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Factions, frames, and postfeminism(s) in the Body Positive Movement

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ABSTRACT
How are contemporary post/feminisms like Body Positivity constituted in and through digital media cultures, and what are the consequences for diverse movement participants? This article analyzes tensions within the Body Positive Movement in North America through a discourse analysis of two sets of prominent blog articles from 2014 and 2016. We identify the coexistence of four social movement frames, termed Mainstream Body Positivity, Fat Positivity = Body Positivity, Radical Body Positivity, and Body Neutrality. Key differences between these frames often arise due to intersecting experiences of privilege and oppression within the movement, as well as disagreements between activists about whether the movement should focus on individualized, psychological issues such as body image or structural concerns such as size discrimination. Our findings reveal the coterminous existence and blurring of boundaries of various feminisms within Body Positivity, including forms that align with as well as those that challenge postfeminist sensibilities. This study 1) illustrates how feminist organizing in digital spaces continues to be shaped by unequal power dynamics and 2) deepens our understanding of the complex and multivocal nature of online feminist discourse.

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Introduction
Feminists have long protested the objectification of women in media cultures, as well as the exclusionary nature of Western beauty ideals. Thousands of activists have utilized new digital technologies to express opposition to these forces since the 2000s, constituting a collective that has become known as the “Body Positive Movement.” Today the Body Positive Movement is quite broad (Alexandra Sastre 2014), encompassing a variety of loosely connected networks and campaigns taking place across numerous cultural arenas, not all of which are in direct dialogue with one another. Most prominently, Body Positive activists use a range of online platforms to discuss their varied relationships with beauty culture. However, such platforms are characterized by power imbalances and infrastructure limitations that restrict use and access. Indeed, scholars such as Jodi Dean (2003) and José Van Dijck and Thomas Poell (2013) have argued elsewhere that new media technologies reflect and reproduce the political and economic interests of the elite. How are
contemporary post/feminisms like Body Positivity constituted in and through such digital media cultures, and what are the consequences for diverse movement participants?

This article explores this question through a discourse analysis of fifty blog articles about the Body Positive Movement in North America. We begin by reviewing the existing literature on Body Positivity, post/feminist tensions, and social movement frame analysis. After discussing our methods, we then elaborate upon the coexistence of at least four social movement frames uncovered during data analysis, which we label Mainstream Body Positivity, Fat Positivity = Body Positivity, Radical Body Positivity, and Body Neutrality. Distinctions between these frames reflect differing experiences of privilege and oppression among activists, as well as disagreements about whether the movement should focus on individualized, psychological issues such as personal body image or structural concerns such as size and/or racial discrimination. Our findings deepen our understanding of how platform structures and unequal power dynamics impact the complex nature of post/feminist organizing in digital spaces.

**Analyzing the Body Positive Movement**

The Body Positive Movement’s current tensions are best understood within historical context. According to scholar Jasie Stokes (2013), the Fat Acceptance movement emerged in the 1960s alongside other identitarian movements. Throughout the following decade, sex positivists within the women’s liberation movement began to promote body positive approaches to sexual and reproductive health. Meanwhile, the struggles of feminists of color involved in the Black Is Beautiful movement promoted positive body image and embodied liberation for people of color (Ingrid Banks 2000; Maxine Leeds Craig 2002; Stephanie M. H. Camp 2015). These various approaches coalesced with the advent of the internet, reemerging in the 2000s under the label “Body Positivity” (Charlotte Cooper 2016). New digital technologies have enabled Body Positive activists to organize large online campaigns with the goal of achieving cultural change and reclaiming self-love. However, in recent years, mainstreamed forms of the Body Positive movement have become co-opted by corporate interests (Rosalind Gill and Ana Sofia Elias 2014), leading to a greater risk of factioning within the broader movement (see Josée Johnston and Judith Taylor 2008; Amara Miller 2016).

The expansive nature and diversity of approaches to Body Positivity provide an underutilized opportunity for feminist scholars to study movement tensions. One early study by Johnston and Taylor (2008) compared the campaign strategies of Dove to those of grassroots Body Positive groups. The authors found that consumer feminism (represented by Dove’s marketing approach) obscures the systemic influences that promote idealized beauty typologies. In contrast, grassroots Body Positive approaches encourage individuals to engage in systemic critiques of the power that validates beauty norms. Thus, corporate and grassroots manifestations of Body Positivity work towards markedly different goals: the former encourages women to psychologically adapt to the existing social structure, while the latter emphasizes the need for structural changes.

Sastre (2014) agrees that radical body positivity is often not realized by mainstream approaches. Drawing upon a qualitative analysis of three prominent Body-Positive internet sites, Sastre argues that many representations of the movement ultimately preserve—rather than disrupt—the status quo:
The ideology of body positivity frames the democratization of exposure as liberatory, and positions the inclusivity it embeds in the act of showing oneself as a radical move. Yet in so doing, it continues to imagine the relinquishment of privacy and the act of exposure as the devices through which bodily acceptance is obtained; rather than liberating the docile body, there is merely an extension of who is allowed to declare her compliance (Sastre 2014, 937).

