

Title: Aberrant Consumers: Selfies and Fat Admiration Websites

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Abstract:

In contemporary consumer culture, the healthy body acts as a sign-value for success, a strong work ethic and self-control; it is viewed as a productive resource and medium for creating “bodily capital.” But there is a conflict at the heart of consumer culture, between the imperative to work hard and delay gratification, and the consumer dictum of instant pleasure. Health demonstrates the individuals’ ability to balance the opposing forces of production and consumption. Overtly fat and thin bodies signify an inability to balance the conflict. In this article, I compare different forms of self-presentation on social networking sites and online platforms to explore sign-values of the body in contemporary consumer culture. Websites such as Fantasy Feeder offer advice on how to gain social security benefits, and use fast food industry “bundling techniques” to maximize calorie intake with minimal cost suggesting that fat admiration participants are disruptive to social and economic ideals. I use Marxist and psychoanalytical theories to

interpret photographs of “unhealthy” bodies to build a theoretical model for potentially disruptive figures in capitalist society.

Keywords: Selfie, consumer, capitalism, fat fetishism, health, thinspiration.

### Body Sign Value Exchange

My artwork is concerned with representations of the body in popular culture and how photographs discipline an individual’s relationship to her/his own body. The idealization of slender “healthy” bodies leads to a reduced visual language of expression for the body; I explore ways of expanding sign-values of the body using disruptive bodies. In this article, I compare different forms of self-presentation on social networking sites and online platforms to explore the sign-values of the body in contemporary consumer culture. Thinspiration and fat fetish images depict individuals who seem to reject hegemonic body ideals due to their “unhealthy” lifestyle choices. They are aberrant consumers who ascribe to a different value system in relation to the body and consumer practices.

The healthy body acts as a sign-value for success, a strong work ethic and self-control; it is viewed as a productive resource and medium for creating “bodily capital.”<sup>1</sup> The unhealthy body is a signifier for a lack of self-control and is deemed to be an obstacle to productive labor. Foucault describes how anatomo- and bio-political forces such as health ideals developed in tandem with capitalism to provide “methods of power capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern.”<sup>2</sup> Through multiple discourses, from medicine to popular culture, the dominant classes impose their body standards on others. The healthy

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1 Dworkin, Shari L., and Wachs, Faye, L., *Body Panic: Gender, Health and the Selling of Fitness*, (New York: NYU Press, 2009) p. 104.

2 Foucault, Michel, *History of Sexuality: Volume 1 An Introduction*. trans by Robert Hurley. 6th edn (London: Penguin Books, 1990) (*Histoire de la sexualité*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976) pp. 140-1.

body signifies a person with the financial resources to undertake self-analysis and self-improvement practices in order to achieve “bodily capital.” In contrast, according to Dworkin and Wachs, shamed bodies, traditionally working class, poor, and other marginalized people “are subjected to the ‘bio-power’ of experts who impose upon these bodies judgments that explain their pathologies and failures.”<sup>3</sup> Shamed bodies are viewed and manipulated by others while confessional bodies are self-regarding and able to create themselves.

Robert Crawford suggests that capitalism “structured by the mandates of production and consumption requires both a work ethic and a pleasure ethic.”<sup>4</sup> There is a conflict at the heart of consumer culture between the imperative to work hard and delay gratification and the consumer dictum of instant pleasure. Fitness and working out demonstrate the individual’s ability to balance these opposing forces. Health is a way of exerting control over the population, transforming leisure into a form of body labor that compliments the individual’s economic function. Lack of health suggests the individual is unable to balance the conflicting demands of production and consumption. The imperatives to over-indulge in celebration and control the body against its appetites are read in the extreme eating habits of restriction and binge. They produce bodies that expose the contradictory messages of consumerism. The anorexic consumer type implies a disharmony between production and consumption in which consumption is drastically minimized and the labor potential of the body is valued to an excessive level. In contradistinction, the fat body is considered to aberrantly embrace the imperative to self-indulge. Robert Crawford writes:

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3 Dworkin and Wachs, *Body Panic: Gender, Health and the Selling of Fitness*, p. 14.

4 Robert Crawford, “A Cultural Account of “Health”: Control, Release, and the Social Body,” in *Issues in the Political Economy of Health Care*, ed. by John McKinley (London: Tavistock Publications, 1984) p. 92.

On one hand we must repress desires for immediate gratification and cultivate a work ethic, on the other, as consumers we must display a boundless capacity to capitulate to desire and indulge in impulse; we must hunger for constant and immediate satisfaction. The regulation of desire thus becomes an ongoing problem, constantly besieged by temptation, while socially condemned for over indulgence.<sup>5</sup>

Health care in the U.S. is entwined with the Protestant work ethic because employers frequently provide health insurance for workers, suggesting that health is not a general condition of the body and mind but relates specifically to work. Lack of health is related to an inability to work and health care is provided to enable the individual to return to work. I suggest that this is why the fat body is so widely vilified in Western, capitalist societies. Society assumes the fat individual chooses lack of health and denies medical intervention that would return the individual to work. The extremely large fat fetish body combines characteristics of the lazy man and the dying man, described by Michel de Certeau as “intolerable to society” because the lazy man chooses not to work and the dying body “no longer even makes itself available to be worked on by others.”<sup>6</sup> These forms of inaction are unbearable because they signify a body that can no longer be socially regulated, representing instead a lapse in cultural control. De Certeau says this is why the dying person is censored, hidden away, and denied in language. Old age and illness are “parasitic on the rationality of work’ so they are ‘transformed into a scientific and linguistic object foreign to everyday life and language’.”<sup>7</sup>

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5 Robert Crawford, “A Cultural Account of “Health”: Control, Release, and the Social Body,” p. 99.

