

OUT OF STYLE: HEGEMONIC CONSTRAINTS ON FAT MAN'S SELF-  
PRESENTATION THROUGH FASHION

by

Cassio Marques

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Laura Backstrom, Department of Sociology, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

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Fashion has functioned to produce and maintain hegemonic discourses of beauty and size by privileging thin, white, upper-classed and heteronormative standards. While fatness opposes these expectations, past research has yet to fully account for fat men who take an active role in using fashion. Neither their purpose nor their reasoning for using fashion has been extensively detailed. I ask three questions: (1) Are fat men able to manage fat stigma through their engagement with fashion? (2) How do fat men use fashion as part of their presentation of self? (3) What role does intersectionality play as these men use fashion in their presentation of self and possibly in managing stigma? Using a content analysis of four hundred Instagram posts and twenty-two semi-structured interviews, I found that given fatness's stigmatized position in fashion, men rely on their abilities to adhere to masculine standards in downplaying their fat identity. Furthermore, Black gay men's hyper-marginalized position makes it more difficult for them to adhere to the same masculine standards. These findings show that the fashion industry actively

prevents fat men from fully participating due to their size. Yet the way they use fashion is dictated by their ability to adhere to hegemonic masculine standards. Black gay men are most affected negatively as they have a hyper-marginalized status due to the intersection of their identities. As a result, popular accounts for “plus size” male fashion contribute to reproducing and reinforcing hegemonic standards of masculinity, and Black gay men who push boundaries in both gender and body presentation are left invisible.

## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to all who supported me

OUT OF STYLE: HEGEMONIC CONSTRAINTS ON FAT MAN’S SELF-  
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## I. INTRODUCTION

Music superstar and fashion icon Rihanna had social media and fashion insiders all talking about her October 2020 fashion show that showcased her fashion line Fenty. However, it wasn't the clothes that drew so much attention. Instead, the most shocking aspect was the way that fat bodies were incorporated on the runway and the degree to which these fat bodies were exposed. Media accounts praised the male body diversity that has been largely missing from the fashion industry (Nast 2021).

Fashion has functioned to produce and maintain normative discourses of beauty and body (Connell 2003; Gramsci 2000). Gramsci's (2000) theory of hegemony focuses on power relations between the dominant and dominated classes, specifically the enabling of the dominant class through their ability to dictate ideals for the lower classes by which these dominated classes scrutinize themselves over. These ideas create normative standards of power hierarchies that are perceived as natural (Barry 2015; Filiault and Drummond 2007; Robinson 2015). Fashion's privileging of thin, white, upper-classed and heteronormative body standards adds to the oppression of groups sitting outside these standards (Crane 2012; Connell 2003; Nichter and Bordo 1995). The contrast to normative cultural standards label fatness as opposite to normative cultural standards and is seen as embodying attributes related to moral flaws ascribed to people's failure to "get in shape." (Saguy 2011; Saguy and Ward, 2011; Stevens 2017).

In recent years, professional fashion has incorporated a more inclusive notion of fatter bodies through an increase of “plus size” models and “plus size” clothing (Acar et al. 2017; Czerniawski 2011). However, these bodies are “othered” rather than incorporated as acceptable within fashion (Connell 2003; Peters 2014). The industry is under critical scrutiny for the lack of true body inclusion, as the majority of “plus size” models are criticized for their bodies scarcely fitting into fat categorization. At the top of professional fashion there is an even greater absence of fat men, and in-trend style and popular brands have ignored the participation of men outside their standards. These men have limited agency since their abilities to present through fashion coincides with restricted appropriate options (Stevens 2017). These limitations make it almost impossible for fat individuals to participate in on-trend and fashionable options (Peters 2014). Past research has mainly focused on women’s participation in the fashion industry with little theoretical or empirical work aimed at understanding the participation of fat men in fashion.

Furthermore, little attention has been paid to fat men with minority racial and sexual identities as they participate in the fashion industry. Because fashion is influenced largely by hegemonic masculine standards, that use allow men to gain sexual validation and be a signifier of power, an intersectional analysis is needed to address how men manage the stigma of fatness along with other stigmatized identities. Peters (2014) argued that other identities help fat women as they present through fashion and serves the function of downplaying fat identities. However, these concepts have not been used to detail the experiences of fat men and how their identities might influence their experiences.

Given past research, however, there is reason to believe that these other identities will have an important impact on how fat men negotiate stigma through fashion. Within the gay community, there is a great emphasis on self-presenting within heteronormative fashioned standards and emphasizing muscular bodies which grants those superior positions on the social hierarchy within gay communities to men that fit into this presentation (Foster-Gimbel and Engeln 2016; Joy and Numer 2018; Grimm and Schwartz 2017; Robinson 2016). Ethnic stereotypes have also incorporated the importance of masculinity within the experiences and social hierarchies of these men (Foster-Gimbel and Engeln 2016). Black bodies are stereotyped with highly masculine attributes, placing more of a greater emphasis on the appearances of these men, as muscularity is expected of them (Grimm and Schwartz 2017). Yet the intersection between fatness and race nor sexual orientation have been fully explained within these studies. Although Cole (2019) shows that Black gay men have used fashion to gain back power from their stigmatized identity by adhering to notion of hyper-masculinity, the intersection of fatness adds another layer that these men need to contend with since it is an antagonist to masculinity.

Examining the possibilities for fat men as they engage with fashion, this study looks to fill the gaps in the literature. Specifically, I ask three research questions: (1) What discrimination do fat men face with fashion and how are they able to overcome constraints in fashion? (2) How do fat men use fashion as part of their presentation of self when their bodies are counter to normative standards of fashion? (3) What role does intersectionality play as these men use fashion in their presentation of self and possibly in managing stigma? To answer these questions, I draw on data from a dual methodology

study using both a content analysis consisting of four hundred Instagram posts and twenty-two semi structured interviews. All the data collected was from “plus-size” men who had used Instagram within a time span of a year starting from June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 to promote their fashion presentation through the use of a “plus-size” fashion hashtag. In analyzing the data, I find that fat men were able to manage stigma through engaging in fashion, mostly through the online platform. Their ability to use fashion is related to their ability to adhere to standards of masculinity, which determines their use of fashion in their presentation. I found two patterns that were used by these men: conformity and countercultural self-presentation. The intersection of marginalized identities affected Black gay men as they were unable to conform to masculine standards in their use of fashion given the hyper-marginalized position. These men were the sole subgroup to be coded as presenting in a countercultural manner.

Given these findings, I argue that although the fashion industry has been incorporating more “plus-size” models and options into fashion, participation by fat men in fashion is still stigmatized. Fat men are actively prevented from full participation as fashion refuses to include these men in areas of consumption, professionalism, and digital presentation entirely, nor do they see these men as valid participators in these realms. Given the stigmatized status of fatness, these men relied on their ability to downplay their fat identity by using fashion in their self-presentation. Adhering to hegemonic masculine standards allowed these men to gain confidence as their bodies gained validation and reduced their fat identity. Intersecting marginalized identities of Black gay men did not allow these men to gain advantages of adhering to masculine standards. This resulted in Black gay men to push forward gender and body boundaries as their presentation did not



rely on presenting themselves with fashion for reasons of power or sexual validation. Although Black gay men's use of fashion promotes fat acceptance in a way that does not reproduce negative connotation associated with hegemonic masculinity, these men are the most invisible and underrepresented in "plus-size" fashion. These findings are important in that they outline the position of fat men as it relates to fashion which has not yet been given adequate attention in the past literature. Additionally, these findings indicate that the importance of the role of masculinity as a way for these men to navigate stigmatized statuses when they felt they were adhering to hegemonic masculine standards. These findings suggest that hegemonic masculinity plays an integral part in fat men's participation and interaction with fashion since the majority of these men have relied on using its standards to reduce their stigmatized fat identity. The way masculinity is used is not just in their self-presentation but in their access to present in the first place. Since Black gay men are marginalized in their abilities to conform to these standards their use of fashion is different, this further suggests that intersectional analysis is needed to understand fat men's abilities to participate in fashion.

### **Roadmap**

In Chapter Two, I review the literature on fashion and presentation of self, stigma management, masculinity and intersectionality, and online platforms including methodology approach with the coding scheme and the interview protocol. In Chapter Three and Four, I present my findings. I break these findings into two major sections. Chapter Three details how men negotiate stigma in fashion and Chapter Four explains how these men came to use fashion and how they present. Chapter Five provides a summary and discussion of my findings.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Theoretical Context**

Fat men's low position within the social hierarchy is due to the negative information given off by their bodies. Goffman (1978) expressed the need for individuals to either seek information about those they meet by their self-presentation or to bring into play information already possessed about them, helping to define the situation by the perceived expectations of one another. Information is communicated in two ways: first through the trivial sense of verbal symbols, and second by the actions of the actor which can be treated as signaling (Goffman 2005). The focus on the external presentation of the self emphasizes the actions of the actors. The use of fashion can be seen as one of these signaling actions. Jagger (2000) states clothing's use-value, the purpose of clothing as to be utilized for protection or labor related use, has been replaced by signifiers becoming symbolic as they give off information about the person wearing it. Goffman (2005) stresses the importance of the information is on the intention of the impression rather how it is received, as long as the actor feels they are giving off their desired impression. Furthermore, fat bodies have been notoriously perceived within negative connotations when it comes to the information that they give out. The normative cultural views within the West regard these bodies as morally wrong and their bodies go against cultural logic of fashion (Cole 2019; Foster-Gimbel and Engeln 2016; Gruys 2012; Joy and Numer 2018; Limatius 2020; Saguy 2011; Saguy and Ward 2011; Stevens 2017). In recent years there has been a shift to consumption that has a considerable impact on the self, oriented

towards self-indulgence as a culturally meaningful practice and creating a culture centered on appearance (Jagger 2000; Howson, 2004).

Fat bodies come in direct conflict with contemporary consumer culture that encourages men to use fashion and other consumer products to enhance their presentation (Howson 2004). While they try and give off the impression as someone, this usually results in their intended impression to not be received. In current consumer culture the self is bound with the body, as the sense of who they are, their relation to others and their relation to the social context are essential in the appearances of an individual which the body is expected to be presented in a certain way (Jagger 2000). Given the link between one's body and self, fat men should need to somehow create a fashioned identity by their own means. Given their stigmatized position within consumer culture, these men have to deal with fitting into the culture norms before producing an impression relating to fashion.

The current position in relation to consumer culture means these men find themselves stigmatized. The negative conception of fatness is stigmatizing. Stigma is a trait that is deeply discrediting, but stigma is relational and does not refer to the characteristic itself (Goffman 1963). The media's growth of using bodies in their campaigns shifting the notion of these bodies from health to marketability, allowed for an ideal body image to be produced which gave way to comparisons (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner 1991). Sobal and Maurer (1999) express how ideal weight is socially constructed through social interactions. Backed by Western consumer culture to facilitate the concern about health and its association with the body, men are encouraged to use fashion and other products to enhance body image in fitting within ideals of

healthy bodies, and for men that is the body of muscularity (Howson 2004). The dominant appearance for men is influenced by hegemonic notions of masculinity that places emphasis on proper masculine bodies, whereas fatness is placed against consumer logic as its association goes against ideals of health and wellness and interpreting it as stigmatized (Cole 2019; Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner 1991; Foster-Gimbel and Engeln, 2016; Joy and Numer 2018; Grimm and Schwartz 2017; Robinson, 2016; Sobal and Maurer, 1999; Stevens, 2017).

Goffman (1963) differentiated between two types of stigmatized identities. Discreditable identities occur when the stigma can be concealed, and discredited identities occur when the stigma cannot be hidden. Saguy and Ward's (2011) research highlight the incapability for fat bodies to pass as normal since their body size makes them hyper visible and unable to be concealed. At most, individuals with discredited stigma can simply try and cover their stigma (Goffman 1963). These concepts are particularly relevant in the case of fat men's use of fashion. Fashion can be seen as a tool used of in the performances of these men as they try to alter negative information given off by their bodies through their fashion choices. Through consumption these bodies might try and transform their outer appearance of the body in pursuit of an idealized form (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner 1991; Howson 2004). However, because fatness is a discredited identity these men cannot guarantee that they are able to fully change the perception of their presentation. Consumer culture reproduces body-maintenance with the purpose of maintaining the dominant desired appearance, as the individual is expected to produce their best self through consumption (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner 1991). Information is needed to see how these men use and come to use fashion in their self-

presentation. Their discredited stigma coupled with their body's position outside the cultural norms brings up paradoxical position where the image of consumer culture presents a world of privilege, individuals are free to indulge and enjoy their freedoms to consume, yet fat bodies are continually stigmatized and blamed for their bodies' willingness to indulge (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner 1991). Where consumer culture has privileged others in ideals of consumption these privileges do not fall for fat bodies. In contrast Davis (2002) argues that it is not the muscular man that is at the top of hegemonic masculinity, it is the rational man who embodies real power, making an argument for the body in the case of men being irrelevant at best and an obstacle at worst. Ideals of masculinity guided by rationality furthers sees fat men adherent of stigma as fatness is seen as self-imposed due to a lack of constraints and moral failing. Given the normative culture of health, fatness is seen as an irrational decision by these men.

Gramsci's (2000) concept of hegemony where the holding of power is maintained, and definitions are set can be linked to the ideals found in current consumer culture where hegemonic norms are regulated by the current cultural of consumption, setting normalized standards of discourse to which individuals compare themselves to, including appearance (Barry 2015; Filiault, Micharl and Drummond 2007). Neither based on rationality or muscularity, fat bodies are positioned against ideals of consumer logic which is influenced by hegemonic standards. More information needs to be gathered on how this affected their overall presentation of self through fashion, especially as multiple identities deviate from normative standards places these men further away from expectations.

## **Fashion and Self-Presentation for Fat Men**

Identity can be defined as an internalization of societal conceptions (Sobal and Maurer 1999). Fat identity can be seen as socially constructed and re-created through social interactions as one internalizes social cues. Fashion has been used by women in negotiating their fat identities. Peters (2014) shows that “dress can be used as an important means to either foster or downplay a fat identity as it is lived and experienced by the person” (65). Through the use of fashion these bodies participate in a performance that functions to define the situation for the observers. Rather than the body itself the image of the body is central to the identity (Jagger 2000). Body image and fat identity are seen as connected concepts where downplaying the stigma of fatness results in a different presumption of their body image. Czerniawski’s (2005) research further shows the link between body image and a fat identity with female “plus-size” models. Commodifying the fat body sees their image sexualized in their attempts to alter fatphobic stereotypes and successfully attract consumers. Though their bodies remained fat bodies the body is that of sexual attraction. This act of changing the image of the body relates to Goffman’s (1978) description of the “front” as a performance which appearance can be utilized to tell us of their social status or ritual state, such as if they are working or engaging in a social activity. Consumer culture has shifted appearance as central to statements about oneself individually and this allows for bodies to be modified in trying to create a desired signifier through clothing (Jagger 2000; Howson 2004). Frith and Gleeson (2004) argue that through clothing, men modify and manage the appearance of their bodies depending on how well it fits within normative ideals. Rather than their appearance, body image is

being modified to better fit in with consumer culture which I expect would engage in the reproduction of norms by these men.

Fashion then can be used by fat men in an attempt to present a different interpretation of the self than their bodies give off. Cole (2019) highlights how fashion and styling can signify a desired meaning about multiple aspects of an individual. Through the use of fashion, these bodies participate in a performance that functions to define the situation for the observers. This kind of performance is once again what Goffman (1978) calls the “front.” Cole (2019) additionally shows how Black gay men in his study used their fashion in changing how they wanted to be perceived by negotiating their appearances based upon their own identities in fitting into acceptable styles or pushing conventional stereotypes. Research on fashion blogs show they have allowed people who are traditionally outside fashion standards to express their sense of fashion, and their capability of presenting a fashionable and fat self (Limatius 2020). The blog's interactive platform has allowed for channels of community building around notions of fashion, where “plus size” women have found their participation in fashion empowered and showing the ability to resist negative discourse of fatness, while creating positive ones.

Despite findings that suggest that fashion might be used to create a positive presentation of self, fat men’s position with cultural consumption offers them little in fashion choice and in fully participating in fashion. There is little concern for body variations outside its narrow scale of sizing (Peters 2014). Peters (2014) points out that “plus size” fashion options for women are commonly “considered down-market, very rarely designer, and certainly never couture” (57). Bodies are not just actively subverted

away from participation due to the quality of fashion but also in availability.

Inconsistency within size standards affects individual's self-perception of their fat bodies in ways that influence their body practices. Bishop, Gruys and Evans (2018) argues that this inconsistency of sizing has a direct effect on women's self-conceptualization of their bodies as women closer to "boundaries between size categories" can assert themselves in conformity with body ideals. Peters (2014) study states that this allows these women to gain "psychological, social, and material privileges." Thus, different body types must be considered when studying fat individuals given the multitude of variation. Moreover, lack of options in both quality and quantity has a significant effect on how one would self-present themselves. As Acar et al. (2017) research on online shopping by fat individuals informs us both men and women indicated difficulty when finding fashionable "plus-size" clothes which are proper to their body shapes. Physical shopping produces the same results with these bodies being filtered away from stores or to far-off sections (Crewe 2015).

Fashion and style can be seen as not a matter of conscious choice but the expression of structures that are unconsciously generated mentally by forming practices and perceptions (Cole 2019). Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner (1991) state that consumer culture operates by providing a multiplicity of images designed to stimulate needs and desire and then changing the nature of social interaction through material arrangement of social spaces. Thus, fat men are not free to signify desired meaning with fashion as they must contend with choices produced through the cultural norm as they self-presentation and try to use fashion to manage stigma. They also must contend with masculinity as a significant influence on body standards and fashion given the role



masculinity plays. As such, one needs to take an extensive look at the role of masculinity within the structure of the fashion. Empirical research highlights how the industry's main reference is to model bodies through normative culture standards (Nichter and Bordo 1995; Volante 2019). Volante (2019) argues that the state of thin ideals has grown together with the fashion industry and that fashion itself is opposed to producing fat sizes but does not mention of the role gender within the industry.

Missing from the research is how these men incorporate fashion into their presentation of self when their fatness places these bodies further away from current consumer cultural that reproduce normative ideals. Since fashion has left little for these bodies in terms of participation, research has yet to tell us how and why these men continue to attempt to participate in fashion when they are restricted in their choices. Little has been written how men negotiate fashion and whether they feel validated in their participation. Although these men might be able to implement performance through the use of fashion, further investigation is needed of how fashion itself is restricted to the fat male body, which in turn restricts them from using it in their presentation of self. This research establishes Instagram as an online space where these men have come to manage stigma, creating communities and finding work through their presentation of fashion online. However, the dynamics of their bodies being antagonistic to fashion still means these are temporary solutions.

### **Masculinity and Fat Stigma**

Fat men implementing the use of fashion in their self-presentation face issues as the classification of their bodies in reference to cultural ideals influence their self-presentation in determining what they wear (Sobal and Maurer 1999). Cultural ideals

dictate that the male body should be kept out of sight (Davis 2002). Given their discredited stigmatization of these men and the aspects of consumption that see shopping and advertising as a process of constant monitoring against expected standards of appearance, fat men's engagement in fashion is judged upon their bodies as well as masculinity (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner 1991). Connell (2003) argues the presentation of masculinity is always thought to proceed from men's bodies either through direct action through physicality or setting limits to action, inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body. Mason (1992) further supports masculinities expression through physical bodies by the male body's ability to occupy space and defining men as holders of power. Fatness is positioned away from these standards, resulting in many fat men having low self-esteem and internalizing feelings of moral failure as normative cultural standards interpreted fit bodies as right (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner 1991; Howson 2004). Gender becomes vulnerable to these men as they fail to meet masculine body expectancy (Connell 2003). Monaghan (2005) expressed how fatness can render men subordinate on masculine hierarchies. The suppression of femininity is needed as these bodies lose their superiority which Mason (1992) describes as leading to a gross distortion of masculine characteristics.