According to Sastre, the Body Positive Movement reinforces heteropatriarchal values by encouraging women to self-objectify in the name of liberation, leaving hegemonic power structures unchallenged.

Other scholars have also noted that the traits that achieve the most representation within mainstream formulations of Body Positivity are oftentimes those that pose the least challenge to hegemonic gender ideology. Upon comparing viewer feedback generated by body hair and body fat advocacy campaigns, Helana Darwin (2017) speculates that body fat might be more celebrated than body hair within the movement because it is less saliently associated with gender-inversion and “man-hating feminism.” Darwin further notes that self-proclaimed members of the Body Positive Movement were quick to delegitimize the body hair campaigns in her sample as “body positive” on the basis of the models’ thinness, even though no viewers delegitimized the body fat campaigns on the basis of the models’ hairlessness. Darwin concludes that fat positivity has become synonymous with body positivity and ultimately wields a hegemonic influence within the movement. Meanwhile, Jessica Cwynar-Horta (2016) argues that the dominance of relatively thin white women using Body Positive affirmations on Instagram has changed the structure and goals of the movement in ways that are less inclusive. Though these authors reach different conclusions about fat’s status within the movement, similar to Shelley Budgeon (2014, 326), both find evidence that “the privilege of particular femininities is sustained … at the expense of other possible articulations.” Thus, stigmatized body features remain marginalized within the “Body Positive” movement.

**Historical tensions within post/feminist movements**

In many ways, the contemporary Body Positive Movement reflects the complex entanglement of third and fourth wave feminism with postfeminism(s). The third wave of feminism achieved prominence in the 1990s, spearheading critiques of the racially exclusionary nature of much “second wave” organizing in the 1960s and 1970s. According to R. Claire. Snyder (2008), the third wave constitutes an intersectional approach to feminism that foregrounds multivocal personal narratives and seeks greater inclusion of racial and sexual minorities (Kimberlé Crenshaw 1991; Amber E. Kinser 2004; R. Walker 1995). A “fourth wave” emerged when feminist dialogues moved into cyberspace in the 2010s, enabled by social media platforms like Youtube, Facebook, and Instagram (Elizabeth Evans and Prudence Chamberlain 2015, 399). Nicola Rivers (2017, 24) notes that “much like the third wave before it, fourth-wave feminism is fractured and complex, frequently reinforcing the advancement of the individual and centering the seductive notions of ‘choice,’ ‘empowerment,’ and ‘agency.’” Although the interface of digital platforms and feminist activism offer great potential for new subjectivities and social formations, such feminisms are also precarious. The oppressive nature of neoliberalism and the potentially “toxic” environments of online spaces can restrict the formation of solidarity among diverse activists (Hester Baer 2016).
The third and fourth waves are often associated with “postfeminism,” a distinct ideology and conceptual shift that, despite having roots in earlier activism, didn’t gain prominence until the early 1990s (Rivers 2017, 15). According to Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (2013), the term is associated with the (popular culture) suggestion that feminism is a thing of the past as well as the subsequent scholarly responses that argue postfeminism is a backlash against past feminist successes. Theoretically, postfeminism signals an epistemological break linked to postmodernism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism. Rosalind Gill (2007) also argues that postfeminism can be conceived of as a sensibility, or cultural phenomenon, which emphasizes “the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them.” Postfeminism is generally characterized by a number of relatively stable features, including:

- the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification;
- the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference (Gill 2007, 149).

These themes are shaped by experiences of inequality and exclusion. Given the emphasis on individualism and freely choosing subjects, “postfeminism is . . . a neoliberal sensibility” and may be best thought of as a kind of “gendered neoliberalism” (Rosalind Gill 2017, 611).

Considering the relationship of contemporary feminisms and neoliberal principles, it remains unclear the extent to which digital platforms generate and mobilize particular constructions of postfeminism(s) and resist others (Abigail Locke, Rebecca Lawthom and Antonia Lyons 2018). Some critics worry that when the meaning of “feminism” becomes too elastic, it becomes vulnerable to capitalist and patriarchal manipulation; thence arise “false feminism” and “weak feminism,” which appear to challenge the status quo while ultimately leaving oppressive power structures intact (Kinser 2004). In this study, we join Jessalynn Keller and Maureen E. Ryan (2018, 2) in asking what the contemporary “feminist zeitgeist” suggests about the relationships between and among femininity, feminism, postfeminism, anti-feminism, and contemporary media culture. Which feminisms attain mediated visibility and which remain marginalized?

