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Whalen Symposium Abstract

Project Title: Unruly Bodies and Sexual Pleasure: An Exploration of the Relationship Between Body Image and Physical Intimacy in Fat Women

Abstract:

Previous research has indicated that there is a relationship between women's body image and their sexual experience, but little research has been done on how fat women experience sexuality. A recent study published in the *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology, and Education* found that the average American woman wears between a size 16 and 18, which lands solidly within the range of plus-size clothing (Christel and Dunn, 2017). This information suggests that there is a significant portion of American women who are being left out of academic research on body image and sexuality, as the most commonly studied samples consist of younger, heterosexual white women who are much closer to having 'acceptable' bodies [based on socially-constructed beauty ideals (Satinsky et al., 2013)]. Fat women are in a unique position to discuss body image and sexuality because they are hyper(in)visible, in that fat women tend to be simultaneously hypersexualized through fetishization of their fatness *and* desexualized by society based on notions of what the "ideal" woman should look like. Fat women may perceive themselves as being viewed negatively by society (including by potential sexual partners), which can have extensive and lasting implications for their sexual experiences (Satinsky et al., 2013). Thus the primary research questions we posed were: 1) How does body image impact how fat women experience physical intimacy and sexual pleasure during partnered sex?; 2) Does body image impact how fat women find sexual partners?; and 3) Does the impact of body image on how fat women experience physical intimacy and sexual pleasure in partnered sex differ between casual sex and long-term relationships?

Our goal for this study was to look at fat women who were not actively attempting to change their bodies; we did not want to focus on weight but on how fat women felt about their bodies as they existed at the time of the interview. We did not want to focus on weight loss in any aspect of our study because we did not want to play into the existing literature that promotes the idea that fat women should be unhappy with their bodies and should be actively attempting to lose weight in order to feel happy, or in this case, sexually satisfied. We interviewed nine women whose average clothing size was size 16 or above; we recruited through various Facebook groups that were aimed towards plus-size or fat women. Due to our recruitment strategy, none of our participants attended Ithaca College—our participants lived all over the U.S., and ranged in age from 19- to 32-years-old. We decided to recruit online via social media in hopes of getting a diverse sample of women and not limiting ourselves to exclusively college students (the population featured in a significant amount of existing literature on body image). We ended up with a diverse sample in terms of age as well as sexual orientation.

We conducted all of our interviews via Zoom video conferencing during December 2018, and concluded our research at the end of last semester. Our data suggest that there is a link between body image and physical intimacy for fat women, especially related to experiences of partnered sex, confidence in finding potential sexual partners, specific positions that fat women are comfortable using with a partner, and sexual pleasure that fat women experience. Our findings suggest that it is unequivocally possible for fat women to be confident and love their bodies as they are, and that fat women can have sexually satisfying relationships, a conclusion

that is not commonly drawn, given existing academic research and societal scripts of what 'sexy' and 'happy' should look and be like.

Abstract word count: 602

Works cited:

- Christel, Deborah A. and Susan C. Dunn. 2017. "Average American women's clothing size: comparing National Health and Nutritional Examination Surveys (1988-2010) to ASTM International Misses & Women's Plus Size clothing." *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology, and Education*, 10(2): 129-136.
- Satinsky, Sonya, Barbara Dennis, Michael Reece, Stephanie Sanders, and Shaowen Bardzell. 2013. "My 'Fat Girl Complex': a preliminary investigation of sexual health and body image in women of size." *Culture, Health, and Sexuality*, 15(6): 710-725.