goal. Oftentimes I would have as few as 500-600 calories a day. To put this into perspective, 500-600 calories is equivalent to about two slices of pizza. I would plan strategically, and prepare snacks with small caloric values to eat at different intervals throughout the day, until after dinner, at which point I refused to eat until the next day, when my calorie slate (as I

saw it) would reset. On top of these food restrictions and rules, I also developed and maintained strict exercise regimes. For instance, there was a period where I *needed* to run on the treadmill for 30 minutes everyday.

I received satisfaction from meeting these goals. A night where I went to sleep having consumed the least amount of calories possible or had managed to meet my calorie-quota *and* exercise, meant that I would wake up the next day with pride and excitement, before heading down to the kitchen to eat my well-deserved, 56-calorie apple breakfast. These moments of satisfaction and these mornings after “successful” days meant that I was not gaining weight. It was a twisted game, led by the morbid fear of weight gain that was my oppressive dictator.

This fear drove my deprivation of basic nutrition, my starvation, my obsession with food, or lack there of. It drove my compulsive and exhausting exercise. It drove my constant body checking. I remember placing my right index finger and thumb around my left wrist each day to ensure they could make a circle around it without actually touching my wrist. I felt a sense of relief when they did not, and severe angst if they did. Fear drove my looking into the mirror, often thinking I was too large when, really, I was frail. And perhaps worst, when the disorder morphed into bulimia, this fear drove me to shove my own fingers – or a toothbrush – down my own throat, to upchuck the very little nutrition my body managed to receive. Where did this fear come from? I never once thought to ask myself this question throughout the duration of my illness.

I managed to go to school as usual, attend classes as usual, and still get by with good grades and receive my acceptance to Queen’s, despite my overwhelming

mental and physical distraction. I also managed to still play all the sports I had always previously played, but with a dramatic loss of energy and performance. I remember that my volleyball serve, previously strong, noteworthy and one of my best assets, became weak and frequently failed to make it over the net. I remember feeling confused about why, in soccer that year, I could not run as fast as I used to. In my last soccer game of high school and to date, a soccer ball that flew into my wrist managed to shatter it into pieces. I was not the same athlete, or person, that I used to be. Yet, I still appeared to be successful. I even managed to receive the “Female Athlete of the Year” award that year, as I had done the previous year, despite my stark loss of energy and strength. However, regardless of what it seemed like from the outside perspective, once the disorder kicked in I was no longer truly invested in academics and sports. When I look back at my last year of high school, I remember a life devoted to disordered eating, to weight loss, to fear of weight gain. The urge to control my body became my ultimate passion, my ruler. I now wonder how many seemingly successful women are suffering from the same detrimental issues without realizing it, or without others realizing it. I also wonder if the fact that thinness, constantly advertised as the key to success in traditional media (Hesse-Biber et al. 2008) had anything to do with the way I was perceived – by myself and by others – to be “successful” at the time.

In the summer following grade twelve, before entering university, my issues turned from bad to worse, as my anorexia turned to bulimia. I say “worse” because my memories of bulimia are more graphic than my memories of anorexia. How I see it is that my body, that had grown so used to starving and depriving itself, began to

crave nutrition. This craving came out in the form of binges, as described earlier. When I would enter a binge phase, I would lose all the control that I worked so diligently to maintain; I could not stop eating until my stomach was bulging and the physical mania faded away. I could not anticipate these episodes were coming or understand why they happened at the times they did. Immediately after these binge episodes, I was overwhelmed by intense fear and anxiety over the amount of calories I had consumed, followed by a relentless urge to purge. In most cases, I would force myself to throw up. I can still remember the sickening yet determined feeling of heading to the bathroom, closing the door, reaching for my toothbrush and shoving it into the back of my throat, over and over again, until I had thrown up a “satisfactory” amount of food into the toilet. It was a truly awful feeling. It hurt and was frightening. I still remember looking into the mirror after these toilet encounters, tears streaked across my face, a sense of horror and yet relief at having rid myself of some calories. Sometimes, however, if that purge was not “successful,” I moved to the next form of purging: exercise. There were additional complications to these purges. I did not want my parents to know what I was doing and kept these graphic habits as private as possible. Thus, if these binge episodes occurred while they were home, I would usually wait until they had gone to bed before I would go for a late night run (something they would object to if they had known about it) or to the downstairs basement – or outside in the dark – to throw up.

Of course, you might ask, did my family and friends not see what was happening? To a degree, they knew that something was wrong in the way that I clearly obsessed over food and exercise. They also could not ignore the drastic

amount of weight I had lost. I remember feeling as though I was too heavy on a family March Break trip to Mexico in grade 12, until my aunt, who was with me on the first beach day, commented on how skinny I had gotten, seemingly concerned. Yet, in my twisted mindset, I turned her words of concern into relief of having “achieved” thinness. Moreover, regardless of the concern my family and friends had for my behaviour, I still managed to complete my life’s tasks seemingly successfully and still acted optimistic and upbeat, denying that anything was wrong, which provided a masquerade of healthiness.

After high school I went away to Queen’s University. I was still very much enwrapped with my disorder when I first arrived. In the first few weeks, I would often avoid social gatherings that involved food. However, since I wanted to make friends, I found myself eating more again, as many social encounters inevitably revolved around meal times. The fact that there were shared bathrooms in residence also meant that I would not ever throw up after a binge, as I did not want to be caught doing it. This situation likely contributed to the fact that I never threw up (in a self-induced fashion) again after that summer before university. I did go the school’s gym, excessively, however, in attempt to balance (or cancel) out the increasing amounts of food I was eating. I remember a period where I would force myself to run on the treadmill for at least an hour at a time, at a relatively high speed, several days a week. Nonetheless, I still seemed to be getting better than I had been. I had also, upon the eventual insistence of one of my parents, seen a specialist and attended eating disorder educational clinics the summer after my first year at Queen’s. A few months later, at the start of my second year at Queen’s, I entered a

very healthy and supportive romantic relationship. These socializing factors are the ones that I can only guess contributed to my recovery. I will not ever know, for certain, all of the factors that led into my full-blown disorder and those that helped make it go away. Thanks to my recovery, however, I am now able to investigate the possible reasons for my illness, with a strong and healthy mind – something I was unable to do while under the control of the disorder.

### **Connections Between Experience and Research**

My story is important for academic research for a number of reasons. Firstly, my story is important because it is not unique; it is just not usually talked about, especially in academia. When I go to the gym now and watch first-year students working out, recognizing that most of whom would be in residence as I was, I wonder if they are compelled to the gym for the same reasons I was. There is a lot of academic research regarding media and body image issues, but rarely are the researchers' personal investments and perspectives reflected upon. My story is important because it is frighteningly common and relatable to many women, young and old, living in contemporary Western society. I provided the graphic details of my story in order to gather some attention for possible action. An action as small as choosing to not speak negatively about your body in front of other people, or even becoming aware of one's own motivations for exercise, for instance, can make a very important difference. Most importantly, it is urgent to discuss these personal experiences, such as mine, so that we can work to distinguish the reasons for them, start working on ways to improve the conditions that produce them and start

recognizing these behaviours as serious and common socially produced problems that are harmful to women.

Additionally, research on knowledge bias shows that women who have suffered and recovered from eating disorders might have more of an impact on women's opinions than health experts or other women without these experiences (Perloff 373). Knowledge bias is "the perception that a communicator harbours a biased view of an issue, as a result of his or her gender, ethnicity, religion, age, or other background factors" (Eagly et al. as cited in Perloff 372). When people think that a person carries knowledge bias towards a particular topic, that person is seen as lacking credibility in their statements (Perloff 372). Conversely, if a person is seen violating their knowledge bias, that person is seen to have more credibility (Perloff 372). To violate knowledge bias would mean that someone "makes statements that cannot be easily attributed to a demographic background factor that predisposes the communicator to a biased position" (Perloff 372). An example of a knowledge-bias violation would be when a "former alcoholic embraces stricter penalties for drunk driving" (Perloff 372). In this instance, the former alcoholic is seen as "a credible source on the issue, having both overcome his or her biases and recognized the wisdom of an alternative view" (Perloff 372-3). Consequently, if this is true, young women might be more swayed by "spokespersons women who suffered from eating disorders, but have overcome their problems, than if they selected health experts or other demographically similar young women who do not have these credentials" (Perloff 373). Thus, my position enhances my credibility in this topic as well as my potential to make a positive impact on other women.

Importantly, when I recovered from my illness, I escaped from a world that not only oppressed my mind and body but also blinded me from thinking about why it was even happening. The world I emerged into, post-illness, was one that I saw with a set of fresh eyes. My fresh eyes did not start working immediately, of course, as my full recovery was not immediate. But eventually my eyes began to see things I had not seen before. Certainly, I was *looking* at the same things, but the way I saw them before was without questioning them and merely internalizing them. My new eyes saw these same things in a much different and critical light. These things belong to the world that I still see, and that I am still fighting to grasp and challenge.

In this world, I turn on the radio to hear a female musician singing a song called “Habits,” that involves bingeing on Twinkies and throwing up in the bathroom. In this world, I cannot purchase groceries without seeing five to ten magazines at the checkout with tabloids shaming celebrities for gaining weight. Either that, or tabloids on “health” magazines celebrating weight loss tips for women to appear “sexy” and therefore “successful.” In this world, I witness several of my female family members, friends and peers not only act overly guilty and self-conscious when it comes to eating but also behave in unhealthy ways towards food and exercise. I frequently find myself telling women around me to stop worrying (about how much they ate or about the few pounds they might have gained) or to stop talking about their bodies in such negative ways. It is for these reasons that I have come to believe, like scholars Charlene Hesse-Biber, Susan Bordo and Angela McRobbie, that disordered eating is widely accepted as normal. This is also one of the reasons it is necessary to address these issues in personal and direct ways.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the thin ideal, flourishing within a neoliberal media landscape, privileges hegemonic whiteness and targets middle-class consumers. Consequently, the thin ideal has additional or different implications for women of colour, those from different classes, and also transgendered people, as they are not often addressed in the standards of the thin ideal. Those with visible disabilities, and the elderly, too, are vastly underrepresented in popular beauty standards. There are many areas of research I still need to explore, relating to the diverse implications of the thin ideal as just described. I will do my best, however, to incorporate the research I have done, relating to such issues, whenever possible.

## **Methodology**

This thesis is structured around two case studies. I will examine two different sources of alternative, positive body image online that have garnered large followings: Beauty Redefined and GabiFresh. I will examine the ways in which each of these sources, though different in their approaches, both work to empower women and challenge the thin ideal that perpetuates many women's lives in Western society. By "empower," I mean empower women to be more critically aware of mainstream beauty ideals and their potential consequences on the one hand, and on the other hand, encourage women to think about their bodies positively. I will also examine how the new media platforms utilized by my case studies help make the above methods of empowerment possible. In doing so, I will argue that these sources, through their new media platforms, present women with new psycho-social knowledge about their bodies.

The primary methodologies for analysis of the phenomena presented by the case studies are feminist media analysis and auto-ethnography. I use analysis of new media tools and platforms and counter these to what I refer to as “dominant” or “traditional” forms of media. Dominant or traditional forms of media include television, advertising, magazines and other formats owned by media conglomerates whose financial power is intimately tied to that of the fashion industry. Auto-ethnography is a type of methodology whereby academics “analyze their own biographies as resources for illuminating larger social or cultural phenomena” (Butz and Besio 1660). In my case, I will use my own experiences with disordered eating to better inform my connections to research in this field. My darker experiences in combination with my current confident state have provided me with a valuable perspective on the tyranny of the thin ideal that pervades Western society. Interestingly, auto-ethnography is a tool that my two case study subjects use in their production of alternative media. As a feminist, my goal with this research is to increase positive body image for women. This goal is shared by my case study subjects. I wish to show, via studying these two sources, that new media can be effectively used to counter current and widespread negative body image perceptions amongst women.

The first case study I will examine, in Chapter 2, is the online Beauty Redefined brand (which I will often refer to as BR), created by two sisters, Lindsay and Lexie Kite, that have completed doctoral work in media and body image. By online “brand,” I am referring to an online source, usually accompanied by a mission statement and logo, that utilizes several platforms, such as any or all of the following

(or more) to promote and perform its goals: a website, a Facebook page, a Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Youtube or Google Plus account. The Beauty Redefined brand directly and intentionally provides the online public with researched knowledge and education that counters dominant body image ideals and brings awareness to the consequences of such dominant ideals. In other words, it acts as a direct form of media literacy regarding mainstream beauty ideals. Importantly, however, it also urges women to not only recognize but also redefine and reject the mainstream beauty ideals they bring attention to.

The second case study I will examine, in Chapter 3, is the GabiFresh style blog (or brand) created by Gabi Gregg, a plus size woman of colour and popular fashion blogger. GabiFresh's brilliant and fun plus size fashion presents alternative images to those most often seen in traditional fashion sources. She has large online followings, with thousands of followers on each of her platforms. While she does not provide lengthy media literacy and education in the way that BR does, she arguably promotes fat activism (and is considered a "fatshionista" by scholars) via her messages of self-acceptance and body positivity. While many of Gregg's posts focus mainly on plus size fashion and style, she identifies as a critic of mainstream fashion images and an advocate for style at any size. Importantly, GabiFresh is Gregg's full-time job, as she receives sponsorships from major fashion and beauty corporations, demonstrating the arguably crucial impact that positive body image promoters in new media can have on traditional beauty and fashion industries. Her success shows that alternative (to traditionally mainstream) fashion images are sought, needed and important.

Although these two case studies come from different sources of alternative knowledge for women, they both work to shine light on the mainstream body image and its impact on women. Thus, I argue that these sources, as examples of the many other online sources of alternative body image for women, present women with new and promising psycho-social knowledge about their bodies.

Chapter 4, the conclusion, will summarize analysis about new media and the two case studies examined. It will also outline possible future research directions and inspiration for a personal project. This project will be aimed at embracing and promoting the need for more diversity in fashion. It will act as an online brand, like the case studies I examine in this piece, and will require interested members of the online public to participate in modes of self-representation, by submitting creative photos of themselves in outfits they like, doing something they enjoy.

The remainder of this introduction will provide a review of literature. First, I will review research on disordered eating and the thin ideal in traditional media. Second, I analyze research on the conditions of body image for women in new media. After the review of literature and in the last section of this introduction, I will theorize my argument before presenting my case studies in Chapters 2 and 3.

### **Disordered Eating and the Thin Ideal**

It is important to discuss the term “disordered eating.” The women I described earlier, those that seem frequently guilty over what they are eating or how much they are exercising, do not necessarily have full blown “eating disorders,” but there are visible disordered traits associated with their eating and exercise

habits. As Charlene Hesse-Biber and others point out, there are several women that suffer from disordered eating symptoms (such as excessive dieting, bingeing, purging, over exercising, use of laxatives, and more) but are not clinically diagnosed as having eating disorders because “they do not manifest the full range of psychological traits usually [associated with them]” (211). Moreover, “disordered eating and obsession with food is a widely accepted way to deal with weight and body image issues” (Hesse-Biber et al. 211). As a result, disordered eating is seen as normal and “remains largely unproblematized or altogether ignored by a clinical perspective” (Hesse-Biber et al. 211).

Both Susan Bordo and Angela McRobbie agree that disordered eating and even full-blown eating disorders are now seen as normal. Bordo explains that most women in Western culture “are ‘disordered’ when it comes to issues of self-worth, self-entitlement, self-nourishment, and comfort with their own bodies” (57). Eating disorders, far from being out of the ordinary, are completely in sync with dominant ideals of femininity in contemporary culture (Bordo 57). McRobbie, too, argues that disordered eating and eating disorders, along with other illnesses, have come to be normal in today’s society. Women who are “cutting themselves, endlessly on diets, fearful of their weight, prone to low self-esteem, frequently anorexic” (McRobbie 96) and more, are exhibiting “healthy signs of unhealthy femininity (McRobbie 96). The normalization of disorders is exemplary of the post-feminist condition that averts the possibility of challenging current issues in need of feminist critique (McRobbie 97).

I will address trends of “disordered eating” as much as I address trends of “eating disorders” wherever necessary in my research. I wish to problematize the normalization of disordered eating. Of course, it is important to acknowledge the contemporary consumption paradox of Western culture, whereby increasing trends of disordered eating are occurring alongside food inflation and rising rates of obesity. Thus while I argue that disordered eating is normalized, it is simultaneously difficult to precisely define “normal” eating habits.

At the root of the problem in the world I described earlier, there is one body type advertised as ideal for women: the very thin, often white, young and able-bodied. This world, one that I was unable to question while deeply consumed by my disorder, has come to infuriate me. When I was at my most unhealthy, I met “ideal” body standards for women. When I recovered, gaining weight in the process, I no longer met ideal standards. Unsurprisingly, then, I did not initially feel *good* about getting *better*. This was the first connection I made that turned my focus (and anger) towards Western commercial media and the ways in which it tells women to treat their bodies.

I was often told, while sick, that I should be a model. Although I did receive several concerned comments for my drastic weight loss and obsessive nature over food, these did comments did have the same force as those that praised me for my thinness and, likely unbeknownst to those making the comments, fuelled my desire to lose more weight. Despite the fact that people could sense there was something “wrong” about my state, I often felt an eerie admiration from women around me. When I did gain weight on route to recovery, although family members and friends

recognized that I was “healthier,” I did not receive the same sense of admiration that I did when I was ill. I did not receive supportive comments for my weight gain, for my *recovery*. Instead, I felt that there was something negative associated with my recovery. Perhaps this feeling was encouraged by some of the comments I received the summer after my first year at university, when I had noticeably gained weight. Someone at a birthday party I went to had said, when the topic of my weight gain came up, that “*that’s* what happens when you go away to university.” That’s when *what* happens, exactly? Why did I *then*, after returning to a *healthy* weight, feel bad about my new appearance?

This question is one that I could not ask myself immediately upon recovery nor at the times such comments were made, as my mind had not yet truly grasped societal issues surrounding my experience. As I mentioned earlier, it took me a little while for my fresh eyes to start working. When they did, and they started to see the media and societal conditions for women’s body image critically, I was able to start asking questions such as the one above. Moreover, I began to ask myself, what is happening? How has this come to be? Why is the mainstream media glorifying unhealthy body standards? Why is there only one type of body advertised as ideal? Why are women giving into and obeying these body ideals? Why are women treating their bodies with such discipline and disdain?

A plethora of research focusing on women’s body image disturbance has centered on the thin ideal in mainstream fashion and media images. The thin ideal is a public body ideal held for women in Western society that glorifies the ultrathin body standards of fashion models whose weight represents “only the thinnest 5% of

women in a normal weight distribution” (Kilbourne 396). This means that 95% of women do not meet ideal standards (Kilbourne 396). Since the thin ideal is constantly presented in mainstream media as the key to social success and acceptance (Hesse-Biber et al. 208), millions of women who do not meet its standards are often left with body image dissatisfaction, which is a “primary determinant for disordered eating” (Fiske et al. 357). Time and time again, research indicates that the thin ideal is unrealistic, unattainable or unhealthy for the majority of women. In fact, it is “nearly impossible to achieve the look naturally” (Duncan 49). It is not surprising, then, that mainstream media has been accused of instilling body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviour in women (Perloff 363).