6 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendell, (Oakland: University of California Press, 1988) (“L’invention du quotidien,” Vol. 1, *Arts de faire*, Paris: Union générale d’éditions 10-18. 1980) p. 190.

7 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 191.

Users on fat fetish and pro-anorexia websites take scientific signification to an obsessive level, periodically weighing and measuring the circumference of body parts to chart weight gain or loss. The unhealthy otherness of the extremely fat or thin body is glorified rather than vilified. Although fat and thin bodies become knowable and relatable through measurement, the diminishing numbers associated with anorexia remain close to the measurements of the ideal body whereas the fat body becomes increasingly removed from that ideal. Various forms of social intervention attempt to regulate these aberrant consumer bodies and recoup their sign-value in capitalist exchange systems.

### Recuperation of Aberrant Bodies

Because anorexia signifies a refusal to consume, consumer society attempts to discipline the anorexic. Medical intervention by the state tries to transform the anorexic body into a productive one. Significantly reduced consumption is unacceptable in consumer society and the excessive productivity of the anorexic can be fatal. In her ethnographic study of eating disorder treatment, Helen Gremillion describes the work ethic of one patient thus: “losing weight was no effort at all. But the effort it took to keep up with all her activities at increasingly lower weights balanced out the ease of losing weight [...] Maude implied that she kept losing weight so that she could continually test her ability to achieve.”<sup>8</sup> She continues “she did not think she was too fat [...] rather, she kept losing weight because she could not imagine stopping this form of body work that was a display of achievement.”<sup>9</sup> Because the anorexic work ethic mirrors the Protestant work ethic, it is not discouraged but rather redirected toward ideas of health and fitness. Exercise is restricted because eating disorder patients often use it to compensate for calorie consumption. The patients must reach a particular weight (known as their “exercise

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8 Helen Gremillion, “In Fitness and in Health: Crafting Bodies in the Treatment of Anorexia Nervosa,” *Signs* 27 (2002) p. 385. This study takes place in an Eating Disorder Clinic in America.

9 Gremillion, “In Fitness and in Health,” p. 387.

weight”) to be deemed medically safe to exercise.<sup>10</sup> Exercise is simultaneously a symptom of illness and a method of recovery. By negotiating a compromise between eating and exercise, the value of thinness is maintained but the way it is achieved balances the imperatives of capitalist societies to produce and consume.<sup>11</sup> Inpatient clinics reinforce preoccupation with weight and calorie counting while teaching patients how to manage their consumption of food in order to remain within the lower limits of the socially acceptable body ideal.

In order to recuperate the sign value of fat bodies into capitalist exchange systems, sexual, medical, and commercial gazes try to create both a feeling of shame and a desire for health in the subject, while a plethora of products and services is offered to achieve this aim. For example, the diet industry promotes products that seem to permit both imperatives to delay gratification and seek reward. Diet food, characterized by chocolate, crisps, and milk shakes, is both the temptation and the solution for temptation. These products keep the craving to consume alive while enabling the consumer to demonstrate an acceptable work ethic and the desire to acquiesce to social norms. Consumers are transformed from shamed docile bodies into active confessional ones by turning their aberrant consumer behavior into a form of consumption that produces sign-value for the body. There is an in-built obsolescence to the system because calorie control and restriction of food can cause the metabolism to slow down, resulting in greater weight gain. Diet products are the exemplary commodity of late capitalism because they incite increased consumption by frustrating desire rather than fulfilling it. As Richard Klein writes in “Fat Beauty,” “more diet means more appetite, and more appetite means more consuming.”<sup>12</sup> Change takes place in the relationship between the

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10 Gremillion, “In Fitness and in Health,” 2002.

11 Gremillion, “In Fitness and in Health,” 2002.

12 Richard Klein, “Fat Beauty,” in *Bodies out of Bounds*, eds Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco

consumer and society, and not in the physical characteristics of the consumers' bodies. They yield to social regulation and the system of sign-value; the pleasure of eating chocolate and crisps is transformed into a culturally regulated activity.

### Aberrant Consumer Communities Online

Aberrant consumer practices of severe restriction or excessive consumption of food appear to celebrate one aspect of the contradiction of capitalism. Although both extreme consumer habits are discouraged in mainstream consumer culture, they have large communities of users who share tips, photographs, and stories on specialist online platforms.