**Incorporating frame analysis**

Existing literature indicates that the Body Positive Movement is far from unified; however, scholarship has yet to clearly identify the various groups within this movement and to explore their relationships with one another. Recognizing the coexistence of numerous frames within Body Positivity and the multiplicity of the movement, our analysis explores how online discourse among activists (re)exposes fractures, inconsistencies and inequalities within contemporary post/feminisms. To accomplish this task, we draw upon social movement theory, a body of knowledge that conceptualizes the dynamics of social movements.

According to Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow (2000), successful movements generally mobilize their followers behind a coherent objective known as a “collective action frame,” or a set of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of movement organizations and/or participants. Activists must engage in
three overlapping processes to establish a frame for a social movement, including: *discourse* between participants; *alignment strategies*, aimed at unifying and amplifying the power of the movement; and *contestation* between activists, followers, and oppositional forces, which allows for the clarification of movement goals and tactics (Benford and Snow 2000).

Through digital platforms, members of the Body Positive Movement can readily engage in discourse and frame contestation; however, whether and how they resolve their ideological differences through “alignment strategies” requires further scrutiny. Benford and Snow (2000) clarify that there are at least four different types of alignment strategies, including: *frame bridging* (bringing the goals of two or more factions together); *frame amplification* (increasing the importance of one faction’s frame); *frame extension* (broadening the frame of the dominant faction to address the concerns of other factions); and *frame transformation* (changing the frame of the movement entirely to acquire greater appeal). If one group amplifies their particular interests over those of other groups—thereby failing at frame bridging—the movement risks dissolution or a phase of transformation that produces a new, distinct iteration of a movement. As Johnston et al. (2008) note, the Body Positive Movement is especially vulnerable to the frame amplification of “false feminism” and “weak feminism” due to the corporate interests of beauty companies. This study considers how Body Positivity is constituted through social media, particularly blogging, revealing contentions and factions within the movement as well as “mini-narratives” utilized by participants to frame their efforts to achieve cultural and social change. It is beyond the scope of this analysis to determine whether these factions represent separate movements altogether, rather than facets of the same movement. Future studies might explore this matter further through social movement analysis.

**Methods**

Before proceeding any further, we should specify that our entry into this project was driven by our positionality as movement participants, or what Asale Angel-Ajani (2004) and Kim TallBear (2014) refer to generally as “scholar-activists.” Helana Darwin has blogged about critiques of the Body Positive Movement for the online news site *Huffington Post* and regularly attended meetings of a Body Positive group in New York City during 2015. Amara Miller has been involved in Body Positive work within yoga spaces since 2014. Our insider status benefits our scholarship by heightening our awareness of competing ideological factions, yet also renders us vulnerable to bias, a contradiction we sought to navigate throughout the research process.

We originally intended to pursue a digital ethnography of a virtual Body Positive community. However, after a preliminary exploration of Body Positive sites on Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and Instagram, we concluded that conversations in these spaces did not highlight the movement’s frame(s) so much as individuals’ personal experiences with beauty culture. We eventually settled on a discourse analysis of blog articles about the Body Positive Movement because this medium allows authors to explain the movement to outsiders while sharing their criticisms of the movement. Bloggers’ rhetorical devices and constructions illuminate instances of frame contestation as well as important ideological divisions among members of the movement.
We collected a convenience sample of blog articles by searching for the phrases “Body Positivity” and “Body Positive Movement” through Google. We allowed the Google search algorithm to guide the sampling process, reasoning that those who are curious about the Body Positive Movement may begin by performing just such an internet search; therefore, the top results carry substantial prescriptive and descriptive power in defining the movement. It should be noted that this methodological approach limits the scope of our analysis to the Anglo-American faction of the Body Positive Movement.

Sometimes these blog articles presented quotes from famous Body Positive activists such as Lindy West, but more often than not the bloggers provided their own definitions and observations about the movement. There are two main categories of articles within this sample: news pieces and opinion pieces about the Body Positive Movement. News pieces present presumably objective definitions of the movement, feature quotes from Body Positive leaders, and often acknowledge the coexistence of multiple movement frames. Opinion pieces feature the authors’ observations about the movement along with their frame contestations and accompanying rationale.

In total, the sample (listed in the Appendix) included fifty blog articles, averaging 1270 words each and ranging from 156 to 3020 words long. We conducted our first round of research in 2014 and the second in 2016, reviewing twenty-five blogs during each time window and only including articles that made reference to the purpose of the Body Positive Movement or provided a definition of it. There are three authors who occur twice within the sample; all other blogs are written by different authors. It appears that all authors are women—opinion pieces include references to the authors’ identity as women and all authors’ names are stereotypically feminine. Though cis men, trans men, and non-binary people also participate in Body Positivity, their voices are evidently not represented within our sample of authors who dominated Google search results about the movement, a reflection of already existing media silences, exclusions, and inequalities.