Historically, women are the ones being produced for the gaze of men, as objects of consumption for men through fashion (Jagger 2000). With masculinity being centered on holding of power and control, men's presentation through fashion raises issues for their masculinity (Davis 2002). Mears (2011) research describes modeling as an active production of gender and can be a prime location for the construction of masculinity and femininity. Men's engagement was seen as feminized through their participation that

reduces them to visual objects which violated hegemonic masculinity suggesting queer identity among these men (Mears 2011). Mason (1992) points out that it is only on “playing fields” or “battleground” where men get away with femininity. Modeling could be described as one of these locations for men. Although men are underpaid in fashion it is argued that this helps them continue to hold power as a sign of resistance and protection of hegemonic masculinity from commodifying and displaying their bodies (Mears 2011). This highlights the need for men to try to hold on to power as they try to maintain a masculine social role. Little is mentioned about this notion with fat male bodies as they already occupy an emasculated position before entering fashion. Mason (1992) suggests that femininity then needs to be downplayed. Although wage discrimination might facilitate that for the men in Mears (2011) study, fat male bodies are mostly missing for being paid for their fashion in the first place. While Mason (1992) shows how male bodies can be legitimate through the object of desire, further investigation is needed on different ways these men try to legitimize their participation as fat is rarely considered desirable.

Body variation within the categorization of “plus-size” leaves room for some men to be seen as more appropriate or masculine than others when they engage with fashion. Normative masculine body standards and gender norms of men are not simply defined by thinness as with women (Cole 2019; Foster-Gimbel and Engeln 2016; Joy and Numer 2018; Grimm and Schwartz 2017; Robinson 2016 Saguy 2011). Saguy (2011) points out that Western ideals of beauty for men are muscular, not exceedingly thin, with “too small” being a stigmatization among men. Thus, men’s body ideals are a balance between thinness and muscularity. Frith and Gleeson (2004) express this in their study stating,

“Men and boys do not necessarily view thinness as an advantage and are as likely to want to be bigger or heavier as they are to want to be thinner” (41). With muscularity being an essential part of masculinity, men also experience body image concerns when their bodies do not match these standards. (Cole 2019; Foster-Gimbel and Engeln 2016; Joy and Numer 2018; Grimm and Schwartz 2017; Robinson 2016 Saguy 2011). Frith and Gleeson (2004) suggest that men are aware of their bodies as it relates to normative standards and are dissatisfied when they do not meet these standards. Men are not only affected by their fatness through bias and stigmatization of their bodies but perceive that their bodies are outside normative standards and have shown discontentment of their position. As further highlighted in their research men are increasingly pressured to conform to these standards of lean and muscular, highlighting that their dissatisfaction with their bodies as both due to being “overweight” or “underweight.” Thus, the masculine expectancy produced through the current consumer norms add another layer to the presentation of these men which affect their fashion choices.

Fatness in men thus raises concerns of being discriminated against and devalued, yet further investigation is needed on fat men that present their bodies and fashion publicly. Past research fails to truly grasp the variation of the male body in fashion. The focus on thinness in most studies leaves out aspects of male body restrictions as they are confronted with conforming to ideals of thin and muscular. This aspect must be taken into consideration as bodies designated outside standard sizing might actually be adhering to cultural body norms. Most of these studies use the Body Mass Index (BMI) as a standard for determining one’s “obesity levels.” However, since fatness can be understood as self-identifying using BMI might not all account for all men who see

themselves as fat (Jaffe 2008; Peters 2014). Further, body ideal standards for men are based on muscular bodies, so using BMI is unreliable as it does not distinguish between muscle and fat. This could challenge some studies that have downplayed “obesity” affecting men because BMI standards do not look at body types rather than weight and height. (Saguy 2011). Saguy (2011) highlights the need to distinguish between fat and muscle as they both can be classified within “overweight” which could result in skewed results that point to fatness being advantageous. The variation of outcomes for “plus-size” male fashion has been understudied as “plus-size” has been mostly seen as one type of body. I expect that body variations found in men’s “plus-size” fashion leads to a body hierarchy that privileged in-standard men, those closer to masculine standards. These men still do not receive the same notoriety when compared to fashion models outside of “plus-size

Issues relating to fatness might create specific forms of stigma, bias and discrimination for women that are not experienced by fat men. Men might be able to compensate for a lack of beauty with other characteristics such as wealth, status, or fame while women are held to higher standards of thinness (Saguy 2011). Although Saguy (2011) points out that men are expected to be bigger and allowed to express a greater intimidating factor, fatness is still not acceptable for men rather it might be a little more tolerated. On the other hand, research shows that fatness also resulted in negative forms of stigma and bias towards males (Stevens 2017). Both fat men and women are often viewed as unattractive and sexless and emasculation is commonly linked with fat men. Thus, emasculating of their bodies further positions them away from consumer cultures norms and fat male bodies find themselves feminized as they fail to meet norms of

masculinity (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner 1991; Foster-Gimbel and Engeln 2016; Joy and Numer 2018; Grimm and Schwartz 2017; Robinson 2016).

Robinson (2016) highlights that “hegemonic masculinity is the dominant position in a given interactional pattern of gender relations” (173). If so, marginalized masculinity would leave some men within lower realms of the societal hierarchy. These men then must contend with this emasculation to handle stigmatization and with their self-presentation. Fatness in men violates gender norms with body ideals of men being based on muscular figures. They experience a devaluation to their bodies through feminization that leaves these bodies subjected in similar forms as fat women’s bodies (Saguy 2011). Stevens (2017) points out that the fat men in her study experienced similar body judgment and body evaluating as the women in her study expressed. Both genders have a constant fear of exposure to ridicule from the people around them because of their bodies. Stevens (2017) furthers the complexities of discredited stigma stating that “the irony of visibly stigmatized bodies is that these bodies are often erased and marginalized” (134). Robinson (2016) highlights this hyper(in)visibility for fat bodies within online gay dating sites. These fat men were hyper-visible as these sites require measurements and body specifics to be stated on profiles, yet invisible as these descriptions of their bodies lead them to be filtered out and not considered desirable partners. Their embodied stigma is always visible while their lack of representation and devalued status makes them invisible, furthering their marginalization. (Saguy and Ward 2011; Stevens 2017).

Moreover, Stevens (2017) shows the effects of fat embodied stigmas through her research which sees fat college students experience hyper(in)visibility that has caused these bodies to avoid perceived hostile spaces and has also linked these bodies

experiences in college with lower graduation rates for fat individuals. This highlights how fat bodies can be denied access to spaces and programs. Fat people are often perceived as unattractive and not a viable romantic partner, both within heterosexual couples and gay couples (Gimbel and Enguin 2012). Once again given further evidence to the emasculation of fat bodies since masculinity is equated to attractiveness based on gendered norms.

This lack of consideration with body standards within the literature shows an expression of fashion involvement as being outside the gender norms for men. It is assumed that men are uninterested in fashion, clothing is practical, and shopping is just a simple process of acquiring new clothes. Few men expressed that their bodies actually affect their choice in clothing, as they are not concerned with appearances (Frith and Gleeson 2004). Mears (2011) has shown that men involved in the fashion industry professionally try and distance themselves from fashion due to its feminization. More research is needed that includes fat men, which could alter the use fashion given their bodies are already emasculated and restricted. Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner (1991) argue that men through consumption could produce a presentation in line with cultural norms. This study looks to bridge the gap as fat men consume, showing the experiences fat men contend with in fashion. Less clear from the literature is the role of masculinity in the process leading up to their use of fashion in their self-presentation. Since fat men are stereotyped as emasculated, there needs to be further research on the effects of such a status in their participation. Since men are shown to concern themselves with conforming to masculine standards through their fashion, I expect that fat bodies need to contend with their emasculated state. In order for them to feel validation in using fashion to conform,

they need to validate their masculinity. Intersectionality furthers this as it could be preventing men from validation of their masculinity and leading them to use fashion as countercultural.

### **Intersectionality**

Using intersectionality as an analytic tool to look at issues through varying dimensions of social inequalities to expose the social exclusion or privilege of identities. (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016; Romero 2018). Romero (2018) points out that the social conditions of the world cannot be easily understood as shaped by one factor but shaped by a multiple axis of power. Hill Collins and Bilge (2016) stress the dominant powers places the many social identities in different positions relative to the times. Given fat males placement in relation to their other identities should reveal more information of these social identities' positions in fashion which is already low. The current cultural norms see the devaluation of fatness as it strongly adheres to masculinity and marked by the logic of what a healthy male body should be. Yet there is more than just body shape that is valued and weighed by these dominant views.

Men's fatness influences their self-presentation as it restricts clothing choices and their masculine identity since their body type plays a crucial role in their own emasculation. Largely missing from the literature is how other identities play a role in influencing self-presentation and also forming notions of the self that these men must contend with. As Peters (2014) highlights that these actions of self-identification can be both an individual and collective, while being maintained through their dress. Men might themselves be able to construct a fashioned identity without reproducing normative standards of fashion. Research has yet explored fully the relation with fat men self-



presentation through their fashion as it relates to their other identities which might influence their ability in constructing a fashioned identity. Although fatness embodies a discredited stigma, some women have been shown to be able to avoid this from time to time. Peters (2014) shows this with her sample being able to dress in adherence to other identity such as dressing age or culturally appropriate to achieve a perceived notion of fashion. Thus, other identities influence one's choice of fashion which would influence their presented self. This has to be further explored to understand how these identities interact in relation to the fat stigma of the male body and also on masculine identity since it is seen as the most valued for their social hierarchal placement.

Racial identity can be seen as playing a significant role in their presentation of self. Fat Black men make for an interesting case to focus on because they are outside both racial and body normativity. This is especially so if they also have a gay identity as a fat and Black body places them low on the gay body hierarchy (Grimm and Schwartz 2017 Robinson 2016). As gender-based norms equating masculinity to attractiveness is further intersected by ethnic stereotypes that produce particular body expectations (Foster-Gimbel and Engeln 2016). With Black individuals stereotyped as hyper-masculine there might be heightened stigmatization for the male bodies that fail to fall within these standards (Grimm and Schwartz 2017). Cole (2019) asserts that Black men's adherence to these notions of hyper-masculinity is understood as a means to "recuperating some degree of power over the condition of powerlessness and dependency" (51).

Moreover, sexual identity is also strongly influenced by such standards. Gender hierarchies are closely connected with the culture norms of masculinity and reproduce current consumer culture (Pyle and Lowey 2009). Within gay communities there is a

strong implication to adhere to hegemonic masculine standards because fitting within normative male standards acts to alleviate the stigmatized position within society due to their sexual identity (Foster-Gimbel and Engeln 2016; Joy and Numer 2018; Grimm and Schwartz 2017; Robinson, 2016). Gay men judge other gay man more harshly on their appearance (Foster-Gimbel and Engeln 2016). Robinson's (2016) research on online gay dating sites also show this notion. Fit bodies are the desired bodies of potential partners while fat bodies are objected to these spaces. Further evidence can be found in the work of (Pyle and Loewy 2009) as they show the possibility to avoid the stigma of being fat by placing emphasis on stereotypically masculine qualities within Bear subgroups, a gay subculture distinct by fat body types and masculine attributes. This allowed them to avoid being associated with stereotype notions of fatness and feminization as they proclaim actions of dressing as a real man, focusing their clothing on masculine standards, rather than on fashion which has been established as inherently feminine. Fitting in is based on the use of heteronormative masculine norms in presenting the body or in managing stigma. However, this raises issues on assimilating rather than resisting dominant ideals. Bears hold the highest popularity in relation to fat gay subgroups, explained by their embracing of masculinity standards and favoring hypermasculine gay images. Rather than the focus being on their fat bodies that are emasculated these men downplay fat identity through the use of masculinity (Pyle and Loewy 2009) Upholding hegemonic masculine standards in the gay community grants those who fit in social acceptance while furthering the discrimination upon those on the outside, which raises questions on other sub identities as they interpret body acceptance differently (Cole 2019; Foster-Gimbel and Engeln 2016; Joy and Numer 2018; Grimm and Schwartz 2017; Robinson 2016).

The intersection of racial, body, and sexual identities should then be also taken into consideration. Fat gay Black men's self-presentation has not been given enough attention within the empirical literature as their identities leaves them in a hyper-marginalized state. While Cole's (2019) research also shows this utilization of fashion and intersectionality, gay men of color have employed fashion to assert statements about who they want to be perceived as. Thus, through fashion these bodies are able to gain an element of agency. However, the emasculation of men because of fatness was not included in Cole's (2019) research. Therefore, further information on intersectionality as men interact with masculine hegemonic standards in fashion is needed.

Given that racial and sexual identities are highly influenced by masculinity and fatness within these identities are within disadvantaged states, a further investigation on how this might affect their use and ability to use fashion is needed. The intersectional effects of having both these identities and a fat body is in further needs of investigation since these bodies deal with multiple marginalized identities. I expect that Black gay men, because of their intersection of disadvantaged identities could leave these men incapable of the same participation through fashion as other subgroups. This might lead to a presentation of self through fashion that is different from other groups.

### **Online Presentation of Self**

Fashion can be used as a means to manage stigma, either through clothing choices or online community building. (Firth and Gleeson 2004; Limatius 2020). For fat men, hiding their bodies is not an option. They cannot passively hide their stigma, nor do they accept it (Stevens 2017). Since fatness embodies a stigmatized identity at all times, they participate in a great deal of anticipated stigma, referring to a person's expectation that

others will devalue or discriminate against them. This leads them to usually take measures to prevent or counter such occasions (Stevens 2017). Instead of withdrawing from these spaces that have historically stigmatized their bodies, some fat people have been able to create subgroups with their other identities that change the discourse around these stigmas. Instead of just assimilating to negative views, they have resisted them (Foster-Gimbel and Engeln 2016; Joy and Numer 2018; Saguy and Ward 2011). Joy and Numer (2018) shows this in the gay subculture of bears who have shown to counters dominant body ideals of both heterosexual and the mainstream gay culture. This could be done either within the physical or digital world.

Online presentation through fashion might offer these men alternatives in their fashion participation. Online digital spaces offer new methods of resistance for people within marginalized categories, allowing for asynchronous organizing through these spaces. Online spaces bridge the physical distance between individuals with shared identities, allowing for the ability to include a larger number of individuals than physical spaces allow (Eschmann 2020). Digital platforms offer a position for stigma management and also a tool for these bodies to self-present. Through interactions and creativeness fat bodies have been seen to be empowered within digital spaces (Limatius 2020; Monaghan 2005). Monaghan's (2005) research highlights how the cyber bodies of fat men have altered meaning by gaining alternative validations within online communities. Masculinity gets reinterpreted to fit within the frame of fatness online as social cultural norms are actively challenged. Thus, masculinity is further shown in playing an integral part in managing of stigma, more information is needed of how masculinity might interact with other subgroups.

The multiple identities these men have also become a factor when presenting online. Individuals of similar identities have been shown to gain access to others more easily and less costly now through social networking services and other online platforms. These digital worlds have proven to provide safe spaces and support for identities within the periphery of society and allow for collectivism in relation to their issues (Sobieraj 2018). In a study directly related to fashion self-presentation, Limatius (2020) research showed that fat women's fashion blogs allowed for community building and identity construction around fashion. This allowed them more agency to self-present their fashion, while positive community support provided opportunity for managing these bodies' stigmas and normative fashion ideals. Goffman (1963) described two groups that have shown support and acceptance of stigmatized people. The own, which is usually ones that share in the same stigma and often provide comfort and support. The second group known as the wise, these individuals do not share in the stigma but understand the stigmatization of groups based on their personal relationships and experiences with that group. Online spaces have made it easier for stigmatized groups to find support by the two classifications, and resistance to these normative practices has been shown to be amenable through these online platforms with the focus being on countering and community building (Eschmann 2020). Thus, further evidence needs to be found of the uses of online spaces and their experiences by fat men with an interest in presenting through fashion.

Additionally, the motives of these men must also be considered as they are marketing themselves online through the use of their fashion. Research has shown online "plus size" fashion bloggers have variations of different topics and reasons behind their

online activity, from fat activist driven blogs to general fashion blogs (Limatius 2020). This raises questions of the objectives of these “plus size” bloggers as criticism of fat acceptance has been centered on not yet having developed into a strong counterculture as it has been focused on rejecting negative stereotypes than affirming group practices, beliefs or values (Saguy and Ward 2011). Since this research implements the use of the digital platform of Instagram, it is important to highlight the rise of Influencers as they incorporate neoliberal logic. As highlighted in Limatius (2020) research, these women's blogs contained neoliberal ideas about body regulation and consumerism. Through their online self-presentation influencers engage with neoliberal logic of individuality and competition which largely determines their success. As these blog’s main goal is to generate attention, they largely adhere to neoliberal ideas about body regulation and consumerism, and self-presentation is largely based within heteronormative social ideals and norms (Drenten, Gurrieri and Tyler 2019). It is important to understand the motives behind the presences of fat male within these online digital spaces. Given the requirements to participate in the study they have all at one point marketed themselves through their fashion with the use of fashion related hashtags, we can expect these men had at one-point desired internet popularity.

Norms that dictate these men’s ability to engage with fashion could also translated online. Creating a sense of inclusion within digital communities might see issues with reinforcing societal stereotypes and social hierarchies. As Sobieraj (2018) explains that gaining access has become easier within digital social networks but still remains unequal. However, Snider (2009) points out the reliance on shaping communities based on similar identifications can be problematic as worries of identity policies might

be found within these online communities. Monagan (2005) also shows the power structure of self-subjectification being reproduced within online fashion communities by fat men based on their sexualization. This could be an expected issue within fashion communities. Women within fashion blogs have shown to try to promote the fitting of larger bodies within fashion aesthetics rather than expanding the standard to include fat women (Afful 2015). Saguy (2011) additionally argues that some attempted notions of resistance reaffirmed the normative culture, such as women participating in fitness class which adds value to individualistic blame fat bodies receive. Similarly, men who find resistance with their cyber bodies are also placed and categorized by online and off-line social relations, and their alternative definitions to fatness is in relation to negative connotations of fatness. (Monagan 2005). Thus, online activity might both help create an environment for these men to self-present in crating inclusion or masculine norms might be further reproduced within these spaces. A focus needs to be placed on these men interact with fashion based on their relation to hegemonic masculine standards, both offline and on.

Moreover, social media provides both resistance as a collective around self-presentation of one's style or fashion, while also allowing for an individualistic influencer culture to arise. Instagram has become a successful site to show off normative concepts of fashion, bodies, and genders as a lived experience and an accurate representation (Drenten, Gurrieri and Tyler 2019; Gurrieri, 2013). This might also be translated into the physical world from the digital as their engagement with the digital world becomes an extension of daily life. (Lupton 2015). These fat bodies have both an

active and coercion choice when it comes to their body presentation, as they adhere, or counter normative cultural standards related to their presentation through their clothes.

Online platforms allow for marginalized groups to manage stigma with online communities and support tools for their self-presentation. Normative influences on these men as they use online spaces for their presentation needs to be further investigated. I expect an unequal disruption of popularity and opportunities based on the identities of these men as they try to reinterpret masculinity to fit within the frame of fatness online.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

In light of these lingering questions, this study will examine three questions. First, I ask: what discrimination do fat men face with fashion and how are they able to overcome constraints in fashion? While previous research has shown that women have found agency in fashion, there is the possibility men would also find some sort of agency in managing the constraints of fashion, especially through online digital platforms. If this is the case, it would mean that these men through online platforms could through community and fashion presentation on these platforms be able to challenge restrictions placed on them. Secondly, I ask how do fat men use fashion as part of their presentation of self when their bodies are counter to normative standards of fashion? Given that their ability to use fashion is restricted due to their position away from normative standards their ability to use fashion could be seen as managing fat stigma. The link with masculinity since it is such an integral component of the presentation of men might place a role in their abilities to use fashion in their self-presentation. Lastly, what role does intersectionality play as these men self-present and possibly manage stigma through fashion? While research has shown racial and sexual identities are influenced largely by



masculinity, they did little to incorporate an analysis that includes fatness which is stereotypically seen as emasculated. If this is the case, then fat bodies emasculated perception places these men in lower hierarchical standing within their racial and sexual identities given these identities rely so much of adherence to hegemonic standards of masculinity. Thus, this would mean that men with intersectional identities would have a more difficult time in conforming to masculine standards that play a role in their presentation through fashion.

Focusing on the larger hegemonic masculine standards that inform not only fashion but individuals' decisions that are additionally influenced by the multitude positions their bodies encompass, this study will examine: (1) are fat men able to manage fat stigma through their engagement with fashion, (2) why and how do fat men use fashion as part of their presentation of self when their bodies are counter to normative standards of fashion, and (3) what role does intersectionality play as these men self-present and possibly manage stigma through fashion? In sum the past literature provides the foundation for where I look to add on. Experiences of fat individuals in fashion have only been researched as it pertained to women's involvement. However, as stated fashion for men and "plus-size" has been expanding, while also new spaces online have become the preferred space where one can share their fashion presentation. Thus, my study looks to give the experience and perspectives of fat men that use fashion in their self-presentation, dealing with issues of that have positioned these men against standards of masculinity that are used in producing fashion but also reproduced by fashion.