Fat fetishism is a sexual practice that takes the pleasure of eating to an extreme. Fat admirers encourage a "fat fetish" to eat in order to watch the body grow. Fantasy Feeder is a website for fat admirers and fat fetishists. It is similar to Facebook because users have to register to access message boards and other content. The website contains other features similar to mainstream social networking sites: users can upload their own content in the form of stories, photographs, videos, and comments on forum discussions. Underneath each photograph and video the number of times other users have viewed and "liked" the video and photograph is displayed, and there are spaces for users to add comments. When researching fat fetishism I came across a private medical insurance advertisement on Large Passions website. The advertisement read "United Kingdom: Jump NHS queues with private medical insurance from 79p per day." Because Large Passions is a website for fat admirers and fat fetishes, it was unclear to me at whom the advertisement was aimed. Perhaps the desire to "jump queues" shows that fat fetishists are concerned about the health implications of fatness. News reports in the

United Kingdom frequently describe “obesity” in relation to cost so fat patients who do not wish to lose weight may feel vilified as a financial drain on the National Health Service. Paying for private medical treatment would negate this negative experience.

Thinspiration or pro-ana (pro-anorexia) websites are blogs created by individuals with eating disorders. The writers share stories about their own weight loss regimes, provide tips on how to lose weight, and evade detection by doctors, family members and friends. They frequently contain thinspiration images of the blogger’s emaciated body, of other individuals with eating disorders and very thin celebrities. Most blogs also enable followers to leave comments in response to posts similar to mainstream social networking sites. Some of the websites are written in a manner suggestive of a company rather than an individual. For example the introduction of the Prothinspo website states:

Welcome to WORLDS BEST DIETING TIPS Prothinspo was voted the number 1 site in the world For Tips and Tricks to Weight loss...This site also has the largest selection in the world of diet, exercise, celebrity and Supermodel weight loss tips...BE SURE TO RELOAD FOR UPDATES...<sup>13</sup>

The website contains images of emaciated celebrities, along with weight loss advice and diets, similar to pro-ana blogs, but it also features multiple advertisements for diet products. Although anorexics are often viewed as anti-consumers, thinspiration websites suggest an engagement with consumer culture to produce sign-value for the body. The diet industry attempts to commodify self-starvation by advertising appetite suppressants and metabolism boosters on thinspiration websites.<sup>14</sup> Unlike fat fetish

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13 Unknown Author, [www.prothinspo.com](http://www.prothinspo.com) [accessed 30 July 2015].

14 For example Unknown Author, “Top Ten Diet Pills,” <http://yoshithin.blogspot.co.uk/2007/06/top-10-diet-pills.html> [accessed 9 April 2015].



websites, many thinspiration websites encourage users to balance consumption and production. Thinspiration websites suggest methods of distraction or rewards for resisting food that are also couched in terms of consumption and bodywork. For example, visitors to one website are encouraged to undertake some of the following activities to prevent them from giving in to hunger pangs:

Exfoliate your entire body, take a long hot bath, pluck/wax your eyebrows, paint your finger and toe nails, use crest white strips, apply self tanner, try a new hairstyle, have your hair cut, straighten your hair, give yourself a make over with totally different makeup, shave/wax your legs, put a face mask on, go for a manicure or pedicure.<sup>15</sup>

Another website suggests that the readers calculate how much money they have saved by not buying food and reward themselves with a shopping trip for smaller sized clothing.<sup>16</sup> These recommendations turn self-starvation into an activity that enables consumption of commodities and produces sign-value for the body. Capitalism pursues the anorexic through illness and health. The anorexic body is a distortion of consumer society ideals rather than a denial of them.

In consumer culture the term “desirable” has largely been replaced by the term “healthy” so products associated with body improvement can be promoted in a manner that foregrounds the appearance of the body without being overtly objectifying. The creators and disseminators of thinspiration also seem to appropriate the concept of

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15 Unknown Author, “Pro-Ana Distractions,” <http://www.prothinspo.com/proanadistractions.html> [accessed 9 April 2015].

16 Unknown Author, “Diet Distractions and tips for Not Eating,” <http://myproanorexialife.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/dietsdistractions-and-tips-for-not.html> [accessed 9 April 2015].

health to negate censure. Since the mid-2000s thinspiration or thinspo imagery has been criticized for promoting eating disorders in newspaper and journal articles.<sup>17</sup> In response to public concern, social media websites such as Tumblr banned the #thinspo and #thinspiration hashtags. In order to circumvent the issue, pro-eating disorder users appropriated the #fitspiration or #fitspo hashtags.