We manually coded the blogs in two rounds, initially conducting a preliminary round of “open coding” that noted any themes or rhetorical devices that the authors utilized to discuss the Body Positive Movement. Main thematic categories that emerged included definitions of Body Positivity; assertions about the movement’s framing, purpose, goals, shortcomings; observations about contentions within the movement; and suggestions for improving the movement. After this initial round of coding, we focused on identifying the different rhetorical devices that authors used to discuss and represent the movement’s purpose. Four main frames arose from this second round of coding, which we label: Mainstream Body Positivity; Fat Positivity = Body Positivity; Radical Body Positivity; and Body Neutrality. We did not identify any significant changes in the dominance of these frames between the 2014 and 2016 blog samples.

Of course, there are limitations with this study. The opinions of prominent Body Positive bloggers are not necessarily representative of the movement at large (Douglas Blanks Hindman 2009; Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba and Henry E. Brady 2010; Jen Schradie 2011). Future studies might interview regular participants as well as leaders in the Body Positive Movement (besides Lindy West) to explore this movement’s constructions from other angles. It might also be productive to survey a general audience about their understanding of the movement, whether and why they identify with the movement, and how their engagement with Body Positivity has transformed over time. How have Body Positive activists become radicalized through certain (digital) spaces or
experiences? Understanding paths of entry into the Radical Body Positive faction might help chart a path toward a more inclusive future for the movement that is able to resist postfeminist neoliberal constructions and create a more just and equitable future for all.

**Results**

This section summarizes each faction of Body Positivity identified during coding, the self-identified purpose of the movement according to faction proponents, and noteworthy criticisms from other activist bloggers levied against proponents of that frame. We call the dominant frame (referenced thirty-two times) “Mainstream Body Positivity,” since this is how critics refer to it and because it is the frame that corporations most often endorse. We call the second most prevalent frame (referenced twenty-six times) “Fat Positivity = Body Positivity” to convey the conflation made between these movements by faction proponents. We call the third and least prevalent faction (referenced eleven times) “Radical Body Positivity” to highlight the self-conscious, intersectional approach expressed by its proponents. Finally, a fourth faction (referenced fourteen times) advocates for a psychological goal we call “Body Neutrality.” Though some of these frames can be—and are—integrated with one another (such as Radical Body Positivity and Body Neutrality), other frames explicitly contest one another and exist as mutually distinct factions. The tensions between competing factions illuminate how a number of unresolved questions and ideological disputes about the Body Positivity Movement and feminism arise in new online contexts of the fourth wave.

**Mainstream Body Positivity**

Mainstream Body Positivity argues that women need to engage in more self-love as a psychological act of resistance against their objectification in society. This message often manifests through corporate image campaigns and “selfies” (self-portraits that individuals create to post online). Selfies are typically staged; therefore, the process of constructing a selfie is also the process of constructing an idealized self (Michel Foucault 1976; Katie Warfield 2014). Selfies that people associate with the movement through hashtags such as #BodyPositivity convey the message that beauty is democratically attainable by all, and that looking and feeling beautiful and sexy is tantamount to empowerment. It is worth noting that the same faction that sends this message is often comprised of or supported by powerful actors and corporations who profit from beauty culture.

Within the ideological context of Mainstream Body Positivity, some celebrities’ naked photos have been heralded as Body Positive milestones. For example, Keira Knightly’s topless photo shoot is on a list of best Body Positive moments from 2014. Knightly explained that she posed for the session in an effort to reclaim the sexiness and beauty of her small breasts, which are usually digitally enhanced. Another example is Laverne Cox’s naked spread for *Allure* magazine. Cox explained why this imagery was empowering: “Black women are not often told that we’re beautiful unless we align with certain standards. Trans women certainly are not told that we’re beautiful. Seeing a Black transgender woman embracing and loving everything about her body might be inspiring for some folks” (as quoted by Elizabeth Siegel 2015).
However, not everyone within the Body Positive Movement agrees that these mainstream #BodyPositive selfies and photo shoots are empowering. Some activists argue that this type of imagery reinforces a patriarchal value system that assigns women worth based on their bodily appearance. Blogger Lisa Kaplin (2015) pronounces that “The positive body image movement is yet another dangerous fascination with women’s appearance and not women’s overall well-being.” According to this activist and others like her, these images do little to change beauty culture, especially when they feature women who already align with Western beauty ideals. Blogger Just Me Leah elaborates:

It’s not my place to say who gets to be proud of their bodies, but it seems to me that a large percentage of people use body positivity to say ‘Look how fabulous I am!’ whilst POC, larger fats and less traditionally attractive folks who need body positivity the MOST are being edged out (as quoted by Alyssia Dalessandro 2016).

For these critics, Mainstream Body Positivity campaigns and selfies constitute a type of “false feminism.”

Some defend Mainstream Body Positivity in response to this critique, arguing that women have the right to navigate the current power structure in whatever ways help them feel good about themselves. Mainstream Body Positivity advocate Kobi Jae (2016) explains:

Unfortunately, the vessel we exist in plays a big role in the way we navigate through this world . . . . So yes, the overarching concept of beauty is so much more than just skin deep. But body positivity is about the body, and using diversity as a beacon for body acceptance is actually a really productive thing.