## METHODS

### The Case

This research uses 22 semi-structured interviews and a content analysis of 80 Instagram profiles to answer my research questions. I focus specifically on fat men using fashion in their presentation of self on Instagram. This is a useful case for answering the research questions of this study because these men have incorporated fashion into their daily presentation of self while marketing themselves online through fashion. These men see themselves as validated participants in fashion even when their bodies are restricted by it. I chose a dual methodology since evidence from Limatius (2020) research suggest that a combination of qualitative and quantitative data provides greater insight into the process within online platforms where individuals form community and shared norms. I also chose to incorporate an analysis focused on the effect of different identities and intersecting identities. In doing so the content analysis includes an even distribution of racial and sexual identities, and the interviews used a purposive sampling method to balance out the overrepresentation of one subgroup. I have also chosen to incorporate different body types that have used “plus-size” fashion hashtags. This is done to look at body variations and how they might offer different experiences in fashion.

### **Interviews**

I conducted interviews between March and August 2021. The first set of interviews were conducted between March and May. I conducted twelve interviews via Zoom due to the current Covid protocols required by FAU IRB. The demographic

breakdown for the first sections of interviews is as follows: four gay Black men, three straight Black men, one bisexual Black man, two gay White men, one gay Latino man, and 1 straight Latino man. The average age of this group of participants is thirty, ranging from twenty-two to forty-nine.

The second round of interviews included ten participants: two gay Black men, two straight Black men, two straight Latino men, one Asian straight male, one gay Latino male, one gay Pacific islander male, one straight mixed race (white passing) male. The average age of the second round of interviews was the same as the first round of interviews at thirty-two, the range of these interviewees was twenty-five to forty.

The total sample demographics includes twenty-two participants: six Black gay men, five Black straight men, one Black bisexual man, two gay White men, two gay Latino men, three straight Latino men, one straight Asian man, one gay Pacific Islander male and one straight mixed race (white passing) male.

### **Interview Recruitment**

Recruitment was done through the online platform of Instagram. The niche research sample made seeking out these men on Instagram an active process. First, I prioritized top rated “plus-size” male models on the site, which allowed from popular hashtags commonly used by fat men in fashion to be gathered. All participants in the study were required to have used at least one of these hashtags, allowing for the focus to specifically be on men that have identified themselves both as “plus-size” and involved with fashion. I used my personal Instagram profile for recruitment, which include my own with self-presenting posts, interactions and a number of followers to help provide a sense of authenticity when reaching out to these accounts. Doing so negated any concerns

of being labeled as a bot or online scammer. My own categorization of my body being fat might have provided an advantage in recruitment as I posted more photos to give off a better sense of inclusion. Reaching out to prospective participants via direct message (dm) on Instagram, providing them a brief summary of the research, an invitation to participate, and the requirements for these men to self-identifying as both “plus size” and fat. The second round of interviews took a more selective approach, in order to guarantee more representation of categories outside of Black gay men who were overly represented within the first round of interviews. I used the same pool of hashtags as the first interviews when recruiting,

### **Informed Consent**

Participants that provided an email address were sent the consent form via email, consenting either through written response or electronic signature of the document. Interviews took place during various times of days, due to time zone differences. Interviews began with me providing participants the opportunity to ask questions or bring up any concerns. I provided further clarification if requested. Interviews ended with further asking the interviewees if there were any further questions that I could answer. The majority of these men did ask about the research while also inquiring about my own personal use of fashion. All participants expressed appreciation for inviting them to participate in the research, as the invitation provided them a sense of confirmation of their fashion status. Some also expressed that a focus on fat men in fashion is overdue and thanked me for the study. I did not recruit base on my opinions of fashion. Participants were informed when recording was in progress and when it ended, and recordings only proceeded after participants agreed to start recording.

## **Interview Questions**

I started each interview by asking how these men would classify their bodies within fashion usually prompting them to disclose their experience with restrictions as they try to engage in fashion. I questioned them on their involvement and experiences within fashion both online and off, while probing for how these bodies use fashion and their involvement in the fashion industry. Issues related to intersectionality were brought up in early interviews but were not fully incorporated into the research questions until the second round of interviews. Conducting a second round of interviews incorporated the findings from the first round of interviews and the content analysis to better understand findings and fill gaps in the data. I put more focus on patterns of intersectionality and the use of Instagram as they stood out as important factors from the first interview round. Additionally, I focused more on the personal lives of the participants rather than their involvement directly within fashion. Questioning them on their backgrounds and upbringing proved to show further patterns on their self-presentation around standards of masculinity. I utilized this information to focus the coding on examples of how this relationship with masculinity can impact their self-presentation. I added new questions to the second round of interviews and also removed questions pertaining to consumption habits and resistance in the fashion industry directly. Interviewees brought these topics up naturally as questions focused on their experience while presenting through fashion. The second round of interviews was intentionally geared towards personal stories and using of active listening with a semi-structured process to further explore concepts relating to their self-presentation through questions outside of the questionnaire. I found that this more personal engagement focused on experience led to questions being answered ahead of

time in interviewee responses and provided more intimate understanding of their process with their bodies, fashion and their identities. All second-round interviews over an hour, and the same process of recruitment was followed. Just as the first round after the interviews these men asked more questions of the research and my personal use of fashion and expressed gratitude for being asked to join the study.

### **Data Analysis**

The first round of interviews was coded both thematically, specifically focused on answering the research questions. I looked for patterns on how these bodies interact with the multiple facets of their self-fashioning, including their consumption habits, experience within the industry and their online usage (further expanded in the second round of interviews). After coding these interviews, there was a gap in the personal aspects of these individuals' lives that needed to be addressed to the reasons behind their self-presentation which was the purpose going into the second round of interviews.

From my research sample, I established two different categorizations based on the presenting body shape and size as they might be labeled in accordance with normative standards. The first body classification established was that of bodies within hegemonic standards of masculine “plus size” bodies i.e., what an acceptable “plus size” body should look like. Conceptualizing this category accounts for the presenting body size and shape, along with height, since it is an important aspect of hegemonic masculine body standards. Although difficult to get an accurate representation of their height, extremes height differences, that were obvious through these posts were taken into consideration.

Bodies were coded as “in-standard” if they fell within the three conceptualized body groups: non-fat, dadbods and big-and-tall. These body groups were formulated with

information from the first round of interviews as complaints were made of the bodies that are being represented as “plus size,” with interviewees seeing a dissimilarity between their size and those usually representing “plus-size” along with the use of literature descriptions of hegemonic masculine in the conceptualization of in-standard. Non-fat bodies fall more in line with athletic builds and muscular frames. Dadbods represent a smaller more acceptable body where fat features are much less noticeable. Features include a significantly smaller chest, stomach, and hip areas. Big-and-tall men are seen as less defined muscular mass but their tall frame results in not having a large deposit of excess flesh or fat.

The second coded body was that of fat bodies. These bodies were coded and conceptualized for a noticeable accumulation of flesh; enlarged stomach, enlarged male breasts, wider hips and larger thighs were all included in the conceptualization of this code. Initial plans were to gather an equal representation of these two different body codes (“in-standard” and fat). However due to the irregularity of finding “in-standard” bodies in the category of Gay Black men, this goal was not obtained. Even distribution within all categories proved difficult with a very limited amount of body variations in some of the categories, such as the lack of fat coded Straight white in the recruitment pool.

Additionally, as I used round one of interviews to focus on answering the research questions, I generated codes related back to stigmatization, self-presenting, and role of intersectionality. Codes were later refined upon coding the second round of interviews, while also expanded to incorporate the more personal and experience-oriented data from the latter interview round. Stigmatization based codes to answer the first research

question were found in both set of interviews. Codes were categorized in distinct spaces in fashion that sees fat men stigmatized: personal consumption, professional fashion, and online platforms. Personal consumption codes were made up from restrictions detailed when these men tried to consume. Codes include the issues in the number of options, the quality of these options, sizing restriction, proportion issues, and pricing issues that when grouped together provided the evidence in the restrictions these men face while personally consuming. Codes on the strategies implemented to manage these restrictions included ones related to their purchasing power and creativity.

Moreover, when answering the second research question, codes of conforming or countering were established as the two main patterns used by these men in their fashion. Conceptualization of these codes came from interviewees description of what kind of fashion they wear and what kind they stay away from. After coding the second round of interviews these codes were fleshed out further to incorporate the role masculinity played in influencing their participation. Given the more detailed and linear aspects of these interviews further codes were generated to give a spatial and linear breakdown on their conceptualizing themselves with a fashioned identity, and where masculine standards were coded in these experiences with codes including a focus on sexuality, physicality and gender norms. These codes were later cross referenced with the original patterns found in categorizing where each interviewee fit into one of the categories of conform or counterculture. In order to analyze difference based on intersectional identities, I incorporated codes of masculinity in relation with codes focused on racial and sexual orientation. With the cross reference of the role of masculinity in relation to identities, the



pattern of presentation through fashion could also be easily implemented together in pointing out the presentation pattern of intersectional identities.

### **Content Analysis**

I conducted a content analysis where I examine the representation of fat bodies on Instagram focusing on both self-representation and on intersectional factors.

### **Sample**

Since findings from the first round of interviews showed significant patterns of intersectionality involved, I gathered the sample with the intention of having equal representation of racial identity, sexual identity, and body shape. I conducted the content analysis in a span of a month from June and July 2021, where four hundred posts were coded from eighty profiles by using the first five image posts were analyzed. I chose to use posts consisted of photo image media only, skipping over videos and Reels (Built on video program that allows one to record and edit fifteen-second multi-clip videos with audio, effects, and new creative tools) due to the incapability to view the amount of likes on video content and reels being an extension aspect of one's profile, that usually features videos from other social media platforms. I felt it best to stick with image media only as this is the main content of Instagram. I have also included collage posts that can feature up to ten images; however only one group of codes will be used for this type of post.

As stated, I strategically chose to incorporate a wider sample that will place focus on intersectionality. All profile samples are from fat men defined by their use of hashtags that have mentioned the sizing of their bodies being inside the category of "plus-size." Hashtags included are "#plussize," "#bigandtall" and "#bodyacceptance" along with more hashtags related to body acceptance or larger bodies. This sample included:

twenty profiles of gay Black men; twenty profiles of straight Black men; ten profiles of gay white men; ten profiles of straight white men; ten profiles of gay Latino men; ten profiles of straight Latino men. Plans to gather the same number of bodies within the two categories of fat bodies and standard “plus size” bodies were also planned. However, given that some of these body types are significantly missing with certain identities, leading to some categories having an over representation of one body type.

### **Coding**

Coding was broken down into four categories. The first category was basic information of the profile, such as their number of followers, the number of people they follow and the number of posts they have posted. In addition to this, I coded each of the five on their presented appearances such as body shape (fat or standard “plus size”) racial identity, and sexual identity. This presented a challenge in the sense not all accounts highlighted their sexual orientation within posts or in bios, especially Black males. Because of this, I further investigated accounts beyond the five posts in order to correctly categorize these men, relying on posts that feature their stated romantic partner or sexual identity related posts. Since it was the beginning of Gay Pride month many of these profiles had a dedicated post to celebrating and stating their sexual orientation.

As mentioned, Black bodies proved much more difficult in identifying their sexual orientation as finding these features of a gay identity on some of these accounts proved difficult. I relied on their catalog of posts with an over representation of more feminine attributes and clothing styles when coding for some of these Black men. These men have been coded as gay. This decision to code them based on feminine posing and clothing choices along with the lack of sexual identity expressed within Black individuals

online might have contributed to their over representation in the Black gay subgroup. The other three categories were focused on each post themselves and the second section of codes focusing on their gender presentation.

Codes focused on gender-conforming clothing and accessories; include my codes for gender language used both in captions and hashtags and with codes based on their posing also incorporated. The third category of posts focused on their body presentation and also racial identity. Codes in this section focus on how their bodies are being presented as codes include exposing flesh, “plus size” language use, and body visibility. Along with these codes racial codes that focus on language can also be found in this section. Lastly the fourth section highlights the success of these bodies online, as paid ads, brand integration and verified account integration being coded.

*Table 1 Interview Participants Demographic*

| Name      | Race         | Sexual Orientation | Income class       | Age |
|-----------|--------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----|
| Jaime     | White/Latino | Gay                | Lower-class        | 35  |
| Jeremy    | Black        | Straight           | Middle-class       | 31  |
| Marcellus | Black        | Bisexual           | Middle-class       | 25  |
| Tj        | Black        | Gay                | Not disclosed      | 28  |
| Alex      | Black        | Gay                | Lower-class        | 33  |
| Frank     | White        | Gay                | Middle-class       | 39  |
| Victor    | Black        | Straight           | Working-class      | 28  |
| Andres    | White/Latino | Straight           | Upper-middle-class | 34  |
| Dylan     | Black        | Gay                | Middle-class       | 22  |
| Diego     | Black        | Gay                | Middle-class       | 29  |
| Ryan      | Black        | Straight           | Middle-class       | 26  |
| Danny     | White        | Gay                | Upper-class        | 49  |
| Noah      | Mixed/Latino | Straight           | Middle-Class       | 31  |
| Curtis    | Black        | Straight           | Lower-class        | 25  |
| Virgil    | Black        | Straight           | Middle-class       | 29  |
| Bobby     | Black        | Gay                | Lower-class        | 40  |
| Andy      | Asian        | Straight           | Not disclosed      | 29  |
| Joe       | White/Latino | Straight           | Middle-class       | 39  |
| Trent     | White/Latino | Gay                | Lower-class        | 36  |

|         |                       |          |                    |    |
|---------|-----------------------|----------|--------------------|----|
| Jordan  | Black                 | Gay      | Middle-class       | 25 |
| Elliot  | Mixed (White passing) | Straight | Lower-middle-class | 32 |
| Allison | Pacific Islander      | Gay      | Middle-class       | 35 |

### III. FINDINGS

Men are typically considered bystanders in fashion and only engaged with clothing for special occasions or out of practicality (Frith and Gleeson 2004). Fat individuals are also assumed to be marginalized in the fashion industry, although most research focuses on the stigmatization of fat women within fashion (Bishop, Gruys and Evans 2018; Connell 2003; Czerniawski 2011; Peters 2014). In this chapter, I bridge the gap as it relates to fat males in fashion by answering the research question: What discrimination do fat men face with fashion and how are they able to overcome constraints in fashion? I analyze three areas of the fashion industry that provide evidence of their stigmatization and these men's strategies in navigating their marginalized positions. First, I look at their personal involvement with fashion as they try and consume; second, I discuss issues in fashion professionally; lastly, I explain the use of digital spaces to self-present through fashion.

#### **Stigma Management and Consumption**

Men are typically seen as nonparticipants in fashion despite the market for men's clothing increasing through the years (Acar et al. 2017). Still much of the literature does not specifically focus on how fat males utilize fashion. Men's enjoyment and care of fashion has been largely glossed over as fashion is explained to just be merely for practicality, and this is even more so the expectation for fat bodies. Fashion for these bodies is expected to be worn to conceal rather than based on the preferred appearance by

the individual. However, the findings from the study both in the content analysis and interviews show that these men do care about fashion more than just for practicality even as they face constraints participating in fashion. It is through their own creativity and agency as consumers that I argue these men have been able to combat some constraints.

All men from the study acknowledged that they used fashion to craft their presentation of self since I used hashtags related to fashion as a qualification to join the study. Men interviewed were active in self-identifying themselves and their content with fashion itself. “If I'm not put together, then the whole situation, the whole day will not be put together because I, I don't know. That's like the start of it.” stated Dylan, a Black gay man. Participants expressed the important role that fashion plays in their self-presentation in their day to day lives. Although there is no guarantee that it is fully because they care about or enjoy fashion, multiple posts dedicated to their self-presentation through fashion suggests that fashion is something they at least like to present through. My interview data supports these claims of fashion being a process these men care to take part in and enjoy.

Alex a Black gay male expressed their feelings towards fashion:

I do love fashion so much and I like to be appreciated for my own aesthetic. So, I think it is pretty important for me to, for people to know, or for me to come across as someone who knows what they are doing, particularly being a bigger person because a lot of the times bigger people are seen as sloppy or not as put together or, you know, any of those asinine comments.

Throughout these interviews, men expressed their emotional tie to fashion making statements about how it has helped in transforming themselves. Andres a straight Latino male says, “I think that it shows my individuality, it shows how much, uh, growth, just on a personal level I've had as a person,” and statements like “I'm one of those people that get up and get dressed every day. I enjoy it. I like to look; I like to look good. You look

good. You feel good” by Alex captured the unanimous agreement shared throughout the interviews.

With the enjoyment and care of fashion, these men take part in the process of being consumers of fashion. Just as established in the literature about “plus-size” women’s consumption of fashion, these men faced similar challenges in purchasing their desired articles of clothing due to a lack in both quantity and quality (Bishop, Gruys and Evans 2018; Connell 2003; Czerniawski 2011; Peters 2014). Because these bodies are an afterthought in fashion, the quantity of clothing these men find that fits them in one physical location is slight. Jaime a gay Latino man shared their experience in shopping as a thirty-five-year-old fat gay man:

Especially being larger, you kind of have to be willing to look more often and, you now, check around and see what is there and then be willing to go home, and like. I didn't find anything today and that's that, you know, so part of that has been me getting less attached to outcomes and be willing to go, hey, I'll go try some things on. If it doesn't work, then I'll walk out, maybe another day, which is why you look more often through the year as opposed to just when you need it. Cause then you're not gonna find it.

Physical shopping was referred to as being a tedious function that held no guarantees of finding an article of clothing suitable. An issue in the lack of quantity left these men spending more time and effort into finding fashion. “I always do this and that, I just don't shop at one store. I got to get it bit by bit” stated Diego a Black gay man. The inconsistency of being unable to find clothing both limited these men’s abilities participating in fashion and how they would want to appear, given that they cannot find adequate supply within physical stores. Frank a White gay man stated, “It is really hit and miss when it comes to wearing something that's fashionable and in trend and being able to find it for my body.” This also means that these men have to put in more time and

effort in finding clothing whereas non “plus-size” individuals get a plethora of options in multiple stores. Their experience involved multiple trips to find clothing, a process of trial and error that was echoed by the other fat men in the study.

Further evidence of the care these men have for fashion is their desire to have better quality clothing options. Alex who identified as a Black gay male detailed their attempt at finding sustainable clothing and how their size has prevented them, “There's just not enough. I'm going through this situation right now, where I'm trying to be more conscious about my purchasing power. Um, and I've been looking for, um, sustainable denim in men's wear for plus men and it does not exist.” Currently most of fashion, both “plus-size” or not, are products of fast fashion, cheap and low quality. However, for these men, quality had more of an importance since clothing is not as easily replaceable, “I get articles of clothing that I can wear, and I want them to last a long time, because I don't know if I'm going to be able to find that article or that company“ expressed Frank then further stressed what they go through to maintain their clothing “Like most of my clothes I'll wash them one time. I don't dry any of my shirts because I know if they dry, just once they are gone, I'm never going to be able to wear them again.” The inability to easily replace their clothing is connected to the restrictions in consumption they face because of their size. Trent a gay Latino man highlighted this as they had a new value for their clothing as they gained weight compared to when they were standard size:

I don't know, maybe I'm a little neurotic about my clothes and I've never been before when I was younger, I would wear a t-shirt whatever, throw it away. Who cares. But now that, you know, I can't find clothes that fit me when I do find clothes that fit me. I, you know, I, I cherish them. I, I, I, I, I almost, I don't want to say worship them, but like, look, I lost a shirt. I went on vacation and we came back and I lost a pair of pants and it feels like a loss of friend almost



Although fast fashion is usually cheap there is a common agreement that these bodies experience fat tax making the quality of clothing even more crucial for these men as it cost them more to replace. Diego highlighted this extra cost for these men, “it's a lot cheaper for them [Non “plus-size” individuals] sometimes because you can go on website, order a shirt. If you're a size up like Uber print, custom ink, whatever it is, you end up paying above the shirt price, they charge you a little extra for your bigger size.” Individuals outside of the “plus-size” category have both better access to sustainable options that are more widely available in their size and also cheaper. The intrinsic and monetary cost for “plus-size” bodies for the lack of quality clothing is higher on these men than others outside of “plus-size.”