Concurrently, medical professionals also began to diagnose orthorexia, a type of eating disorder in which the individual becomes obsessed with healthy eating to the point that so many foods are removed from the diet the individual becomes malnourished. A study by David Giles and Jessica Close found that exposure to male body ideals in “lads magazines” led to a drive for muscularity and eating disturbance, particularly in single men.<sup>18</sup> Mike Featherstone says “anxiety about their body image coupled with excessive work-outs in the gym can apparently lead to a new condition, dubbed ‘*athletica nervosa*.’”<sup>19</sup> Athletic nervosa complements “orthorexia” the pathological pursuit of healthy eating and demonstrates the pathological implication of “exercise weight” in the treatment of eating disorders. It remains to be seen whether these eating disorders are acknowledged as distinct disorders or treated as a type of anorexia, but they seem to signify forms of self-starvation that also displace the slender body aim with the desire for health. The pathological pursuit of health reflects the changing discourse of the body in popular

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17 Iris Mansour, ““Thinspiration” Packages Eating disorders as a Lifestyle Choice,” in *MashableUK*, 2013 <<http://mashable.com/2013/12/05/thinspiration/#tk0Fb5OzBEqd>> [accessed 4 January 2016] “Similar photos [thinspiration] have been online since the late '90s. But their volume and accessibility is unprecedented. One survey shows that between 2006 and 2008 alone, the number of such sites had increased by 470%.”

18 Filaout, (2007) quoted in David C. Giles and Jessica Close “Exposure to “Lad Magazines”, Drive for Muscularity in Dating and Non-dating Young Men,” in *Personality and Individual Differences* 44 (2008). This research refers to readers of magazines such as *Loaded*, *FHM*, and *Esquire* in the UK and *Maxim* and *Stuff* in the US. The authors note two main features of the magazines; the importance of heterosexual success and negative comments in relation to bodies that do not resemble the muscular ideal. The research found that lack of heterosexual success was attributed to inadequate muscularity of the body.

19 Mike Featherstone, “Body, Image and Affect in Consumer Culture,” in *Body and Society*, 16: 1 (2010), p. 202.

culture. Very emaciated bodies can be found online using a variety of hashtags, including #thinspiration, #fitspiration, #orthorexia or #selfie, demonstrating the normalization of this body type in consumer culture.

In a manner similar to thinspiration websites, Fantasy Feeder contains forums for feeders and feedees to share advice regarding interaction with medical and social service professionals. Secrecy is encouraged and readers are told to pretend that they are trying to lose weight when they come into contact with doctors or disapproving relatives. A page on Fantasy Feeder says “since obesity is wrongly but officially classified as a ‘disease,’ you can apply for Social Security Disability, even if you are only 18 years old. The government considers anyone over 400lbs as unable to work.”<sup>20</sup> The webpage describes the process of applying for social security payments and benefits including “in home” health care assistance. Similar to thinspiration blogs and websites, Fantasy Feeder offers advice about food, telling the viewer which products to buy to ingest the most calories for the least expense. On Fantasy Feeder a report by the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity (NANA) is subverted to the fat fetish aim. The report analyses “supersizing,” “value marketing,” and “bundling” high calorie drinks and side orders at fast-food chains and convenience stores in the U.S. Restaurants and grocery shops encourage these practices so consumers spend additional money to increase the quantity of food they purchase, without expecting an increase in quality that would eat into profit margins. The website quotes the findings of the report:

Upgrading from a 3-ounce Minibon to a Classic Cinnabon costs only 24% more, yet delivers 123% more calories. The larger size also provides almost three-quarters

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20 Unknown Author, “Obesity and Social Security,” <http://fantasyfeeder.com/articles/view?id=106> [accessed 30 July 2015].

of a day's worth of saturated fat. Switching from 7-Eleven's Gulp to a Double Gulp costs 42% more, but provides 300% more calories [...] Moving from a small to a medium bag of movie theater popcorn costs about 71 cents- but adds 500 calories. A 23% increase in price provides 125% more calories and two days' worth of saturated fat.<sup>21</sup>

Supersizing and bundling are generally viewed negatively. Unhealthy food with low nutritional value is sold cheaply and in large quantities. Because of the low cost and selective placement of outlets, the companies that use these tactics target lower income, working class, and ethnic minority people.<sup>22</sup> The working classes, who are more likely to experience externally exerted control during work hours, are less likely to submit to a mandate of control during leisure time.<sup>23</sup> These workers might view productive body-work as an infringement on their right to a time without restraint. Fat fetishists use the profit-increasing methods of the food-industry to grow the body to gargantuan proportions. The value gained from the exchange changes from capital accumulation to calorie accumulation and the sign-value of the body is also dramatically altered.

Although online platforms used by thinspiration and fat fetish communities are similar to mainstream social networking sites in terms of format and user interaction, they subvert the body ideals disseminated on their mainstream counterparts. Thinspiration websites take the slender ideal to an excessive degree but are recuperated as a sign value because they connote a Protestant work ethic and overvaluation of body-

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21 Unknown Author, "Super-sized Portions," <<http://fantasyfeeder.com/articles/view?id=91>> [accessed 30 July 2015].

22 A. K. Yancey, J. Leslie, and E. K. Abel, "Obesity at the Crossroads: Feminist and Public Health Perspectives," in *Signs*, 31 (2006).

23 Robert Crawford, "Cultural Influences on Prevention and the Emergence of a New Health Consciousness," in *Issues in the Political Economy of Health Care*, ed. J. McKinley (London: Tavistock, 1984).

work. The anorexic consumer is targeted by multiple advertisements for diet pills and fitness programs to that enable her/him to balance the conflicting demands of capitalism. Fat fetish websites rarely contain advertisements for commodities, but frequently publish tips on how to maximize calorie consumption while minimizing expense. The fat fetish reduces profitability usually derived from “supersizing” and “bundling.” The fat body is deemed to be an obstacle to work; it is also unproductive as labor. As it does not signify body-work or labor, it resists recuperation as a sign value.