In 1994, when research on women’s body image disturbance began to surface through a series of significant sources, eating pathology scientist Eric Stice and others performed one of the first studies testing the effect of media exposure on eating disorder symptoms. Their study involved 238 undergraduate females and “revealed a direct effect of media exposure on eating disorder symptoms” (Stice et al. 836). The same study discovered media linkages to gender-role endorsement and ideal body stereotype internalization (Stice et al. 836). Several studies since then have indicated similar things.

As partially discussed earlier, while the thin ideal is often tied to the ultra-thin bodies of mainstream fashion models, I have come to understand that the thin ideal is not only about thinness, and is actually a term far more complex than initial research makes it appear. The ideal female body in mainstream media is presented as not only extremely thin, but also mostly white (with a suntan), young and able-

bodied. While women with different body sizes are severely underrepresented in mainstream fashion, so too are female ethnic minorities or women of colour, older women and women with visible disabilities. This is why I wish to develop a project, discussed in the conclusion, that will showcase the need to diversify mainstream fashion images.

There is also the complicated promotion of certain body parts ideal when larger (such as the breasts and buttocks) while certain body parts (such as everywhere other than the breasts and buttocks) ideal when very thin. There is also the promotion of the ideal fit and toned body, that might not equate to terms of extreme thinness, but still requires extremely low body fat, body diligence and body transformation. Thus, I have come to see the thin ideal as umbrella that covers all of these issues, and indicates not just thinness but monolithic and exclusive beauty standards unattainable to the majority of women. So when I refer to the thin ideal, though I am often referring to literal thinness, I am also referring to a predominantly white, young and able-bodied ideal. The Kite sisters, whose online brand I will discuss as my first case study shortly, argue that the thin ideal's monolithic "cycle of 'never quite good enough' is fantastic for a consumer culture supporting \$100+ billion beauty product and weight loss industries, but it is certainly not conducive to real progress as individuals or as a culture" (Kite and Kite).

This leads to the next important discussion surrounding the thin ideal. Why does it exist? Two main explanations will be explored in the following paragraphs.

The first is directly related to socio-historical issues surrounding gender. The second is related to the West's multi-billion dollar beauty industry.

Feminist theorists like Susan Bordo and Angela McRobbie feel that the thin ideal, or moreover, the female pursuit of perfecting the body according to societal standards is something strictly related to gender. Bordo explains that the body has always been considered a part of the "woman's 'sphere' in family life, in mythology, in scientific, philosophical, and religious ideology" (143). Additionally, women have always been far more vulnerable to cultural manipulation of the body than have been men (Bordo 143). In the history of fashion and medicine, it is plain to "see that the social manipulation of the female body emerged as an absolutely central strategy in the maintenance of power relations between the sexes over the past hundred years" (Bordo 143). Bordo urges us to take this historical understanding into consideration when looking at contemporary body preoccupations with thinness and especially anorexia (143). Anorexia directly reflects social issues of our time (Bordo 141) and demonstrates "the unwitting role played by our bodies in the symbolization and reproduction of gender" (Bordo 168). Specifically, the anorexic reflects the double bind that women currently face (Bordo 171). The conditions of this double bind are as follows: "on the one hand, society still advertises domestic conceptions of femininity" (Bordo 171) that positions women as the head emotional and physical nurturer to others and whose self-nurturance is seen as selfish (Bordo 171); on the other, since women now have access to the professional working world, they have also been taught to "embody the 'masculine' language and values of that arena – self control, determination, cool, emotional discipline, mastery, and so on"

(Bordo 171). Bordo contends that the anorexic, consuming as few calories as possible (in line with feminine standards of selfless nurturing), while obsessively controlling her consumption and exercise (in line with masculine traits of self-control in the workforce), “embodies this double bind, in a particularly painful and graphic way” (174).

Angela McRobbie also feels that the thin ideal and disorders involving the pursuit of thinness are connected to gender. Elements of popular culture and political structures promote ideas of feminism in what seems to be good nature (McRobbie 11). However, she continues, such promotion actually contributes to the undoing of feminism because it implies that feminism is already there and therefore unnecessary (McRobbie 11). She calls this a “new form of a sexual contract” (McRobbie 2). Moreover, with the growth of less visible patriarchies (McRobbie 95), deeper anxieties arise in women that come out in the form of disorders (McRobbie 95). These disorders illustrate the boundaries and hierarchies of sexual difference (McRobbie 95).

Both Bordo and McRobbie believe that media images play a large role on the perceptions women develop regarding their body image. Bordo contends that “with the advent of movies and television, the rules for femininity have come to be cultural transmitted more and more through the deployment of standardized visual images” (169). Women “are no longer told what ‘a lady’ is or of what femininity consists” (Bordo 17) but rather “learn the rules directly through bodily discourse: through images which tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements and behaviour is required” (Bordo 170). McRobbie, too, discusses the

role of the media on women's body image. She stresses that consumer culture and magazines, in particular, encourage female perfectibility (McRobbie 97). She calls attention to the hypocrisy and post-feminist contradiction evident in magazines that include for instance, "super-slim models on one page, and good advice about overcoming low-self esteem on the other" (McRobbie 98). These contradictions "confirm a notion of female confinement and entrapment" (McRobbie 98).

This leads to the second explanation for the perpetuation of the thin ideal in mainstream media: the glorification of an unattainable and monolithic ideal supports industries that make billions yearly (Kite and Kite). According to Jean Kilbourne, writer of *Still Killing Us Softly: Advertising and the Obsession with Thinness*, the mass delusion that most women think they weigh too much "sells a lot of products" (396).

Margo Maine, author of *Body Wars: Making Peace with Women's Bodies* points out that mainstream media sources such as women's magazines take advantage of the fact that many women are searching for a "perfect self." She explains that popular women's magazines are seen as experts that offer chances for people to meet ideal body standards (Maine 18). These "experts," however, are reliant on body dissatisfaction in women (Maine 18) and continuously come up with several different regimes and options for weight loss "to keep women's self esteem and body image on edge" (Maine 18). Magazines promote the idea that with the "right" amount of diet and exercise, a woman can obtain the ideal body (Brownell 2). However, given that the ideal body is unattainable for most women, it is not surprising that "the quest for a body as thin as the model's becomes a prison for

many women” (Kilbourne 396). Margaret Duncan agrees that magazines such as *Shape* set “women up for a lifetime of self monitoring, exercise and weight control” (55). She also importantly points out that while these magazines appear to promote health above all else, they actually promote the idea that “feeling good means looking good” (Duncan 55). She stresses that magazines emphasize “the importance of health but links feeling good to looking good so that real health issues are subordinated to beauty issues” (Duncan 51). So if feeling good means looking good, and looking good means fitting an unattainable standard (for most women), it can be argued that magazines are promoting unhealthy advice as healthy advice.

The following passage highlights an interesting connection between the blurring of beauty and health standards.

With the relatively recent conflation of beauty ideals with health ideals, the weight loss and diet industries have begun to flourish unlike ever before, with an estimated \$61 billion spent on the quest for thinness in 2010 – more than twice as much as Americans spent on all types of diet programs and products in 1992” (Kite and Kite).

In my own research of two popular women’s magazines, *Women’s Health* and *Shape*, I discovered that the “health advice” on the websites of both magazines was seemingly endless, ambiguous and oftentimes contradictory. It is for this reason and the reasons discussed above that I believe that current popular women’s health-related magazines aim to be ambiguous in their dietary advice: they benefit from having women continue to search for dietary regimes that are “right for them.”

It is important to recognize that the above analysis points to issues within neoliberal consumer culture and capitalism. Indeed, the thin ideal is “embedded in neoliberal discourses around citizenship” (Herdon as cited in Afful and Ricciardelli 453) that emphasize “personal responsibility” (Herdon as cited in Afful and Ricciardelli 453) and in the case of attempting to reach unrealistic body standards, “punishing regimens of strict diets and exercise” (Herdon as cited in Afful and Ricciardelli 453) or body dissatisfaction and disordered eating.

### **New Media and New Possibilities for Women’s Body Image**

The above research focuses on *traditional*, institutional media sources, such as magazines and television, and their impact on women’s body image. This type of research has taken place for decades (Fardouly and Vartanian 1) and has provided me with much of my initial knowledge in this field. But then, an avid user of social media myself, I began to wonder about *new* media and what it meant for women’s body image. Does it differ from the ways in which traditional media sources did and do promote monolithic ideas about women’s body image? If so, how?

Certain scholars are starting to ask these questions. As social media continues to increase in popularity (Fardouly and Vartanian 1), “researchers are beginning to investigate the possible consequences that these new media formats have on body image” (Fardouly and Vatanian 1). Thus, the topic of new media and body image is still an emerging field in the academic world. Much scholarly work that *has* addressed new media and body image, however, tends to highlight the negative impact that social media has on women’s body image – for reasons such as

those associated with social comparison theory and heightened imagery surveillance (Perloff 366).

For example, Richard Perloff argues that new media tools that allow “viewing, content-creating, and editing 24/7, on mobile devices, anywhere, anytime” (366) provide “more opportunities for social comparison and dysfunctional surveillance of pictures of disliked body parts than were ever available with the conventional mass media” (366). He also discusses the many frightening pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia accounts and sites online that promote the disordered pursuit of thinness as a lifestyle, bearing images with quotes such as “the sadly iconic Kate Moss aphorism – ‘nothing tastes as good as skinny feels’” (Perloff 366). Additionally, there are countless “thinspirational” (a term used to describe thin inspiration) images of women that are shared on sites such as Pinterest, Twitter and Tumblr, “sometimes with weight in pounds listed, along with before and after weight-loss images” (Perloff 366). In general, there are copious amounts of thin-idealized images that young women locate and repost to pages online (Perloff 366). Even “healthy living blogs also emphasize thin appearance values and disordered nutritional messages, while also containing self-objectifying messages about women” (Beple and Thompson as cited in Perloff 366).

Additionally, some recent studies on young women and social media “have found that Facebook users report more drive for thinness, internalization of the thin-ideal, body surveillance, self-objectification, and appearance comparisons than do non-users” (Fardouly and Vartanian 1). Moreover, in agreement with Perloff, the fact that “10 million new photographs are uploaded to Facebook every hour”

(Mayer-Schonbergr and Cukier as cited in Fardouly and Vartanian 2) “provides regular opportunities for users to make appearance-related social comparisons” (Fardouly and Vartanian 2) that can often “lead to a negative body image” (Myers and Crowther as cited in Fardouly and Vartanian 2).

My stance on new media, however, is different than those above. To begin, it is necessary to acknowledge a point that Perloff makes about new media being different because it is peer based. The role of peers in knowledge consumption and spreading has of course always been important, but unlike the days of traditional media, new media means that peers *are* the media (Perloff 366); “in contrast to mass media, social media are the domain of similar others, a veritable electronic nation peopled by peers” (Perloff 366). This aspect of new media is crucial for women’s body image because it has often been argued that women’s body perceptions are significantly influenced by peer opinions. Though the mass media promotes and glorifies the thin ideal, thin-ideal internalization most often results when individuals “internalize attitudes that are approved of by significant or respected others” (Kandel as cited in Thompson and Stice 181). Ultimately, comments and actions from socialization agents “communicate expectations concerning the benefits of thinness, such as increased social acceptance” (Thompson and Stice 181).

In a recent study, Jolanda Veldhuis and others tested a group of adolescent girls to see how they would respond to peer testimonies on YouTube regarding the thin ideal (Veldhuis et al. 174). Their results indicated that teen girls “who were confronted with an extremely thin media model were most dissatisfied with their

own bodies when peers marked this model to be just somewhat underweight (i.e., '3 kg underweight') instead of a more accurate 6 kg-underweight-status of the model" (Veldhuis et al. 178). In other words, when peers labelled the models as not being extremely underweight (and therefore not extremely unattainable), girls viewing the content internalized the thin ideal, felt unsatisfied with their own bodies, and took on the thin ideal as a desirable goal (Veldhuis et al. 179). Evidently, "the effects of exposure to thin-body ideals depend largely on how peers comment on them" (Veldhuis et al. 180). Not surprisingly, then, it is vital to study peer influence via new media when attempting to understand current conditions of thin-ideal internalization (Veldhuis et al. 172).

An advantage of peer-based media is that, since social media involves peers viewing peers as media sources, women are seeing more diverse portrayals of women in the media. Assuming that a woman's Facebook friends or Instagram peers does not solely consist of super-model thin, white, young and able-bodied women, a woman is seeing *diverse bodies in the media*, something that she still cannot see in most forms of fashion advertising or in traditional media images. There are also things like the "explore" feature on Instagram, where people can view hundreds of diverse images that strangers post of themselves. Women are also seeing *themselves* in the media, when they post pictures of themselves on social media platforms, and are arguably receiving social confirmation and acceptance for their body image when they receives likes or comments on such pictures. I would need to perform more research on this assertion to verify it, but if posting images of oneself made a person feel negatively towards their body, why would they bother posting them?

Julie Andsager, in response to Perloff's assertions discussed earlier, argues that social media arguably depicts a greater range of female bodies as acceptable (409). She further argues that depictions of diverse bodies in social media can sometimes even drive attention away from appearance in general; for instance, "someone might post on Facebook or Instagram a photo of several young female friends – some of whom are thin, some overweight or obese – having fun together, which might focus attention on camaraderie rather than body shape" (Andsager 409). Or, perhaps, this kind of message (of a group of diverse bodies together as friends) would help show women that you need not pursue ideal body standards in order to be accepted.

Moreover, Andsager agrees that new media is more promising and positive than traditional media in regards to the spread of alternative knowledge, something that I strongly agree with and will drive the main argument of this paper. As the thin ideal is still ubiquitous and thriving, it is admittedly unlikely that the majority of vulnerable young women go online "to seek materials that attempt to defy the notion that beauty is limited to the extremely thin, the young, and (mostly) the white" (Andsager 409). However, in social media, as compared to traditional forms of media such as magazines and movies, people have greater chances of being exposed to ideas and messages from peers that they have not initially sought (Oliver et al. as cited in Andsager 409). Even a woman "using social media to obtain information and encouragement (thinspiration) regarding weight loss may inadvertently be exposed to a more diverse and potentially positive set of messages about the body than they would via traditional media" (Andsager 412). One

alternative post, in this case, might catch a woman's attention and affect her attitude in a new way.

I argue that these alternative posts can help foster new forms of media literacy. Media literacy that dispels mainstream beauty ideals is highly important and effective on women's body image perceptions. I will expand on this later on, at the start of the first case study.

### **Body Theory**

Susan Bordo believes that the current self-discipline that women have over their bodies is a means of Foucauldian social control (Bordo 166). In this process of social control, media representations that promote empowerment for women via self-modification of their bodies are reasserting traditional gender configurations (Bordo 166). She calls this a "backlash phenomenon" against older forms of feminism (166). In this situation, "female bodies, pursuing these ideals, may find themselves as distracted, depressed, and physically ill as female bodies in the nineteenth century, pursuing a feminine ideal of dependency, domesticity and delicacy" (Bordo 184). Additionally, Bordo reiterates Foucault in asserting that social control and power occurs at ground level places. She stresses that we must "abandon the idea of power as something possessed by a group and levelled against another" (Bordo 167). Instead, we "must think instead of a network of practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination within a particular domain" (Bordo 167).

I agree that female progress is suffering and this inspires my research. I also agree that power occurs at ground level places. However, what is crucial to note is that the ground level places Bordo describes, being the network of practices, institutions and technologies where dominance and subordination circulate, *are changing*. They are changing because of the shift from old media to new, and this is pivotal to my argument.

### **Changing Media Landscapes**

Prior to new media, media sources consisted solely of institutional platforms such as television, film and magazines. I have been calling it “traditional media” thus far. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, in their book, *Spreadable Media*, call this period the “broadcast era.” They explain that in this period, media circulation was not so much “circulation” as it was “distribution” (Jenkins et al. 2). They explain that movement of media content in such modes of distribution “is largely – or totally – controlled by the commercial interests producing and selling it” (Jenkins et al. 2). They argue that now, with new media (what they call “spreadable” media), an emerging “hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways” (Jenkins et al. 1). They assert the following:

This shift from distribution to circulation signals a movement toward a more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simple consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who

are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined” (Jenkins et al. 2).

They point out that our sharing and posting choices in new media “are reshaping the media landscape itself (Jenkins et al. 1-2).

Despite the fact that they indicate a shifting media landscape, however, they remain hesitant to attribute it too much credit for social change. They explain that while new media presents new ways to spread material, “word-of-mouth recommendations and the sharing of media content are impulses that have long driven how people interact with each other” (Jenkins et al. 2-3). The following passage illustrates this stance further.

Our approach doesn’t presume that new platforms liberate people from old constraints but rather suggests that the affordances of digital media provide a catalyst for reconceptualizing other aspects of culture, requiring the rethinking of social relations, the reimagining of cultural and political participation, the revision of economic expectations and the reconfiguration of legal structures. (Jenkins et al. 3)

I agree that people still have the impulses to interact with each other as they did before the digital era. Nick Couldry, a media theorist and advocate of practice theory, explains that practices of interactivity stem from human needs (34). More specifically, he asserts that “practices related to media are shaped by basic needs for coordination, interaction, community, trust and freedom” (Couldry 34).

I do not agree, however, that the changing media landscape does not liberate people from old constraints. In fact, many assertions Jenkins, Ford and Green make

throughout their book show precisely how new media challenges old constraints. Thus, I find that they contradict themselves in saying that new media does not liberate people from older forms of media-dissemination, at least in some ways. Providing new ways for rethinking social, political, economic and legal structures, as they state new media does in the passage above, is the *very feature* of new media that helps liberate people from older constraints. It does not immediately balance out power discrepancies between dominant and subordinate forces, but it certainly provides new ways for people to send and receive knowledge, which can have an extremely important and empowering impact on many people's lives.

Later on in their book, while discussing alternative (to dominant or mainstream) media makers, they state that "there is strong evidence that the public has access to a much more diverse array of media texts in the digital era than ever before" (Jenkins et al. 239) and that "this new diversity represents expanded opportunities for independent media products of all kinds" (Jenkins et al. 239). Again, this seems like a very legitimate way that new media liberates people from old constraints.

As Couldry has pointed out, it is the media's job to tell us "what there is" (31). And as discussed so far, the consequences of this notion have shifted dramatically from times of older forms of media to new. Unlike the days of the broadcast era, where media institutions were solely top-down, profit-driven systems, people are now able to send and receive information *in the media* to and from other people who are not speaking on behalf of institutions or commodities. Thus, I argue that alternative ideas can now spread in the same places as dominant ideas and that this

is both new and promising in regards to the ways in which people consume knowledge. It is important to acknowledge that “alternative” or “dominant” ideas are not always intentionally created, sent and received as being one or the other, and do not necessarily fit into this binary of “alternative” or “dominant” with ease. I use the terms “alternative” and “dominant” in order to articulate the general difference between ideas that are more well known and internalized (such as the thin ideal), and ideas that contradict such knowledge (such as positive body image). Specifically, then, I argue that new media presents women with new opportunities to receive alternative and therefore more positive psychosocial knowledge about their bodies. Again, by alternative, I mean alternative to the very thin, young and white ideal originating in traditional, mainstream media that is frequently held responsible for widespread body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating in women.