The biggest lack of quality options compared to standard men is within high fashion, as these men expressed that high fashion is not made for them. Ryan who is Black and straight expressed this by saying “High fashion is for people who take care of themselves or fit a healthier criterion. And it's discriminated like its discrimination. That's the only thing you can call it.” High fashion is the pinnacle of normative body standards being upheld and reproduced, so it is not surprising why fashion of this caliber is not produced for these bodies. Although some of these men expressed resentment in ever spending a large amount of money on luxury clothing, they all wanted to see “plus-size” representation in high-fashion. Curtis a Black straight male expressed their desire for quality clothing not available to them:

I don't want you to drop the quality or do something different because I'm bigger. Like I want you to keep it the same. Just give me the opportunity to, to buy it or have it in my size. Like my money is gonna spend the same, just let me, you know... Even if you had to make it a little bit higher, like maybe \$5, \$10 higher, whatever. Okay. I'll get that. I'll spend that because I want that, you know what I'm

saying? I don't want to have to go over here or, you know what I'm saying? I want, I want to have that the same stuff.

Moreover, these men faced an issue where sizing lacks standardization, meaning that there is no guarantee that one size will fit the same from brand to brand or even clothing to clothing. Even in-standard men who expressed advantages in shopping, suffered from the lack of size standardization. Joe identifying as straight Latino man, self-described as having a “dadbod mentioned how they can still shop in stores with ease “I can still go to a store and buy off the rack. I know that there's guys that they just can't do that, unfortunately.” However, issues in sizing and proportions still affected them:

I could never find the perfect pant length for me, it will be 29, right. But I have to buy 30, you know, my legs are a little bit shorter, right. And my waist is a little bit bigger. So, you just, the only restriction is really is you really have to do your research and you have to go out there and physically put these clothes on to kind of get a better understanding of how that company cuts their stuff, yeah. Like an average person, like an average person who has like the perfect torso and the perfect length, they have no problems, but for bigger guys, you know, it becomes more of a, uh, of a trial and error type of situation.

All the men in the interviews complained that the process of finding the right size for their body is never guaranteed since sizing standards are different across brands. “Most brands don't have a good fit model for their larger sizes. They just blow up the sizes from their other base. And so, the proportions don't all expand the same way” Jaime who is a gay Latino man explained. All the men from the study experienced the difficulties of consuming when sizes are not standard. “I've had the experience where just because this place had a three-X over here, this place had a three-X, but it didn't fit like this place. So, you definitely gotta try it on.” expressed Diego who identifies as Black and gay. These

similar experiences can be found consistently through these interviews. Specifically, we can look at Ryan's experience in trying to buy pants for a desired style they want to wear,

I enjoy like the styling of like Harry Styles and I'm a big fan of seventies fashion and I like how it's androgynous and I prefer that style. However, I can't do that most of the times because it don't fit me. And even if I find things that will fit me, I don't think it would look right. You know what I mean? Just, um, for example, I went to a suit store and they fitted me for the pants, they were horrendous, like they are high waisted like I wanted, but they just did not look right on me because they don't know how to measure our bodies. That's one problem I have with brands is that they think that our legs are the same size as our thighs and our hips when they're not. So just things like that. And you have to spend more money on getting them tailored and taper to your body, which is a hassle. So, I'd say I've been excluded from like dressing how I really want to for a while.

These men used trial and error where they have to concern themselves with insecurity around the fit of the clothes and a constant struggle of finding clothing that are the right proportions. It is also more difficult for these men as their bodies are further from normative body standards. "I'm a big guy, but I'm also short. And so, you know, oh, I can find a pair of pants that fit around the waist, but they are way too long or the, um, the rise is too big. And so, all of a sudden, I'm walking around with a diaper on kind of look" expressed Frank a White gay man. As height has been shown to be a major factor in the sizing for their clothing, men can be disadvantaged both for their larger bodies and shorter statures.

Sizing is an important indication that these men base their fat identities on. We can see clothing size plays a big role in how men categorize themselves as "plus-size." Victor who identifies as Black and straight, with more of a muscular build than fat excess on their body. Yet their categorization of themselves as "plus-size" came from having to wear "plus-sizes" clothing, he explained "I've always seen the label plus sizes, uh, a way of representing the size of clothing," then followed up "So I, I like to say plus size is just

the representation of all body types that fits any clothing from the range of maybe two XL upwards” This puts an emphasis in just how important sizing can be for these men as they use it as classification. Instead of using their bodies to categorize, they opt for the sizing on their clothing. By looking at Joe’s experience as his body transitioned into needing to wear bigger sizes, an example is provided on the importance of sizing to fat identity.

So, I had always been like, uh, that medium, large size in shirts. That's, that's where I was always at. And I think mentally, I didn't want to buy an extra-large, even though I needed one, right. So, I would buy large and I would literally just try not to wash it as long as I could. I'm taking it to the dry cleaners instead, because I didn't want it to shrink a little bit, because from experience how I tried to kind of mask it... Um, so it was really hard to make that transition.

Their unwillingness to leave standard sizing so they might feel that their bodies are not categorized as “plus-size” shows the dynamics sizes play in their conception of their fat identities. Lack of standard sizing could result in these men having negative connotations of themselves as they might find themselves having to size up for certain choices. They also deal with issues from society that further stigmatize bodies in larger sizing, “I feel like a lot of times, uh, people have this perception that like three-X, oh my God, that's a huge, you know, like that's crazy big. Like that has to fit every fat person, but that's not the case,” expressed Andres a straight Latino participant.

While compared to standard bodies, options for “plus-size” are often minimal and relegated to different sections both online and off. Along with the lack of standardized sizing many of these men took extra steps such as knowing measurements or relying on the same clothing previously purchased. All these factors resulted in these bodies being pigeonholed into a handful of brands, not necessarily by their own choice. These

restrictions, just like in the case of “plus-size” women, segregated these bodies out of physical stores and limits where they can shop, “I started just buying online instead of going to the, to the, to the mall because there's more options online,” mentioned Trent who is gay and Latino. A small handful of stores and online websites were mentioned throughout these interviews, demonstrating just how limited the options are for these men. Malls were seen as impractical for fat men since their bodies cannot shop within name brand stores, with the majority relying on department stores when physically shopping. Although there was also a limited number of online stores mentioned by these men, they felt online shopping has provided them with much more options than ever before, “Online shopping has been a massive bonus, I think for so many people because they have the opportunity to get their size” stated Victor a Black straight man.

Online shopping provided these men a sense of agency as options for clothing, although still limited in comparison to standard size, has increased. The more widely available options for these men allowed them to feel a sense of validation in their self-presentation through fashion. Andy an Asian American straight male expressed how the availability of clothing online made them feel like they have not been prevented from self-presenting through fashion.

At first? Yeah, but as I saw like more stuff so readily available online and stuff, like I know some people get scared of online shopping a lot, but at the same time, like if you just know your size and you know, your measurements, then you're good to go. Like, like, I don't know, like I've never pictured myself wearing full leather jeans in the winter with like some like Chelsea boots and like a long like Henley shirt with like a biker jacket or something, you know? So, it just really, really, I don't know, there's a lot of readily available stuff.

Online shopping allowed for these bodies to feel catered to, as they gain more agency to participate with fashion. Online stores allowed these men to see what is in stock and

available in their sizing, reducing the time spent going from one location to another.

Online shopping was also better for guaranteeing these men find clothing in their size, as they are able to filter out specific sizes, removing the disheartening feeling of not being able to find items in their size. Shopping was still an active process where these men have to learn how and where to shop.

Online shopping still has a lot of issues. Fat men are segregated away from regular sized men either through specified “plus-size” sections on these websites or filtered out by these men themselves using the filtering tools. Although this might offer bodies their own space, it is still a way to separate between bodies that are acceptable and those that are not. As Andres expressed their experience shopping online as a larger “plus-size” body.

I've just learned where to shop online and, and what, um, sizes you have to shop for. So, for websites like, um, like Boohoo or, uh, Fashion Nova, they say they are big and tall, but, um, a lot of their clothes are manufactured in like the UK or in Europe. And so, they only run up to like three-X, but it's not even a three-X here in the states. It is like too small for even three-X here. So, um, I learned.

The inconsistency of sizing again makes the consumption of fashion even within online spaces a more costly and difficult activity for “plus-size” men. With a globalized market this also presents further sizing problems for these bodies, just as in physical stores. All the men from the study ran into sizing issues from online shopping. Jeremy a straight Black man coded as In-standard due to their physical height stated that online shopping:

definitely was a trial and error because actually a two-X for me translates to a Four-X for Boohoo, so learning those little nuances like that is another part of being a big guy. You gotta, you gotta try things out. You gotta know, you know, you gotta really look at the size chart”

Although online shopping might offer up more options for these men, there are still constraints of quantity, quality, and issue in sizing.

Alternatively, these men found better success in consumption by having clothes made for them to their specifications, ensuring wider availability and better quality. However, this option was not available for all participants from the study. These men acknowledged that their bodies result in them experiencing a fat tax and the already costly price for custom made clothing is even more because of their size. Danny a White gay man, who exclusively wears suits in his day-to-day pointed to the benefits of having clothing made:

There is things you can do to make yourself more comfortable with just having good clothes or spending more time buying nice stuff that is well fitting instead of cheaper stuff, that is not going to last long and is not as well fitting. Um, but I'll also admit that that's more expensive and that it is not easy to go off the rack with people that are larger.

His ability to purchase better and “made to wear” pieces is due to his income, but also having the knowledge of where he can go to get custom pieces is important to his purchasing agency. Noah who identified as mixed race and straight shared his experience with getting custom clothing as money and knowing where to purchase are shown as main factors in obtaining better fashion:

What I've been trying to do until recently is to not really support fast fashion or any conglomerates really, or any like corporations. What I do is I I've been supporting a lot of my, um, my friends who have their own companies or their own clothing lines and stuff like that. And, um, getting custom stuff done. Like it sucks. Cause sometimes it is a bit more pricier than if you just run and buy a shirt from, you know, popular store X. Um, but I think it's really important to support those who are creating space for you and your body... think before it was like, all right, I want to get something that looks good enough to rock it in my own way. And as long as it was pretty affordable, um, for me now, if I got it, I will splurge provided that it's quality material in that I know the person who's making it gives a, they're not just trying to make a sale. Um, so yeah, even a couple years back, I

did like a custom, I had a custom piece made for me and it was just, it was so amazing, but the gentleman who made it, he's a friend and he makes clothing for plus men and women.

The ability to have custom clothing made for them was not viable for all these men in the study. The majority consumed through retail, as it is more of a practical experience and a more cost effective one. Only two of these men expressed this notion of purchasing custom “made to fit” outfits. Purchasing power allowed these men to manage the stigma with the lack of options when they consume, but it was largely based on one's income and their knowledge of where to go. Without the ability to have their clothing made, many of these men relied on their creativity in bypassing the restrictions of consumption. Andres a straight Latino man stated, “When I got into fashion, it was like, I never thought fashion could be from me. And it really just turned out to be like, fashion just takes a little bit more work and you have to get creative. But once I learned that man, it was, uh, it was game over.” They worked to recreate a certain outfit or style that they have not been able to find in their size. Andres further explained his creative process: “what I'll do is I will just literally try to recreate a look that I really admire or something that I really want to recreate. So, it, it also becomes like a, almost like a project or like a creative outlet for me.” These men enjoyed the process of putting together an outfit and getting positive reactions from it, boosting their confidence and also validating their presentation. Curtis a Black straight male expressed their belief that their bodies size does make it a challenge but through their creativity they can rise through it and be praised on it:

I have to take on the extra challenge of finding things or finding it in my size and wearing it, you know? So, when people see me, sometimes they'll be like, oh man, that looks good on you or even some of my bigger friends, they be like, man, they make that in that size. So yeah, man, it's like, oh, that look really good on you know what I'm saying? So, it's the challenge. It's the challenge of going out and



making this look the best I can, you know? And that's why I say, I think it affects me in a positive way because, because when people see that, especially the bigger, another bigger man who may have not had the confidence to put that on, he see me wear it, they'd be like, well, okay.

Another facet to their creativity was their ability to make their own clothing themselves. Although only expressed by three of the men from the sample, the ability to design and create their own clothing benefited them as they can avoid the stigmatized nature of shopping as their main source in obtaining their fashion. Virgil a Black straight man explained their process of designing clothing “The reason I started it up, because I just knew how I have other friends who are big and tall, like myself, and they just showed this interest in trying other things, because they felt like they didn't, it didn't work for them” They decided to use their resource to further expand clothing options for themselves and others.

Creativity allowed these men to find validation in their fashion, as they feel like what they are doing is presenting themselves as best as possible. Although these bodies are restricted from certain styles and outfits these men go out of their way to try and recreate these outfits to fit with their bodies. Having the ability to make their own clothing also assures that they can wear styles not available via consumption. However, the ability to make their own clothing just like with purchasing custom clothing is not afforded to the majority of these men. There is also the labor aspect where these men have to put in extra labor to create something that can be found within standard sizing easily, “Some of the things that I want to wear are just not available for me to either make them or really search for them and that be an exhausting and tiring situation” expressed Alex.

In sum, all the men from the interviews cared about fashion or at least cared about how they presented themselves through fashion. The evidence shows that men have found enjoyment in fashion, and fashion became part of their daily presentation of self. Because fat bodies contradict the normative standards of fashion these men found themselves constrained. When consuming these men experienced a lack of options in the clothing available both in quality and quantity. Also, where In-standard men shared the same issues is the lack of standardized sizing which leaves the process of shopping up for a trial-and-error situation for these men. I argue that these men have used creativity and purchasing power to combat these constraints. Although they have been able to manage stigma relating to consumption, options are still limited to certain factors that are not available to all these men. Online consumption is still largely exclusionary for fat men and the issue with sizing is further worsen. The ability to make or get clothing made is only available to a select few where income and knowledge of the process is not available to all these men. Lastly, creativity is still a process that takes up much of these men's time and can be exhausting as they search to recreate a style not easily found in "plus-size."

### **Working in the Fashion Industry**

This section describes the constraints that fat men faced on the professional side of fashion. Based on content analysis of Instagram profiles, fat men consistently used marketing strategies in an attempt to enter the professional side of fashion. These men used fashion hashtags and tagged fashion brands as a way to draw attention to their profile and market themselves for the fashion industry. Although not all these men cared to be successful models, their goals resided around the industry of fashion and their initial

postings using fashion was done so with the intentions of showing off their fashion.

Beyond monetary gain, these men sought to achieve representation for “plus-size” as they saw little in current fashion. I make a distinction between the professional potential for gaining profits and representation to just wearing clothes for everyday life. Entering into the professional fashion industry changes the dynamic of their presentation as it now encompassed a purpose of having their fashion influence more than just their self-presentation but others’ presentations as well. This section further establishes these men’s stigmatized status in fashion by looking at their experiences in fashion profession.

Using interview data and content data analysis to fill the gaps of fat men’s involvement in professional fashion that is missing from the literature, I argue that as these men tried to gain access into working professionally in the fashion industry as models and social media influencers, there is a body size hierarchy within that negatively impacts the men who are further from acceptable fat bodies. Although all bodies in this study are categorized as “plus-size,” since recruitment was based on their acknowledgement of this title, there are still differences in the types of bodies that are grouped within “plus-size.” Professional fashion highlights the hierarchical differences found between body types. Similar to the consumption options of fashion, different body types had varying experiences within the industry connected to how well their bodies fit within normative standards of “plus-size.”

In-standard men expressed their experience in professional fashion as facing little difficulty in finding work as models, making money and gaining popularity. Victor explained his process of entering the fashion industry, “I emailed the agency with the pictures and then within a week they called me and said like, we want to sign you. And I

was like, what does that mean? He says, “We want to represent you and get you work and stuff.” In their first attempt at fashion professionally, they were able to be signed and find work soon after, “Then two, a week later I was assigned to the German agency who were connected to, um, my UK agent. Um, and then the week after I was doing my first shoot for the first time in London.” In-standard men were seen much more acceptable when they engage in fashion. Likewise, Jeremy who identified as Black and straight was able to get job opportunities in fashion based on posting on Instagram a semi-serious photoshoot he did with a friend. He said:

I felt like a boss. I posted those pictures and they went crazy. And like the likes, I hit explore pages. People were sending it back to me and then the brands started hitting me up. Like, Hey, can we send you something? And can you shoot? Um, you look so good we're interested. Then I found other models. So that one drug, that one post sparked so many conversations that I hadn't had yet. They opened up and I was like, wow, this is really a theme. Um, and I thought it was a joke at first where people were just really being kind, but they were like, no, I got product. I need you to shoot him. Like you have a unique look. And I'm like, I mean, like a model. And they were like, yeah, like you could get paid. And then when I finally got my first paid gig, I was like, this is crazy.

Both these men gained success within the fashion industry with relative ease. They talked about traveling and being paid for their content, something that was not expressed with men that were coded as fat with one exception. We can see another example of the advantages In-standard bodies have with Noah's experience of winning an impromptu fashion show and gaining access into the professional realms of the industry with little effort. He said:

I started my, my social media and I started posting stuff. And um, I remember like shortly thereafter I attended a, a runway show for like, it was like specifically geared towards plus models, men and women. And, um, I remember they had like an intermission runway contest thing where it's like, Hey, walk this runway and you'll receive one of our vendors, you know, a sponsor gifts or whatever. I was like, sure. Why the hell not? You know? Um, so I did it and I won and I was like,

okay, this is cool. I enjoyed this. And at that point it was like, Hey, what's your name? Hey, what's up? Hey, let's work. So, um, that's literally how it started. And from that one show that I attended as an audience member, I made some serious connections and um, also just sort of lifelong friends that, that I just love right now in adore. And, um, basically from there it was like, Hey, we have this show, you know, are you available? Hey, we have this to shoot. Are you available? And that's literally how it happened. I think I didn't expect any of that,

These three different In-standard experiences show that these men did not have a difficult time when they decided they wanted to enter into professional fashion. “For me, it was like, I was just, they dropped me at the top and left me there” Victor stated.

The experience of these In-standard men, highlighted the positive experiences used to generate a narrative of “plus-size” being more acceptable in fashion and society. With little presence in the industry beforehand, it is not difficult to see why men from the study praised the industry for incorporating “plus-size” male models. Specifically, men coded as In-standard had much more positive feelings towards the industry as they felt catered to because of the opportunities gained. “Now, five years ago to now of what size inclusivity looks like. I have seen more brands go more plus and fuller figure size. I've seen so many countless campaigns for notable brands like Nike, Lane Bryant, Walmart, Target that just have true representation of what real bodies look like” expressed Jeremy. Their easier time within the industry and quicker turnaround to find professional work was described as a happenstance. These bodies were seamlessly able to engage professionally with fashion that has allowed for modeling and runway opportunities compared to fat men from the study. Additionally, these bodies had greater access into inner fashion circles through peers and agents since they are more conforming to normative standards of “plus-size” and seen as acceptable. Although these bodies might

have found the process easier, they still must deal with their inferior positions as “plus-size” models.

In-standard men faced disadvantages since their bodies are still outside the normative standards of fashion. The men from the study complained about the lack of options and the type of clothing that they model compared to models outside of “plus-size.” Again, we see a separation between body types as clothing is restricted for these bigger men. This goes even further with “plus-size” modeling being separated from models outside of “plus-size” and feelings of aggression coming from these models. Fat men expressed negative feelings towards these in-standard men because they feel as if these men are not truly representing them. Victor a Black straight man said, “When I started out doing plus size modeling, I used to get people say you're not plus-sized because I was very athletic. So, it was like, you're not plus size as well. I'm not, mid-sized either. So, what am I?”

Looking at data from the content analysis, in-standard men generated more likes and followers on Instagram than fat men, despite only making up 47.5% of the bodies from the sample. (See figure 1) These individuals who do not necessarily represent the common stereotyped appearance of fatness received 10% more likes on their posts than fat coded profiles. (See figures 2 and 3) The self-presentation of these bodies was closely identical with only a difference of 1.5% in the amount of time these men were coded wearing concealed fashion and a difference of 2% when they exposed flesh. (See figure 5) Furthermore, out of the four verified accounts, verified meaning these accounts are seen as a business or entity, three of them were coded as in-standard. Verified accounts mark these profiles as professional and shows that these accounts are tied to their

professionalism in this case the fashion industry. The one fat coded account used fashion hashtags and used fashion in their presentation of self, but their account could be seen as verified because of their career in music rather than fashion. These three accounts verified can be seen as the faces of “plus-size” fashion since their accounts showed the most evidence of professional involvement with fashion and major brands, while also these men were named countless times by men in the interviews as established “plus-size” models. This brings up the issue of body type hierarchy where the verified accounts were coded majority in-standard and the majority of likes and followers were held by these accounts. Although their bodies closer fit to the normative standards of “plus-size” benefits them in fashion, it is only in comparison to the experiences of fat men from the study. With only three “plus-size” in-standard verified accounts that are also coded being exceedingly heteronormative with their clothing choices and racial identity. There is still much to be gained by in-standard men when compared to the industry of fashion as a whole. Men from the interviews still complained they were not “big” in fashion, even with high numbers compared to the other profiles from the sample; these men still felt their accounts were not substantially successful.