### Selfies and Sign-Value Exchange

The term selfie came into popular use in the early 2000s and was Oxford dictionary’s “word of the year” in 2013. The practice is widely viewed as a narcissistic activity of young women; however selfie-taking traverses gender, race and class boundaries. In academic discourse the selfie is analyzed as a symptom of the negative impact of globalized social networking sites and an empowering form of agency. In his article interpreting the positive potential of the selfie for female artists, Murray claims that: “viewed individually, they appear rather banal, commonplace, and benign. Taken en masse, it feels like a revolutionary political movement – like a radical colonization of the visual realm and an aggressive reclaiming of the female body.”<sup>24</sup> According to Murray, selfies are “a forum to produce counter-images that resist erasure and misrepresentation.”<sup>25</sup> Iqani and Schroeder also draw attention to the self-expression offered by selfies:

The selfie represents a way of saying “look at me,” “ I exist,” “ I am having fun (or not),” out loud, in a public domain – attempts to attract attention – but also about

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24 Derek Conrad Murray, “Noes to self: the visual culture of selfies in the age of social media,” *Consumption Markets and Culture* (2015) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2015.1052967> [accessed 13 August 2015] p. 1.

25 Murray, “Notes to Self,” p. 2.

crafting the self as a social media object in a very particular way and with very particular claims to authentic identities and experiences.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the radical potential of selfies, a google search reveals homogenization of gestures and body ideals. In reference to Sarah Gram, a social media blogger, Iqani and Schroeder suggest that selfie-takers turn the self into a commodity to “claim themselves as valuable in a cultural system (capitalism) that considers them valuable only in certain ways (as sexy bodies and pretty faces).”<sup>27</sup> By taking selfies and sharing them online, the individual becomes an object of exchange. Although the phenomenon enables an individual to produce the image of her or his choosing, selfies also increase self-surveillance and foreground the value of appearance. Evidence can be found in the multitude of “selfie-ready” and “photo-finish” cosmetics now available on the market.<sup>28</sup> The phenomenon of selfie taking encourages consumption to improve the sign value of the body.

Michel de Certeau writes that the skin becomes a parchment written with rules and regulations when it is shaped by cultural norms. Until the process of intextuation begins, the body is not standardized or recognized by society. As de Certeau says, the body is “essentially a *flesh*, which writing changes into a *body*,”<sup>29</sup> turning it into an identity that “can be read and quoted by others.”<sup>30</sup> To fit into society I accept standardization of my body in return for social meaning. Although individuals who take and share selfies follow strict aesthetic rules for the body, they are validated by the online community and

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26 Mehita Iqani & Jonathan E. Schroeder, “#selfie: digital self-portraits as commodity form and consumption practice,” *Consumption Markets & Culture* (2015) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2015.1116784> [accessed 5 January 2016].

27 Iqani and Schroeder, “#selfie,” p. 7.

28 Meredith Jones, “Cosmetic Surgery and the Fashionable Face,” *Fashion Theory*, 16: 2 (2012).

29 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 149.

30 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 149.

given acceptance. Selfie producers turn their bodies into signifiers of rules while giving the abstract rules material form, making the rule “real.” Selfies reinforce the status quo; gendered identities become polarized and hyperbolic. Fat fetish and thinspiration selfies disrupt these gender binaries.

Thinspiration denotes the large volume of photographs devoted to the celebration of extreme thinness. The anorexic produces the self as an acceptable and unbearable image, fixating on a slender ideal but distorting the sign-value of the body in the process. Although at its most extreme I view the anorexic body of thinspiration with uncanny horror, I see evidence that selfies and thinspiration share visual characteristics. In thinspiration photographs, the objects that surround the body appear to express contradictory messages. The multiplicity of connotations can have a normalizing effect on the negative signs suggested by aberrant bodies. In some selfies the bodies are very slender with visible hipbones and ribcages, bodily characteristics that are usually associated with thinspiration. But the detritus of ordinary selfies surrounds the individuals. The bodies do not function as negative signs that cannot be recuperated as sign-values; the commodities that surround them place the body in the system of sign value exchange with which I can identify. The commodities, such as cosmetic products and clothes strewn around the room, are associated with the construction of an ideal body, implying that the visual cues of emaciation also signify idealization and desirability. Skeletal thinness appears as a style with which to be identified and appropriated when it is fashionable to do so.