According to this rejoinder, women ideally shouldn’t need to worry about beauty; yet, we do not live in that ideal world and it is unfair to blame victims for adapting to their circumstances. These internal contentions about Mainstream Body Positivity’s potential to spur lasting change raise important questions about whether the purpose of the Body Positive Movement is to promote individual psychological change and feelings of empowerment, or to enact systemic change for the sake of the collective well-being of all groups.

Mainstream Body Positivity is strongly characterized by postfeminist sensibilities. This faction generally constructs individual choice as the primary means of personal empowerment, while embracing ideals of beauty and sexiness as key elements of positive body image. Emphasis on selfies and photoshoots encourages self-surveillance and participation in one’s own objectification, often relying on makeover paradigms that are tied to consumption practices. Such a construction reflects the coexistence of contradictory feminist and anti-feminist themes common in postfeminisms. According to our analysis, this particular faction has garnered the greatest mediated visibility in the context of the fourth wave, illuminating the extent to which movement discourse intersects with neoliberalist ideology, consumer cultures, and corporate interests.

**Fat Positivity=Body Positivity**

The second-most prominent faction, Fat Possitivity = Body Possitivity, advocates for a focus on the systemic discrimination that fat women experience instead of the body image issues that women experience more generally. This frame amplifies the significance of fat women’s exclusion from Western beauty ideals, spurring substantial online discourse
about the differential impact of fat stigma and how to operationalize fatness in the first place. As Lindy West explained to blogger Jaleesa M. Jones (2016): “Putting a size 12, hourglass-shaped white woman on the cover of your magazine, who’s just microscopically bigger than the model you would normally see on the cover, and then congratulating yourself on being progressive? That proves nothing.”

Scholars within Fat Studies have argued that Fat Positivity should not be used synonymously with Body Positivity (Cooper 2016); however, our findings indicate that some bloggers perpetuate this conflation. Proponents of the Fat Positivity = Body Positivity frame stand out as a separate faction from Mainstream Body Positivity insofar as they disagree that Body Positivity is for everyone; rather, they often imply that Body Positivity is (or should be) for fat women specifically. As Fat Positivity = Body Positivity activist Janine Williams explained to blogger Dalessandro (2016):

There is an increasing emphasis placed on the inclusion of all bodies within the body positive movement, and while that is certainly good in some respects, it’s important to consider the ways in which that forced equalization erases the very real ways in which fat bodies are disproportionately affected by stigma. It’s vital that we remember body positivity was born from the fat acceptance movement and continue to center the voices and experiences of fat people.

Fat women unquestionably experience systemic discrimination within American society compared to their thin counterparts (Janna L. Fikkan and Esther D. Rothblum 2012). However, Williams’ assertions are historically contestable. Contemporary Body Positivity has undoubtedly been influenced by the Fat Acceptance movement, but there is no evidence that the Body Positive Movement arose solely from Fat Positivity.

Fat Feminists’ claims to the Body Positive Movement have been challenged by numerous women who find themselves excluded by this frame amplification of fatness. As one blogger Alissa (2016) explains:

Unfortunately, the media will have you believe that its only people who are overweight or obese that struggle with body image. I didn’t grow up plus size and I can remember having personal body issues just like any young girl. People who are tall, short, thin, thick, fat, or chubby all have personal body issues. You can be a size 2 and think your thighs are humongous or your booty is not big enough.

Alissa questions the Fat Positivity = Body Positivity frame through a psychological standpoint that emphasizes the harmful impacts of society’s “thin ideal” on all women. Indeed, studies indicate that Western beauty ideals have a negative psychological impact on women regardless of their body size (Rachel M. Calogero and Tracy L. Tylka 2010).

Moreover, repeated exposure to thin ideal imagery has been correlated with an increase in eating disorders (Calogero and Tylka 2010). Nevertheless, recovering anorexics and bulimics find themselves excluded from Fat Positivity = Body Positivity if they socially benefit from thin privilege. Blogger Pia Glenn (2015) elaborates upon why she perceives her exclusion to be problematic, given her history with eating disorders:

I am a person who has survived eating disorders and still has to manage certain destructive behaviors … I’ve come a loooooong way with regard to feeling good about what I see when I look in a mirror and I’m still on that journey. If the #BodyPosi tags were LITERALLY ONLY about feeling positive about your body, then technically I could jump on board without a second thought. But once again, I am preaching to the Gospel of Almighty Context. The
swiftest of Google searches or even a quick perusal of the pictures people are sharing of beauty in sizes larger than the majority of selfies out there.