Of course, as Jenkins points out in *Covergence Culture, Where Old and New Media Collide*, not all participants on social media are created equal (3). He explains that “corporations- and even individuals within corporate media – still exert greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers” (Jenkins 3). Because of this, while user-generated content has arguably more power than before, it is still limited, to a degree, within the boundaries of corporate power or influence. Jenkins also expresses that “some consumers have greater abilities to participate in this emerging culture than others” (Jenkins 3). These are important considerations. The point that drives my argument, however, does not ignore these limitations. Rather, it stresses the idea that more alternative knowledge is available

than before to wider networks, and also that alternative ideas can now circulate as media messages through the same media technologies that dominant or commercial messages circulate within. Further, such alternative messages can and do sometimes become commercialized messages, or have the potential to become dominant messages because of the opportunities that new media platforms present. Thus, the modes of social control that Bordo describes as oppressing women's bodies have changed or have the potential to change, since the new media landscape mixes together dominant and subordinate ideas, and provides subordinate ideas the same tools used by dominant ones, despite there being a power imbalance between the two.

Moreover, this is not to say that thin-ideal imagery consistent in older forms of media does not circulate in newer forms of media, for as I have already discussed, it does and to alarming degrees. What I assert is new, however, is that there are more opportunities to access alternative ideas regarding body image in the same media networks that dominant ideas about body image circulate. What this means is that the same day the Victoria Secret show airs (on traditional media) and receives thousands or millions of positive responses on social media platforms, thousands or millions of negative responses can also spread throughout such platforms, at the same time. This is not to say that the amount of negative responses would in reality match the positive ones, due to pre-existing notions of beauty and acceptance, but it is possible. This possibility is one that new media allows and this possibility is what liberates people from older constraints. In the broadcast era, it would be impossible for everyday people to challenge dominant ideas with the same media tools that

media institutions had access to. Perhaps most importantly, more access to alternative ideas in new media means that there are more opportunities for such ideas to catch fire.

The spread of positive body image via new social media is already happening and to impressive degrees. There are several websites, Facebook pages, social media accounts and simple posts made about positive body image, disordered eating awareness and alternative ideas regarding the perpetuation of thinness. The bulk of this thesis will now demonstrate the power of these alternative and positive body image platforms by looking closely at Beauty Redefined in Chapter 2, as introduced earlier, and GabiFresh in Chapter 3, also introduced earlier, and the ways in which these brands present women with arguably new and powerful information about their bodies. Before this analysis, it is important to note that these sources do not escape from a neoliberal media system that revolves around consumer capitalism, for each of the brands engage with monetization. They operate within the same neoliberal, consumer-driven media systems that dominant, commercial sources operate within, but present alternative knowledge (to dominant, mainstream knowledge) in the process, which is what I argue is new and important about the opportunities of new media.

## **Chapter 2: Beauty Redefined**

### **Media Literacy in New Media**

Positive and alternative social media posts about women's body image can be considered a form of media literacy. Media literacy is a tool that educates consumers to be "active, critical processors of the messages we receive via media" (Potter as cited in Andsager 411). It gives people the skills to disagree with and challenge media messages (Mihailidis as cited in Andsager 411). Though media literacy programs often exist outside of the online world, such as in elementary schools, high schools and universities as extra curriculums (De Abreu and Mihailidis as cited in Andsager 411), "social media are capable of dramatically expanding the reach of media literacy programs on body image" (Mihailidis as cited in Andsager 411). The popularity of Facebook, for instance, means that "parents, family, friends, teachers, and popular celebrities can easily disseminate media literacy messages by sharing them" (Andsager 412).

Media literacy interventions regarding mainstream beauty ideals have proven to garner positive effects on women's body image. For instance, such interventions have "positive effects on knowledge, influence, attitudes, self-efficacy, and behaviour" (Jeong et al. as cited in Andsager 411). They have also appeared to be effective in disrupting body dissatisfaction in young women and teens (Andsager 411). Yuko Yamamiya and others performed a study in 2005 that revealed that the harmful effect of thin-ideal "media exposure was significantly reduced among high-internalization women when they were given media-literacy information and either asked to recall and write down the information or induced to make written

arguments against the media's thin-ideals based on the information” (Yamamiya et al. 78). Interestingly, in the same study, low-internalization women (who have not internalized the thin ideal significantly) “were unaffected by any of the study's experimental manipulations” (Yamamiya et al. 78). These findings suggest that women who might come across an alternative body image post will be especially impacted, for the better, if they are struggling with the thin ideal.

A similar study by Heidi Posavec and others tested whether or not women were more likely to perceive fashion models as “dissimilar others” after experiencing interventions educating them on things such as the fact that “the majority of women are genetically predisposed to be heavier than fashion models” (Posavac et al. 329). This specific intervention was called the “Genetics Realities Intervention” (Posavac et al. 329). Their results proved that media literacy interventions can reduce “the likelihood of women comparing themselves with media images” (Posavec et al. 327) and therefore can “reduce the likelihood of women experiencing increased body image disturbance when exposed to media images” (Posavac et al. 327).

These proven positive impacts of media literacy on women regarding body image, partnered with what I argue to be new media’s ability to disseminate alternative ideas (such as media literacy for the thin ideal) in new and promising ways, means that new media can and is presenting potential for women to receive more empowering knowledge about their bodies. A most crucial example of online media literacy regarding mainstream beauty ideals is the Beauty Redefined brand

created by two sisters, Lindsay and Lexie Kite, who received their PhDs in media and body image from the University of Utah (Kite and Kite).

### **Beauty Redefined: The Website**

The Kites' Beauty Redefined (BR) brand utilizes many new media platforms in addition to their website (Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram and Google Plus) to pursue its mission. The BR mission, as articulated on each of its platforms, is to "take back beauty for females everywhere."

The BR website is the backbone of the brand's platforms and is thus the best place to begin. The website has nine tabs: home, blog, about us, merchandise, speaking, contact, image gallery, newsroom and resources. I will not discuss all of these sections, but will rather focus on those most central to the topic of media literacy and potential empowerment through new media.

In the "About Us" tab, the sisters explain that "Beauty Redefined is the academic and personal passion of Lexie Kite and Lindsay Kite, 30-year-old identical twins with PhDs in the study of media and body image" (Kite and Kite). They have a "passion for helping girls and women recognize, reject and resist harmful messages about their bodies and what 'beauty' means and looks like" (Kite and Kite). They perform this not-for-profit work through research-based online education, such as their blog and eight-week Body Image Resilience program (Kite and Kite) and through "sharing empowering posts through social media" (Kite and Kite) – mainly via their Facebook page, Twitter and Instagram (Kite and Kite). They also perform in-person speaking engagements to thousands of people across the U.S. in a wide

range of settings (Kite and Kite), using an “empowering visual presentation” (Kite and Kite) formed by their master’s and doctoral research (Kite and Kite).

In the “About Us” section, the Kites also “assert that having positive body image isn’t believing you are *beautiful*” (Kite and Kite) and rather that instead, “it is having a positive perception of your body overall” (Kite and Kite). Instead of constantly confusing our bodies with “how our bodies look” (Kite and Kite), which is a form of self-objectification (Kite and Kite), the Kites aim to show that “the vital point that your body is far more important and powerful as an instrument for your use than it is as an ornament to admire” (Kite and Kite). They conclude that “getting past the obsession with the outsides of our bodies is key to developing a positive perception of our own bodies, which is the definition of positive body image” (Kite and Kite). At the bottom of their “About Us” page, they have placed a YouTube video from the BR YouTube account, where the twins reiterate the above points on screen.

While I argue that the Kites work presents women with new, positive and important information about mainstream beauty and their bodies, it is also necessary to address potential limitations of the brand. For instance, in the *About Us* section, discussed above, while the Kites indicate that their brand is not-for-profit, they still require a fee for the 8-week program that is meant to guide girls and women “through the life-changing process of developing positive body image and body image resilience in manageable steps” (Kite and Kite). They also sell merchandise, which has its own tab on the BR website. While the merchandise they sell are products that are meant to be used for media-literacy and positive body image, and while the Kites do explain that selling merchandise is to raise money for

their mission (Kite and Kite), the act of monetizing certain methods of their arguably empowering brand must be recognized and met with some curiosity, if not scepticism. It seems ironic that a brand that chastises multi-billion dollar industries for instilling negative body image in women (as I will describe later) still monetizes aspects of their brand. This is not to dismiss the importance of the Kites' work, but rather, to highlight my earlier point that this brand that produces alternative (to dominant) knowledge does not escape the same neoliberal, capitalist media system that is arguably responsible for instilling negative body image in women. It is understandable that the Kites need to raise money for their work. At the same time, nonetheless, the monetization of certain aspects of the brand demonstrates one of its limitations. Importantly, however, albeit abiding by certain rules of dominant consumer capitalism, the Kites are presenting alternative *knowledge* in modern media systems that contrasts dominant and arguably harmful knowledge that circulates within the same systems.

The home page of the website presents information to viewers that supports the Kites statements in their "About Us" section, and displays the scope and goals of BR. Just below the horizontal list of the website's tabs, viewers are met with a poster or billboard-like series of rotating images and text. The images rotate randomly between promoting the brand's mission statement, informative quotes, facts, images and criticisms regarding the mainstream media and its treatment of women's body image and also resources or solutions for negative body image or disordered eating.

Upon scrolling down the home page, the Kites provide text that outlines the current conditions surrounding women's body image, exemplary of the media

literacy that BR provides. In the following passage, the Kites provide a description, reasons for and consequences of the thin ideal in mainstream beauty and fashion images, very similar to the way that I do in my introduction to this thesis. The Kites not only make their research publicly accessible but write in plain language and in a familiar (and enjoyably satirical) way.

If you've glanced at a magazine or turned on the TV in the last decade, you've got a good idea of what it takes for a girl or woman to qualify to be featured positively in media: she's tall, young, usually white, has long, flowing hair, is surgically enhanced, blemish-free and very thin. In fact, academic research tells it like we see it: studies show the women we see in media these days are on screen specifically to be looked at, as objects to be viewed and consumed. They fit ideals that drive huge profits for the beauty and diet industries. On top of that, surgical and digital enhancement has become an unquestioned standard. And in a world where a constant flow of media images far outnumbers women we could ever see face to face, this unrealistic ideal has become the norm in our minds. A counterfeit, dangerous, unattainable norm.

This text provides a sample of the type of media literacy BR provides. Moreover, there is a bolded paragraph that follows this text at the end of the home page, that quite specifically and directly outlines the Kites' mission statement:

Beauty Redefined is dedicated to promoting positive body image and resilience through teaching people to recognize, reject and resist

harmful messages about female bodies in media and cultural discourse. We do this through speaking engagements in a wide variety of settings, offering online education through our website and 8-week online program, and continuing the conversation through social media. For more on our work and how you can join the battle to redefine the meaning and value of beauty in healthy and empowering ways, please follow the links above through Step 1: Recognize, Step 2: Redefine, and Step 3: Resist. (Kite and Kite).

In the original text, the Kites provide hyperlinks on certain words (such as “8-week online program,” “social media” or “recognize,” “redefine” and “resist”) that link readers to corresponding parts of their website or social media platforms if they click on them. This allows readers to easily navigate through important parts of their brand, in an understandable and accessible fashion. This last passage again situates the brand as an outlet of media literacy, by stating that they wish to teach people about harmful beauty messages in the mainstream media, and also within a liberal feminist framework, by encouraging individuals to garner positive body image and resistance to mainstream ideals in “media and cultural discourse” (Kite and Kite).

Although the Kites’ mission is to educate and empower girls and women, and to “take back beauty for females,” they do not address what this might mean for transgender or queer women. Are they included in these processes of empowerment? Perhaps the Kites could be more specific about this, for without identifying these groups of women, such women might not feel invited to participate

in the brand's mission. Furthermore, while the Kites briefly mention that current body ideals include whiteness on the BR home page, they could stress, perhaps more clearly and with more emphasis (on the home page) that the thin ideal is very much embedded in white hegemony and that this has additional consequences for ethnic minorities. The Kites do, to their credit, write about race issues and representation in mainstream media in their blog, as one of the following blog posts I discuss shortly will demonstrate.

The three links that the Kites refer to in the last passage, "Step 1: Recognize," "Step 2: Redefine" and "Step 3: Resist," displayed above the text and just below the billboard-like, rotating series of images mentioned earlier are another important characteristic of the home page and of the BR brand. These icons represent and link to different categories of the BR blog, directly published on their website. This blog is one of the key outlets for BR's media literacy. The three icons and corresponding blog categories are based on the Kites' three main steps in challenging mainstream beauty messages.

Each of the three icons provides a mini description for each blog category. According to such descriptions, the blog posts belonging to "Step 1: Recognize" are helping for "recognizing harmful messages about female bodies" (Kite and Kite) and that doing this "is the first step to taking back beauty and health for ourselves" (Kite and Kite). They state that the blog posts in "Step 2: Redefine" are important for "redefining the way we perceive our own bodies and health" (Kite and Kite) and that this "is the second step to taking back beauty and health for ourselves" (Kite and Kite). Lastly, blog posts in "Step 3: Resist" are about "resisting harmful messages

through the development of body image resilience” and this is “the final continuous step to positive body image” (Kite and Kite).

### **Beauty Redefined: The Blog and “Three Steps to Positive Body Image”**

In order to understand the research-based media literacy available through BR, I examine some samples from the website’s three blog categories. When clicking on each blog category or “step” advertised on the website’s home page, you are brought to an archive page where any articles posted on BR’s blog related to the step in question appear. Most articles are written by the Kite sisters but sometimes the articles are written by guest authors.

Some of the articles that will pop up upon clicking on the “Recognize” category include those entitled, “Vanity Fair-Skinned Only? The Race Issue in the Hollywood Issue” (Kite and Kite), “Invisible Women Over 40: Anti-Aging and Symbolic Annihilation” (Kite and Kite), “Dying for A Tan” (Kite and Kite), “Starving and Stifled: Women are Counting Calories Instead of Changing the World” (Garcia) and more.

While the issue of hegemonic whiteness is not outlined in detail on the BR home page, BR does address issues of race and racialization in certain articles of their blog, such as “Vanity Fair-Skinned Only? The Race Issue in the Hollywood Issue” (Kite and Kite). Released in 2014, the article discusses Vanity Fair’s (and the mainstream media’s) underrepresentation of women of colour.

You’d think that with approximately one-third of the women in the U.S. representing an ethnicity other than Caucasian, media would wake up

and catch up – both in terms of writing and offering film roles for women of color and in representing those women positively after they're stars. In terms of capitalistic common sense, that's an undeniably large segment of this country's consumers who don't see their own races, ethnicities, skin tones, hair colors and styles reflected in mainstream media. (Kite and Kite)

The Kites explain that women are colour of not only “dramatically underrepresented in the media,” but also that “they're digitally and physically whitewashed when they do appear in media (by their own choices and the choices of stylists, editors and directors).” One of the images the Kites use in this article (accompanied with a quote from one of the Kites' earlier articles on media “whitewashing”) speak to this point precisely:

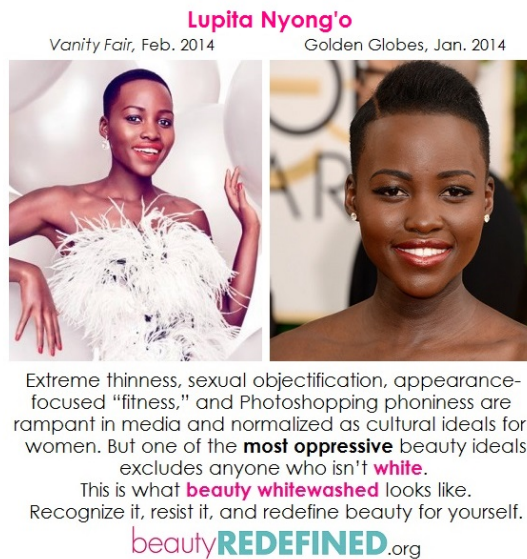


Figure 1. Image that the Kites use to depict whitewashing

The Kites discuss *Vanity Fair* in particular, and the fact that the company “essentially refuses to feature a woman of colour on the cover of one of their most

popular issues of the year that names Hollywood's newest, most important stars." They demonstrate how problematic this lack of representation is by pointing to Vanity Fair's mission statement, which is as follows:

*'Vanity Fair is a cultural filter, igniting the global conversation about the people and ideas that matter most...Vanity Fair is the first choice and often the only choice for the world's most influential and important audience'* (Kite and Kite).

As the Kites point out, "by repeatedly leaving women of color out of the conversation, and literally out of the picture, VF tells us over and over again exactly who and what 'matters most'."

In this article the Kites address the common trend for women's magazines to use "images and editorial content that consistently emphasize thinness, weight loss, and the attainment of what the magazines define as "beauty" in order to achieve personal success, happiness, health and attention from men." They combine this standard with portrayals of race to show the complexity of beauty standards for women.

As if unattainably thin ideals (that look completely normal due to repeated exposure) across all genres of media aren't enough of a strike against women's perceptions of their own bodies, **why don't we throw in a skin color as the foremost standard of beauty** – one that at least a third of the women in this country don't have. In addition to being extremely thin yet curvaceous in all the "right" places, the beauty ideal presented in mainstream media is almost

exclusively white, making it all the more unattainable for women of color. But that doesn't mean they don't try. Even with the conspicuous absence of women of color from the highest-selling magazines, real life women of color suffer nearly the same effects as white women from our unrealistic, generally unhealthy, white ideals. (Kite and Kite)

The Kites go onto dispel the common belief that “women of colour are more capable of resisting the influence of dominant standards of beauty than white women” by listing statistics that indicate that women of colour experience many of the same body image issues as white women, such as disordered eating. They also point out that media representations of women of colour, such as Latina stars like Jennifer Lopez and Shakira, “have become increasingly anglicized within U.S. media, with shrinking figures and lighter-colored, straighter hair” (Cepeda; Guzman and Valdivia as cited in Kite and Kite). The Kites conclude the article by saying that awareness of the media's misrepresentation of women as well as rejection of its corresponding messages are very much important. They point to Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldua who emphasizes the importance of knowledge (or alternative knowledge, for that matter) and awareness:

Take the words of awesome Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldua and consider what progress you can make armed with this knowledge: *“Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a travesia, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again. But if I escape conscious awareness, escape 'knowing,' I won't be moving. Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious.*

*'Knowing' is painful because after it happens I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before."*

-Anzaldua, 1999, p.70. (Kite and Kite).

Anzaldua statements are similar to those made by Bordo in *Unbearable Weight*. Bordo articulates "that in our present culture of mystification – a culture which continually pulls us away from systemic understanding and inclines us toward constructions that emphasize individual freedom, choice, power, ability – simply becoming more conscious is a tremendous achievement" (Bordo 30). She admits that critique of culture cannot magically protect one from cultural imagery, but it can, she stresses, provide us with healthy scepticism towards it (Bordo 30-31).

Another article in the "Recognize" category, "Invisible Women Over 40: Anti-Aging and Symbolic Annihilation," highlights the fact that older women are extremely underrepresented in the mainstream media, despite the fact that people over 40 "make up the majority of the population" (Kite and Kite). Further, when they do appear, they are either represented in problematic ways (Kite and Kite) or shown with "zero signs of aging" (Kite and Kite). The former means older women are presented as "neurotic, crazy, evil, out-of-touch-with-reality characters" (Kite and Kite) while latter means that older women appear to have "no lines or wrinkles, tight skin all over [and] no signs of silver hair sparkling through their thick, flowing brunette and blonde heads of hair" (Kite and Kite). The "media's totally normal-appearing ageless older women are the product of two tricks: cosmetic procedures and digital alteration" (Kite and Kite). In sum, "we rarely see an older woman in media, but when we do, she generally fits [the above descriptions]" (Kite and Kite).