Other photographs found when carrying out image searches online bear visual similarity to the emaciated selfies found on Tumblr and other mainstream image sharing websites, but they were viewed on a thinspiration website. The body in the photograph

follows predominant thinspiration codes because it is fragmented and posed to emphasize bones. But the untidy room behind the figure has more in common with a selfie than a thinspiration photograph. It is noteworthy as it contradicts the descriptions of anorexic character traits found in psychiatry and psychoanalysis. The typical anorexic personality is characterised by perfectionism and rigidity. The anorexic fears making mistakes and may display obsessive-compulsive tendencies. The need to control food intake coincides with a need to regulate all aspects of her/his life; everything has to be neatly organized and under strict control.<sup>31</sup> Disorganization and clutter would cause anxiety for the anorexic. The bedroom behind the emaciated figure in the thinspiration photographs does not connote a pathological demand for control. Rather it suggests the codes of the emaciated body celebrated in thinspiration have been absorbed into popular culture, normalized and then disseminated as an ideal body. Sign values are recuperated in the system of sign-value exchange even if they appear to be signifiers of ill health, death, and a refusal to consume.

De Certeau suggests that the body might break free from social control during moments of intense pleasure or pain. He writes:

The only force opposing this passion to be a sign is the cry, a deviation or an ecstasy, a revolt or flight of that which, within the body, escapes the law of the named. Perhaps all experience that is not a cry of pleasure or pain is recuperated by the institution. All experience that is not displaced or undone by this ecstasy is captured by “the love of the censor,” collected and utilized by the discourse of the law. It is channeled and instrumented.<sup>32</sup>

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31 Mervat Nasser *et al.*, eds, *The Female Body in Mind: The Interface between the Female Body and Mental Health* (Hove and New York: Routledge, 2007).

32 Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 149.



For “flesh” to be out of control it cannot be coded and inscribed by the system. The anorexic body is recuperated by the system of sign value exchange because it embodies a rational, work ethic that can be “channeled and instrumented” by social regulation. If the pain of self-starvation can be appropriated in commodity culture, the pleasure of eating, when it is not bound by social propriety and disapproval of the fat body, removes the eater from the demands of culturally coded sign values. In stark contrast, fat fetishism images are often knowingly humorous about the appeal of the body and the exchange of images. Many of the images uploaded by members of the Fantasy Feeder website resemble the tropes of selfies. They are often taken using a mirror to record the individual’s appearance at that moment and they emphasize particular body parts such as breasts, buttocks, stomachs, and legs. But these bodies are not toned and smooth, they bulge, ripple, and sag, inhabiting space in an entirely different way. Fat fetish photographs do not simply borrow from the conventions of selfies; rather they parody them. An image on Fantasy Feeder of a woman in a white swimsuit quite obviously references Kim Kardashian’s famous selfie. Kardashian’s image was taken to show off her buttocks, and the fat fetish parody draws attention to the curvaceous body ideal enhanced by commodities in a different way.<sup>33</sup>

Fat fetish images also reproduce many of the visual tropes of thinspiration: the body is decapitated or the face hidden behind a camera to conceal the identity of the individual. The body appears dissociated from the thinking subject, but in fat fetish images it is exalted rather than destroyed. Fat fetish photographs are often presented as sequences showing the transformation of the body, but progress of the body described in before-and-after images in advertisements and thinspiration is reversed. The fat bodies

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33 Princess Piggy <[www.fantasyfeeder.com](http://www.fantasyfeeder.com)> [accessed 7 August 2015].

do not sculpt, flatten, and pull inwards; instead of skeletal signs of death, these bodies resemble mounds of flesh.

In consumer society the body is not permitted to change indiscriminately. The body is only permitted to grow in ways that reinforce gender difference: the buttocks and breasts of women, and the arm, chest and shoulder muscles of men. The fat fetish body is a work in progress but it is not turning into a slender object of desire. Expansion is not selective so the body's growth does not reinforce gender difference. On Fantasy Feeder, approximately half of the users posting fat fetish images are male, suggesting the practice is enjoyed equally by both sexes.<sup>34</sup> The way the bodies transform also disrupt gender binaries, the stomach takes prominence for both male and female bodies, and it is often difficult to identify the gender of a body when viewing closely cropped images of breasts, buttocks, and thighs.

#### Future Conditional Consumers

The disruptive potential of the over-eater is inferred by its absence from popular, visual culture. In "Sex and Fat Chics" Jana Evans Braziel discusses diet magazines, expressing her surprise when she is unable to find a single image of a fat woman between their covers.<sup>35</sup> She says fat women are signified by numerous images of food but very rarely shown openly. Braziel says the fat woman is signified as an absence because her body is outside the frame of signification of capitalism. She describes the fat body as "the *absent* body-in-excess: an all-consuming, uncontrollable monstrosity that can be represented

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34 Out of the first two hundred photographs that appeared in the "pics" section ninety-five were of male bodies. <[www.fantasyfeeder.com](http://www.fantasyfeeder.com)> [accessed 24 February 2016].