The Fat Positivity = Body Positivity faction also excludes the formerly obese on the basis of their newfound thin privilege. As a blogger who simply goes by the name of Kenlie (2016) shares, “A few years ago I faced incredible amounts of opposition from the most notable fat acceptance organizations in the US because I didn’t necessarily want to stay fat.” Kenlie felt ostracized within the Body Positive Movement when she lost weight because her community equated Fat Positivity with Body Positivity. Such exclusion is problematic given evidence that the formerly obese remain at risk for suicide, negative body image, and lower self-esteem even after weight loss (Becca R. Levy and Corey E. Pilver 2012).

The contestation surrounding this frame illuminates a tension within Body Positivity: relatively thin women feel excluded by Fat Positivity = Body Positivity, while proponents of this frame accuse Mainstream Body Positivity of amplifying thin women’s interests. In both cases, the emphasis and contention surrounding Fat Positivity = Body Positivity revolves around size. Proponents of this faction are generally more focused on structural concerns, challenging gendered neoliberalism, and resisting postfeminist sensibilities than Mainstream Body Positivity. However, this seemingly fourth-wave Fat Positivity = Body Positivity frame also reproduces critical weaknesses of second wave feminism by amplifying the concerns of the relatively privileged—in this case, (fat) middle-class white women. This reveals how historically grounded conditions of power and privilege continue to contribute to the amplification of particular frames over others in Body Positivity, thereby marginalizing diverse movement participants.

**Radical Body Positivity**

Radical Body Positivity also argues that the movement’s focus should be on combating systemic rather than individual experiences of oppression; however, this faction disagrees that the focus should be explicitly on fat. This self-consciously intersectional faction extends Body Positivity to all axes of oppression and often criticizes whitewashing within both Mainstream Body Positivity and Fat Positivity = Body Positivity frames. Proponents of this frame often explicitly connect their work to third wave feminist theorists, even though their use of social media to disrupt and transform media cultures evokes operational definitions of fourth wave feminism as well. Radical Body Positivity actively resists postfeminist sensibilities and criticizes those factions that prescribe to such approaches.

Blogger Kobi Jae (2016) summarizes this faction’s central critique of the broader movement as follows: “The fact that we are primarily presented with the package of white, cis-gendered, plus-size (yet perfectly proportioned and ‘hourglass’ shaped) women is no accident. This is safe.” Podcast microcelebrity Ariel Woodson also elaborates upon Radical Body Positivity’s mission in an interview with blogger Alysse Delassandro (2016):

> I need body positive folks to focus less on reassuring people that they are ‘pretty’ or ‘not fat’ and more on what can be done to disrupt the standards that oppress all bodies, while never forgetting that not all oppressions are equal. Center people who fall further outside of the conversation in all ways.

Proponents of Radical Body Positivity like Kobi and Ariel advocate for a shift in focus toward those who experience multiple axes of vulnerability, instead of just sizeism. They
argue that a focus on such intersectionally marginalized subjects yields the unique potential to illuminate the systemic forces that privilege a select few, address the root causes of oppression, and ultimately liberate all bodies.

One of the most radical Body Positive bloggers in this study, Sonya Renee Taylor, founder of the online community The Body is Not an Apology, advocates for a shift away from beauty altogether toward a focus on what she calls “body terrorism”: As Taylor explains on the organization’s website:

The historical and contemporary violence associated with body hatred is widespread and horrific. Terror is defined as intense, sharp, overmastering fear. Terrorism is the inflicting of such fear on an individual or group. The Body is not an Apology is a movement focused on countering the devastating impacts of hating our bodies and having others hate our bodies (Sonya Renee Taylor n.d).

Taylor encourages followers of the Body Positive Movement to extend their focus to the global and/or macro scale in order to attune to the needs of the most marginalized. Taylor’s team of bloggers regularly produces articles about issues facing people who have been excluded from Mainstream Body Positivity, including women of color, trans* people, women who wear hijabs, and Native Americans. Although Taylor emphasizes collective well-being and systemic change as the central preoccupation of the movement, she understands this to be inextricable from individual psychological well-being.

Significantly, Radical Body Positivity was the least prevalent of the frames within our sample, only occurring a total of eleven times. This underrepresentation of Radical Body Positivity is not a coincidence, according to blogger Dalessandro (2016). Dalessandro encourages her readers to resist Mainstream Body Positivity’s dominance by educating people about Body Positive factions that pose a greater threat to the status quo and consequently receive less media attention:

Confronting a person who doesn’t understand body positivity beyond mainstream’s iteration can be frustrating. But taking the time to explain that body positivity as a movement shouldn’t be about one person’s individuals body liberation but a group of individuals pushing for acceptance for bodies still stigmatized the most can be a valuable lesson for a person willing to listen.

The goal of this kind of Radical Body Positivity is to shift the movement’s focus away from the individual towards systemic change by centering the voices and experiences of multiply marginalized subjects.