Conversely, the sentiment for fat coded bodies through these interviews can be highlighted by Ryan a straight Black man:

These are the people running our industry because they are tall or they are the acceptable version of plus. Um, and honestly there are people sometimes that are more stylish than these people and don't get the opportunities they deserve in either brand deals or modeling gigs, because they're not society's accepted version of plus size.”

Fat coded bodies had a much more difficult time finding professional work within fashion and when they do find work it is usually for small brands that focus on “plus-

size” and offer no monetary gain, rather they are given clothing articles to keep after modeling them. Andres highlighted this by pointing out the body type hierarchy “there's like a line and you have to be on this side of that line, even if you're a plus size, even if you're a big and tall, you can't be too far over, you can't have a stomach that's too big or be visually too large.”

While in-standard men show to have more worth in their time as they explained they do not participate in any promoting that does not benefit them financially. They have a better sense of how much worth their time is compared with fat bodies, who did not reject opportunities that did not offer financial compensation. The more precarious status of fat men left them more than likely to take on exploited gigs. This could be because these men had little experience in professional fashion as their attempts to participate are restricted by fashion standards. “A lot of times I go to casting calls, I usually don't make the casting call because I'm a bigger guy, because the first thing a boutique or a designer would say they don't have plus clothing” expressed Marcellus a Black Bisexual male. These bodies had been explicitly rejected or restricted by the lack of options in their size that has prevented them from these professional opportunities. These men had a much more difficult time finding representation through fashion agencies as these bodies are not sought after by the industry. Their involvement in fashion was from their own efforts making it both time consuming and costly for them since these men are not getting paid. Diego expressed his commitment towards fashion:

I would try out for the runway show, but somehow it just, it never worked out because I couldn't fit the clothes. Right. Cause I'm always been a bigger guy, you know? Um, or they would be, you know, you have a great wall, but we don't have your size when it comes to the designer. Right. You know, you're a very fashionable, but again, we don't have your size when it comes to the designer. So, I had to choose to be in the background or not participate at all, but because I love



fashion and because I love everything that fashion stands for, I chose to stick around because I wanted to see how the process was.”

Their exclusion from fashion was not due to a lack of trying. These men strategized posting times and put efforts into their presentation through fashion on Instagram.

Although not professional photoshoots, their pictures were of high quality and they stated there was editing involved with these posts.

The content analysis revealed that fat men put more effort into marketing themselves online in comparison to in-standard men. Fat coded profiles have marketed themselves through the use of hashtags 9.5% more than in-standard profiles and 8.75% more likely to tag fashion brands in their content. (See figures 6 and 7) Although fat bodies were more likely to promote themselves on Instagram, in-standard profiles had 5.5% more posts indicating a professional photo posted i.e., posts with high-quality detailed photos that feature a noticeable photoshoot setting, usually highlighting the brand and professional photographer in their captions. With their popularity significantly lower the efforts put in by these fat men were largely invisible within these online spaces and especially in terms of the professional fashion industry. We can see this effort made by Bobby a Black gay man who left their job to pursue fashion full time in 2019

since 2019, seriously, I've been a big and tall freelance model. Um, I have done, um, well, I won't say work with, but I have gotten the praise of Tyra Banks. Um, I am a part of Izod clothing brand. I am an ambassador for them. Um, I just recently got signed to a non-exclusive contract with a modeling agency. Um, and I'm going to New York fashion week in a month.

However, even with all this achievement, they had yet to be paid for anything related to their fashion career, with their fashion week event being the first monetary gain they will receive, they said:

My first gig of me getting paid to do anything is going to be New York fashion week, which is great. Um, now I've been doing this freelance stuff for two years and I've been literally pouring my money into everything. Um, and so it's gonna be a good feeling to finally get paid for what I do.

The outcomes of these men who try to engage in the professional aspects of fashion were minimal in comparison to in-standard models. Entering into this realm for the most part did not offer these men much in the amount of monetary gain. Rather they cited these opportunities more with being able to be a representation to others. However, this did not take away from the fact these men wanted to be paid and be part of fashion. Throughout these interviews there were two clear different experiences between the types of bodies in “plus-size.” There was a body size hierarchy within the male plus size fashion industry that has given success and opportunities mostly to in-standard men. While in-standard bodies gained the most because their bodies are more in line with the normative standards of “plus-size,” they still face disadvantages as being within the “plus-size” label.

Marcellus expressed:

I can get in and get out. I try not to talk to anyone because I know how things are. And I know where the conversation leads and a lot of time it's just a negative conversation from the models because they're like, oh, well you're a big guy. Like, have you ever walked out? They only go up to a size 32 or 34. How would you, uh, what would you fit to get on the runway.

This highlighted their disadvantages in their clothing and negative reception they receive from men that are categorized as “plus-size” compared to those outside these standards.

Both the two coded groups of “plus-size” men in the sample experienced stigma when they participate in the professional side of fashion. The interviews highlighted the varied outcomes depending on how much these bodies fit into an appropriate “plus-size” standard. Although the hierarchy of body type in “plus-size” fashion produced different

experiences, they shared in being within the outskirts of the fashion industry. “Plus-size” fashion was still marginalized compared to the whole industry and these men have only gained minimal accomplishment within fashion. Although these men expressed the notion of fashion’s inclusion of more bodies and its progression in recent years, the content analysis data did not show much change in these bodies gaining much access within professional fashion besides the selected few as only 4% on these posts indicated paid ad content.

This section along with the section above on consumption establishes the stigmatized position of these men in “plus-size” fashion, with their attempts to limit stigma not being entirely accessible by all nor truly successful. Legitimate participation in consumption and having a profession in fashion is not to the same degree as standards bodies, since this industry is tied to normative standards. With these two sections filling the gaps on the experiences of these “plus-size” in both the personal and professional realms of fashion, I tackle how these men get better results in managing their stigma through the digital platform of Instagram next.

### **Instagram and Fashionable Fat Men**

“Plus-size” men are both personally and professionally constrained in their attempts to participate in fashion. Consuming fashion is a process of trial-and-error due to the lack of options. In the fashion industry, “plus-size” categories were excluded from being recognized as validated participants of fashion with body size hierarchies ensuring fat coded men are in further marginalized position. However, research on online social networks show that marginalized groups can benefit as like-minded communities are built within these digital platforms (Eschmann 2020). Instagram has emerged as a form of

expression and representation for “plus-size” men who interact with fashion. As their bodies are judged as morally wrong, their online activity through Instagram allows them to invalidate such notions as they find acceptance in their self-presentation through fashion. Instagram gives these men the opportunity to better participate in fashion consumption and fashion professionally through community and business opportunities. In this section, I will highlight how Instagram has provided these men with alternative ways to participate in fashion. Yet, there are still issues with Instagram as it upholds non “plus-size” dominance in fashion participation and does not fully do away with the stigma surrounding “plus-size” bodies.

The growing nature of digital platforms with the social world means a higher integration and importance of these platforms in the everyday lives of individuals, as expressed by Ryan:

I use Instagram for all of those things. Like it is a business because I do work with brands, um, through my blog and through my social media. So, I try to put my best foot forward and make all of my content pretty accessible, so that brands would want to work with me more, but it's also something just to make me feel good and to keep up with people that I know in my everyday life. So, to be showing off my personality and connecting with these types of people, and then I also use it to find social groups and find people that I enjoy who are like me and who are not like me, that I enjoy. So yeah. It's a good mix of all of those. It's I say Instagram is just something that is good for me to keep going in my craft.

Instagram has been a source of interaction between the physical and digital world that made it a necessity for these men in their venture into professional fashion and personal consumption, as evident by these men’s expression of its importance to their exposure, Curtis states:

Well, it is the gram, it is the all-seeing eye, and all of this stuff, like everything, runs through its server. As far as, especially being exposed or getting exposure or

being out there, may you, you have to have Instagram, like, that's how you build your brand. You know? Um, I feel like it's definitely exposed me to more people being featured on certain, certain pages or something like that.

Instagram became a way for these men to navigate the stigmatization of their bodies in fashion as they find inspiration and representation, while being able to express their fashion and feel validation in their participation.

Instagram provided these men with tools to help navigate their stigmatized status. Because these men were constrained by their bodies when it comes to their full participation in fashion through personal consumption and professional involvement, they used Instagram to manage the stigma as they build confidence and community support.

Andres who is straight and Latino said:

I got so many followers and so many people like tell me how they enjoyed myself, how it was hard to find stuff for bigger guys, like asking me for advice. I think those certain of things where we include the people in our community and share them to other people who may be struggling with the same thing is the best option we can do”

Instagram provided men with a better representation of clothing options, being able to see their bodies modeled. Furthermore, it helped them with validation of their bodies. As Joe a straight Latino transitioned from a standard size to “plus-size,” Instagram and other social networks helped them find validation to participate in fashion by showing him individuals with similar body types. He said:

I was like, wow, like this guy is like, this is guy, he's a bigger guy. Um, I have a really big back, like, that's kind of broad. And I noticed he did too. And I was like, wow, this guy looks great in his fashion. Um, so I kind of, uh, you know, credit him for kind of launch me into my own journey and kind of reaching out to other companies and finding different fashion, um, things like that. So that's where I'm at now.

Seeing other bodies similar to theirs online validated their ability to use fashion in their self-presentation, along with inspiration for clothing options. Inversely, their participation of self-presentation through fashion online offered the same opportunity to their audience, while likes and interactions grant them validation in their presentation.

Instagram allowed these men to participate within professional aspects of the fashion industry. All but one participant stated that they used their profile as a business, pointing again to the active notion that these men at one point were trying to make it into fashion professionally. Instagram was described as their business card, detailing their efforts put into succeeding in fashion since these bodies are not getting opportunities from brands or agencies. “Instagram is a big driver. Um, it actually cuts out the middleman” expressed Bobby who identifies as Black and gay. Instagram facilitated these men to reach out to brands or posts content tagging brands, bypassing fashion agencies, while also reaching out to more potential opportunities. “It’s also a tool for brands to, to seek you out and find you and offer you gigs and opportunities” stated Noah a mixed race and straight man. Instagram allowed them to bypass strict fashion industry body standards, as these men can produce their own semi-professional photoshoots tagging brands and fashion industry hashtags. This acknowledged them to be associated with these brands that still might lead to future opportunities. Bobby explains the importance of their content posted:

So, when it comes to Instagram, I made sure that I will represent me. Right. Because, um, every picture that I put up, you know, I go back and forth, back and forth about which ones would be the best because, you know, I, I know that this is a hard industry to crack and I don’t want to leave anything to imagination. I want everything, I want all my cards on the table

Instagram offered them the ability to pick and choose what they want out there and how they marketed themselves to potential brands. Instagram allowed these stigmatized bodies to find work in professional fashion settings they normally wouldn't, with companies reaching out to these men through the platform itself for modeling opportunities. This permitted them to experience both a validation in their participant and gaining professional experience.

Moreover, their online presentation of self through the use of fashion helped them build both confidence and community. The majority of these men expressed positive feelings towards Instagram as it has allowed them to confirm their fashion identity. These men expressed the feelings of having others applauding their presentation through fashion, either through their posts gaining an adequate amount of likes or individuals and companies reaching out to them. These interactions helped these men validate their fashion, while allowing them to feel enjoyment by presenting online. Their online presence within communities helped them in furthering their desire to be within the professional side of fashion.

Some men wished to further their reach and engagement outside the niche communities of "plus-size." Some of these men used their other identities to gain access to other groups. The content analysis data shows that Gay identity-based hashtags granted these men a boost in their popularity online as they further expand their networks, a boost was also shown within racial hashtags but not to the same degree. Post that used Racial hashtags averaged 10 more likes than those that did not, while for gay men an increase of a 185 more likes per post were shown significantly increasing the exposure of their page.

(See figures 8 and 9). Communities online provided more exposure for these individuals but at a certain point these men did not feel benefited from them.

Instagram provided a way for these men to manage fat stigma that has constrained them from participating with fashion. However, as these bodies presented themselves within a realm that is largely antagonistic to these men, they experienced some negative outcomes through their online presentation. Their inability to gain access to a large follow count and their presence rarely seen outside of dedicated fat fashion spaces limits the amount of visibility these men are afforded. Stevens (2017) highlighted that fat bodies in social spaces are left invisible. The explore page and searches results on Instagram provides little inclusion of fat bodies since they are based on popularity. Rarely in the months when my Instagram was strictly used for research did fat males appear within my own explore page where posts are supposed to be personalized to preference of recent activity. Notions of fat bodies being censored from the online platform were expressed as a concern for these men. Noah discussed the negative aspects of Instagram.

It is a tool for me to make connections with folks, whether they be, you know, people that want to get involved in industry, um, people that just want to be friends, people that want to be colleagues, um, you know, yes, there can be, you know, hateful things and there can be negative things and there can be, you know, accounts that are removed or shut down. They're restricted because they're simply just showing some skin or whatever. And that's unfortunate. Um, because a colleague of mine, you know, he had a whole thing where he was posting like himself without a shirt on he's he's, he's a plus body and they would remove it. They would restrict it every time. And, you know, you see, you know, slimmer guys are chiseled guys that post shirtless all the time and it's still there.

Other negative experiences these men expressed were comments on their posts that criticized their body. Not all men expressed having negative experiences online the ones that did highlighted comments directed to them based on their body size. Although these



bodies used fashion and for the most part it was accepted, given they receive sufficient likes by their own standards, their bodies were still seen as unacceptable and an issue. Bodies were the main focus of these negative comments no matter their presentation, pointing to an issue with their bodies rather than an issue with what they are wearing. Within these digital spaces these men gained validation as they find and become representation for other “plus-size” bodies they still must deal with the negative perception their bodies give off. Their bodies were still considered morally wrong and their engagement in presenting their bodies should be seen as managing stigma itself, but the results have not changed the structural process of the fashion industry. For the most part this is why these men have stated that if they were not “plus-size” they would have much more success while also highlighting how thin bodies are naturally seen as fashionable in whatever they wear. (See figure 4). Instagram still perpetuates body status inequalities.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter sought to show the stigmatized positions of these men and highlight their experiences within these three realms of fashion: consumption, professionally, and online. In answering the research question: What discrimination do fat men face with fashion and how are they able to overcome constraints in fashion? I show how these different dimensions result in these men engaging and experiencing fashion differently based on body size hierarchy and similarly since these bodies are all still categorized in the marginalized group of “plus-size.”

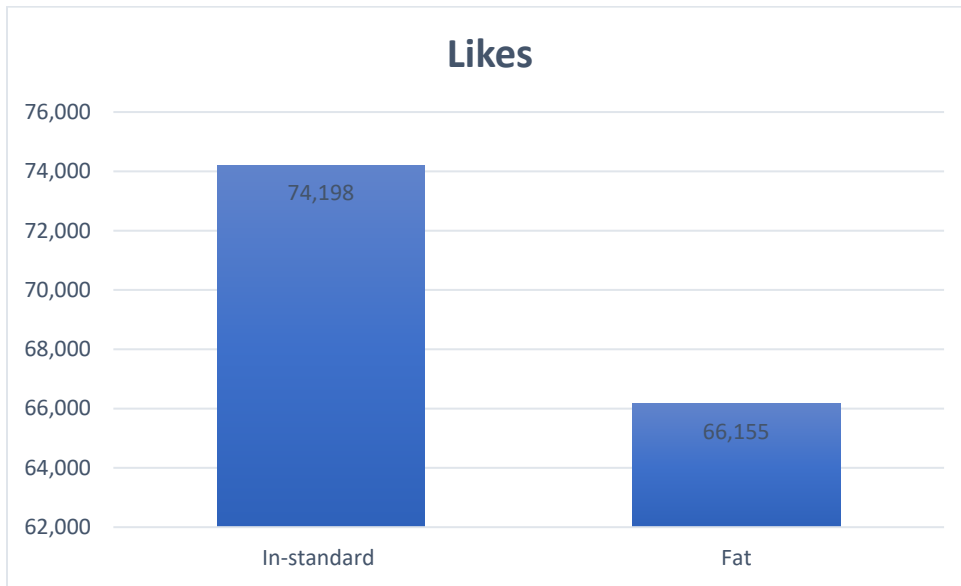
In their consumption, the two body types experienced different results in the availability and ability to shop but were both negatively affected by the lack of sizing

standardization. These men found that online shopping helped them navigate the lack of options but still suffered from the same restrictions found in physical shopping. Their options were to either get clothes made or make it themselves were limited to a selective few, while their creativity allowed them to feel validation in their fashion, it still meant that they had to spend more time and effort to produce an outfit that is easily obtained by standard sized individuals. Professionally, in-standard size men had a much easier time when getting involved in fashion, with fat men being restricted due to the limited options for them by the industry. Fat men experienced little monetary gain in their participation, with them spending money and time to try and be seen as professionals in the industry of fashion.

Although these in-standard men had some success that is only in relation to fat men, as all “plus-size” bodies from these interviews were still very much insignificant when compared to standard fashion. Instagram provided all these bodies with a sense of validation as they use Instagram to self-present. These men mentioned the opportunities they have gained through the use of Instagram as their business, bypassing fashion standards of bodies. However, this has not offered them much since their bodies outside of their communities are largely still being criticized for being morally wrong. The experiences of these men were similar to what has been found in the literature related to the abilities fat women have as they engage with an industry that is antagonistic to their bodies (Bishop, Gruys and Evans 2018; Connell 2003; Czerniawski 2011; Peters 2014). Although they might be able to navigate some stigma through specific strategies their bodies are still unacknowledged as legit participators. While these men have seemed to engage and feel like they are valid in their engagement, their status is largely minimal

in the bigger picture. However, this does not take away from the personal achievements and enjoyment these men have created through their limited success within fashion.