The Kites go on to assert that the lack of older women in the media, apart from their minor appearances as either negative or altered appearances can be considered symbolic annihilation (Kite and Kite). This symbolic annihilation, however, has quite literal effects “on women’s body image, feelings of self-worth and bank accounts” (Kite and Kite). They explain that the anti-aging industry strategically targets older women, since “women over 40 influence 80 percent of the purchasing decisions in the U.S.” (Invisible Women as cited in Kite and Kite). Moreover, the “fountain of youth,” as the Kites call it, being advertised to women in America is “raking in billions for several different industries each year” (Kite and Kite).

This article goes on to highlight gender discrepancies. For instance, “older men appear as much as 10 times more than frequently than older women in the media” (Peterson as cited in Kite and Kite). Moreover, “men are featured in the mainstream media well into their 70s while women tend to start becoming invisible in media right around age 40” (Kite and Kite). Furthermore, older men in the media, in contrast to the negative stereotypes associated with older women, are made to appear “wise, funny, intelligent [and] ‘sexy’” (Kite and Kite). They list many men with these positive characteristics, such as “Harrison Ford, Sean Connery, Richard Gere, Tom Cruise [and] Liam Neeson,” but have trouble coming up with female equivalents (Kite and Kite) as “it’s rare to think of really positive portrayals of women over 40” (Kite and Kite). Furthermore, these observations are about white women (Kite and Kite) because there are too few examples of older women from other races to generate accurate findings (Kite and Kite).

Despite the fact that both men and women begin to start looking different with age (Kite and Kite), changes for men are often “depicted as looking ‘distinguished’ and aren’t something for men to be ashamed of” (Kite and Kite) while “for women, those changes are to be immediately stopped, reversed and hidden at all costs” (Kite and Kite). The societal impact of this can be demonstrated with the statistic that indicates that about 92% of those who get Botox in America are women (Kite and Kite). This trend makes real-life, older faces “look abnormal and sub-par” (Kite and Kite) and the cosmetically or digitally enhanced normal and ideal (Kite and Kite). It is important to note that “in just the last 15 or so years, there has been a 446 percent increase in cosmetic procedures in the U.S., which raked in \$12 billion in 2010 alone” (Kite and Kite). Also, we must not forget that the “great lengths women are going to in order to achieve a youthful ideal are not limited to surgical procedures and magic creams – they also include disordered eating of all types” (Kite and Kite).

The Kites use some powerful images to demonstrate their points in this article. The photo of Twiggy in an Olay eye cream ad, below, demonstrates what the Kites call “age-defying examples.”



Figure 2. Photoshopping example (Kite and Kite)

An example such as the one above illustrates “daily deliberate decisions by media powerholders who profit from female anxiety about our faces and bodies” (Kite and Kite). They point out that “Olay, the anti-aging skin care brand owned by Procter & Gamble, spent more than any other company in the U.S. on advertising in 2011” (Kite and Kite). Moreover, “they and many other companies claim to sell the keys to the fountain of youth at every drug store in the nation, but the only real solution to aging lies in the hands of their photo editors” (Kite and Kite).

At the end of their article, the Kites present solutions to these issues and urge women to do things such as compliment “others on more than their looks” (Kite and Kite) and to shut “down negative thoughts” (Kite and Kite) in order to “change the way you perceive your own face and body” (Kite and Kite). They explain that “the way we feel about ourselves and treat our bodies has real influence on those around us, even if we aren’t aware of it” (Kite and Kite). They finish the article with the following passage:

The media will continue to symbolically annihilate women who don’t fit money-making beauty ideals, but WE do not have to annihilate our own faces and bodies to fit those unreal standards. What we COULD annihilate is our allegiance to the idea that women have to look young forever, and that women who don’t look young forever aren’t worthwhile or beautiful. I *promise* that will be much more empowering and less painful. ***Let the anti-anti-aging annihilation begin!*** (Kite and Kite).

To provide some insight into how many people are reading these articles, this web page for the anti-aging blog post states that the article has 3309 likes on Facebook. This does not represent the amount of social media “shares” the article has, nor the amount of social media “likes” it has received via shares. Moreover, the 3309 likes that the article appears to have received directly does not even necessarily mean that those that “liked” it actually liked it. What it does mean, however, is that at least a few thousand women – or men, for that matter – and potentially many more thousands of people are viewing this information.

Readers on the BR website have the option to comment directly on the articles that are posted there. On the anti-aging article there are ten comments. Of the ten, there are many that support the article or that find the information is “eye-opening.” There are also some that are more hesitant to agree with the article. Below are a few of such comments. Please note that I have not mentioned everything that the article discussed, and the comments might address some of these things.

The comments that praise the article, which are over half of them, are similar to the following comment, made by one of the readers.

Thank you for bringing this topic to the table in a way that combines dignity, non-judgementalism, self-responsibility, research, and the courage to look at the issues and intense forces of outside profit driven pressure in a way that is truth seeking without the condemnation. This 49 year old woman (me) who owns and has earned right where she is at on aging and my own reality with it, will

continue to navigate this terrain in this environment with open eyes. I applaud you.

Some of the article's comments, however, are more inclined to challenge it, as exemplified by the following comment.

At the same time though, sometimes we become so accustomed to routine hair dyeing, eyebrow plucking, leg shaving, whatever) that we don't even notice how much money and effort we're pouring into these rituals and how that money and effort only increases as we age. I have to admit, I'm a bit petrified of the idea of no longer coloring my hair and letting it grow out because I'm not sure if I want to give up the routine, and the "okay, all better!" feeling I get after dye my hair (or shave, or put on makeup, etc.). It's a total imaginary reward system but it seems endless.

Evidently, there were some readers that did not agree with the article, or at least wished to deny its message. To be specific, three of the ten respondents had points that disagreed with or resisted the article's messages. Seven of the comments agreed with, appreciated or reinforced the article's messages. The readers that resisted the article demonstrate that the Kites' analysis might not be agreeable to some women. The comments that resisted the article also show the important feature of new media, that allows diverse opinions to circulate and create conversation. While the article does not appeal to some readers, the respondents that expressed appreciation for it, and especially those that claimed the article was "eye-opening," indicate that the alternative information and media-literacy that the

Kites present does have the ability to change the way some women see issues surrounding their body image in arguably positive ways.

Another article in the “recognize” blog category, *Starving and Stifled: Women are Counting Calories Instead of Changing the World*, written by a guest writer named Vanessa Garcia, discusses the writer’s own battle with disordered eating and her belief that such issues are preventing women from doing other, non-appearance related things. Garcia writes this article in the same way, auto-ethnographic way that I do in my research. Her experience with disordered eating occurred later in her life than mine, while she was attempting launch her career. She starts the article off with an allusion:

I hadn’t eaten anything but gum and coffee for three days. Even before that, I’d been eating very little for weeks, months, even years. I was 24 years old and a full-fledged anorexic-bulimic. It was 2003, and I was trying to launch my career as a writer. I had dreamed of publishing my first novel by then. Instead, between the ages of 15 and 29, I suffered from numerous bouts of anorexia and bulimia. I wasted my most promising years and what little energy I had obsessing over my weight. (Garcia)

She explains, in line with my experience and outlook, that though her “problem reached the extreme, [...] these kinds of unhealthy relationships with food are hardly uncommon for women” (Garcia). She continues, “at every turn we see them: a woman counting calories, a woman dieting despite her normal weight, a woman cutting carbs or pretending she’s allergic to gluten” (Garcia). The majority of

her article then goes on to reiterate the thoughts of Bordo and McRobbie concerning gender and the current illusion of both feminism and empowerment via self-alteration of the body. While “21<sup>st</sup>-century feminism seems to be booming” (Garcia), women are disappearing, as “eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental disorder” (American Journal of Psychiatry as cited in Garcia). The main message of her article is that the drive for ideal thinness is distracting women from real social change and empowerment. In her words, women that are starving themselves are “spending more time thinking about their calorie intake than how to change the world” (Garcia). Moreover, “we can’t close gender gaps when we spend endless hours counting calories instead of cracking glass ceilings” (Garcia) as “it takes a whole lot of strength, fuel and energy to push all of inequity’s baggage off of us” (Garcia). She urges women to “take their bodies back” (Garcia), echoing BR’s mission statement.

She ends the article with another motivating personal allusion:

I know exactly the kind of life that weight obsession leads to. I was shaken out of my blackout by an enormous push on my back, a big jolt and something — perhaps my inner voice – whispering, “**You have too much left to do.**” I realized that I was alone and that I could very likely die that way. I could waste away, along with my brain, my thoughts and everything I could possibly become. I put on my coat, went outside and bought a wrap. I tried to ingest it. It was painful, both physically and emotionally, but I wanted to live. This was the beginning of my recovery. Back then, I was 5 feet 5 inches tall and 100

pounds with a winter coat, sweaters, long underwear and boots on. (I only weighed myself fully dressed in winter, so if I weighed too much, I could blame it on the extra clothes.) It took five years from that moment — two of those in weekly therapy — for me to truly gain normalcy in my eating patterns. (Garcia)

When she looks back at the time she spent suffering, she thinks, “what a waste of life” (Garcia). She thinks about “the missed opportunities and the unmet goals [she] sacrificed because of the time and energy [she] wasted on cutting my weight” (Garcia). Finally, if she “could talk to her 25-year-old self, [she’d] tell her, **‘your time is precious. Get help. Do it now. You have too many important things to do’**” (Garcia). Garcia uses her auto-ethnographic approach and her experiences to urge others who are suffering to wake up, receive help and move on to more important goals.

At the end of the article, the Kites weigh in on Garcia’s points. They agree with her assertions and too urge readers, particularly those that are suffering from disordered eating, to resist their situations. They provide helpful advice and motivating words, such as the following:

You can use your pain — your dark, unhappy, hurtful thoughts and experiences relating to your body — as a platform to grow stronger. You can *see* more about yourself and the world, and *be* more than you could be without that pain. Not *in spite of* those hard experiences, but *because* of those hard experiences. This process is called Body Image Resilience, and it is within anyone’s reach who is willing to face body

image problems head-on rather than coping with them through harmful means like disordered eating, cutting, abusing alcohol, or any other means of attempting to hide or fix our bodies. (Kite and Kite).

The language that the Kites use in the above passage adhere to characteristics of liberal feminism, that emphasizes women's equality through individual choices. By articulating that body image resilience is with "anyone's" reach, so long as they face their "body image problems head-on," the Kites are emphasizing personal responsibility for achieving positive body image. It is interesting that the Kites promote individual responsibility for positive body image in what seems to be similar – in method – to the way that mass beauty and fashion industries promote individual responsibility for obtaining the thin ideal. Again, this highlights the conditions of neoliberalism. What is crucially different about the Kites and the mass industries, is that the Kites are promoting alternative and arguably positive messages about obtaining empowerment while the latter are promoting dominant, arguably oppressive and illusory messages about obtaining empowerment. The two sources provide opposite knowledge, but operate within the same neoliberal contexts. It is important that an alternative idea (to a dominant idea) is able to use the same media tools that dominant sources use for the purposes of knowledge circulation. I argue that this is a new and promising affordance of new media.

The above article received 5,189 likes on Facebook. There were not many comments on this article's web page, only five, to be precise, and most of which disagreed with the article. These disagreements are not surprising, for there is

currently such a fine line between what is healthy and not healthy, and those that take health seriously might easily misinterpret or become offended by this type of analysis. It is also possible that these negative comments come from women that are satisfied in their disordered eating habits and wish to deny that is anything wrong (as I did when ill). Or, quite simply, these people might just disagree with the article for other reasons. Importantly, however, there were thousands of people that “liked” this article, which indicates that this information is reaching and being recognized by many. It is also likely that the article reached more than the 5,189 that “liked” it, some who might have disliked it, some that might have liked it, and some that perhaps felt indifferent towards it, but did not leave evidence of their thoughts. Nonetheless, the thousands of “likes” indicate that this alternative and important body knowledge is being seen and recognized by many, who might not have encountered such knowledge without new media structures. We must also remember the point I made about knowledge bias in the introduction, whereby women who have suffered and recovered from disordered eating, like Garcia, can have a notable and positive impact on other women’s perceptions about body image.

In another article of the “recognize” category, *Dying for a Tan*, Lexie Kite, like Garcia, takes the stance of both an auto-ethnographer and a credible knowledge-bias violator in discussing the Western, white preoccupation with being tanned. In doing so, BR brings our attention to another (sometimes) fatal beauty ideal for women. Lexie describes her experience of being “diagnosed with melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer” (Kite and Kite). She explains that “On Sept. 24, 2014, [she] had surgery to remove a large chunk of [her] thigh and three lymph nodes that

could spread cancer throughout [her] body” (Kite and Kite). Importantly, she states that she “can 100% confirm that tan skin is not worth dying for” (Kite and Kite).

She begins, like Garcia, by describing her experience and urging other women, like Garcia did, to wake up and make different choices.

Friends, before years of research into how harmful unattainable beauty ideals can be and before forming Beauty Redefined, I was a light-skinned girl that bought the lie sold to us at every turn that tan skin was most beautiful. I’ve stepped foot in a tanning bed at least 15 times throughout my life. I laid out at the pool without reapplying sunscreen more times than I can count. And I would \*beg\* my younger self to do things differently. I would shout to her what I shout to the world now – You are more than a decoration for the world! Don’t buy the lie that your value and power are dependent upon your looks! Our lives are valuable, and that is abundantly clear after receiving a skin cancer diagnosis at age 28. (Kite and Kite)

The Kites then point out that many women “really do believe a ‘healthy glow’ is worth dying for, or at least worth having large areas of skin removed and tested for the rest of [their] lives.” This is because statistics show that “the incidence of melanoma (the deadliest form of skin cancer) in young adults is sky-high, with a six-fold increase in the past 40 years” (Kite and Kite). The rise is “by far most noteworthy in young women ages 18-39, where the incidence of melanoma increased eight-fold from 1970-2009, while it increased four-fold for men” (Kite and Kite). The Kites state that the above gender-specific finding proves that “Caucasian

girls and women are being totally convinced that having tanned skin is equivalent to looking more beautiful, and that beauty is *worth every risk*." They illustrate, grimly and satirically, the grueling efforts involved in obtaining an "ideal" tan, much like the ways in which I outlined the processes involved in my obtaining "thinness" while ill from anorexia and bulimia.

Where did we get this idea that fair skin is embarrassing, unflattering or a flaw in need of fixing by desperate means? By "desperate means," we're referring to baking in an indoor cancer coffin (a.k.a. tanning bed), lying unclothed in the blinding sun on a lava-hot lawn chair/trampoline/beach (a.k.a. sun bathing), paying good money to get hosed down with orangey-brown skin dye that sheds off in patches within 5-10 days (a.k.a. spray tanning), or slathering yourself in smelly orangey-brown solutions at home twice a day for two weeks while not touching any fabric or light walls for an hour because you will leave a distinctly "sun-kissed" look on everything (a.k.a. self-tanners). (Kite and Kite)

Then they go on to question "our culture's unflinching allegiance to the idea that *girls and women must be tan*" (Kite and Kite), that "tan skin is most beautiful" (Kite and Kite), and that "tan skin looks to the most 'healthy' – regardless of one's natural skin tone or how much damage gets done to it by tanning" (Kite and Kite).

Perhaps one of the most striking points in this article is that this tanning trend resembles, in a reverse and yet seemingly identical fashion, the skin-lightening industry worldwide. This industry is "is set to rake in \$10 billion globally

by 2015” (Abuja as cited in Kite and Kite) by “convincing women of color from the U.S. and China to Nigeria and India that fair skin is most beautiful, most feminine, most desirable – and alternatively, that dark skin is ugly, shameful and unworthy of love” (Kite and Kite). Furthermore, “a full two-thirds of India’s dermatological industry is dominated by skin-whitening products, including totally mainstream companies with names like ‘Fair and Lovely’” (Kite and Kite).

The article goes on to point out that while “the skin-darkening and skin-lightening movements might appear to be opposites, they’re extremely similar” (Kite and Kite). While the skin lightening industry produces far more revenue (Kite and Kite), both industries “use similar tactics to incite appearance anxiety in women and then capitalize on that body shame by selling products to ‘fix’ the flaw” (Kite and Kite). Additionally, both trends are dangerous.

In many cases, those so-called “solutions” to our skin tone problems are extremely dangerous to our health – whether it’s burning your face with hydroquinone to get a lighter complexion or burning your whole body with UVA/UVB rays to get a darker complexion. *Both have proven to be deadly.* (Kite and Kite)

They then go on to urge their readers to push “back against the skin tone ideals that have been manufactured for us and used against us” (Kite and Kite). Instead, we should “*own* our skin tones” (Kite and Kite) and commit “to no more fake baking and spreading on the sunscreen when we’re out in the sun” (Kite and Kite). This is because “we want to live long, healthy, cancer-free lives with you and

your beautiful-as-it-is-skin!” (Kite and Kite). They finish the article with tips for avoiding skin cancer, recommended by dermatologists.

This article had 6,215 Facebook likes. Some of the comments, as usual, agreed with the article or encouraged its sentiment, such as the one below, from a man who lost his wife to melanoma.

My wife passed away from Melanoma early last week, so if you're looking for real-world skin cancer effects, just ask. She used tanning beds and tanning oil as a teenager and that is likely the main contributing factor in her diagnosis. She was first diagnosed almost 4 years ago and it returned about a year and a half ago. Eventually the disease progressed quicker than her doctors had even anticipated. Melanoma is a vicious bitch, and anything you can do to lessen your chance of contracting it, and any more anyone can do to convince you to respect the sun and protect yourself from it, the better. It's an awful, awful disease, and there are simple things you can do to lessen your chance of getting it. Stop using tanning beds. Start using sunscreen. RE-APPLY the sunscreen regularly, and as my wife's last words of her last blog entry state, "Check your skin, people. Check your skin."

Some of the article's comments, however, disagreed with or challenged the article, such as the one below:

I believe that sunshine is nature's way of helping us to sustain good health. It's like homeopathic medicine, too much can be dangerous, but in correct dosages, can help to cure. I have regularly used a

professional sunbed, responsibly, for many years. I don't burn. The scaremongering in the media is so misleading. It's all about getting the biggest emotional reaction, regardless of the facts and relates to burning and fair skinned people who should not tan. The vast majority of people, like me, can tan, without burning and as a result maintain Vitamin D levels, so important for good health. Responsible use of a professional sunbed is perfectly healthy, it's abuse by silly people that the journalists so enjoy reporting. Call them stupid yes; just don't confuse them with the millions of responsible users like me.

The above examples of comments made on BR's article indicate, again, that some people appreciate and agree with their messages, and might be positively impacted by their information, while others might not. Both comments provided above were interestingly made by men, indicating that while the brand aims to improve a women's issue, men are still receiving, interpreting and are interested in such messages (as exemplified by their being drawn to comment on BR's articles, shown above). Moreover, the comments above show that men too are impacted by beauty standards that impact women. While this relates to different field of research, it is important to acknowledge.

The second blog category, or step, in redefining beauty, is "Redefine." The articles in this section are related or associated with redefining mainstream beauty ideals, after having "recognized" them. Some of the articles that can be found in this section are as follows: "Your Body is Powerful. Use it as an Instrument, Not an

Ornament” (Kite and Kite) and “When ‘You Look So Skinny!’ Does More Harm Than Good” (Kite and Kite).