35 Jana Evans Braziel, "Sex and Fat Chics: Deterritorializing the Fat Female Body," in *Bodies out of Bounds*, eds Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press) 2001.

only by what she consumes. Food, then, is a metonym that effectively obscures the grotesqueness of what cannot be depicted.”<sup>36</sup>

In *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* Kathleen LeBesco identifies a possible reason for the invisibility of the fat body in popular culture. A positive image of a fat body would seem to support fat body politics, a growing political movement campaigning for “fat rights,” and an end to discrimination toward fat people. LeBesco says the fat body is indistinguishable from fat body politics, so a positive image of a large body would support this political movement.<sup>37</sup> The magazines and television programs that could depict fat bodies are frequently reliant on funding from the health and beauty industries, so a strategy to take a fat body positive stand is a conflict of interest. Instead the magazines and television programs respond to public demands for the representation of a greater variety of body types with “plus-size” models who are actually an average body size, rarely exceeding size twelve in US clothing sizes. Madeline Jones, editor-in-chief of Plus Model Magazine, claims that plus-size model sizes have changed from between twelve to eighteen in US clothing size in 2002 to size six to fourteen in 2012.<sup>38</sup> The fat body still remains invisible but a marginally greater variety of bodies are represented in popular culture.

The problem that comes from representations of fat bodies does not arise from the body’s lack of signification or inability to articulate a position in capitalist consumption. It is problematic because it always, instantly, says too much. As Petra

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36 Braziel, “Sex and Fat Chics: Deterritorializing the Fat Female Body,” pp. 223-4.

37 Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).

38 Madeline Jones, “Plus Size Bodies, What Is Wrong With Them Anyway?” *Plus Model Magazine*, 8th January 2012, (<http://www.plus-model-mag.com/2012/01/plus-size-bodies-what-is-wrong-with-them-anyway/>) [accessed 5 November 2015].

Kuppers says, “the fat woman is fat, and this sign rules all her other aspects.”<sup>39</sup> The rare appearance of the fat body in popular culture is not outside cultural signification in de Certeau’s liberatory sense; it is deeply inscribed with signs of excess and loss of control. These signs overpower and arrest any other verbal or gestural expression of the fat individual.

For the fat body to become visible, it must submit to another kind of cultural coding, in which the individual’s identity is determined by a desire to lose weight. LeBesco states that “fat people contrive to participate in a kind of pseudo-subjectivity that reintegrates them into the larger social structure as people longing to be objectified; their subjectivity [...] is tragically relegated to a status lower than the agency of objectivity.”<sup>40</sup> In a culture that rewards the individual as an object of desire, the fat body must acquiesce to the desire to be desired. The attributes of the desirable object are tyrannically policed by social ideals of youthfulness and slenderness, preventing the fat body from being desired as a fat body. As a result the fat body is represented as a “before” image of the body expected to become thin. It is what Hillel Schwartz describes as the “future conditional, suspended between what they are and who they will be when they are finally thin.”<sup>41</sup>

When fat bodies are depicted they are reduced to body parts that emphasize fat and diminish the idea of pleasure in eating. Charlotte Cooper uses the term “headless fatties” to describe the phenomenon of photographs of fat bodies on news reports. She argues:

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39 Petra Kuppers, “Fatties on Stage” in *Bodies out of Bounds*. Eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) p. 279.

40 LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*. p. 28.

41 Schwartz, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies and Fat*, 2nd edn (New York: Anchor Books, 1990) p. 325.

Every hand-wringing article about the financial cost of obesity, and every speechifying press release about the ticking time bomb of obesity seemed to be accompanied by a photograph of a fat person, seemingly photographed unawares, with their head neatly cropped out of the picture [...] As Headless Fatties, the body becomes symbolic: we are there but we have no voice, not even a mouth in a head, no brain, no thoughts or opinions. Instead we are reduced and dehumanized as symbols of cultural fear: the body, the belly, the arse, food. There's a symbolism, too, in the way that the people in these photographs have been beheaded. It's as though we have been punished for existing, our right to speak has been removed by a prurient gaze, our headless images accompany articles that assume a world without people like us would be a better world altogether.<sup>42</sup>

Cooper's critique is supported by content analysis of the photographs used by U.S. news websites to accompany articles about "obesity." Heuer et al. found that more than half of the images depicting fat people were cropped to show only abdomens or lower bodies, but images of thin people were not framed in this manner.<sup>43</sup> Fat people were also more likely to be photographed from the side or back than thin people, further reducing the individual's agency and emphasizing fat. The activities undertaken by fat and thin subjects in the images also differed dramatically; the fat subjects were more likely to be shown eating while the thin subjects were frequently depicted undertaking exercise. The

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42 Charlotte Cooper, "Headless Fatties," 2007

<http://charlottecooper.net/publishing/digital/headless-fatties-01-07> [accessed 10 May 2016]

43 Chelsea A. Heuer, Kimberly J. McClure and Rebecca M. Puhl "Obesity Stigma in Online News: A Visual Content Analysis," in *Journal of Health Communication*, 16:9, (2011).

research found that 72% of images of fat people met at least one criterion of stigmatization.<sup>44</sup> Heuer et al call the phenomenon the “headless stomach,” writing:

by isolating certain body parts and emphasizing unflattering portrayals of excess weight, news photographs degrade and dehumanize obese individuals. Consequently, obese people are reduced to being symbols of the epidemic, rather than valued members of society who deserve compassion and respect.<sup>45</sup>

Decapitation prevents the viewer from identifying with the bodies in the photographs as human beings. When I identify with another body I acknowledge equivalence as I seek out the differences that provide my own body with differential value. If the body is headless, my identification with it is barred. On thinspiration websites images are also frequently cropped so the head and face of the subjects are missing. These images disrupt identification and dehumanize the body but the power relation between subject and viewer is totally different. Unlike decapitated thinspiration photographs the images of fat bodies on news websites and television reports are not proud displays of body-work but the objectifying, judgmental gaze of the other. When thinspiration images depict a desubjectivized individual it is self-chosen. The subject takes the photograph to view the body as a separate, degraded thing demonstrating the tyrannical rule of the mind over the body. In headless images of fat bodies the fat body signifies a mind overpowered by bodily urges.