*Figure 1: Number of Likes*



*Figure 2: Average Likes Per Profile*

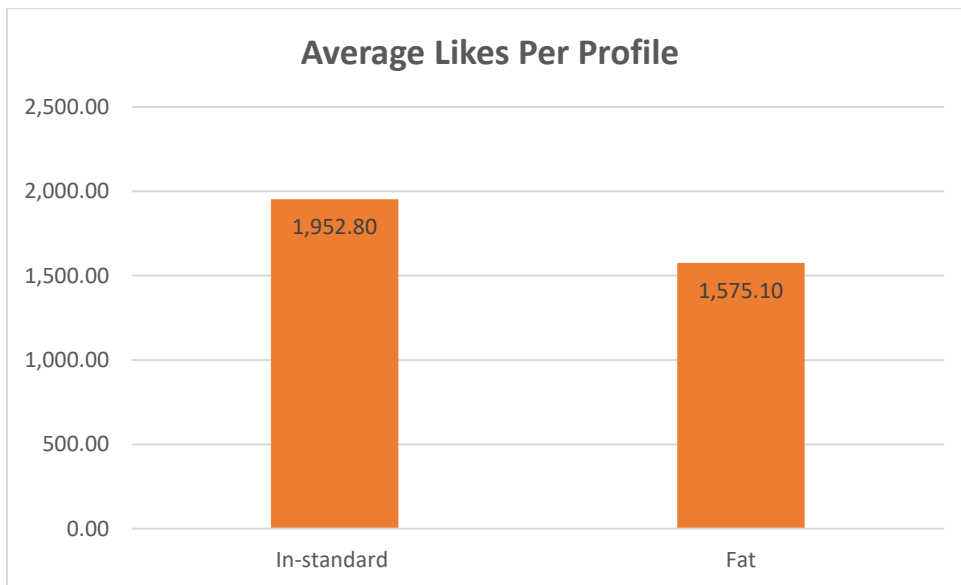


Figure 3: Average Likes Per Post

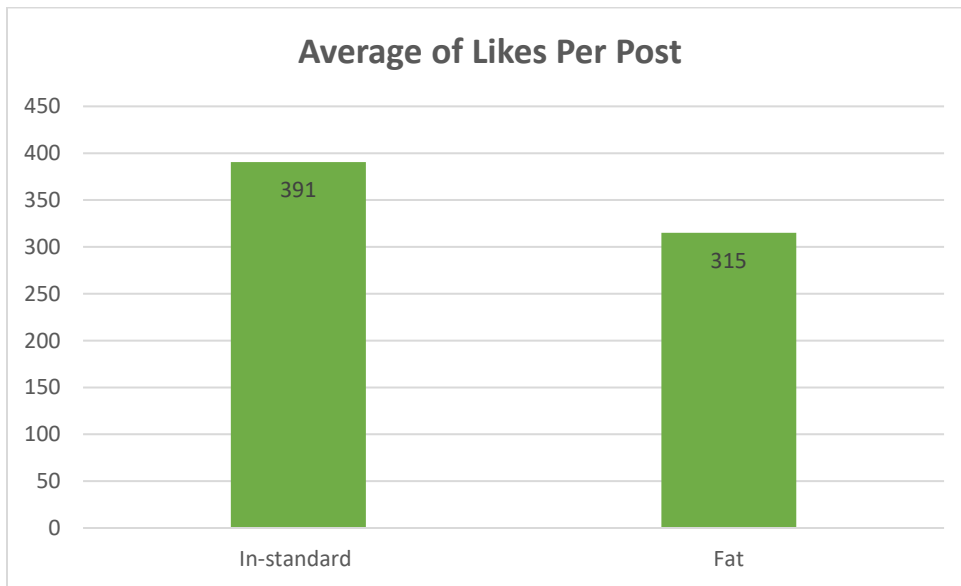


Figure 4: Difference Between Follower Count And Likes

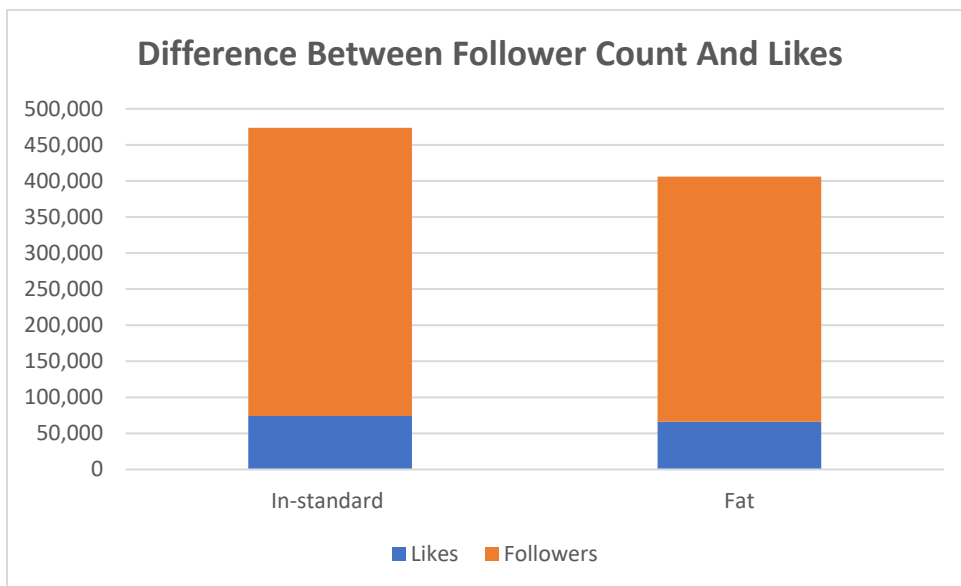


Figure 5: Presentation Type Per Post

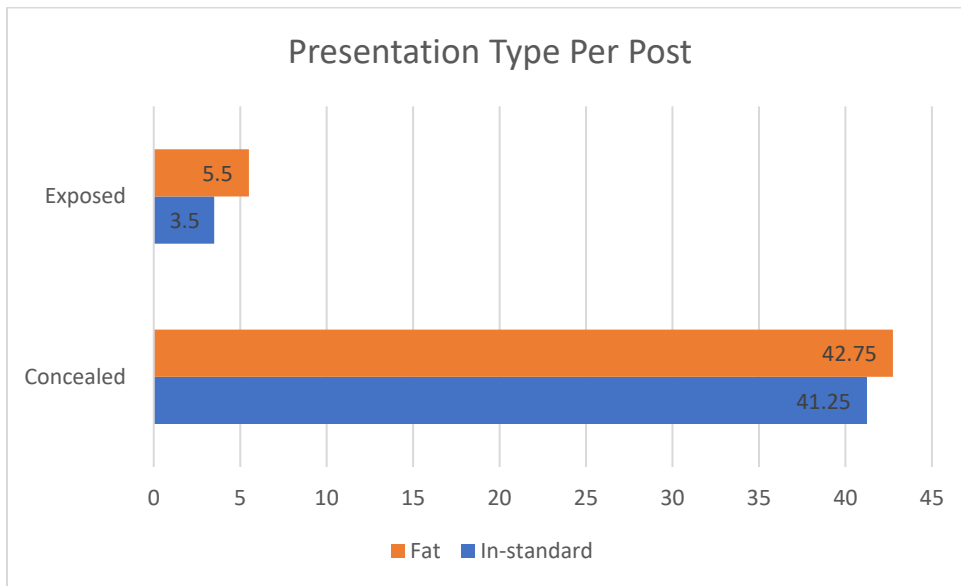


Figure 6: Marketed Through Hashtag Use

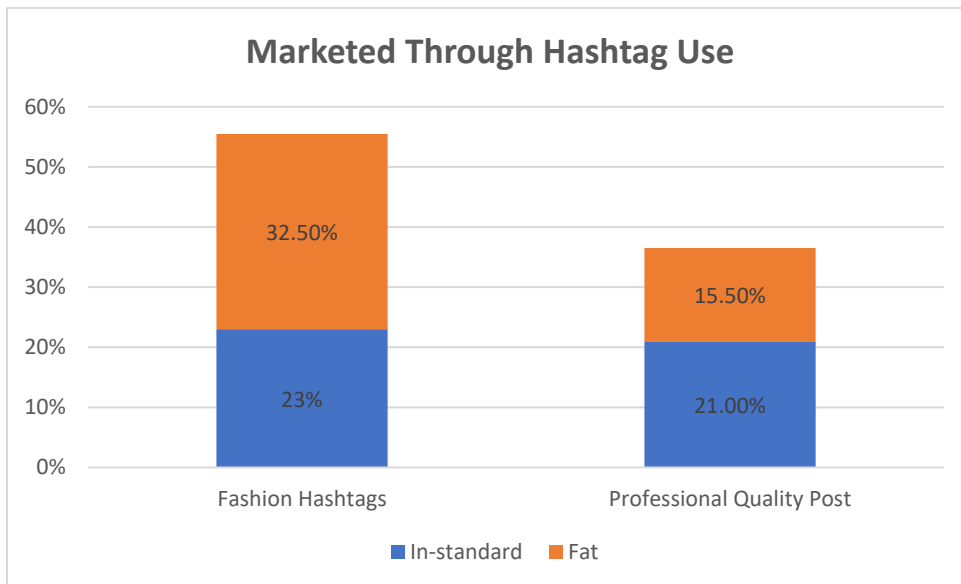


Figure 7: Marketed Through Brands Tagged

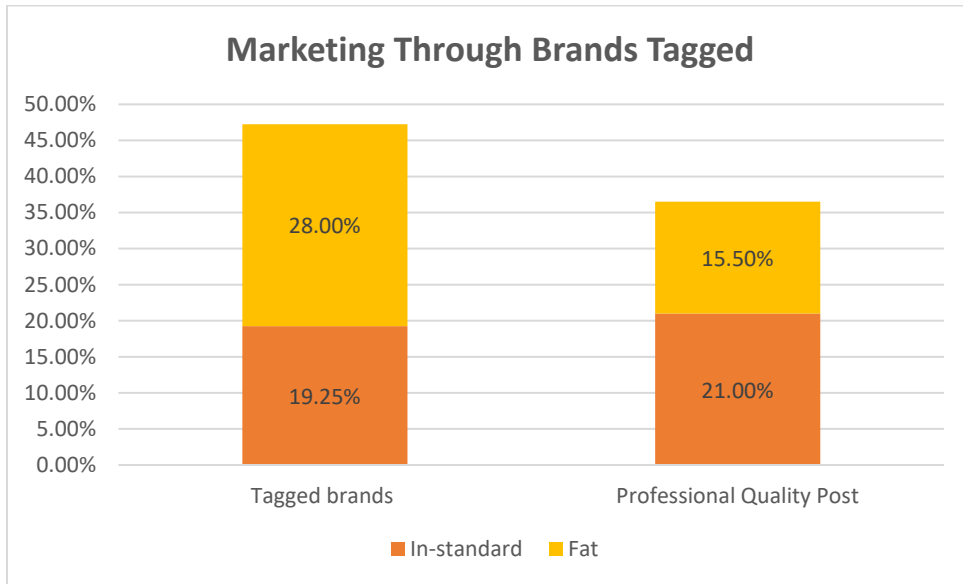


Figure 8: Gay Identity Hashtag Usage

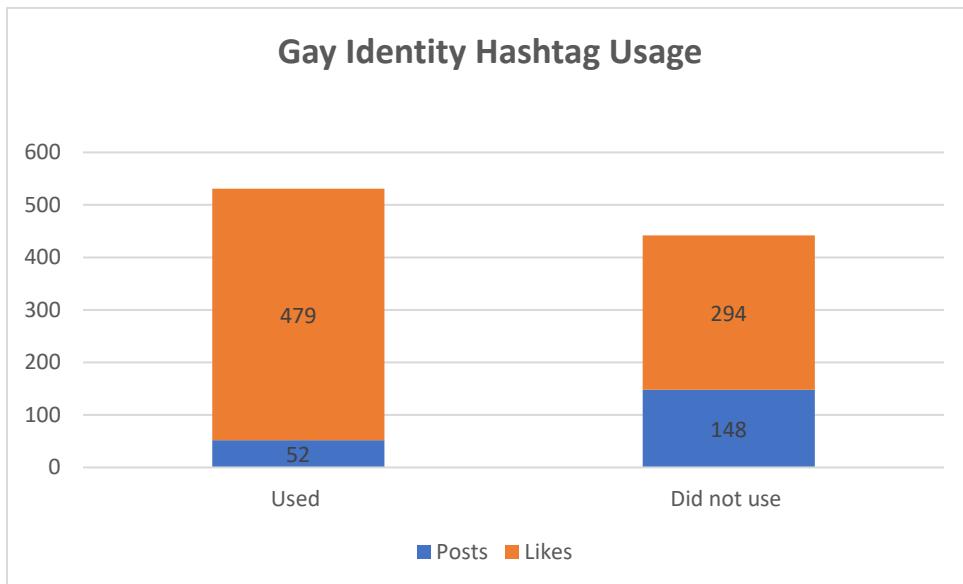
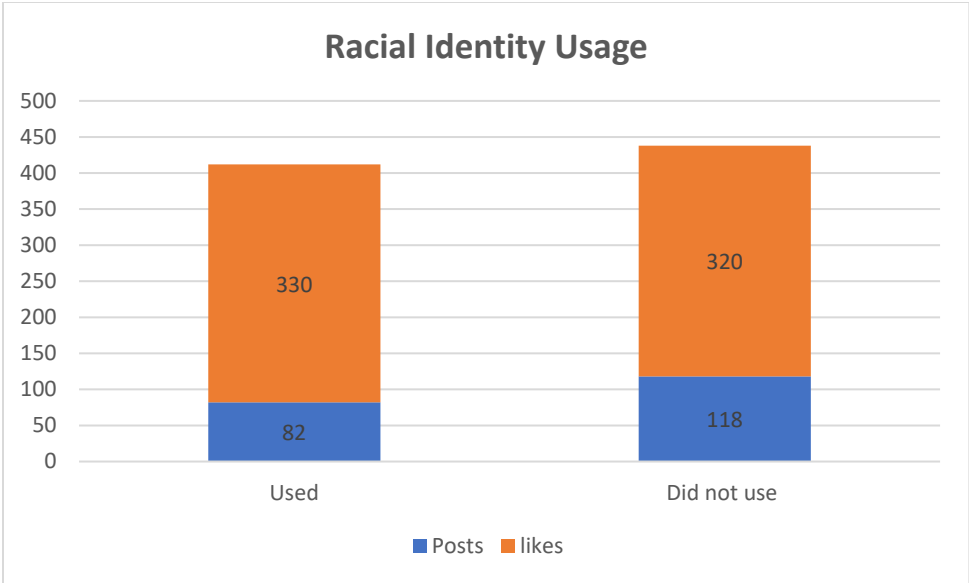


Figure 9: Racial Identity Hashtag Usage



#### IV. FINDINGS SECTION TWO

##### **Conformity or Countering: Self-Presentation, Masculinity, and Fashion**

After analyzing the experience of fat men's stigmatization as they participated in fashion through consumption, professionally, and digitally in Chapter Three, I will now turn to analyzing the role normative standards have in the decision making of these men when it comes to how they use fashion as part of their presentation of self. This chapter provides the answer to the research question: how do fat men use fashion as part of their presentation of self when their bodies are counter to normative standards of fashion? I found two patterns of presenting through fashion these men use. These patterns hinge upon their ability to manage their fat identities as it becomes key to their use of fashion since its largely based on normative consumer culture that rejects fatness. Building confidence through adhering to hegemonic masculine standards or countering these standards, fat men use fashion in two ways that allow for them to manage stigma through fashion.

In the content analysis of Instagram post, conforming and countercultural were coded based on the clothing type. Conforming included regular outfits such as shirts, pants, and suits. Additionally, exposed flesh that was fitting of occasion and setting was also coded as conforming. For example, settings such as beach, pool, or activities that are expected to have some exposed flesh, as long as they were wearing normative masculine swimwear, were coded as conforming. Counterculture was coded when clear gender boundaries were being broken, such as the wearing of skirts, tight fitted clothing, or



accessorized with feminine purses. Exposing of flesh outside of normalized was coded as counterculture such as inside public places. Exposed flesh that was presented through underwear and sexualized was also coded as counterculture in the presentation. However, data from the interviews proved more useful in determining the categorial pattern because the interviews revealed their intentions behind their presentation that differed between conforming and countercultural patterns based on their ability to adhere with notions of power and sexual desirability. First, fifteen men used conformity where their fashion was focused on adhering to hegemonic standards of masculinity and making sure their bodies were seen as appropriate. Secondly, seven men used fashion as countercultural. Their presentation was counter to the expectations for how fat men should present their bodies while also failing to conform to hegemonic masculine standards. This chapter will further breakdown the dynamics that go into these men's presentation through the two stated patterns. Masculinity is a crucial component of their presentation of self as it interacted with the multiple identities of these men which allowed some groups to downplay their fat identity through adherence of normative masculine standards. In answering the third research question: What role does intersectionality play as these men self-present and possibly manage stigma through fashion? The intersection of marginalized identities of race and sexuality left Black gay men unable to gain benefits from adhering to masculine standards. Their hyper-marginalized positions saw that their presentation through fashion was countercultural based on their own personal enjoyment and positive perception of fatness.

## **Development of Fashion Identity**

Fat men took an active role when it came to their participation in fashion. Rather than being bystanders, these men enjoyed and engaged in fashion. Although these men faced constraints related to fashion, they were able to form a fashioned identity. Men confirmed that they see their self-presentation beyond the expectations of fat men with their use of fashion and saw it more than just a practicality. These men established that they have a fashion identity, and this section will break down their process in obtaining and confirming their identity. I found that these men developed an identity around fashion in adolescence or adulthood, and I argue that they gain confidence in being fashionable as they age. This section focuses on the process of gaining confidence that allowed the participants to see themselves as valid in fashion.

### **Early childhood**

The men's early childhood experiences included the feelings that their bodies were different from non "plus-size" peers. They noticed that they were segregated away from the same clothing options since their bodies required them to shop either in adult or "husky" sections, which emphasized their position as different. Bobby highlighted this segregation in their experience at a young age with clothing:

There were limitations. I mean, from even me being a little boy, I had to wear Husky clothes in my, in my world or in my thought process, you know, I thought something was wrong with me even when I was a little boy, like, why do I have to wear Husky clothes, but actually a Husky guy, you know, if you really pay attention to the word Husky, that's like a dog. Um, so right there, I'm already tainted. Uh, and then going forward, um, you know, when I was growing up, yeah, it was hard. Like I basically had to go to like the street vendors or, well, yeah, let me get real grimy. So, in the hood, you know, people sell clothes out of their trunk and all those clothes was usually run big, like four X, three X things of that nature. So, I had to go there.

Consumption in earlier childhood was a different experience. Participants were bothered by the extra work to find clothing and affected by the negative label that shopping in bigger sized sections entailed for their bodies. Ryan a Black straight man further highlighted their experience:

I mean, when I was younger, uh, my parents shopped in the Husky section for me. I couldn't wear the regular clothes and I hated going into that section and I hated having to go get clothes tailor, and my regular tailor, like commenting on when I gained weight, doing that type of stuff, like me not taking my shirt off

The process for these men to find clothing at a young age was a catalyst for negative associations with their fatness. Although their ability to choose how they dressed was out of their hands, having their fatness reinforced by negative comments or segregated clothing definitions were key in the forming of the participants fat identities. The need to dress outside expected categorizations left their fashion presentation clashing with their other identities, especially their identity as a child. Their clothing categorization in adult or “husky” sizes being antagonistic to their age and maturity, signified their bodies as incorrect for their age group. This feeling of their bodies being wrong is further seen as thirty-five-year-old Allison a Pacific Islander and gay man recalled his experience being fat in his earlier childhood

I guess if you're a big, a big guy or a big kid, you, you get pushed back to the, you know, the backside of the scene. So that, that stuck with me for a long time, probably well into my twenties. Um, I always was trying to be smaller than I actually was. Um, because you never wanted, the fear was to be called (fat), you know, the fear growing up. I do know I had a very irrational fear of being, you know, singled out as the big guy, oh, you, you broke this or you were too strong for this or you, you know, you didn't fit in this. You are always, always scared. Like, what am I going to break this? Am I going to be the one that breaks that rickety chair? Or is it going to be somebody else? And so, there was always this level of irrational fear that came with being the big kid, because you're always afraid it was going to be you that did something. Cause if it was one of the smaller kids, people would laugh it off and just be like, oh ha ha. But if you were the big

kid, they'd be like, oh, it's because of what you weighed or what you look like. You know? So, I feel like I, I carried that with me throughout most, all of elementary school, especially middle school because middle school people are terrible and middle school of all, all three age groups of elementary, middle and high school, middle is where it's a rough cause you're also discovering who you really want to be too at that time.

Furthermore, there was an emotional weight as they realized their size constricted them but also exposed them to criticism. Negative experiences were common as their bodies signified their difference not only to themselves but to others. Men felt both a sense of hyper-visibility and hyper-invisibility that kept them from valid participation in social activities (Stevens 2017). Usually, participation meant they further faced the reinforcement that their bodies were different, as Jeremy highlighted the separation between them and his friends

I still did sports, but I didn't make the basketball team in middle school. I made the football team in the high school cause I was big. You know what I mean? I got to do different things. Um, I didn't box with my friends. I was bigger. I had to box older weight class. Um, I was good on baseball, but I could only be a catcher. I cannot be a shortstop. So, I was able to participate but definitely your size is a part of your physical ability. It's going to limit you from certainty.

Again, fatness was reinforced as wrong through separation away from peers based on body category. Their bodies had expected placement seen appropriate which restricted them from engaging in desired activities. Not only did these men perceive their fatness as wrong, it was also perceived by others and further reinforced. Interviewees expressed being bullied as a common occurrence through this life stage. Curtis stated because of their fatness they dealt with constant bullying

You were getting it all, you know, you getting fat, Twinkie, like it hurt. You know, you can't really do nothing for you. Can't defend yourself. You know what I'm saying? This, you know, sometimes you cry about it when you like that young, you

know, you cry about it, you fight and had several fights in middle school trying to defend myself, you know, from stuff like that.

The men's experience with "plus-size" in their early childhood prompted the formation of a fat identities, while establishing them as negative. Reinforced by the separation during consumption of fashion and social activities, these men were in a state the matches what Stevens (2017) has described as hyper(in)visibility. Further this separation sees them being placed in categorizes that signifies their bodies as incorrect as their age did not match up with categorization of clothing or who they are grouped with during social activities. Participants experience with bullying furthers the negative association of fatness as it is perceived and reproduces by others still within a negative context. During these early years little agency to downplay their fat identities associated with fashion presentation were found available to these men. Rather their inability to have significant purchasing power during this phase, along with parental income being the biggest determinant of clothing choice.