In the “Your Body is Powerful. Use it as an Instrument Not an ornament” article, the Kites suggest “a way to experience real empowerment, decrease self-consciousness, and embrace your body as your own – not as a decoration for everyone else to gawk at.” This way is through the “power of your body” (Kite and Kite) but “not the way the rest of the world tells you your body is powerful” (Kite and Kite). Rather than power coming from beauty, it should come from “who you are and what you do” (Kite and Kite). In other words, “it is in your physical power – the power to be, and do, and live, and move” (Kite and Kite). They explain that “when you learn to value your body for what it can *do* rather than what it looks like, you improve your body image and gain a more powerful sense of control.” Once again, by placing emphasis on individual responsibility for positive body image, the Kites adhere to principles of liberal feminism.

They assert that performing physical activity that is not aesthetically focused, such as “competitive team sports, rather than activities that rely on the way you *look* while participating” (Kite and Kite) will significantly increase one’s body image (Kite and Kite). It has been shown that when “girls [or women] develop an appreciation for what their bodies *can do*, rather than how they *appear* to others” (Kite and Kite), their body satisfaction increases (Kite and Kite). They urge women to use their bodies “as an instrument to experience life, and enjoy fantastic health benefits like increased cardiovascular health, improved blood sugar, lowered cholesterol, healthy

blood pressure, and countless other internal health benefits in the process” (Kite and Kite).

In “When ‘You Look So Skinny!’ Does More Harm Than Good,” the Kites preach the importance of not commenting on other women’s bodies. To emphasize their points, they provide the following passage, submitted to them from a BR fan. It is important to use the entire story, despite its length, in order to truly grasp its sentiment.

Last year, four months after giving birth, I began focusing on getting healthy, eating right, and exercising. Over the course of the next six months I lost a significant amount of weight and I felt good — better than I had in years and years — so I was happy. Here’s what I was not happy about: the fact that everyone I had ever met all of a sudden felt it was appropriate to comment on my physical appearance. Casual acquaintances felt like it was perfectly reasonable to start asking me about my weight and size. Family members would tell me how good I looked now, and I couldn’t help but feel bad for me from a year ago, who I had loved, but apparently everyone else was thinking could be a lot better. I have never felt so uncomfortable in my own skin in my life. I — a woman who has always felt infinitely more defined by my thoughts and humor than by a number on a scale — suddenly felt very self-conscious about everything. All of this new attention found me wanting to be sure to hide my flabby arms (because losing lots of weight leaves a lot of skin) and saggy boobs (because I’d been either

pregnant and/or nursing for the last five years). And no matter how wrong I knew it was I couldn't help but think to myself, 'If people think I look good now, they'll really think I look good if I lose 20 more pounds.' This sudden (undeserved) praise from others has really wreaked havoc on all of my previously held ideas of positive body image and female empowerment. I have no answers. (Kite and Kite)

They explain that in the “name of trying to meet unattainable beauty ideals,” (Kite and Kite), whereby women are suffering the “debilitating consequences of eating disorders, appearance obsession, body anxiety and depression” (Kite and Kite) and “little girls with eating disorders is up 100 percent in the last decade,” avoiding conversation about a woman's body to anything else can “help stop this downward spiral” (Kite and Kite). They stress that “we *must* make sure that our dialogue reflects what we know to be true: we are not bodies to be looked at, judged, and constantly in need of fixing” (Kite and Kite). They warn us to not comment on someone's weight loss, for compliments or general comments regarding someone's weight “are exactly the motivation someone needs to continue down an unhealthy pathway of unsafe diet pills or over-exercising or disordered eating” (Kite and Kite). Moreover, by changing the conversation, we can value women for more than their appearances (Kite and Kite) and can “remind them of their beautiful talents, characters, and gifts” (Kite and Kite). This article received 17,223 likes on Facebook, interestingly by far the most likes on any of the articles I have described thus far. Again, this does not mean that 17,223 people actually liked the article or were

positively impacted by it, but rather that it has been read and recognized, perhaps more so than some of the other articles.

They also incorporate BR Facebook fans into this article, sharing their experiences of weight loss compliments in incredibly awful situations. Here is an example of a fan's story:

When my mom was sick and three months later passed away, I was so stressed out and grief-stricken that I lost about 20 lbs. Everyone at work complimented me and told me to keep doing whatever I was doing because it was really working for me. (Kite and Kite)

After listing many more of the same comments, the Kites conclude that "if these comments aren't enough to convince you that body-based comments aren't helpful, we don't know what is!" (Kite and Kite). Many of the comments on the web page of the article itself seemed to reiterate similar personal stories to the ones described above. I can easily relate to such stories, for as I had mentioned in the introduction, it was comments that praised me for my weight loss (such as "oh my god you're tiny!" or "I would kill to be your size" or "you should be a model" or "what are your tricks"?) that helped fuel my satisfaction and determination for continuous weight loss and self deprivation.

The third blog category, (or the third step in redefining beauty according to the Kites), "Resist," includes articles that encourage action in resisting mainstream beauty ideals. Some articles include "What Will You Gain When You Lose (Your Scale)?" (Kite and Kite) and "Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History. Let's Misbehave!" (Kite and Kite).

“What Will You Gain When You Lose (Your Scale)?” challenges readers to join the Kites in “pledging to fight toward reaching goals that have little to do with the way [they] look and everything to do with what [they] can accomplish” (Kite and Kite). This is because, far too often, women set ideals for themselves based on the ideals they see in the media (Kite and Kite). But since these ideals are “designed to be unattainable” (Kite and Kite), women spend far too much energy, time and money striving to reach them (Kite and Kite). This article offers “15 empowering, achievable goals” (Kite and Kite) to focus on instead. For instance, one of these goals is to forget the number that you weigh and “make a goal to stop or limit the number of times you weigh or measure yourself” (Kite and Kite). Another is to “make a goal to only shop at stores that treat females respectfully in their advertising and products” (Kite and Kite). They explain that doing this “is one of the most powerful ways you can show retailers what you will and will not put up with” (Kite and Kite). Another is to speak up, and “make a resolution to write to companies that produce and distribute offensive messages, as well as those that you appreciate for showing females as valuable for more than being looked at” (Kite and Kite). They state that they have “seen major companies pull advertising and products that were offensive because girls and women speak up” (Kite and Kite).

“Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History. Let’s Misbehave!” tells women that “it’s high time we stop behaving – looking, acting, speaking, buying, thinking – how the ever-so-powerful beauty, diet, cosmetic surgery, fashion, and media industries would have us behave” (Kite and Kite). That is why the Kites “constantly remind females how powerful, valuable, and beautiful they are in a media-saturated

world that profits from them forgetting that truth” (Kite and Kite). They explain that they “misbehave” regularly “by speaking out against all kinds of normalized pressures women face regarding their appearance” (Kite and Kite). This is because their work and actions of speaking out is often seen by others as “wildly misbehaving” (Kite and Kite).

What this backlash against our work tells us is that seeing and treating women as objects to be consumed, judged and ogled above all else is absolutely the status quo. It is the norm. It is invisible. When we call it out for what it is, for what effects it has, with years of research to back it up, we see ourselves as *behaving very nicely*. Others who are perfectly comfortable inside the oppressive status quo (both men and women) are often extremely hesitant to have their worldview shaken. Those are the people who perceive our work as *misbehavior* (to put it lightly). (Kite and Kite)

They then go on to praise Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, who coined the phrase “Well-behaved women seldom make history!” (Kite and Kite) and who was “a powerful, feminist voice for good” (Kite and Kite). The Kites point out that Ulrich did not know how “much her work would change history,” (Kite) and then motivate their readers by telling them that they too can change history (Kite and Kite). They conclude the article by encouraging women to “misbehave,” to “turn away from the media that hurts [them],” (Kite and Kite), to speak out against or do not spend money on things that do not reflect their values or that objectify women (Kite and Kite) and to spend time “progressing in ways that matter – school, service, hobbies,

health, and relationships” (Kite and Kite). They say that this is real empowerment and that we should be ready to “misbehave” in such ways (Kite and Kite). This message and article again underscores the Kites’ liberal feminist rationale. Also, while the article makes significant and valid points, it does not address the many instances of violence that some women are subject to for “misbehaving” in society. Failure to acknowledge this important point is one of the article’s limitations, as it not address the diverse implications of the thin ideal on intersections of race, class and gender.

The three blog categories I have just described – Recognize, Redefine and Resist – differ in message but are based on the same principles of media literacy through a liberal feminist lens. While it is difficult to determine the amount of women that actually liked the information in the above articles, and it is clear that not everyone agrees with such articles, the fact that at least thousands of people are “liking” and therefore reading such blog posts likely means that many women are presented with new and arguably positive information about their bodies. It can also be argued, then, that new media tools are exposing women to alternative knowledge about their bodies that they very likely would not have received in the top-down, commercially driven broadcast era.

### **Beauty Redefined: Social Media Platforms**

I will now turn towards the BR social media platforms, the ways in which these platforms extend the Kites’ goals and the ways in which such platforms provide more opportunities for women to receive new information about their

bodies. The Kites' Facebook page has 59,396 likes with each follower (whoever liked the page) having the capability to share or like BR's Facebook posts with hundreds or thousands of their own Facebook friends. This is where new media's dissemination strengths are most notable: presenting possibilities for women to share or stumble upon alternative, positive pieces of body knowledge that might impact their attitudes in new ways.

The Facebook page echoes the BR website. The Kites recently posted a celebrity-quote photo of Adele, one that is also available on the Image Gallery section of their website where images of celebrities are accompanied by their quotes regarding mainstream beauty and body image. These images, ones that they frequently share on their social media platforms, are important because in using them, the Kites extend the goals of BR to the opinions of celebrities that many readers likely know or like. In doing so, they presumably improve their chances of catching attention and reaching larger audiences. It also importantly shows that celebrities, those in the spotlight and arguably most stringently susceptible to beauty standards, embrace important truths about mainstream beauty standards or believe in forms of alternative empowerment, setting important examples for their fans. While the Adele photo they recently posted to their Facebook page is available on their website, the additional commentary they provide for it via the Facebook post is not available on their website. The following passage contains the additional information the Kites provide for their Facebook post about Adele.

In honor of the fact that I can't stop blasting her new song, "Hello" at full blast on repeat, here are some new body image insights from

Adele! This goes right along with another incredible quote we've featured from her: "I don't make music for eyes, I make music for ears." Sing it, sister! Literally. She also said, "I've seen people where it rules their lives, who want to be thinner or have bigger boobs, and how it wears them down. I don't want that in my life. I have insecurities, of course, but I don't hang out with anyone who points them out to me."

This description is followed by the following picture of and quote from Adele (one that is also available in the Image Gallery of their website).



Figure 3. Adele quote (Kite and Kite)

This Facebook post received 3,179 likes and 2,368 shares. When clicking on the post's "shares," you can see who shared the photo and what they wrote when sharing it. One "sharer" added the caption, "love thyself" when posting it. A self-proclaimed "body image educator," Anastasia Amour, too shared it with the caption – "well said, Adele!" Another caption read,

This is why I love this woman so much...not only does she inspire me as a singer but also as a person...she gives me hope that I can make it regardless of my outer appearance. 'I make music for ears not for eyes' ....now that's what music should be about! Preach it Sista!!!!

Another "sharer" quoted the Kites' post description with the caption, "A lot of peace can be found in viewing your body as an instrument for your use, rather than an ornament for others to admire." Binge Eating Disorder Association also shared this post with quotes from the BR caption. The above "shares" of the Adele post were just a few of the thousands that were shared. Each of these shares received varying amounts of likes, from as little as 1, 2 or 0 to as many as hundreds. The amount of likes also depends on the following or amount of friends that each of these sharers has. Again, however, the "likes" a post receives does not accurately represent how many people read or were impacted by such posts, for as I have already mentioned, one does not need to like or share a post in order to have seen and understood it, nor does one who does not like a post have to leave evidence of it. It is important, however, that all of the shares that ripple outwards from the original post are presenting women that come across them with new knowledge about their bodies.

In another recent Facebook post, the Kites provide a personal update on their work with BR wherein they reflect on the correspondence they have received that indicates something about the positive impact their work is having on some women. Here is an example of one of letters:

I can't even begin to explain how much you guys just impacted my life. You are such inspirational and amazing people. Thank you for speaking the truth. Girls all around the world need to hear you talk.

Here is another thank you letter they include, where the reader specifically mentions their struggle with disordered eating and the positive impact the Kites' had on them.

I'm eternally grateful for y'all's presentation. Sometimes I feel like I'm simply an object of display. That has led to my bulimia, anorexia, and binge eating disorder. The presentation helped me to find the core issues behind my many problems. It has changed my perspective for my own recovery.

This post received 147 likes, not nearly the same amount of likes on the Adele post, for instance, perhaps because it was not as catchy or "sticky," a term that Malcolm Gladwell uses in *The Tipping Point* to describe content that "attracts audience attention and engagement" (Jenkins et al. 4), but is still important nonetheless. It is important because those that may be suffering from negative body image or disordered eating, such as the person in the comment above, might be inspired to receive help, or learn more about the issues BR addresses, if they see such messages.

The Kites' Instagram account, with 11.6k followers, is very similar to its Facebook account. It shares images from BR's website and Facebook page, such as images of their sticky note campaign (whereby people can place BR's body positive sticky notes on pieces of media that objectify women) or the celebrity-quote images

with long descriptions that match the ones on BR's Facebook posts of the same images. They also engage with followers, reposting images that they might post with one of BR's sticky notes, for instance. Each of BR's Instagram posts receives hundreds of likes, but again, these numbers likely under represent the amount of people that have viewed the information (and liked or disliked it).

The Kites' Twitter account, @takebackbeauty, has 6,145 followers. It, like the Facebook page, is an extension of the BR website and its mission. Due to Twitter's limited character space for each post, the BR tweets mainly consist of links to their work without heavy descriptions such as those on Facebook or Instagram or on their website. Their tweets include links to things such as their blog posts or to their celebrity-quote images. They also retweet others' responses to their work, or empowering messages for women's body image. An example of a recent retweet was an image someone tweeted, of the twins doing an in-person media literacy talk, with the caption "Just learned about @takebackbeauty. Girls are more than a body!" These retweets, just like the comments, likes and shares on Facebook and Instagram, indicate an online support system for BR, for alternative positive body image messages and for the need for such messages. Retweets also indicate, as do comments, likes and shares, the potential for BR's messages to spread, create conversation and enlighten those that may not expect it.

The twitter account also shows what other accounts BR followers "might like," such as @Proud2Bme (according to their twitter description, an "online community for young people [whose] goal is to shift the conversation around food, weight & body image!"), @AdiosBarbie (according to their twitter description, "the web's first

intersectional feminist site redefining beauty and power”) and @AnyBody (according to their twitter description, “The UK branch of Endangered Bodies, a movement to challenge the limited physical representation of females in our society”), each with thousands of followers. This aspect of twitter that recommends similar accounts to viewers or followers exploring BR, such as other positive body image accounts, is providing more resources (for followers or explorers) to other online sources of similar media literacy regarding women’s body image. This not only increases conversation and chances for alternative, positive body image messages to spread but it also helps positive body image promoters to join forces and gain more attention in spreading their similar (but varying) ideas. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the potential for alternative knowledge to spread “with exponentially greater speed and scope” (Jenkins et al. 12) than in a “pre digital world” (Jenkins et al. 12) is owed to new “online social tools” (Jenkins et al. 12).

BR’s Google Plus account, with 1087 followers, is again an extension of the website. It reiterates the brand’s mission and shows the same cross-platform images the Facebook Page, Instagram and Twitter accounts share, with long descriptions like those on Facebook and Instagram, in a simple scroll-down page format.

Their Pinterest account, with 2.1k follows, extends the same mission as the other platforms but is organized into “boards” (that Pinterest account users can “pin” images to, based on the board category they create) that each represent a different aspect of BR. BR’s Pinterest boards include the following: “Beauty Redefined;” “Photoshopping Phoniness;” “Inspiring Women;” “We’re Women, Not Objects;” “The Beautiful Life;” “Learning to Love Your Beauty;” “Body Positive Media;” “Beauty Lies.”

On Pinterest you can either upload your own pin, or pin something someone else has uploaded and or pinned. For instance, the Kites' Photoshopping Phoniness board consists of images that illustrate the impact of photoshopping (usually before and after comparisons). At the top of the board, is the following caption: "while the vast majority of images of women are being digitally altered, so are our perceptions of normal, healthy, beautiful and attainable" (Kite and Kite). Many of the pins they use on this board are images from their own BR website, but they also pin other people's pins that illustrate photoshopping issues. The other BR Pinterest boards use similar strategies of combining their own pins along with other people's pins to support the same sentiments.

The Kites' YouTube account only has two videos. Their first video, released in December 2014 is called *Beauty Redefined: Lindsay & Lexie Kite, PhD, Promote Positive Body Image*. While the BR Youtube account has only 356 subscribers, this video has 6449 views. This again indicates that the numbers of followers, likes or shares and in this case, subscribers, does not mean that there are not many more people that have viewed or will view such content. With only 356 subscribers, more than eighteen times the amount of subscribers viewed this one video. In it, the Kites explain their mission statement, background and work. They express, in this video, that they spread positive body image by "online activism and education that reaches millions and speaking events that reach thousands" (*Beauty Redefined, Beauty Redefined: Lindsay*). This point about their online education reaching *millions* while their in-person education reaches thousands is a testament to my overall argument that new media allows for this alternative, positive body information to spread and

be received in more ways than ever before. In this video, they also mention that their research has shown that positive body image is key to real empowerment for women (Beauty Redefined, *Beauty Redefined: Lindsay*). Since new media can spread this alternative positive body image with greater speed and scope than in the pre digital era (Jenkins et al. 12), and since positive body image is key to real empowerment (Beauty Redefined, *Beauty Redefined: Lindsay*), women are arguably presented with new opportunities for real empowerment via new media.

In BR's second video, *Beauty Redefined: How Self-Objectification Hurts Girls and Women*, Lexie Kite explains what self-objectification is and what it looks like. She explains that many women, rather than just living, often *picture* themselves and what they look like as they are living and this is what self-objectification is (Beauty Redefined, *Beauty Redefined: How*). She provides an example of a girl sitting in science class in order to help explain self-objectification: this girl is not paying attention to the teacher and what they are saying, but rather thinking about things such as what her thighs look like while sitting in their chair or that their hair needs fixing or their shirt needs pulling down (Beauty Redefined, *Beauty Redefined: How*). She also explains that looking at social media for a short amount of time and seeing all the "selfies" women post are also forms of this self-objectification (Beauty Redefined, *Beauty Redefined: How*). This constant self-objectification is getting in the way of our progress (Beauty Redefined, *Beauty Redefined: How*).

It is interesting to me that the Kites, not only in this instance but in others I have not mentioned, seem to take a negative stance on new media and its relationship with women's body image. I agree that self-objectification is a problem,

and most certainly that spending time trying to alter one's body in order to fit an ideal is a problem. This is why I would like to assert that a woman posting an image of herself on new media might actually be empowering, as she is providing representation of women like herself – likely – not seen in mainstream, traditional media images. And since posting an image of oneself often results in receiving likes or comments, she is arguably receiving affirmation for herself and her body, whether or not it meets dominant beauty standards.