**Body Neutrality**

The fourth faction of Body Positivity uncovered during coding was only slightly more prevalent than Radical Body Positivity. This faction focuses on individual psychological transformation, but contests the Mainstream frame’s focus on self-love, advocating instead for an adjusted goal that is sometimes referred to by activists as body acceptance or “Body Neutrality.” We use the latter term to refer to this frame due to contentions about mainstreaming of the phrase “body acceptance” (see Miller 2016).

Melissa Fabello, editor of Feministing, explains her investment in the Body Neutrality framing in the following passage:
I’ve started using ‘body acceptance’ to describe the work that I do and the values that I stand for, rather than ‘body positivity’—because I think it’s time that we, as a movement, stop pushing people to love their bodies completely before they’ve even had a chance to apologize and make friends with them.... It puts a lot of undue pressure on folks when we provide a ‘what’ without the ‘how,’ to expect them to miraculously jump from hatred to unconditional love in a single bound (Melissa Fabello 2015).

According to Fabello, the mainstream movement’s directive to become empowered by looking and feeling sexy is not a viable option for all women—or even a commonly shared desire. Blogger Allison Summers (2015) further worries that Mainstream Body Positivity alienates women by advocating for self-love: “Encouraging women to love every inch of their bodies all the time seems patronizing, and honestly, a little narcissistic.” For women struggling to love their bodies, a self-love directive can be exclusionary.

In alignment with third wave feminist politics, Body Neutrality extends membership to anyone who struggles with body image issues, regardless of their social privilege. Thus, despite its emphasis upon psychological well-being, the framing of Body Neutrality resonates with some of the concerns raised by the Radical Body Positivity frame about systemic oppression. West elaborates upon the “Body Neutrality” sensibility in an interview with blogger Jones (2016):

I don’t think everyone needs to feel positive about their body all the time. That’s just an extra layer of anguish that I don’t think is constructive. What I’m interested in is neutrality from the world. I’m interested in people being able to live without being pathologized. And within that, people can feel however they want about their bodies.

According to West, people would be less marginalized within society if their bodies were not so pathologized by themselves and by the outside world. However, society does construct certain bodies as pathological—and it can be difficult to love a body that society hates. Therefore, to include more people within the movement, proponents of Body Neutrality argue that Body Positivity must embrace this more attainable psychological goal. As Fabello (2015) explains, “We’ve got to help people survive before we can expect them to thrive.”

Despite its criticisms of Mainstream Body Positivity, the Body Neutrality frame shares some postfeminist characteristics. Proponents focus on individual body image and generally rely on neoliberal notions of choice and agency regarding one’s relationship with one’s body—even while acknowledging that systemic forces impact one’s ability to engage in self-love. This frame also encourages self-surveillance, with the ultimate goal of maintaining an emotional neutrality toward one’s body. Although less commodified than Mainstream Body Positivity, Body Neutrality approaches can also fall prey to a reliance on a makeover paradigm that is tied to consumption practices; however, this faction generally rejects the Mainstream movement’s emphasis on beauty and sexiness.

Reflections on a body positive future

This article has identified and analyzed four collective action frames that coexist within the Body Positive Movement in North America. Discourse analysis of fifty prominent blog articles reveals that proponents of these different factions have contesting beliefs regarding the movement’s purpose. Mainstream Body Positivity frames the movement as one
that aims to improve women’s body image and self-esteem through empowering phrases like “all bodies are beautiful.” However, at least three other factions contest this Mainstream framing and the way that it tends to amplify the interests and experiences of those who are already privileged. For example, Fat Positivity = Body Positivity activists frequently challenge the prevalence of thin women within Mainstream frames. Meanwhile, women of color who promote Radical Body Positivity take issue with the whitewashing of oppression within both the Mainstream and Fat Positivity = Body Positivity frames. And finally, Body Neutrality activists contest the mainstream movement’s expectation that women make the psychological leap from hating their bodies to loving their bodies while their social circumstances remain unchanged. Though some of these factions overlap at times (most notably Radical Body Positivity with Body Neutrality), ideological schisms among these groups indicate that the Body Positive Movement’s “frame bridging” enterprise is far from complete.

Our findings reveal that the Body Positive Movement is not just multi-faceted, but also deeply divided. Activists are not in agreement about the movement’s purpose or criteria for inclusion and exclusion. While all activists featured in this study seem to agree that “the personal is political,” they disagree about which the Body Positive Movement should emphasize: the personal (e.g., psychological liberation) or the political (e.g., systemic change). According to David R. Brake (2014), “online content creators tend to be from relatively privileged groups and the content of online services based on their contributions may be biased toward what is most interesting or relevant to them” (see also Schradie 2011). In their national study of American bloggers, Lu Wei (2009) found that content producers with higher class status produced more personal journals compared to those who were lower-class, who were more likely to write blogs focused on political knowledge. Although it’s impossible to uncover demographic details for all the blog authors in our study, our data suggests that Body Positive activists who are relatively privileged along race, ability, and/or size axes often frame the movement as a means of promoting individual psychological empowerment, while those who battle structural inequalities feel like the external causes of their oppression are trivialized and under-represented within more dominant movement frames. Despite the movement’s embrace of multivocality and utilization of fourth wave digital platforms, Body Positivity remains compromised by the frame amplification of relatively privileged women’s interests.