### **Adolescence**

As these men entered their adolescence years, they started to gain the agency to downplay their fat identities. Entering into high school was a transitional point where both the importance of appearance and their agency over their self-presentation grew. These men started to have more choice in their fashion options and gained some monetary funds to purchase fashion, even if it was limited at this time. How one dressed became a major point of the social hierarchy during adolescence. The majority of the men expressed adolescence as the start of their fashion identity. Allison who is Pacific Islander and gay said, "I think in high school they start to really pay attention to what

they look like.” The development of their fashion identity was tied to their confidence in presenting themselves through fashion, beyond wearing clothing for practical use. This confidence was gained as these men felt their bodies embraced for the first time as they wanted. Elliot who identified as Mixed race and straight talked about the confidence he gains as he participated in physical activities during their time in high school.

I think through high school and going through weightlifting and the experience I did with that, I would say that was actually empowering. Um, I think when I got into high school, I was, I was, you know, kind of a huskier kid, but I really didn't have any strengths. Um, and not to say that like, you need to have strength to have any sort of, you know, worth or capability. Um, but it was kind of weird being a big dude and then not being able to do a whole lot. Um, so that I think was pretty empowering for me because when I left, I was again, bigger on the scales and it's not like I had shrunk in terms of waysides, you know, I didn't actually lose any weight through all that, but that being said, um, I think it gave me a little bit of confidence and a little more feeling of self-esteem that I, um, that I was now much more physically capable, capable, and stronger.

The confidence that these men found was facilitated through experiences that have validated their bodies as participants. This allowed them to downplay their fat identities since they see themselves breaking stereotypical norms of fatness. Given the stigmatized position of fatness these men grew up feeling their bodies as erroneous. Not until they felt their bodies were accepted and benefiting them did these men grow confidence, and they later used that confidence to develop their fashioned identity. Through physical activities, extra-curricular activities, feeling sexual desire, and physical changes, these men downplayed their stigmatized fat identity during their adolescent years. Curtis a Black straight male expressed how their confidence was connected with these sorts of factors.

I started dominant the sports, real heavy sports, um, debate, all these types of extracurricular activities to keep going. I want to stay busy, you know? Um, it just loving myself too, but I didn't come to fully love myself by this time. I just, I felt like I was transitioning, you know, I felt like I was transitioning. So, I'm like,

okay, cool. Um, years ago, um, the ladies, you know, they show me attention. Um, I'm starting to get sexually active now.

This could be seen as one of the first times these men felt their bodies were not wrong. These men felt included and participated in activities that have been stereotypically restricted for fat men, helping them to gain confidence. Allison further explained the feeling of their bodies being sought after and useful.

I think the mindset shifted when people started coming towards me coming towards me to play, they assumed I wanted to play sports. Um, so I was the perfect size because I was bigger than everybody else was like, oh, well you can be in sport. You're going to be a football player a hundred percent.

Adolescent years offered more ways for participants to downplay their fat identities that had been induced early through their experiences. The men here found opportunities and engagement in social activities that allowed their bodies to participate just as those outside of “plus-size” categories. In this way their actions and inclusion did not create a sense that their bodies are wrong. Rather, it helped deal with stigmatization, prompting them to engage further.

However, not all these men expressed their fashioned identity started to be conceptualized in their adolescents; rather they experienced this period differently. These participants did not mention participating in social activities nor experiencing personal changes either in their physical presentation or through sexual attractiveness. Most of what was shared during this time was negative, Virgil shared his experience in high school.

Yeah, so, I mean, um, growing up being the fat friend or the, the big guy, you know, you always picked on a bunch of sides. So, it was probably up until senior year high school. I was kind of a shell of myself. Anybody knows me personally, you know, I'm jolly, you know, the life of the room. I like to joke, have a good

time. My personality speaks for myself. So, you know, just being picked on at school, you know, school, your kind of reserved because you don't want to do anything to make yourself stand out, even more in a negative manner.

The men who did not express interests in fashion during their adolescence also did not express being part of such social activities or groups which further illustrates the importance of feeling a sense of validation on behalf of their bodies as pivotal to their confidence. Men experienced similar notions as in their early childhood with fatness still being associated negatively, with not finding ways to validate their bodies and downplay their fat identities. The rest of the men that did not feel this validation of their bodies earlier on found it later in adulthood. For those who expressed it during their adolescence, they felt their fashioned identity came to its full completion in adulthood.

### **Adulthood**

Adulthood brought more opportunities for these men to experience a sense of validation for their bodies. Participants expressed gaining agency through weight loss, working out, sexual desirability, or aging, which brought about more opportunities to downplay their fat identities. In the previous chapter, I highlighted how purchasing power helped these men in their consumption of fashion. As they enter adulthood, more agency was gained on their ability to consume. Their older age also came with its own perks. Noah who is mixed race and straight expressed his experience in fashion as an adolescent and early on within his adulthood.

I remember just wearing a ton of sweatpants in like junior high and, you know, stuff like that. Um, yeah, again, I think back then, I didn't really, not that I didn't care, but I wasn't so invested in what I wore, um, you know, clearly by high school, once you get to high school or whatever grade level, you know, folks really care about that sort of thing and start paying attention to what you wear and what's cool and what's not. Um, but yeah, I didn't really, I don't think I even really discovered anything fashion related, till maybe college or even honestly recently,



um, cause even in college I was a stoner, like I would wear shorts and like flip-flops or sweatpants and a hoodie like that. That was just my, for me, I always chose comfort. It was easiest to throw on.”

Until recently Noah did not feel as if they had a fashioned identity. It was not until “two or three years ago” when they felt this change. When asked what changed they stated “I spent so many, so many years worrying about what folks thought about what I wore and how I looked and how I presented myself that I do not care now” pointing to the factor of age helping them men reach a point to where they can use their age identity to downplay their fat identity. Further evidence of age influencing these men’s presentation was seen with Danny a White gay man.

I just, at this point in my thirties where I'm like, you know, I had, I have these jeans and I'm doing all this and I'm just like, I really hate wearing these things. Right. I don't want to wear these. Like if I'm going to wake up and made a choice to stay, I would not wear this. I would wear something more like what I'm wearing today yet”

Although age itself can be an important factor that helped these men reach their desired presentation through fashion, it is important to note that these men mentioned experiences of other factors that could have helped downplay their fat identity. For example, Noah mentioned weight loss and Danny talked about weight training. All these external factors contributed to these men’s abilities to find confidence.

Moreover, participants described a transitional period where they lost their reinforcement to downplay their fat identity. Experiencing weight gain or stopping physical activity created a panic as they no longer felt their bodies being validated. Ryan highlighted their experience when they were no longer on an athletic team.

I was a college athlete and I did all-star cheerleading. And so, I would have to go out of town most weekends with a group of guys and girls and like, look my best.

I had teammates who were ripped and I was the one who was pudgy. And so, I had to make myself look presentable to look like I could be a part of this circle. Um, and so that's when I started receiving compliments and like, okay, maybe people really enjoy this. And then, um, after that ended and I aged out, I kinda went into a depression mode, like where I felt like I wasn't doing anything in life, um, that I was supposed to do or what people thought I should be doing.”

The men commonly felt a defeatist sense when their fat identities were reinforced by circumstances that made them unable to continue on participating in the factors that had allowed for confidence to be produced. As individuals aged, they found the ability to downplay their fat identities more widely available, leading to more confidence in their self-presentation. The average age of participants being thirty-two, further suggests their age had allowed them a higher confidence in their presentation through fashion.

Adulthood allowed the men more experience in situations of physicality, sexuality and heteronormality, which downplayed fat identities. Later in this chapter, I will explain how these experiences are rooted in adhering to hegemonic standards of masculinity and how Black gay men developed a fashion identity without these external factors. Their conception was more of an internal process due to intersectional struggles. In the next section I explain the two patterns that men use to present themselves through fashion.

### **Conformity or Countering**

The ability for these men to use fashion in their self-presentation came from their ability to gain confidence through downplaying their fat identities. Since fatness sits in a marginalized position both in fashion and society, their fat identities restricted them from feeling valid participation in fashion. Not until interviewees found ways to validate their bodies and at the same time manage their fat identities, did they started to conceptualize a fashioned one. In answering the research question: how do fat men use fashion as part of

their presentation of self when their bodies are counter to normative standards of fashion? I found that these men engage in conformity or countering in their fashion choices. I argue that men conform because their identities allow them to adhere to hegemonic standards of masculinity, thereby allowing these men to gain validation. On the other hand, men who counter have a hyper-marginalized identity due to the intersectionality of multiple marginalized identities, thereby not allowing these bodies to adhere to hegemonic standards of masculinity. Black gay men make up all participants in the countercultural category. This section explains both patterns of fashion used by the participants in their presentation of self. The process of using fashion as conforming sees these men adhering to hegemonic standards of masculinity in both their presentation but more importantly in building the confidence to be able to present themselves through fashion. In this section I will focus on the former; how they present using masculine standards, while leaving the importance of their use of these standards in conceptualizing their fashion identity in the next section.

Fashion choices for these men focus on how they should be presenting themselves in line with masculine standards of their body, race, sexuality, and age. These men worried about being appropriate based on these expectations and their appearance in fashion. Jaime said, “Depending on where I'm going is going to determine a lot about what I'm wearing and how, you know, cause that's just, that's just, you know, professional and cultural that trying to follow cultural norms as far as, you know, let's not push too far.” This does well in summing up the majority of these men’s presentation through fashion as they worried about making sure their presentation conforms to standards than on how much they enjoy and like their self-presentation itself. Clothing options for these

men incorporated an attempt to either downplay their body size or adhere to masculine standards when presenting in more unique fashion. “the societal norms around size in fashion and what is deemed appropriate or on trend is very cutthroat. Um, I'm a confident person, but there are some things that I would not put out” Jeremy stressed. With conforming, a main focus is the downplay of their body size; avoiding tight fitting clothes, wearing slimming colors, hiding their body and doing anything that helps conceal them. Men who wore clothing not typically associated with the expectation of how fat men should present were still seen as conforming through fashion because the reasoning behind their fashion identity is based on their adherence to standards of masculinity. These men saw their use of fashion as a way to justify power related to the male body as they conceal irrational and emasculate notions of their body or try to produce sexual validation through their fashion.

Men whose self-presentation was countercultural were motivated by their own desired appearance, rather than placating to normative standards of how fat men should present. These men were much more experimental in their styles and trends as their fashion goes against common expectations of concealment and gender norms. They expressed a more positive outlook on their body compared to those presenting as conforming, as their fat identity did not seem to restrict their ability to present through fashion. Tj a Black gay man expressed their positive view on their body.

I just feel like, yeah, I've been teased my entire life, but look at what being fat has done for me. You know, I've, I've learned to love my body, despite my weight. You know, I've learned that my weight doesn't really hinder me from a lot of the things that I want to do because I do it anyway. You know, I realized that my body's capable of so many amazing things for years. I was a dancer and stuff like that, and I was big. So, it's just like, why am I going to let somebody else dictate how I should feel about my body?

Unlike the conforming men, these men did not engage with self-presenting in masculine standards nor do they rely on the adherence of masculine standards to be able to establish their fashion presentation. These men established their fashion identity through their own personal enjoyment and commitment to fashion. They hardly felt like their bodies should or had restricted them from trying any style or trend apart from not finding it in their size, “I’ve done all the things that they say that we shouldn’t do” stated Alex. In their presentation there was no intention in trying to present appropriately in hegemonic masculine standards. Rather these men pushed their presentation through fashion in realms that counter what is expected of both their body and gender. Black gay men due to their hyper-marginalized position in accordance with normative masculine standards are positioned low in social hierarchies which prevented them to gain the validation through masculinity as other subgroups in the study. This left them with the inability to benefit from standards of masculinity. Thus, their restrictions because of their identities prevented the Black gay men of the study from being validated through the same masculine standards seen with the rest of the men that conform. These men’s fashion identity came from their own enjoyment of fashion and more positive body interpretation of fatness in order to set up their presentation. This will be further explored in a later section of this chapter, as the dynamics of these men’s counter presentation is further highlighted and contrasted with other racial groups of gay men and groups of straight Black men.

### **Gender Role and Heteronormativity**

The two patterns of presentation through fashion that I found in the sample are tethered to hegemonic standards of masculinity, either by rejecting them or implementing

them in both how they dressed and the reason behind their fashion involvement. This section will focus on the dynamics for the men that conform. I have shown how these men presented themselves through the use of fashion based on their fat identity and their ability to downplay this identity. I have highlighted how as these men aged, they gained opportunities to reduce their stigmatized identity as they validate their bodies. The validation experience shown so far are all in terms of adherence to masculine standards, either with physical appearance and activities, sexual desirability, or age itself. I argue that men who conform rely on masculine gender roles and heteronormativity to validate their bodies and reduce their fat identity. Even with White and Latino gay men their presentation as they focused on validating their sexual desirability.

### **Physicality**

Masculine gender roles were used by these men to reify their presentation in fashion as they exhibit notions of competition and physicality, both tangibly and figuratively through their clothing choices. Noah expressed how their desire to wear certain clothing is restrained by their inability to feel as if their body adheres to notions of physicality. He said, “growing up, you see folks wearing like stuff that shows more skin and shows more muscle. And of course, like growing up, I wanted to sort of emulate that.” However, with their body and not being involved in social activities, he was not provided validation for notions of physicality. Their presentation during this time was instead more in line with stereotypes of how fat men should present (practically and concealed). He said, “For me, it didn't look the same, you know, so I think at that point, like I instinctively chose comfort over anything.” The proving of physical capabilities became a way for these men to adhere to masculine standards, often these men expressed

how involvement in sports, other physical activities, and weight loss helped them build their confidence. Through these activities these men reduced their fat identity as they prove their bodies capable of participation just as standard size men. Curtis showed how his athleticism has allowed him to build confidence as he was able to adhere to notions of physicality.

So, I will even take the extra step to go look a little further to get something that I want or just prove it a little different. Like I played basketball, you know, like on a regular, just to stay active or whatever. Um, and sometimes I just like to, they, you know, they start talking and all of this and (he says) let's do a foot race. (others) No, there's no foot race. Like you're not going to beat me. So, I have to show them up, you know, and take off on and they be like, you can really move for a big boy. I said, don't let this size fool you. I was an athlete, man. You know what I'm saying? So, um, as far as letting them, me, me being restricted from a lot, um, nowadays not really, um, not really, like, I like to say the only thing being big stopped me from doing is fitting a shirt.

These men through their abilities to adhere to masculine standards based on competition and strength were able to build confidence. This confidence was then used in their self-presentation through fashion. Making their adherence to such gendered standards of physicality crucial to their ability to engage in fashion.

Moreover, transition into “plus-size” from a standard body produced conflict with these men since fat identity manifested and was antagonistic to masculine gender roles related to physicality. Andy an Asian American straight man said:

I was a little bit fit and skinny. And then as when I started taking my low dose of medication for my schizophrenia, it really made me gain weight. And I've kind of like little bit lost confidence in the beginning. I nearly wanted to like end it all. Just be like, no, I don't want to deal with this weight.

The stigmatized position of their fat identity discredits other identities such as ones related to physical standards of masculinity, since fatness was associated with notions of inactivity and laziness. Joe expressed the same notions when they gained weight.

I started gaining weight and I kind of in an instant, moved from this very fit active person to, you know, I wouldn't say overweight, but not the weight I was used to, and that's another thing, and I didn't know how to deal with that. So that increased my, uh, you know, depression in my eyes, isolation.

These quotes highlighted fat men's position as opposite of masculine standards of physicality, and the lack of experiences or resources to downplay fat identities results in a crisis for these men. Men from these interviews were able to attain confidence as they find themselves being able to demonstrate and participate in masculine gendered roles of competition and physicality. However not all men relied on these notions of masculinity, the next section will look at other alternative notions that allowed these men to adhere to masculine standards.

### **Age and sexuality**

Earlier in the chapter, I established the role of age being used to downplay fat identity. As these men aged, they had more opportunities in adhering to standards of masculinity, through common processes associated with ageing. Masculine standards in ageing sees these men experiencing gender roles associated with familial standards that help reinforce their abilities to downplay their fat identity. "I'm married and, you know, a lot of my validation comes, comes from my wife," stated Joe a straight Latino. Being able to adhere to gender family roles of masculinity gave these men validation where sexual partnership is not stereotypically associated with fatness. Just as I explained how the use of age-appropriate fashion helped them conceptualize their fashion identity, so does



family gendered role justify their presentation in patterns of conformity. Andres reasoning for not exposing flesh expressed this.

I'm personally just a little bit more modest. I still have some self-conscious issues when it comes to my body. Um, and also, you know, just, I kind of feel like that's more of a personal thing. I'm married. I feel like I don't really want to go putting it out all out there on the, on the internet and you can't take it back.”

Adherence to gender expectations of age allowed some of these men to validate their bodies and lower their fat identity. This was done as they use familial gender roles in confirming masculine standards, which justified their presentation.

Not all the men that presented through conforming patterns of fashion, strictly presented in heteronormative outfits. Sexual orientation was an important factor in their abilities to wear slightly less masculine clothing and non-traditionally masculine clothing. White and Latino gay were coded in the content analysis to present in non-gendered conforming clothing fourteen times within their online posts. However, none of those coded as such participated in the interview process. Rather, the five non-Black gay men that participated reinforced notions of heteronormative presentation being linked and valued within gay communities. Allison expressed the social hierarchy that is created in such communities and how being fat places them in an unwanted position.

No, it's pretty, it's, it's hard to be a big guy and especially in the gay community, um, you know, sometimes, you know, talking to, you know, with other friends, sometimes the community that I belong to, it can be the most hateful of their community, you know, because you don't fit this ideal body type, you know, or you, you, you you're in this category or this category.

Not only was their position in the social hierarchy based largely on their bodies fitting into masculine body standards but also these communities reinforce presenting in heteronormative gender conforming clothing. Given the restrictions in consumption this

posed an additional factor that must be contended with. Jaime a gay Latino shared how the perception of their fashion was received differently.

It is complicated because it's funny because there is, there is things I would wear just, you know, lighter colors, not even super bright, it just colors wearing colors in general that I'll hear some street people be like, I wish my husband were here, but he's such a straight man. You're so lucky. You're gay. You can wear whatever you want. I'm like, meanwhile, I wear the same outfit to the gay bar and I get attitude or derision from certain guys who have to hang on to that perfect cis like male identity.”

Gay participants expressed pressure to hold up and present traditionally masculine within these communities as femininity is seen negatively. Although, Black gay men pushed their presentation, White and Latino gay participants do not share the same notion. Rather they knew femininity hold a negative position, Trent expressed:

“Being fem being high-fem being feminine is like, no, that's bad in the gay culture. Like, like, oh, like for example, I was watching RuPaul's drag race the first season with the guy I was dating at the time and we're watching it and I was enjoying it and he's like, oh, these guys need to bunch it up. They are too, like, they are too feminine.”

White and Latino gay men from the interviews avoided pushing non-gender conforming clothing and choose to fashion in conformed standards related to gender. Adherence to masculine standards in their fashion was used in downplaying fat identities as they were able to offset a lower position within gay communities. Although some felt they might be pushing the boundaries on their presentation away from masculine standards, none of their Instagram posts coded had them wearing non-gender conforming outfits. Jaime expressed expanding their fashion to incorporate more gender fluidity, “I'll give it a shot if I think it's attractive” when asked for an example they responded “I don't have any

good examples of that right now. I think about that. No, I thought I did. And I'm like, wait, maybe I haven't."

Unlike those profiles coded online, the non-Black gay men who took part in these interviews did not push the boundaries as far as wearing non-conforming clothing nor exposing flesh. The men that did from the content analysis show that presenting in gender non-conforming clothing and showing flesh for non-Black gay men were more in line with presenting themselves as sexual rather than a fashioned. Given their posts focused on their sexualization rather than on fashion itself and the importance placed on hegemonic masculine standards of being sexually validated, while fashion is seen as emasculating could explain why no non-Black gay men coded presented in non-gendered conforming clothing participated in the research. However, further investigation needs to be done to better understand these reasonings.

Furthermore, straight men that also expressed pushing their presentation beyond heteronormative clothing choices expressed a close connection with gay men in their personal lives, Curtis a Black straight male said:

I think like a society has a standard of what men should and should not wear what colors, stuff like that. Um, I'm going to straighten me up, know I'm straight, but my brother, my oldest brother is gay. So, I always, I think I was growing up different because I, I just, it kind of was like nothing to me. Like I just kinda knew him already. So on like, you know, I never really, it didn't bother me or nothing like that. That's my brother. I'm going to love him regardless.