Katrin Tiidenberg and Edgar Gomez Cruz in their recent article *Selfies, Image and the Re-making of the Body* argue that women's selfies within the NSFW (Not Safe For Work) online Tumblr community “shape the ways of knowing, understanding and experiencing their bodies” (18) in “new, body-positive, feminist and queer-friendly [ways]” (8). They explain that selfies in this community can be “celebrations of corporeal bodies or knowledge devices through which variations of corporeality are spotlighted, accepted [and] internalized” (Tiidenberg and Cruz 18). Importantly, such selfies can “make women feel powerful enough to welcome body experiences that counter the normative discourses” (Tiidenberg and Cruz 10).

Thus, just as selfies within this Tumblr community act as methods of what the writers classify as freedom from normative body discourse, selfies or images of oneself posted on other social media platforms, that receive positive feedback, are too arguably acting as empowering methods of body-positivity. A woman that posts an image of herself on social media and who receives positive feedback for it might not need to feel the need to change herself, and instead of spending time worrying about or trying to modify her body to suit ideals, she might instead focus on other

empowering aspects of her life more so than she would if she did not receive positive body confirmation via social media. Of course, I would need to perform more research on this in order to fully justify these assertions. Nonetheless, it seems ironic that the Kites do not attempt to address the positive side of new media and body image for women (unless they do and I have just not seen it yet), especially since the very aspect of new media itself is what allows them to spread their education and ideas regarding women's body image in the first place.

Furthermore, while I agree with the majority of BR's points, and I do think that beauty needs to be more than just appearance based, I think that seeing more bodies as acceptable will help lead to viewing non-appearance based characteristics as more important. Beauty Redefined criticizes the type of body positivity that stresses valuing women's bodies. Yet, so many of their excellent points illustrate the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of women's bodies in the media. To me, this improper representation points to the urgent need for media images to promote more bodies as acceptable and beautiful, for that matter. New media is already doing this, as everyday people are uploading photos of themselves, whether or not they meet dominant standards. This is a good thing, because although there are still many issues with body-policing and self-surveillance online, as well as the constant spread of thinspirational information via new media platforms, posting an image of oneself on new media for social affirmation places emphasis on body acceptance for the person *as they are*. Receiving positive feedback on an image of oneself takes the emphasis off the need to *change* oneself, a time-consuming, energy-consuming and disempowering task.

## **Beauty Redefined: Conclusions**

This chapter has worked to illustrate certain points about the BR brand. First, there are some limitations of BR. For instance, the Kites could address more specifically and clearly the intersectional issues of race, class and gender on the home page of their website, where they summarize current body image conditions for women and explain their mission statement, and also in some other places of their brand. Second, the monetization of a brand that critiques an issue regarding consumer capitalism is understandable in the neoliberal framework, but is also seemingly ironic and perhaps counterintuitive to the brand's messages. Another limitation – not created by the brand but that the brand demonstrates – is that the “likes” of a post, while helpful in understanding a message's reach to a degree, do not accurately represent the full extent and details of a message's reach.

There are, nonetheless, many promising opportunities that the BR brand presents. Firstly, their platforms present important media-literacy regarding many aspects of mainstream beauty ideals and body image issues for women. They offer helpful ways to recognize, redefine and resist such messages, within a liberal feminist framework. It is also clear that while there are limitations to understanding the extent of their messages' reach and impact, their thousands of followers on each of their platforms, as well as the thousands of likes and shares some of their posts receive, show that their alternative information about body image for women is spreading. This chapter has also worked to demonstrate that these opportunities would not be possible without new media tools.

Consider it. Would the Kites have been able to reach millions with this type of media literacy, that makes blatantly clear that issues tied to women's body image are tied to billion-dollar beauty industries, if this was still the broadcast era, where only profit-driven media institutions and commodities had access to media tools? I am inclined to say that the answer is no.

## Chapter 3: GabiFresh

### Current Conditions for Women's Fashion in Traditional Formats

As indicated in the previous section, traditional fashion media represents women according to very limited sets of iconic markers, such as thinness and whiteness. A history of traditional fashion advertising has shown, along with only one body type advertised as ideal, constant exclusion of images of women of colour, the aged, the disabled and also those with queer identities (Kelly 200) which “suggests an identity unworthy of representation in the dominant ideology to images” (Kelly 200).

A recent Huffington Post study examined diversity in the “most popular [Canadian] fashion or style focused magazines from 2015” (Donato). The magazines chosen were “*Flare, LouLou, Fashion, Elle Canada, Elle Quebec, Pure, Glow, Dress to Kill, Sharp* and *The Kit Compact*” (Donato). The survey did not “include special interest and niche magazines that were lower in circulation, as they would not accurately reflect the mainstream industry’s outreach to general audiences” (Donato). Researcher Al Donato begins the article with an important auto-ethnographic reflection:

Mainstream beauty standards are rough when you’re a person of colour. Growing up, I had to deal with aunts who would pinch my round, Filipino nose to make it slimmer. Kids would ask why my multi-creased eyelids didn’t look like “other Asians,” and I would repeatedly explain why to them, TLC-style: No, I’ve never had surgery; No, I wasn’t trying to look like them.

She adds that she would “hear stories from family and friends who used to wash their faces with stinging lemon juice to make their skin whiter” (Donato). Donato’s study indicated that 13 of the 80 covers examined “had people of colour,” but of the 13 covers that included people of colour, 10 of which had people of colour in groups (Donato). In other words, 95% of the covers featured white people and 16% featured people of colour. To be clear, the researcher used the term person of colour “to define individuals who are from non-white descent” (Donato) and white “to describe people of Caucasian, European descent” (Donato). Donato specifies that “some magazine brands had no identifiable people of colour on their covers for the entire year, while others had one person of colour featured in group covers with white models.” The same study indicated that on the 80 covers examined, none of the cover stars were openly trans, publicly queer or visibly disabled (Donato). It also indicated that of 80 covers, only two women and five men were over the age of 40 (Donato). Lastly, Donato states that an obvious trend was that “there were barely any variations in body size on covers.”

In another study through an online Fashion news site, *Fashionista*, editorial assistant Gemma Kim analyzes the fashion diversity in popular magazines but in the U.S. and specifically regarding representation of models of colour. She looked at “136 covers from 10 leading U.S. fashion publications, and while some did better than others, the results were not encouraging” (Kim). The Study looked at *Allure*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *Glamour*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Instyle*, *Nylon*, *Teen Vogue*, *Vogue* and *W* (Kim). It showed that diversity, regarding people of colour “on the major U.S. publications was almost exactly the same this year as last year” (Kim), when “in

2014, 27 of 137 covers featured models of color while in 2015, 27 of 136 did" (Kim). That only marks an improvement from "19.7 percent to 19.8 percent" (Kim). Kim points out that her categorization of nonwhite people "included those of mixed race and of Latino or Hispanic descent." She also points, however, that "racial identity is very much a social construct and fluid depending on borders" (Kim). For instance, Penelope Cruz "would probably be identified as white in Europe" (Kim).

Furthermore, in regards to plus size women, while "analysts have pointed repeatedly to the economic potential of the plus-sized market, manufacturers and retailers in the fashion and apparel industry have continued to demonstrate a reluctance to cater to the needs and wants of this market" (Euromonitor as cited in Scaraboto and Fischer 175). Jill Andrew and Aisha Fairclough, creators of the *Fat in the City* "lifestyle and fashion blog for stylish women with curves" (Andrew and Fairclough) whose mission statement is "hell-bent on challenging size hatred b.s through fashion and activism" outline conditions for contemporary plus size women their article, "Plus Size Fashion Blogging for a 'Size' of Our Own." They explain that "regardless of the euphemism you choose, 'voluptuous,' 'misses,' 'above average,' 'curvy,' or our personal favourite, *fat*,' women's apparel above a size 14, otherwise referred to in the fashion world as 'plus size,' has been traditionally ignored as 'the ugly cousin' of the industry" (Ellison; Scaraboto and Fischer; Snider as cited in Andrew and Fairclough 89). They go on to outline "some of the consequences of a fashion industry that routinely gives larger women the shorter end of the rack" (Andrew and Fairclough 90), which are as follows. Firstly, "limited plus-size options are often more expensive than 'straight' size clothing (clothing under a size 14)"

(Andrew and Fairclough 90). Secondly, “plus size clothes are usually ‘sizes up’ from straight sizes and therefore do not fit the curves of a larger body, which makes [plus size women] often look like ‘shapeless boxes’” (Andrew and Fairclough 90). Third, the idealization of “unrealistic Western beauty ideals actually leaves female shoppers feeling unmotivated to shop because [they] do not identify with these models and are increasingly aware of the fallacy of so called ‘perfection’” (Barry as cited in Andrew and Fairclough 90). Fourth, “conservative styles seem to imply that fat bodies should be covered up in loose-fitting fabrics, matronly draping, and more basic color palettes” (Andrew as cited in Andrew and Fairclough 90). Lastly, “plus-size clothing areas in department stores are often located near the luggage, children’s wear, or the chinaware, once again suggesting that plus-size women are an afterthought” (Andrew as cited in Andrew and Fairclough 90). Other scholars add that popular clothing chains often sell “larger sizes exclusively online, having removed them from brick-and-mortar stores” (Huffington Post; Adams as cited in Scaraboto and Fischer 175). Furthermore, the popular chains that *do* offer “larger sizes in-store, restrict these to a very narrow selection of colours and patterns distributed unevenly though selected stores” (Poken as cited in Scaraboto and Fischer 175). Many “high-end fashion designers vehemently refuse to produce large-sized versions of their products – as is suggested by the infamous quote attributed to Oscar de la Renta ‘I clothe women, I don’t upholster furniture’” (Scaraboto and Fischer 175). These conditions for plus size women are paired with the “absence of representations of average or plus-sized women in fashion magazines” (Scaraboto and Fischer 175), discussed earlier. One of the many consequences to these

conditions is that “women with larger bodies continue to have difficulties finding fashionable apparel to wear” (Modcloth; Otieno et al. as cited in Scaraboto and Fischer 175). Andrew and Fairclough explain that what one wears is not simply just a matter “clothes” (90), but rather, “our clothing choices are symbols of who we are, who we think we are, and who we aspire to be” (Entwistle as cited in Andrew and Fairclough 90). Moreover, “our self-esteem and our public persona are deeply wrapped in and projected through our dress” (Andrew and Fairclough 90). Thus, if there are limited clothing and fashion options for plus size women, such women are limited in their abilities to express their personas through clothing. It is also likely that such conditions lead to many negative consequences surrounding body image for plus size women.

Furthermore, just as women of colour are immensely underrepresented in traditional, mainstream fashion media that values thinness and whiteness, African-American Studies and Fat Studies doctoral student Courtney Patterson points out that while there has been an “emergence of plus size model popularity in fashion in the US” (257), plus size Black women and Latinas are still very much marginalized within this group (256). She points to online writer, Tasha Fierce, who states that “while many people conflate fatness and blackness, she is confused as to why mainstream publications that publish plus size work continue to exclude Black women and other women of color” (as cited in Patterson 265). Furthermore, “despite the existence of many Black plus size models, an enormous base of Black plus size consumers, and networks within the fat fashion blogosphere being spearheaded by Black women, Fierce says that the face of ‘acceptable curvy is white’”

(Patterson 265). Importantly, however, Fierce thinks that these fashion boundaries “have been reproduced and modified in the plus size blogosphere” (Patterson 265). Patterson too feels that the plus size blogosphere holds promise for plus size women of colour. She explains that “the plus size blogosphere is expanding faster than ever, and as more ‘fatshionistas’ of color and a variety of sizes begin to publish their experiences living in a narrow fashion world, [she believes] the fashion world will begin to pay increased attention to the group” (Patterson 269). Patterson states that “much more social and economic work must be done by the plus size fashion blogosphere and its networks, especially with regard to race” (265).

The above information demonstrates the narrow and exclusive conditions of traditional and mainstream fashion industries, but also suggests that new media might hold new opportunities for challenging such conditions. If more women of colour and women with different body sizes other than those very thin were to be represented in traditional fashion images, would such changes merely address more potential buyers or would such representation go further for social equality? Recent scholarly work regarding “fatshionistas” online points to the strides being made for social change via self-representation and acceptance of plus size women on new media. Some scholars argue that rising trends of plus size “fatshionistas” online, that are actively promoting self-acceptance and challenging mainstream beauty standards, are seemingly in line with fat activism or fat acceptance movements (Scaraboto and Fischer 176).

### **Fatshionistas, Fat Activism and the Rewriting of Fashion Rules**

Having “built momentum since the mid-to-late 2000s” (Andrew and Fairclough 91), “plus-size fashion or ‘fatshion’ blogging is [now] exploding online” (Andrew and Fairclough 96). Consumer scholars Daiane Scaraboto and Eileen Fischer assert that Fatshionista bloggers are “situated at the intersection between the assemblages of the Fat Acceptance Movement and the fashion industry” (176). Fatshionista “bloggers are consumers who wear plus-sized clothing, and who have a strong interest in fashion” (Scaraboto and Fischer 176). According to Scaraboto and Fischer, the term “Fatshionista was created by fat acceptance advocate Amanda Piasecki, who launched a LiveJournal community with the same name in 2004” (Scaraboto and Fischer 176). In general, Fatshionista bloggers “believe that self-acceptance, size acceptance and the inclusion of plus-sized consumers in the fashion market are goals to be achieved and manifest themselves to support those goals” (Scaraboto and Fischer 176). Other Fatshionista bloggers, particularly “those who have recently joined the increasing ranks of plus-size fashion bloggers, have a celebratory attitude towards fashion and avoid associating themselves with the political and activist facets of the Fatosphere” (Scaraboto and Fischer 176). However, while “some plus-sized bloggers avoid endorsing the activist goals of the Fat Acceptance Movement, by virtue of demonstrating self-acceptance and promoting the interests of fellow plus-sized consumers, they can also be regarded as being enrolled in the Fat Acceptance Movement” (Scaraboto and Fischer 176). This is because “even unintentionally, their actions are advancing the goals of promoting body acceptance and making fashion equally accessible to plus-sized consumers” (Scaraboto and Fischer 176).

Thus, regardless of whether a Fatshionista blogger explicitly “adopts the principles of the Fat Acceptance Movement, she can be seen as positioned at the intersection of both [the Fat Acceptance Movement and the fashion industry] if she is promoting fashion brands and helping to promote the increase of fashion choice available to plus-sized consumers. (Scaraboto and Fischer 176).

To define the Fat Acceptance Movement, it first “emerged in reaction to the popularity of anti-fat discourse and the medicalization of obesity that began in the United States and Canada during the 1950s (Kwan; Wisniewski as cited in Afful and Ricciardelli 454). It “adopted early discursive strategies and approaches to collective organization that reflected the rhetorical influences of [...] other movements” (Farrell; Hartley as cited in Afful and Ricciardelli 454) taking place, “such as the African American civil rights, gay liberation, and feminist movements” (Farrell; Hartley as cited in Afful and Ricciardelli 454). In short, “it is a movement centered in encouraging critical debate about dominant understandings of gender in visual representation by challenging normative societal assumption of body image” (Afful and Ricciardelli 454). Adwoa Afful and Rose Ricciardelli assert the following, regarding new media and the FA movement:

Social media provides new tools for women FA activists to use to renegotiate how fat and gender have been reframed within the rational of neoliberal citizenship, and innovate on the popular FA notion of fat as a kind of body diversity, through discussions on body image, beauty and health. (454)

I believe that fatshionistas demonstrate this type of FA innovation, by doing what Scaraboto and Fischer describe below:

In their blogs, Fatshionistas discuss trends and styles, post pictures of outfits they assemble; link to online stores selling plus-size clothes, review plus-size fashion collections and products, interview relevant actors in the fashion world (e.g. models and fashion designers), review fashion events they participate in, and have frequent giveaways of products to their audience members. Increasingly, Fatshionista bloggers have attracted the attention of fashion brands and retailers who offer them free clothing in exchange for reviews posted on their blogs, collaboration opportunities to design or promote plus-size collections, and insider information on the fashion industry in exchange for insights on plus-sized consumers' needs and preferences. (176)

The points that Scaraboto and Fischer make regarding the relationship between plus size or fatshionista fashion bloggers and fashion brands is crucial. The fact that fashion brands – that belong to an industry with narrow and exclusive body image ideals – are noticing and sponsoring plus size brands that promote *alternative body image and fashion* shows that in the new media landscape, “rules are being rewritten and relationships between producers and their audiences are in flux” (Jenkins et al. 35). Moreover, it shows that participants of and consumers within new media, in this case, those with alternative ideas about body image and those supporting such ideas “are making their presence felt by actively shaping media

flows, and producers, brand managers, customer service professionals, and corporate communicators are waking up to the commercial need to actively listen and respond to them” (Jenkins et al. 2). Andrew and Fairclough add that many plus size fashion blogs “are striking lucrative partnerships with fashion brands and selling products via their blogs” (91). Further, “internationally recognized plus fashion blogs like U.S. based GabiFresh” (Andrew and Fairclough 91) “are notable examples of highly successful, monetized blogs with tens of thousands of followers – every day plus-fashion consumers and exclusive industry leaders” (Andrew and Fairclough 91).

These fatshionista bloggers not only review plus clothing and recommend fashion stores/designers to plus women but they have turned their personal blogs into full-fledged careers. Some fatshion bloggers have been hired as columnists for national fashion magazines, spokespersons of plus fashion lines, and some have become plus-fashion designers and plus-fashion store owners themselves. (Andrew and Fairclough 91)

These points demonstrate again that even brands with alternative ideas, such as GabiFresh (and BR, discussed earlier) do not escape neoliberal consumer contexts, but rather, work to promote alternative ideas within them. GabiFresh’s career in fashion blogging and ongoing partnerships with certain fashion brands presents a unique situation, whereby on the one hand, she engages with an industry that predominantly values and promotes the thin ideal (frequently held responsible for body dissatisfaction) while on the other, she promotes alternative and positive

messages about body acceptance, in what I and other scholars have argued to be a form of fat activism.

### **GabiFresh: Plus Size Fashion and Social Action**

Gabi Gregg, creator of popular online plus size fashion brand, GabiFresh, formerly known as “Young, Fat and Fabulous” (Andrew and Fairclough 91), is considered to be a fatshionista by contemporary scholars such as Scaraboto, Fischer, Andrew and Fairclough. She is also, as mentioned above, a well-recognized plus size blogger, having successfully garnered large online followings, secured partnerships with certain fashion brands and turned her blogging into her full-time job (Gregg). The brand’s monetization is important and will be discussed shortly. First, it is necessary to demonstrate the characteristics of GabiFresh and the ways in which the brand arguably functions within the framework of fat activism. According to the GabiFresh Facebook page, GabiFresh “is a personal style blog that aims to show that you can be stylish at any size” (Gregg). Like BR, GabiFresh uses the multi-platform approach; Gregg’s website, which seems to be core of GabiFresh, is accompanied by a Facebook Page, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest account. To gain a sense of the stance that Gregg’s brand takes, here is a passage from the “About” section of her website.

I started this blog in September 2008 after graduating college with an interest in fashion journalism. Since I didn’t have experience and couldn’t land an entry level job or internship, I decided blogging would be a great platform to show my writing skills and love for

fashion. I knew first-hand the lack of resources for younger, trendier women sizes 14 and up, so I decided to fill the void. Over time, it has transformed into a personal style blog, where I share my fashion advice (which mostly consists of “ignore fashion rules!”) and outfits that I hope inspire others to take risks and have fun with clothing regardless of their size. I pretty much disagree with most mainstream fashion ideas and reject the notion of “dressing for your body type.”