### Beyond Sign Value Signification

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44 The stigmatizing criteria are; disproportionately emphasizing a fat person’s abdomen or lower body; portraying a fat person’s abdomen without clothes; featuring a fat person with their head cut of the image; portraying a fat person with inappropriately fitting clothing; portraying a fat person eating / drinking unhealthy food / drink; portraying a fat person engaging in a sedentary activity.

45 Heuer et al, “Obesity Stigma in Online News: A Visual Content Analysis,” p. 8.

The fat body may be invisible or dehumanized in popular culture but in fat fetishism it is immortalized from every angle and in every aspect. The transformations of the body documented in fat fetish photographs oppose the medical and social discourses that disseminate the value of slenderness.

Fat fetish photographs display the tropes of selfies and advertising images while disturbing the ideological messages they contain. The fat fetish image recalls Le'a Kent's description of the fat body marked by its desires as opposed to the "good thin body (a body good only because it is marked by the self's repeated discipline)."<sup>46</sup> She says the change in connotation would allow fat people to relate to her/his body in the present and not as a "before" image of a "future conditional" self. She continues:

According to all cultural "wisdom" (and just watch what happens to self-valuing fat women on talk shows if you don't believe me), I must be deluded – 'I am impossible, I am living in a state of denial, and I must sooner or later come to my senses and resume loathing my body, if only for my "health."<sup>47</sup>

Kent looks for examples for representations of fat bodies that do not connote an unhealthy and disgusting body. Referring to a fanzine made by fat lesbian women, she observes:

In presenting fat bodies in sexual acts, fat women actively desiring other fat women, fat women in S/M scenarios, FaT GiRL appropriates sex as a joyous way of rewriting the fat body. It uses the erotic to envision a good, pleasurable body in

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46 Le'a Kent, "Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women," in *Bodies out of Bounds*, ed. by Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) p. 131.

47 Kent, "Fighting Abjection," p. 131.

which there is an interplay between the body's desire and the self's expressions – the good body is rewritten as the body that can tell the self its desires, act on its desire, provide pleasures. Suddenly the disciplined body, the dieting body, the subject of “self-control,” seems empty and impoverished.<sup>48</sup>

Kent's description corresponds to my experience of viewing fat fetish images. The bodies disturb me because they are unapologetic in their display of enjoyment and destabilise my body-labour ideology. I sense my body as a limitation of pleasure. Fat bodies signify a boundless pleasure that refuses to balance the conflicting demands of consumption and production.

This theory is supported by the different treatment of thinspiration and fat fetish images on social networking sites and mass media outlets. Anorexia images are recuperated by systems of sign value exchange because the slender body ideal is already signified throughout popular visual culture. Thinspiration reinforces the sign value of slenderness, albeit in a dangerously exaggerated form. Thinspiration is viewed as threatening precisely because it can be recuperated by and normalized in popular cultural discourse. Despite a deep-rooted connection between fatness and morbidity in advanced capitalist societies, images of fat fetishism do not meet the same censure. Fat bodies may be erased or derided but the exchange of images is not outlawed, demonstrating that fat signification is not recuperated by sign value exchange and does not transmit through visual culture to cause an “epidemic.”

## Conclusion

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<sup>48</sup> Kent, “Fighting Abjection,” p. 142-3.



Although anorexics are viewed as “anti-consumers” they can be disciplined by commodity culture through a work ethic relating to exercise and body-work. Eating disorder treatments also encourage exercise in the pursuit of health, resulting in a balance between the conflicting demands of capitalism. Thinspiration websites commodify starvation by advertising diet pills and beauty regimes that distract the anorexic from the desire to eat. The normalization of aesthetic and gestural tropes of thinspiration photographs demonstrates the recuperation of these aberrant consumers into the system of sign value exchange.

Fat bodies transgress body ideals and resist disciplinary practices because they evade the bio-political and economic imperatives that equate productivity and health with slenderness. They do not participate in the workout ethos that balances the conflicting demands of capitalism. Fat fetish images resist predominant signifiers relating to ill-health, death, laziness, and greed instead connoting a pleasure that is not bounded by restriction and characterized by deferred gratification. Because fat bodies do not signify control and denial of pleasure, they expand the limited sign values of the body circulated in consumer societies via social networking sites. Photographs of fat bodies offer a model for a disruptive figure that resists, and perhaps counters, homogenization of body ideals.