Given our methodological choice to use social media blogs as a data source, all the factions we studied reflect the complex nature of fourth wave feminism. However, unlike Rivers’ (2017, 24) claim that “contemporary feminisms’ relationship with neoliberal and neoconservative principles has become ever more entwined,” these findings challenge the assumption that fourth wave experiences are also necessarily postfeminist. Factions like Mainstream Body Positivity and Body Neutrality undoubtedly take on many aspects of postfeminism(s), including a focus on neoliberal notions of choice, individual empowerment, and agency obtained through consumption practices and a makeover paradigm. On the other hand, Radical Body Positivity’s frame contestation resists postfeminist sensibilities. Fat Acceptance = Body Positivity and Radical Body Positivity frames engage in structural critiques of dominant society, particularly beauty standards as well as systemic discrimination of marginalized groups. Continued emphasis on systemic inequality belies the individualistic focus of postfeminism(s), and many Radical Body Positive activists remain deeply skeptical of more neoliberal approaches to the movement.
Our analysis also highlights the complex historical ties between the second, third, and fourth waves and the ways such feminisms continue to coexist in digital spaces. Echoing historic debates in feminism, dominant factions in Body Positivity reflect second wave frame amplification of privileged women’s interests, even as factions like Radical Body Positivity rely on a critical racial politic associated with third wave feminism. In the fourth wave, the continued prevalence of these coexisting frames and factions reflect what Hester Baer (2016) more generally describes as “the way recent protest actions play out central tensions within historical and contemporary feminist discourse.” Rivers (2017, 22) argues for a more reflexive and fluid use of “feminist wave” terminology that envisages a wave as constantly in flux: “This means rejecting the imposition of a linear narrative of progression . . . and instead advocating for an analysis that celebrates intergenerational exchanges and the blurring of boundaries between differing schools of feminist thought.” As our analysis demonstrates, diverse feminist politics coexist in the Body Positivity movement. Indeed, this study speaks to the way social media technologies have created spaces where multiple feminist waves and political and epistemological strands exist simultaneously (Evans and Chamberlain 2015) with varying degrees of visibility and direct interaction. Although social media technologies are often considered a democratizing force, digital divides and ideological conflicts between factions based on experiences of size, race, or class reproduce power structures that continue to haunt contemporary fourth wave feminism.

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References


## Appendix. Blog Article Sample

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<td>Body Positivity, Fat Acceptance and Food Justice</td>
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<td>Two Plus Size Bloggers Leading The Body Positive Movement</td>
<td>Kelly Glover</td>
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<td>Is Body Positivity Ruining Your Life?</td>
<td>Callievita</td>
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<td>2014’s 11 Best (and worst) Moments in Body Image- From Neringa</td>
<td>Marie Southard Ospina</td>
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<td>Rekasiute’s “We Women” to Keira Knightley’s Interview Mag Shoot</td>
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<td>What is the Body Positive Movement?</td>
<td>Justine Figueroa</td>
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<td>5 New Directions for the Body-Positive Movement</td>
<td>Melissa A. Fabello</td>
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<td>Is the “Body Positive” Movement a Consumerist Revolution?</td>
<td>Taylor Francis</td>
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<td>Why I Dislike the Positive Body Image Movement</td>
<td>Womanstats</td>
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<td>Pretty Unnecessary: Taking Beauty out of Body Positivity</td>
<td>Lindsay King-Miller</td>
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<td>The “Plus-Size” Calvin Klein Model and Why Everything is Objectively Terrible</td>
<td>Jenny Trout</td>
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<td>Body Positivity Has No Size Limit</td>
<td>Jessica Lovejoy</td>
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<td>American Apparel Can’t Have Its Body Positivity Cake and Eat It, Too</td>
<td>Alison Herman</td>
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<td>Why the Fat Acceptance/Body Positive Movement is Actually Toxic</td>
<td>Anonymous</td>
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<td>The Plus Size Problem: Revisited</td>
<td>Kacee Eddinger</td>
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<td>It’s Okay to be “Fat in Public,” Declares Body-Positive Blog</td>
<td>Rebecca Hiscott</td>
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<td>“All About that Bass” Isn’t Actually Body-Positive</td>
<td>Kelsey Mckinney</td>
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<td>Are “Body Positive” Music Videos All that Positive?</td>
<td>Julie Zellinger</td>
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<td>The Body Positivity Role Model We’ve all Been Waiting For</td>
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<td>Laverne Cox Goes Nude for Allure</td>
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<td>Why the Positive Body Image Movement is Bad for Women</td>
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<td>Sophie Benson</td>
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