(Gregg)

The terms she uses such as “filling the void,” “ignoring fashion rules,” “inspiring others,” “regardless of size,” “disagree with most mainstream fashion ideas” and “reject the notion of dressing for your body type” all suggest that Gregg is presenting alternative (to dominant) knowledge for women’s body image and acceptance. This language positions Gregg as someone who appears to be resisting mainstream beauty ideals and encouraging other women to do the same. This language also, then, positions her as someone operating within the principles of fat activism, which as described earlier, involves “challenging normative societal assumption of body image” (Afful and Ricciardelli 454) and “encouraging critical debate about dominant understandings of [...] visual representation” (Afful and Ricciardelly 454). Moreover, while Gregg does not directly refer to fat activism, The Fat Acceptance Movement or even fatshion, for that matter, “by virtue of demonstrating self-acceptance and promoting the interests of fellow plus-sized consumers, [she] can [still] be regarded as being enrolled in the Fat Acceptance Movement” (Scaraboto and Fischer 176).

On the one hand, Gregg's brand can be seen as often simply focusing on and celebrating "fashionable styling for plus size women" (Sedeke 43). Both her website's blog posts and corresponding social media posts "regularly contain several pictures of herself in a styling, corresponding to recent trends" (Sedeke 43). She also frequently describes which brands she is wearing (often sponsored by such brands) and where to buy the clothes portrayed (Sedeke 43). An example of this type of blogging is seen in one of her recent "Style" blog posts (the "Style" blog section is one of the six blog categories on Gregg's website, the others being "Beauty," "Shop," "Lifestyle," "Video" and "News"), entitled "Set Life." Posted in January 2016, she discusses a brand – one that is sponsoring the post – called Eloquii.

You guys know I've always been a fan of Eloquii, and it seems like each season their selection gets increasingly more impressive. I love their quality and the fact that it's obvious they actually care about their customers; it shows in the clothing itself (and how they interact with us online). I mean, I'm constantly on the search for plus size pieces with the little details that make them feel different or special—from an asymmetrical hem to a well-placed slit—and Eloquii is the brand that is consistently delivers. (Gregg)

She then goes on to describe the Eloquii outfit she is wearing in the pictures that follow her written piece, and provides a link to where readers can buy the same outfit.

I'm still not sick of co-ord sets; I'm sort of hoping they stick around forever. I fell in love with this one when I saw it, from the color combo

and retro print to the unique way the top wraps around and leaves an open keyhole in the back. I'm also obsessed with the comfort and fit (yes to stretchy waistbands)! Use code GABIFRESH for free shipping! (Gregg)

Like BR, some of the original text in Gregg's posts are hyperlinks to other places. For instance, in the above passage, the words "this one" act as a hyperlink, and if the reader chooses to click on it, they will arrive at Eloquii's website, specifically to the page where one can buy the outfit Gregg features on her blog post. Below is one of the images Gregg posted of herself in "Set Life," wearing Eloquii. The image is taken by Sylvia G. as indicated by Gregg on the web page.



Figure 4. Example of Gregg's fashion

At the bottom of the images, she states that "this post is sponsored by Eloquii, all opinions are my own" (Gregg). Like BR, people can comment directly on the blog

post pages. A comment on the above post says “Looking incredible Gabi! Really wish we had Eloquii in the UK as this set is gorgeous!”

Many of GabiFresh’s posts on both her website and her social media pages are similar to the one above, that mainly focus on plus size style. Another example of a post that appears to simply focus on plus size fashion is one of Gregg’s posts in the “Beauty” blog section, entitled “Lavender.” In it, she merely discusses dying her hair purple and the product she used to do it. She states that “in case you don’t follow me on social media, this is the official announcement that I dyed my hair purple!” (Gregg).



Figure 5. Another example of Gregg’s fashion (Gregg)

This particular blog post, rather plain in description and mainly just promoting style, received 4307 Facebook shares (according to a section at the bottom of the post’s web page, where the social media interactions of the post are listed). Some might say that posts such as this one, and the one about Eloquii above, do not appear to be activist-driven. While I argue that they are activist driven, for the GabiFresh brand stands for style at any size, a response to narrow and dangerous ideal body standards frequently tied to body dissatisfaction in women, the posts do not directly promote fat activism.

On the other hand, however, some of Gregg's posts do directly address and respond to issues of the thin ideal in mainstream fashion. An example of such a post is her video "#EverybodyIsFlawless," posted in the "Video" blog section of her website (and originally on Vimeo). The video is "a remake of Beyonce's music video for the song 'Flawless'" (Scaraboto and Fischer 180). Gregg "initiated the remake" (Scaraboto and Fischer 180) after hearing the song (Gregg). Gregg explains that the video is inspired by her feelings towards being treated differently than her "thin, white peers," as outlined in the following explanation she provides for the video.

As a fat woman of color, I'm often treated differently than my thin, white peers. By brands, by fellow bloggers, by the media... I get passed over for things I'm more than qualified for. I get stares and cold shoulders at fashion events. I hear whispers. I get hate mail and trolling comments from people who call me disgusting and say I shouldn't be allowed in public.

After seeing the video, and inspired by her feelings described above, she recruited two other "high profile Fatshionistas" (Scaraboto and Fischer 180) to join her in the remake.

When I heard Beyonce telling her haters to Bow Down in the song \*\*\*Flawless, I immediately fell in love. I knew I wanted to do something with it, so I called up two other major players in the plus size fashion world who I know also deal with their fair share of shitty people, the gorgeous Nadia Aboulhosn and game-changer Tess

Munster, and asked if they'd be interested in collaborating on a video.

(Gregg)

She goes on to explain her goals of the video:

I wanted to show that 1) we are not competing to be the Top Dog in our niche—we are supportive of each other and are all working toward the same goal: body positivity and inclusivity. And 2) you don't have to be a certain size to claim your flawlessness. Fat is not a flaw. This video is dedicated to the mainstream media, to the fashion industry, to internet bullies, and to anyone else who thinks it's their right to try to make us feel less than because of *their* insecurities.

#everyBODYisflawless (Gregg)

Gregg's messages in this passage blatantly critique dominant ideas about women's body image in the mainstream media, and promote fat activist ideas, by using language such as "fat is not a flaw." The video itself starts off with a Huffington Post Live news caster that addresses the U.S. obsession with particular body sizes, before it cuts to people responding live about their experiences being bullied due to body size. Next, the music starts and the three body-positive stars lipsync and dance to the Beyonce's song *Flawless*. The video ends with a Huffington Post live screenshot of a tweet that reads:

For some reason people in society are so detached from one another, they don't view each other as human beings. Regardless of how people's metabolism function, or what they look like, each of us

deserves respect, compassion, and can't be judged by anyone but themselves. (Sequeira, *#everyBODYisflawless*)

Originally posted to Vimeo and directed by Helton "Brazil" Siqueira, the remake has received nearly half a million views and over 200 likes. This number helps us see, again, that "likes" do not accurately represent the number of people that view content. This is because while the video only had about 200 likes, it received nearly half a million views, a number which drastically overshadows the video's likes. We can presume then, with this, that posts with "thousands" of likes, for instance, might often have millions of views.

The information available in the video critiques dominant ideas about body image and provides alternative and intentionally positive messages about self-acceptance. In this way, it is conceivably a form of media literacy and fat activism, that is spreading to at least thousands of people. Some research has shown, however, that the video has received a few critical responses from participants of the Fat Acceptance Movement (Scaraboto and Fischer 180). For instance, it is been pointed out that "Beyonce, the artist who created the original video, is not exactly a promoter of body inclusivity" (Scaraboto and Fischer 180) because she does not "like fat" (Pollycowboy as cited in Scaraboto and Fischer 180) and "likes to have it photoshopped out of her own Instagram photos" (Pollycowboy as cited in Scaraboto and Fischer 180). Thus, it is possible that Gregg's song choice might seem contradictory to some plus size women seeking body-confidence and acceptance. Another point made by participants of the Fat Acceptance Movement is that while the video attempts to promote body positivity, "you barely see much except for tight

shots of [the three plus size stars'] heads" (Diosapretty as cited in Scaraboto and Fischer 181).

Research on some other events regarding GabiFresh, however, do indicate a positive reception of Gregg's work from participants of the Fat Acceptance Movement. For example, in 2012, when "Gregg posted photos of herself in a bikini on her blog, and encouraged her readers to engage in active self acceptance," (Scaraboto and Fischer 179), it led to a series of positive responses for plus size fashion:

The post, entitled 'Fatkini 2012', generated almost 200 enthusiastic comments from readers, and an invitation to create a Fatkini gallery for XOJane. Thirty-one women who consider themselves fat submitted photos of themselves in bikinis. The 'XOJane and Gabi Fresh fatkini gallery' generated almost one thousand comments on XOJane, and was picked up by various mainstream media outlets. Gabi gave interviews to the Today Show, USToday, Instyle and MTV, among others. Following the success of the Fatkini post and gallery, Gabi made a deal with swimwear retailer Swimsuits for All to create her swimwear collection, which she announced in her blog. One of her readers' favourite styles, the Galaxy Print bikini, was sold out within hours, and the remainder of the collection sold out within a week of launching. (Scaraboto and Fischer 179)

This series of events, according to Scaraboto and Fischer, "brought the Fat Acceptance Movement to the Spotlight" (179). Moreover, the fact that thirty-one

women responded to Gregg's Fatkini post with photos of themselves in bikinis demonstrates not only that Gregg's post are encouraging to women, but also that new media platforms are allowing for this type of conversation – or movement, for that matter – to take place. Would those women who considered themselves fat and who responded to Gregg's post by too posting photos of themselves in bikinis have had the opportunity to engage in this type of self-representation in traditional, mainstream media formats? Would Gregg have been able to? Would the women that responded to Gregg's posts have posted photos of themselves in bikinis on their own, without the encouragement of Gregg, or did their exposure to Gregg's "Fatkini 2012" post create this opportunity? Furthermore, would Gregg have been able to start her swimsuit line without her Fatkini post? It seems very likely that this series of events, surrounding self-representation and body-acceptance, was made possible through new media tools.

Another occasion in which Gregg has received praise from fat activists is based on an interview that Gregg had with *The Today Show*.

During her interview to the Today Show, Gabi is asked by the host whether it is possible for someone to be fat and healthy, to which she responds: 'My measure for health is how I feel,' and later, 'judge how you feel and what you're putting into your body'. Her statements were praised by fat acceptance activists who promote the principles of 'health at every size'. At that moment, Gabi Gregg was advancing not only the goals of the fashion industry, but also those of the Fat Acceptance Movement. (Scaraboto and Fischer 179)

While Scaraboto and Fischer point out that Gregg promotes “health at every size” in the above instance, it is perhaps more crucial to note that, according to the GabiFresh Facebook page, GabiFresh “aims to show that you can be stylish at any size” (Gregg). Promoting “style at any size” not only seems to mimic but also innovate the Fat Acceptance “health at every size” principles that Scaraboto and Fischer refer to.

Some have also noted, however, that while Gregg is a woman of colour, she is “proportionate when compared to other bloggers in the blogosphere, and she has fair skin and curly hair, two phenotypical characteristics that the fashion world seem to favour over darker skin and more tightly coiled hair” (Edmonds as cited in Patterson 265). According to Patterson, the “‘preference’ for lighter skin and straight(er) hair is surprisingly under-discussed on most of the blogs that promote size acceptance and reprimand fat discrimination” (265). Furthermore, “this absence shows that some blogosphere members hold different opinions with regard to the intersections of race, racial discrimination and body size” (Patterson 265).

Gregg, however, does address these issues in a blog post entitled, “Simone Feature,” in the “Lifestyle” section of her website. In the article, she writes about opening up a little (Gregg) in a “photo shoot and interview for Simone” (Gregg). According to their Twitter page, *Simone Digital* is “a new online women’s interest platform devoted to celebrating the diversity and complexity of modern women of color” (Simone Digital). In the post, Gregg reveals a snippet of her discussion with *Simone*, regarding her “identity as a mixed girl and feminist” (Gregg).

*I have finally come to terms with identifying as mixed, not because I reject blackness and want people to know “I’m special,” but rather because I respect black voices so much and acknowledge that my experience as a mixed woman raised by a white woman will never quite be the same as a black woman’s life experience. I do experience the world as a woman of color and know my fair share of discrimination, but because I have a white mother, light skin, a certain hair texture etcetera, I have a certain amount of privilege that I think it’s important to acknowledge. (Gregg)*

She then provides the link to her full interview, which is called “Gabi Gregg on Overcoming Perfectionism, Light Skin Privilege and the Beauty of Being Naked” (Jordan). The points that Gregg and Patterson make point to an area of needed research, which is the experiences of darker skinned women of colour, or those with “tight” curly hair, to see how their experiences of body image online and in general differ from others. How many plus size fashion bloggers are there with very dark skin or tight curly hair? How do their experiences differ from lighter skinned women of colour plus size bloggers? How do the experiences of plus size women of colour online differ from white plus size bloggers? It would be useful to address these questions in future research.

Interestingly, prior to the above passage in Gregg’s post, Gregg also mentions having dealt with depression and anxiety. Seeing this type of personal and intellectual discussion in a Fashion blog is something rarely, if ever seen in mainstream fashion media. It also adds to the ways in which Gregg’s fashion is

different to traditional fashion media, in that it incorporates expression and discussion of the mind and mental health, rather than just outer appearance.

### **GabiFresh: Where Ends Overlap Between New and Traditional Fashion Media**

One of the biggest differences between BR and GabiFresh is that, as already mentioned, GabiFresh is Gregg's full-time job. While BR still monetizes certain aspects of their brand in the name of raising money for their cause, Gregg is openly engaging with Fashion Brands and sponsors, while such partnerships likely shape many aspects of GabiFresh's brand. In the "About" section of her website, Gregg provides what she calls "Blog disclosure" so that her readers know she profits from her fashion blog:

This little old blog that started as a hobby has since become my full time job. That means I'm lucky enough to make money from doing what I love!

-I partner with brands that I like, and am paid to collaborate with them on projects which I blog about here. These can be short term (eg 1-2 posts), long term (eg 6 months) or anything in between. I always announce in a blog post when I will be partnering with a brand.

-I receive gifted products from time to time that I wear/feature here. I keep my integrity by only posting things I truly like (I turn down the majority of opportunities/items offered because they aren't in line with my blog or personal style). I always note in a post if something was received courtesy of a brand.

-I use affiliate links for products I love, which means I make a small percentage of a linked product if you choose to purchase it.

-All opinions on this blog are my own. Although I work with brands, I never allow them any control over the written content of posts.

-I am managed/represented by Digital Brand Architects

Although Gregg claims in the above “disclosure” that she turns down many opportunities and corporate partnerships if they “aren’t in line with [her] blog,” and that all opinions are her own, there is no way to tell if these statements are totally truthful. This might also mean that some of her blog posts that are sponsored by corporations might be uncritical of, or persuaded to cooperate with a brand for financial reasons, which might, in turn, jeopardize Gregg’s personal thoughts and content. Scaraboto and Fischer point to “blogger Rachel Kacenjar” (181) who states the following in regards to the monetization of plus size bloggers and the fat acceptance movement:

I think it’s hard for any intensely personal political movement to see its offspring reap capitalist ‘rewards’. This is supposed to be ours – we are supposed to harness the power – and then when we hand over that power for free clothing and publicity, we lose the original oomph.

(as cited in Scaraboto and Fischer 181)

These concerns address neoliberal contexts and highlight the apparent contradiction, as already mentioned, of alternative body image promoters such as GabiFresh engaging with an industry that is at the same time responsible for narrow fashion and body ideals. I believe, however, that while plus size brands like

GabiFresh engage with the fashion industry in a seemingly contradictory way, the forging of the fashion industry with such brands will arguably present new and positive information for women and their body image perceptions. Moreover, the fact that Gregg's plus size fashion has received the attention of fashion sponsors demonstrates the positive impact that alternative ideas about body image and fashion in new media can have on traditional sources of fashion or beauty media, that usually promotes the thin ideal. The same would likely be said if traditional fashion corporations began to use a diverse range of models in their advertising images.

Some of the brands that Gregg receives sponsorships with are in fact dominant beauty companies that originated in traditional media formats. For example, one of Gregg's "Beauty" blog posts, entitled, "Self-Care & Summer Care," posted in August of 2015, is sponsored by Dove, a massive beauty corporation.

I'm a big fan of self-care, and I try to dedicate one night each week to relaxing (read: pampering myself while spending the day in comfy PJs). When Dove asked me to try out their new Summer Care Body Wash and Beauty Bar, I knew they'd be the perfect way to start my next self-care Sunday. I just got back from Mexico and my dry, sunburned skin could definitely use some TLC! (These products are made specifically for summer skincare and are limited edition, so if you want to try them make sure you get your hands on them soon!)

(Gregg)

She goes on to describe her night, beginning with a shower (Gregg) and using the Dove products that smelt delicious (Gregg). She explains that both the bar and body wash she used “have gentle exfoliating beads that left [her] skin feeling smooth and clean without the stripped feeling” (Gregg). Afterwards, she says that she “followed up with a sheet mask, [her] new PJs, Mr. Kate’s book, Netflix, and wine” (Gregg), completing a great night (Gregg). In the original post, the words “Dove,” “Body Wash,” and “Beauty Bar” all are linked to Dove’s website where you can buy the products Gregg talks about. The images that follow the blog show Gregg in Pajamas, first in the bathroom with the dove products in the background and then sitting on her bed, looking happy with her computer and book. Again, there is no way to determine if Gregg thought to explain, for instance, how the “exfoliating beads” felt on her skin, or if this comment was requested by Dove. This presents a quizzical situation for Gregg’s followers that trust Gregg is providing her own opinions. On the other hand, however, the fact that the audience knows Dove is sponsoring the post presents what I argue to be crucially alternative knowledge to those viewing the content. Dove, a major beauty corporation, part of an industry that frequently presents unattainable ideals tied to body dissatisfaction in women, is seeking and sponsoring an alternative to dominant beauty brand, GabiFresh, for the presumable purpose of commercial needs. In other words, viewers are witnessing a dominant beauty company promote (albeit indirectly) alternative and positive body image, via engaging with and sponsoring GabiFresh. Through this engagement, we see, once again, the ways in which alternative body image promoters can use new media to “actively shape media flows” (Jenkins et al. 2) and to have corporate professionals

wake up “to the commercial need to actively listen and respond to them” (Jenkins et al. 2).

The “About” section on the GabiFresh website further demonstrates Gregg’s regular engagement with, and thus influence on, traditional and commercial media sources. In this section, Gregg discusses appearing on sources such as “*Good Morning America, The Today Show, Rip the Runway, Just Keke, and the MTV VMA’s*” and also in “*Glamour, Teen Vogue, InStyle, The New York Times, Seventeen, Time Out New York and Cosmopolitan.*” These interactions demonstrate a blending relationship between old and new media sources, and also between traditional and alternative ideas about beauty. Such interactions, then, arguably support the idea that the rules between media industries and culture “are being rewritten” (Jenkins et al. 35). Perhaps most vital, Gregg has created her own – successful – swimsuit collection for Swimsuits for All, making her too a commercial source of fashion media, but with a positive and alternative (to traditional) fashion message.

I stumbled upon a noteworthy film, after watching one from the GabiFresh account, belonging to Marina Rinaldi’s YouTube account. The video, with over 3000 views, is entitled *Marina Rinaldo “Curvy Lives” – Gabi Gregg – Gabi Fresh*. In it, Rinaldi features Gabi Gregg for Rinaldi’s “Curvy Lives” lives project. The description for the video explains that the video will uncover what Gregg thinks “about fashion, curves and the internet” (Marina Rinaldi Channel, *Marina Rinaldi “Curvy*). In the video, Gregg expresses that fashion is a “mode of self expression which can be really powerful” (Marina Rinaldi Channel, *Marina Rinaldi “Curvy*). She also expresses that fashion for curvy and plus size women is very important due to their sometimes

being left out (Marina Rinaldi Channel, *Marina Rinaldi "Curvy"*). She says that she loves being a fashion blogger because she can show "women all over the world that you can be any size, be beautiful and be stylish" (Marina Rinaldi Channel, *Marina Rinaldi "Curvy"*).

Importantly, Gregg also points out towards the end of this video that when she graduated from college, she had a keen interest in fashion journalism but could not find a job (Marina Rinaldi Channel, *Marina Rinaldi "Curvy"*). It was then that she started her blog and soon after chose to turn it into a "plus size, based blog" (Marina Rinaldi Channel, *Marina Rinaldi "Curvy"*). As already mentioned, Gregg points out on her website that blogging is now her full time job. This bit of information is very significant. It is significant because it shows that a plus size, woman of colour with an interest in fashion had trouble finding a job in traditional, fashion journalism. It also shows that a plus size, woman of colour was able to turn to new media and launch her fashion career when traditional sources did not have the same options for her. New media platforms allow her to disseminate alternative, positive body image and fashion to thousands or millions of other women, who she would not have reached had there not been the Internet, because, according to her statements mentioned earlier, she could not find a job in traditional media. More interestingly is that she does engage with traditional media sources *now*, but only since she had been able to launch her fashion career *through* new media.

### **GabiFresh: Social Media Platforms**

Like BR, GabiFresh uses social media platforms to extend the brand's messages and goals. It is necessary to describe these platforms, in order to provide a glimpse into the amount of people that Gregg's blog reaches, and the ways in which Gregg's information spreads through new media platforms.

The GabiFresh Facebook page has 140, 164 likes. Gregg shares similar images and posts to those on her website. For instance, one of her recent posts is an image of GabiFresh wearing an Eloquii outfit. She states, in the post, that she loves "everything about this set" (Gregg). The word Eloquii is a link to clothing site, and Gregg also provides a link to the GabiFresh website in case people are interested in more pictures or details (Gregg). There are 235 likes and 5 shares on this picture. There are 7 comments on this Facebook post, and all of which are positive, stating things such as "in love with this outfit!" or "I love this!!!!!" or "You look wonderful in this outfit!! LOVE IT!!"

Another example of a GabiFresh Facebook post is one about her swimwear line, in which GabiFresh shared Garner Style's photo (Garner Style is another alternative plus size beauty brand) saying that Chastity, the Garner Style founder, "looks amazing in her Gabifresh bikini [and] cover up" (Gregg). The caption is followed by the Garner Style's photo of Chastity taking a photo of herself, in the GabiFresh swimwear. 1.9 thousand people liked this post and 7.2 thousand people had liked the original photo posted on Garner Style's page. The comments on Gregg's post are supportive and thankful for her new swimwear line. For example, someone commented: "Thank you Jesus!! Cute suits with UNDERWIRE!" This type of comment indicates that while Gregg's alternative fashion imagery is needed, so too

are the plus size items she is designing and selling. As mentioned earlier, plus size women have fewer options for clothing compared to those that can fit into “straight” sizes (Andrew and Fairlough 90). That being said, if Gregg is providing new, trendy and popular plus size options for women, she is contributing to the improvement of this particular issue. The fact that her swimwear line sold out within a week of launching (Scaraboto and Fischer 179) indicates a significant demand for Gregg’s products. Since it was Gregg’s “Fatkini 2012 post” that led to the development of her swimsuit brand (Scaraboto and Fischer 179), it can also be argued that new media platforms have made not only Gregg’s retail accomplishments possible (or easier), but have also helped in providing platforms for plus size women to receive a wider variety of clothing options.

Some other GabiFresh Facebook posts can include positive body image news or promotion, for instance, of the recent *Sports Illustrated* cover featuring plus size model Ashley Graham. Gregg shared the post from Ashley Graham’s Facebook page. GabiFresh’s share received nearly 5,000 likes while Graham’s original post received 281,000 likes (keep in mind the Graham’s page has nearly 800,000 likes to begin with). Interestingly, Graham’s engagement with an online hashtag campaign, #CurvesinBikinis, “a campaign with swimsuitsforall” (Ashley Graham), “made her the first plus size model to appear in an ad in Sports Illustrated Swimsuit edition” (Ashley Graham). Here, Graham’s engagement with social media arguably led to her being featured on the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit cover. Again, we see how new media presents new possibilities for women to receive new information about their bodies, through new media, in person, and even through traditional media sources.

GabiFresh's Twitter account, @gabifresh, has 43.8K followers. On Twitter she identifies as a "style blogger, fashion editor, brand consultant, swimwear designer, comedy lover [and] feminist" (Gregg). Her posts have the same intent as those on her website and Facebook page. Twitter is different from her other platforms, however, because her interactions consist largely of retweeting others' tweets, about and from other fashion bloggers, about positive body image, about her swimwear collection, about her support for other alternative beauty businesses and more. She does produce original tweets, too. For instance, she recently tweeted that "the fact that the world still thinks fat girls are ugly and/or not stylish when people like @CalleThorpe exist is unfathomable to [her]" (Gregg).

In addition to Gregg's Twitter already acting as a support system for positive body image and other plus size women or fashion bloggers, the "you may also like" feature of Twitter provides more information for viewers to access other body positive figures. For instance, on GabiFresh's twitter page, the "you may also like" list lists Tanesha Awasth, Nadia Aboulhosn, Nicolette Mason, "TheCurvyFashionista" and "Garnerstyle." All of these accounts belong to alternative, positive body image promoters and or fashion bloggers. Again, we see the ways in which new media allows alternative ideas about body image to strengthen and spread.

GabiFresh's Instagram account has 300k followers, interestingly Gregg's account with the most followers of all her platforms. For BR, Facebook had the most. This might be because since GabiFresh's brand is largely image based, Instagram might act as a more suitable outlet for the brand, while for BR, that is more text driven, Facebook might be a better outlet. GabiFresh's Instagram images are similar

to those of her Facebook images, some with different captions suited to Instagram but with similar intent, such as promoting her swimwear, posting selfies and updating her fans on what she is doing. For instance, she recently posted a photo of herself on Instagram “wearing @natoricompany lingerie” (Gregg) and explains that this is in “her latest blog post” (Gregg). She also expresses her appreciation for the fact that their sizes now go up to “44H” (Gregg). This post has 9,602 likes. She tags the Natori brand in her description and expresses that the post is sponsored by them. Upon looking at Natori’s Instagram account, one sees that the clothing brand’s mission statement is to “bring a balance of beauty, comfort, and individuality to women around the world.” The images then go on to show their products, such as lingerie, either by itself in some images or on models in others. What is notable is that the models featured appear to be more diverse than in most traditional fashion images. In this instance, we again see the ways in which dominant media sources are, in some ways, responding to diverse body image demands, and how such demands are impacting traditional fashion standards.

Gregg’s Pinterest account has 10.4 thousand followers. She has 34 Boards, many of which related to Fashion, such as “My Style,” “Street Style,” “Sequins and Fringe,” “Beauty Favorites,” “Headwear” and more. She also has some boards that are not related to fashion, such as “Dream Home,” “All Hail the Queen (Beyonce)” and more. Like BR, Gregg uses some original photos of her own and of her self to pin to certain boards, while she also repins some pins from other Pinterest users.

GabiFresh’s YouTube account has 5649 subscribers and 13 videos. An example of a video that she has posted is the “GabiFresh x SwimsuitsForAll

Photoshoot” – Behind the Scenes with 6319 views and 99 likes. The video depicts her being photographed for her swimsuit line. The video’s description provides a link to the Swimsuits for All site where people can purchase her bathing suits. The ratio of likes to views, again, demonstrates that new media content can spread much further than “likes” indicate.

### **GabiFresh: Conclusions**

Like BR, the GabiFresh brand has some limitations. While I argue that the monetization of Gregg’s brand and partnerships with fashion corporations presents positive knowledge to women that view Gregg’s work, some might argue – and have argued, as discussed above – that her engagement with an industry that creates narrow body standards in the first place is seemingly counter productive to the goals of body positivity or fat acceptance. This will likely remain an area of contention. Secondly, while Gregg claims that all opinions on the blog are her own, it is impossible to know if this is true, or to which extent it is true, since many of her posts are sponsored by corporations who likely have a vision of what they wish Gregg to say about them. Lastly, while Gregg provides representation and advocacy for plus size women of colour, more research needs to be done on plus size women with darker skin or more tightly coiled hair than Gregg in the blogosphere, to determine if and how their experiences with mainstream fashion’s “less favoured” characteristics (Edmonds as cited in Patterson 265) might impact their participation in the plus size blogosphere. Moreover, it would be useful to study the similarities and differences between white plus size bloggers and women of colour plus size

bloggers. Do they receive the same amount of followers, attention or sponsorships? This would make for important future research.

Uncertainties aside, GabiFresh demonstrates several positive and promising phenomena. Firstly, her fun and creative plus size fashion that contrasts the monolithic images seen in traditional fashion images is spreading to thousands or millions of women online, that might not have seen it without new media platforms, for as Gregg has said, she could not originally find a job in traditional fashion media. The many women that encounter Gregg's fashion and messages of self-acceptance are met with new opportunities and information about their bodies that might impact their body image perceptions positively.

Gregg's option to start blogging provided a platform for Gregg to start her career, and also a platform to spread her goals of body positivity regardless of size, seemingly in line with fat activism. It was also her blogging that led to her popular swimsuit line, that is providing many women with new plus size clothing options, something that is limited in the mainstream fashion industry. Furthermore, as mentioned above, while some might critique her involvement with the fashion industry because of its current narrow standards, her (and other plus size bloggers') engagement with major brands and appearances on traditional media formats might actually begin to change the industry itself. I argue that it is already changing, albeit slowly. That Gregg was able to launch her fashion career online when she could not originally do so in traditional media formats, or that women who purchased a swimsuit made by Gregg now have a new bathing they did not have before, or that Ashley Graham's social media action led to her being the first plus size model

featured on a *Sports Illustrated* cover, all indicate that new media landscapes are already changing aspects of the traditional fashion industry, however small in scope.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

### Future Research

There is still much to be investigated and understood about the circulation of body image ideas and new media, and about the participants involved. The analysis of both Beauty Redefined and GabiFresh have pointed to particular areas of research that would be useful for further understanding body image conditions in new media landscapes.

For instance, my analysis of BR and GabiFresh indicates that knowing more about “likes” would be very beneficial for grasping a message’s reach and impact. How many people, out of the hundreds or thousands that like a post, actually *like* the content they are seeing? For that matter, how many people that view a video post, for instance, that do not click “like,” like it without leaving evidence of it? How many people that “like” a post actually feel indifferent towards it, but are drawn to “like” it for other reasons? How many people that “like” a post actually dislike it? Of course, it will be impossible to answer these questions with certainty in every scenario. But more research on the psychology of likes, and statistics on the amount of people that actually like what they “like,” or who do not click “like” when they do actually like a post, for instance, would be helpful. Further, it would be interesting to study how many people actually express their disdain for a post, by commenting on it, for instance, compared to how many people would simply not indicate anything of their feelings towards a post they do not like. More research on these questions would help those studying new media trends and the participants involved. In regards to body image for women, this type of research would help shed more light on the way

women might feel towards posts such as those made by BR and GabiFresh, that contradict mainstream beauty and fashion standards.

It would also be helpful to know more about the scope and frequency that alternative ideas spread, in comparison to the scope and frequency of dominant ideas. For example, when the Victoria Secret Fashion show airs, how many negative responses versus positive responses occur on social media? Of course, this would need to be examined in smaller segments. For instance, a researcher could focus on and track responses within their own or someone else's Facebook news feed. It would also be interesting to see if these responses change over time. For instance, would critical, alternative points about the VSFC increase as the years go on, due to the building and spreading of alternative ideas regarding body image, or would they not change, or go down? This type of analysis would be very useful, particularly when attempting to analyse the ways in which alternative ideas spread in comparison to dominant and widespread ones.

Importantly, more research is needed on the complexities of body image issues within intersectional areas of race, class, gender and disability. Current beauty and fashion standards that privilege thin, white and young able-bodies have vast implications for different groups of people. When studying the potentially promising aspects of new media, it is crucial to acknowledge that the experiences within each of the groups above might be different. More research on such groups and their engagements with body image online would be particularly insightful.

Another area that requires more research is on traditional fashion or beauty corporations that promote or embrace alternative and positive body image, or fat

activism, for that matter. Out of curiosity, I briefly investigated the #PlusIsEqual campaign on the Lane Bryant Facebook page. Lane Bryant is a popular clothing company for plus size women, founded in 1904, that has nearly two million likes on Facebook. When clicking on the #plusisequal campaign, under the “more” tab of their Facebook page, one is presented with the option to “See yourself on a billboard” (Lane Bryant). The company states that they are “putting the power of representation in your hands!” (Lane Bryant). The “My Billboard app lets you upload your picture onto a virtual billboard in your favourite city” (Lane Bryant). They urge the public to “post, tweet and share it to declare that #PlusIsEqual” (Lane Bryant). On the same page, you either have the option to “get started,” which would lead you through the steps to have your image placed on one of these billboards, or to explore their billboard gallery. I explored the first 100 billboard images in the gallery, and observed that while all women in the first 100 images appeared to have varying body sizes (that do not usually appear in traditional fashion media), more than half of them were also visible ethnic minorities.

Lane Bryant, a mass commercial company (while it is a plus size brand and already has an alternative to dominant mission statement), shows the ways in which other companies can too incorporate more positive, inclusive ways of presenting body image. By using new media tools to recruit and have women present themselves on billboards in big cities, a traditional format of media, we are again witnessing the ways in which new media can liberate people from older constraints. Perhaps companies that usually thrive off of presenting monolithic ideals in the pursuit of profit will begin to see that there are plenty of more ethical and inclusive

options for profit, given by the obvious demand (evident in new media) for alternative images and ideas. In fact, as already discussed, some companies *are* making changes, for instance, by engaging with and sponsoring plus size fatshionistas. Or, for that matter, some fatshionistas are developing their own companies, like Gregg, thanks to the opportunities within new media. These points are not to disregard the extent to which the thin ideal is still currently thriving, in both traditional and new media formats. Rather, these points are working to demonstrate a changing media landscape that holds promise for alternative ideas, inclusivity and social change.

### **Inspiration for Personal Project**

Inspired by my research on the two online sources of positive body image discussed throughout this thesis, I am hoping to create my own. While many already exist, I would like to create one that combines many different elements of fashion diversity into one source. I will recruit women online to submit pictures of themselves in outfits they love, doing something they love. The “doing something they love” aspect will place emphasis on *doing*, so that the fashion outlet is not just appearance based, and this will highlight the fact that women are more than just bodies, to use the Kites’ words. Most importantly, I will ensure to feature women with diverse appearance characteristics.

Behind this project is my firm belief, based on everything I have discussed thus far in this piece, that we need to see a variety of bodies in the mainstream media and in fashion images. As someone who undeniably enjoys partaking in

fashion, I strongly believe that it should not be limiting or exclusive; it should be inclusive, expressive and embracing of all body types, shapes, sizes, skin colours and ages. If we saw more bodies in the media and in fashion promoted as “acceptable,” maybe women would not spend so much time disliking or trying to change their bodies. Maybe, then, women would choose to spend more time on other empowering aspects of life, and would see that they are far more than just bodies, to use the Kites’ words again. This is what my project will be about: showing the world not only that fashion models need not fit one particular body standard in order to make clothes appear marketable and fabulous but also that women need not fit one particular body type in order to be seen as acceptable and successful in society. It is also important to note that my project will not exclude women with bodies that meet current ideal standards; they will absolutely be included but amongst images of women with other body types as well so as to eliminate the depiction of *one* particular body type as ideal. My project is meant to be fun, positive and empowering!

### **Conclusions About New Media, Beauty Redefined and GabiFresh**

When telling my mother, the other day, about how my research was coming along, and my beliefs about the power of new media to bring about more diversity to mainstream media body image, she said to me, “it’s already happening!” She explained to me that she saw the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit cover, and that this seemed to be a truly important – and rather different than usual – step made by traditional sources of media. I felt happy when she said that. She made me feel as

though my optimism for new media and its potential for positive impact on women's body image is warranted. The new media landscape still undoubtedly circulates many dominant, dangerous and negative ideas about body image, and these circumstances are not to be disregarded. What this thesis has attempted to show is that amidst the dominant circulation of the thin ideal, there are also crucially important and promising opportunities available within new media, that have not been available in previous media formats. These opportunities present women with new possibilities for receiving different and more positive information about their bodies, which can potentially lead to positive action and perceptions about body image. Throughout the exploration of BR and GabiFresh, I have attempted to explore the characteristics of this new and hopeful feature of media. The following paragraph outlines the conclusions I have made regarding the affordances of new media for improving widespread body image issues for women, after examining both BR and GabiFresh.

Firstly, while new media platforms undoubtedly work within neoliberal contexts tied to current body image issues, such platforms allow for alternative and positive body image promotion and media literacy to appear, spread and impact people in the same spaces that dominant ideas do, with greater speed and scope than ever before (Jenkins et al. 12). Secondly, while ideas surrounding the thin ideal still circulate with force throughout new media, new media platforms make available a variety of alternative body imagery to the online public, whether it is sought or to be stumbled upon, and such imagery (and corresponding text), as the two case studies demonstrate, presents women with new and more positive

information about their bodies. Such information might then lead to more positive consequences regarding women's psycho, social and physical health. Thirdly, new media platforms present women with the opportunity to represent *themselves* in the media, as we see with the Kites, Gregg, their many body-positive peers, Lane Bryant's self-representation hashtag campaign and all women who choose to post images of themselves online, for that matter. The opportunity to be able to represent one's self and one's own body image in the media, next to a fashion industry that promotes monolithic and unrealistic beauty standards, is a vastly important opportunity. Lastly, new media platforms and participants' ideas within them present traditional fashion media sources with new options to adapt and respond to user demands about body image. This is especially indicated by Gregg, who not only receives corporate sponsorships for her plus size fashion, but who has also developed her own commercial fashion line in the new media landscape. It is for these reasons that I strongly believe that new media presents women with the power to see that positive body image should not only be an alternative option for knowledge, but an important way of life. It is for these reasons that I believe this new media landscape presents women, particularly those dissatisfied with their bodies, focused on self-modification, suffering from disordered eating, starving themselves or shoving toothbrushes down their throats, more opportunities than ever before to wake up, to receive help, and to accomplish far more than what the perpetuation of monolithic beauty standards tells them to do. I hope that the future of academia in the field of new media and body image will recognize, utilize and continue to investigate the promising possibilities within these new media terrains.

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