Regardless of their statements and feelings towards pushing gender boundaries none of these men were coded or expressed wearing non-gender conforming clothing. The most they expressed was wearing stereotypical feminine colors or shorter pant legs. When asked about pushing their presentation to incorporate non-gendered conforming clothing,

issues related to further marginalizing them since their “plus-size” categorization already left them in disadvantaged position. Elliot who identified as mixed race and straight stated how it is more difficult when their bodies already are stigmatized to get away with breaking gendered norms.

There have definitely been times recently where I wondered if I wanted to try outfits that were a little bit, I guess, gender fluid or gender bending. Um, and that's something I think about because I don't necessarily know if that's, uh, if that's how I want to present myself or not. Even if like, I guess I don't think about it as a problem.

When further asked why they have not done it yet or if they would, they responded:

Being a bigger guy comes into play because I don't know if I'd feel comfortable in something like that. You know, I don't necessarily wear loose baggy clothes, but I wouldn't say I wear any clothes that are very clinging or like super tight fitting. So, you know, maybe that's where my size would come into effect with me. Maybe I want to represent a more feminine part of my personality. I don't know how comfortable I would feel in a piece of clothing that did that. Not, not only from a, you know, a perspective of having to deal with and cope with my own, you know, masculine insecurity, but also just whether or not I would feel comfortable in my body wearing something like that.

The boundaries of expected gendered presentation was not pushed within non-Black gay groups of men from the study. Presentation was largely based in heteronormative fashion, that sees these men use fashion to conform to expected presentations based on hegemonic masculinity. While non-Black gay men online might have been coded using non-gendered conforming clothing, it was not done so as a presentation of fashion, but rather to present themselves sexually. Similar to the presentation in straight men when they were coded exposing flesh it was achieved through their feelings of adhering to a masculine standard of sexual attractiveness. The next section will highlight how conforming to such concepts of sexual attractiveness still leads these bodies to patterns of

conformity through fashion, even when they might be presenting semi countercultural, their reasoning and ability to do so is based in hegemonic standards of masculinity.

### **Sexual Attractiveness**

Additionally, notions of sexual attraction by straight men and non-Black men from these interviews were used to build confidence. The feeling that their bodies were being perceived as sexually desired downplayed their fat identity, as their bodies were validated in participation in typical masculine concepts that has been stereotypically not associated with fatness. Participants then used their ability to adhere to hegemonic masculine standards of sexuality where men based their value on their abilities of sexual conquest, in downplaying their fat identities. Trent a gay Latino man highlighted how feeling desired can affect their presentation through fashion, as they transitioned from a standard size body, they moved away from seeing themselves as fashionable and as sexually valid.

I honestly, at first, um, I was very depressed. I was very depressed because you know, all my life, you know, for all, you know, all my twenties, I was in shape and, um, uh, I was working out and, um, uh, I just felt good about myself. I felt, you know, I don't know pretty, I guess you could say, but, and then, you know, society tells you like, oh, being bigger, you're ugly, Being, Being, Being plus size or big and tall. You're less than. And, um, so when I got bigger, I got really depressed.

They started to find confidence after joining dating sites and feeling they were desired.

It started giving me self-esteem because they would say things to me about like, you know, they would say things to me like, oh, your belly is so beautiful. You know, I've had society been telling me that my belly is disgusting. So, so, um, over time I, I started getting confidence in myself'

Confidence in their bodies helped downplay their fat identities and establish the use of fashion in their presentation. However, the use of sexual attraction sees these men putting

value on historically masculine concepts that reproduces their marginalized positions. Also, in their attempts to come off as sexually desirable they present through conformed fashion sense because it reinforces notions of masculinity, that they associate with giving them the best opportunities to be seen as attractive. Straight men in these interviews relied on their feelings of sexual attractiveness in when exposing flesh or wearing less traditional masculine clothing. Curtis conceptualized their fashioned identity in their adolescence, although they expressed athleticism giving them confidence, they also disclosed that they gained confidence through sexual activity.

I'm going to be honest with you. So, um, you know, I'm feeling good naturally, especially when you a kid a fat kid and you were a Virgin, you know, but then when you lose your virginity and you start getting sexually active, that's going to naturally make you confident. Anyway, just I know me personally as a man, that just makes me more confident, you know what I'm saying?

The feeling of being sexually desired allowed them to take more alternative approaches to their fashion. Although these men expressed more progressive notions of fashion, where they felt gender should not restrict one's presentation, their reasoning for these notions were still adhering to masculine standards, especially sexual attraction. Curtis said, "I'm going to just say like, just be straight candid, Prince. You know, you know, Prince use to wear a blouse and take any man's woman in that room. You know what I'm saying? He wore a blouse and pumps. And still took anybody woman." Further evidence of sexual conquest in the reason behind their presentation is provided as Joe expressed, "I always liked looking good. Right. I mean, as a kid, you know, like, Hey, the ladies, right? Like I always wanted to look good."

The ability for these men to have their bodies feel sexually desired helps lessened their fat identity as sexuality is stereotypical not an association with fat men. Feelings of

sexual attractiveness allowed these men the confidence to use fashion. Although some felt that they were pushing gender boundaries into counter territory, their reasoning was based on masculine standards of sexual conquest, nor did their fashion push boundaries all that much in comparison to Black gay men. Black gay men were the only group that expressed presenting the pattern of countercultural. The next section will discuss this group and their hyper-marginalized position that causes them to present as such.

### **Intersectionality**

All men who used fashion through conformity used hegemonic masculine standards in their presentation and also in the development of their fashion identity. As these men adhere to masculine standards, they gained confidence and diminished their stigmatized fat identity, allowing the conceptualization of a fashion identity which they use in their presentation. Unlike these men, notions of masculine standards were largely missing from interviews with Black gay men. Rather than relying on such standards, this group conceptualized their fashion identity from personal enjoyment and commitment to fashion. They also had a more positive perception of fatness and were unable to be validated through the same masculine standards as the others. This inability to be validated by hegemonic masculine standards resulted in these men's position in fashion. I found that these men were the most likely to engage in fashion self-presenting but the least likely to be seen. Due to their multiple marginalization, I also argue that they do not benefit from the advantages that other fat men have in presenting themselves as fashionable.

## **Content Analysis Data on Black Gay Men**

Throughout the interviews, Black straight men along with White and Latino gay men separately felt that their identities as Black or gay helped their popularity on Instagram. Allison, a Pacific Islander and gay man shared this point “But, um, I think being gay has actually boosted my, um, presence on social media.” While interviews with Black straight men also share the belief that their identities benefited them online, “I think it is easier for African-American in fashion. Now females, I don't think it's easy for African American woman, but as a race in general, like as far as Instagram, ish, I think it's easier for African-Americans to become a public figure” expressed Virgil who is a Black straight male.

Results from the content analysis showed a small boost of ten likes per post as it pertains to Black identities when they use racial hashtags. There was a 185 increase in likes per post when non-Black gay men use gay associated hashtags. (See figures 8 and 9) These boosts helped Non-Black gay men and straight Black men within the content analysis to achieve the highest popularity amongst the sample. White and Latino gay men averaged 455 likes per post, while Black straight men averaged 419 likes per post. These identities, especially in the case of White and Latino gay men resulted in high number of likes as these men used hashtags identifying their sexual orientation. Alternatively, Black gay men had the least amount of likes on their posts, only averaging 229 likes per post on these profiles. The boost in popularity received by Black straight men and non-Black gay men for using hashtags did not translate to Black gay profiles. Rather, their multiple marginalized identities restricted them from benefiting or being seen as valid in using such hashtags. With Black gay men only using racial hashtags 30% of the times



compared to it being used 53% in Black straight profile, while also only using sexual oriented hashtags 20% of times compared to the 33% in non-Black gay profiles. Gay Black men in this sample can then be seen as the most disadvantaged group in terms of popularity on Instagram, with 57% of these profiles marketing themselves through fashion hashtags, they have seen little gain in popularity with their average number of likes being the lowest. (See figure 10)

### **Countercultural Presentation**

Due to the hyper-masculine stereotype associated with Black men, Black gay men's departure from hegemonic masculine standard presented a more significant outcome to their popularity and recognition based on their body and their sexual orientation. Likewise, gay communities privileging of heteronormality furthered penalized these men on their body but also their race. Their intersecting identities left these men negatively impacted within their racial, sexual and bodily groups. These disadvantaged positions within each group left them with no benefit to adhere to hegemonic standards as conforming men, the intersection of their marginalized identities offset any benefits that might have been obtained adhering to masculine standards. Given these men receive no benefits from normative standards in fashion, they were more likely to use fashion as countercultural. Penalties received for breaking cultural norms of how gender or bodies should present was minimal given their already hyper-marginalized positions.

Given that feminine categories did little to affect their hierarchical position, all Black gay men interviewed expressed shopping in women's section and using feminine coded accessories and clothing in their presentation. Participants engaged in women's

clothing options as a necessity due to issues in proportions which again reemphasizes issues with standardized sizing, while also due to preference and ability. Given their position from the intersection of their identities, these men did not worry much about the perception non-gendered clothing might receive. Rather, their decision was influenced on them waiting to get the best clothing for fashion purposes, as Diego a Black gay man expressed why he wears women's pants.

Like, for example, when it comes to pants, I rarely wear men's pants because I think women's pants compliment you more, to me. Women's pants compliment you more when it comes to you trying to give off a look, um, especially like if I'm wearing high tops and I want my shoe to be more of a statement, you know, I feel like women (pants) are easier to roll up. They'll sit on top of my shoes, versus a man pants

Alex a Black gay man further established these men's progressive view on gender roles, stated "there's more, um, variety in women's wear and you know, it's just silly that we have those, those distinctions to begin with because it, you know, it's clothing." As these men have no benefit from their hyper-marginalized position in fashion, they were not pressured in presenting conforming through their fashion. Rather, these men were unconstrained in what they wore. Participants expressed that they usually got push back for their fashion choices, but it never affected their decision in what they wore, Diego expressed the issues his presentation caused.

Um, I've had so-called friends tell me, you know, why, why are you wearing your chest out like that? You don't feel like your, your chest is too big? Why do you have your shirt open? But I've had people literally try to, how do I say this? Okay. I would say I've had people try to adjust my outfit because they didn't like it. I was showing my stomach or they didn't like that my chest was out or anything like that. You know what I mean? So, I've had, I've been criticized. I've been told you need to go change because, or I've had people with straight friends be like, you know, you're gonna carry your bag in here? Absolutely. You know, it's happened. It didn't stop me from carrying my bag. (Video pause because they got a phone call) But did they stop me from carrying my bag? No, I still carry my

bag. You know, you can give me criticism all you want, you know, but I'll take it as constructive criticism. But again, I'm going to wear what I want. Bottom line.”

The multiple marginalized identities held by Black gay men negated any benefits from conforming to masculine standards. The emasculation from their fat identities interacted with both their racial and sexual identities and places them in a hyper-marginalized position with each group associated with these identities. While Black straight men and non-Black gay men used masculine standards to validate their bodies, this is not possible with these men as their identities offset each other. This left these men in a position where they could interact with fashion without much concern of their hierarchical position being affected, resulting in their use of fashion through countercultural means. These men pushed boundaries of gender and body expectations, as their fashion reflected their own personal interests and their positive perception of their bodies.

### **Body perception**

These men's countercultural presentation is established by their enjoyment and dedication to fashion itself and also their progressive acceptance of their bodies. Their fat identity did not take away from their fashion identity, nor their presentation through fashion. Rather than conceptualize their fashion identity through adherence of masculine standards these men expressed enjoyment of fashion and an early involvement in fashion. When asked when these men considered themselves fashionable, they felt it earlier than conforming men and as intrinsic to them, “Um, I grew up like that. Like since I was an infant” expressed Tj. Dylan further stated, “I feel like it's just, honestly for me that it was just natural.” These men felt that fashion was natural to them, but they also felt that it could be used in standing out, given their marginalized identities, Diego disclosed

It's very important(fashion). And it's very important because I come from a very small town where I'm not even posed to. I come from a town where first of all, I come from a family of my mom had four boys. Okay. And all of my brothers dressed very masculine and my mom wanted men. You know what I'm saying? I'm not sending, I'm less of a man, but in my family, I had to find a way to stand out. Okay. And so that's why I turned to fashion. I needed that way to stand out from everybody else to present myself because all my brothers, this is not shaming them. They blended in. Right? I didn't want that. I didn't, I didn't want to do that. So, I take every opportunity I can get and present myself in fashion and to show other people.

Alternatively, In-standard Black gay hid their sexual identity. Fat coded bodies were significantly impacted in their experience both personally but more importantly professionally. Their sexual identities can negatively impact in-standard Black bodies, given the groups hyper-masculinized status. Gay identities can have a significant impact on Black men's social acceptance, as we see Black Gay men on Instagram have less than half the likes straight men have. The lack of in-standard bodies within this subgroup is cause for alarm given when controlled for sexual difference there is an over representation of these bodies in the Black racial group population. Being a Black gay man online then results in a hyper-marginalized position. Allison expressed the difficulties of intersectional for these men "large fat men just are not, they're like the bottom rung of the gay community. Um, let alone, if you're, uh, let alone, if you're a person of color." While in-standard Black straight men continue to hold a high position in the online fashion hierarchy, there is deliberate benefit for men these men to not come out.

### **Sexuality**

I have established the role that sexual attraction had on non-Black gay men, both in terms of adhering to masculine standards and gaining in popularity. However Black

bodies in the gay community were not seen as valid sexual partners and are discriminated against based on racial stereotypes. These participants then did not receive the same benefits for their sexuality. This can be seen by the drop in the number of likes received by these men compared to other subgroups of gay men. Unlike non-Black gay men, their posing in non-gender conforming clothing or exposure of flesh was more based on their activity through fashion rather than a sexualized body as they did not benefit from these sexual notions. Allison expressed this as they used dating apps

Grindr, for example, like I can't even get on there anymore. Like it's just because like those things do, you know, they do kind of take a weight on your psyche. Like, you know, having so many people like ignoring you or like not doing what you, because of like certain things or like people who have like bio, then it says, no black guys, no big guys, you can't be this tall. Or like, just like all this realistic. Like it's just like too much for me.

The combination of their body size and racial identity resulted in them being marginalized within gay communities, the same with how their gay identity leaves them marginalized in Black communities. However, since these men had received little to no benefit in adhering to masculine standards their fashion both pushes the boundaries as they dress in gender non-conforming clothing and expose more flesh. Rather these men presented themselves in such a manner because they consider it to be fashionable. Bobby a Black gay man detailed his Instagram post wearing women's shorts.

Like for instance, there is a picture on my Instagram, um, and I'm going to see it where I can share it. I just want to be as clear as possible. I don't know if you can see that. All right. So, everything in there is a boy except for the jeans, but people wouldn't know that unless I told them.

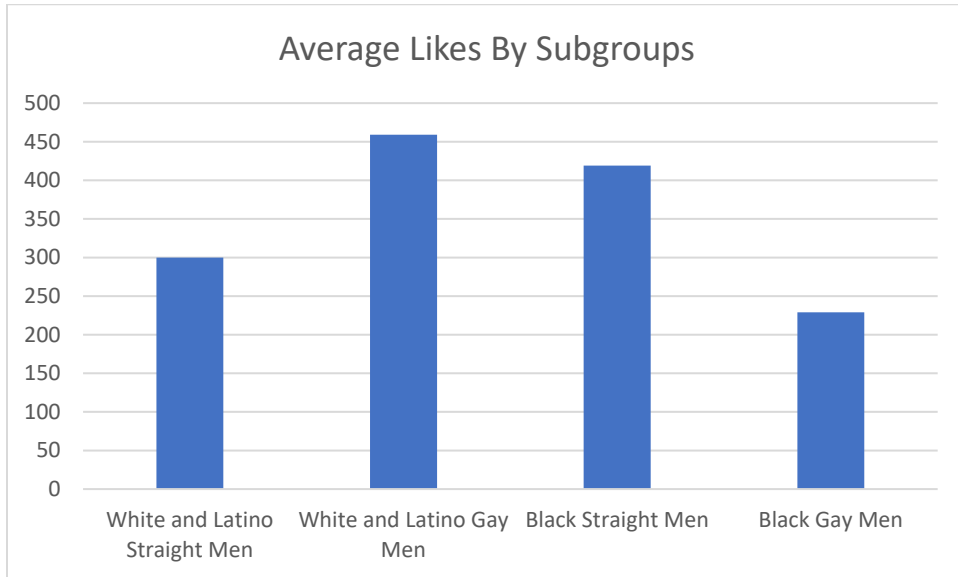
Gay Black men were prevented from their participation in gaining validation with hegemonic masculine standards, affecting them online and offline. As these men self-

present the intersectionality of their marginalized identities resulted in restricting them to any benefits as those conforming through fashion. As such within the online platform of Instagram these men received the least number of interactions from the sample, leaving Black gay profiles to have significantly less interactions and chances of exposure and visibility. However, because they were unable to benefit from masculine standards, they self-presented through countercultural which pushed gender boundaries and body boundaries forward. These men generated a fashion identity through their own enjoyment of fashion and their more positive perception of fatness.

In conclusion this chapter provided the two patterns to which these men self-present through in their use of fashion answering the research question: how fat men use fashion as part of their presentation of self when their bodies are counter to normative standards of fashion. I stated that two patterns are conforming and counterculture which is tied to these men's ability to downplay their fat identity allowing them to manage fat stigma by either conforming or countering standards of hegemonic masculinity. In order for these men to be able to present through either fashion, they had to gain the confidence that led to the conceptualization of their fashion identity by downplaying their fat identity. Conforming men relied on using masculine standards to help them downplay their fat identity. As these men aged more opportunities became available for them to adhere to, mainly through physicality, sexuality, and presenting heteronormativity. Unlike these men, interviewees who used counterculture presentation were hyper-marginalized due to the intersectionality of their multiple marginalized identities. All men in category were exclusively Black gay men and gained no benefit from adhering to masculine standards. Answering research question three: what role does intersectionality

play as these men self-present and possibly manage stigma through fashion? Their intersectional location leaves these men in hyper-marginalized positions, where their fashion is more in line with their own enjoyment and positive perception of their bodies.

*Figure 10: Average Likes By Subgroups*



## V. CONCLUSION

Fat individuals experience a high sense of stigmatization as their bodies have been deemed morally wrong and they are blamed for their size. Fatness is criticized for a lack of healthy choices, bad eating habits and lack of working out (Cole 2019; Foster-Gimbel and Engeln 2016; Gruys 2012; Joy and Numer 2018; Limatius 2020; Saguy 2011; Saguy and Ward 2011; Stevens 2017). This results in fat individuals having a marginalized position within society as they are disadvantaged and seen negatively for their size. Fat individuals try to reduce their stigmatization through multiple strategies from attempting to change their bodies either through dieting, working out, or surgical procedures; or avoiding spaces and situations that might heighten the perception of their fatness by others (Stevens 2017). Fashion has been shown to play a part within marginalized groups in helping individuals within these groups manage stigma related to their bodies (Cole 2019). Fat women have used fashion to downplay their fat identity and thus the stigma they feel that comes with it (Peters 2014). Additionally, men must deal with notions of masculinity in their self-presentation as hegemonic masculinity occupies a dominant position in the social hierarchy (Robinson 2016). Fat men have not been yet examined in their use of fashion to reduce stigmatization of their bodies nor in the roles their identities play in this process. This thesis sought to answer the following research questions: (1) What discrimination do fat men face with fashion and how are they able to overcome constraints in fashion? (2) How do fat men use fashion as part of their presentation of self when their bodies are counter to normative standards of fashion? (3) What role does



intersectionality play as these men self-present and possibly manage stigma through fashion?

To answer these questions, I draw on data from the dual methodology of twenty-two semi structured interviews and a content analysis of 400 Instagram posts from 80 profiles. In answering the first research question I found that fat men were able to overcome institutional discrimination in three dimensions of fashion; personal consumption, professional, and digital presentation yet, they were still limited. In consumption, online shopping helped navigate the lack of options but still suffered from a lack of standardized sizing. Purchasing power helped with getting outfits made to their size but were limited to income and knowledge of where to shop. Creativity allowed these men to feel accomplished in being able to recreate a wanted look but takes up time and effort whereas standard size men can easily obtain these same looks through consumption. Secondly, professional fashion is based on a body size hierarchy where men coded as in-standard gained accesses into the professional aspect of fashion without much effort; yet they are still in a marginalized position as their exposure or degree of fashion is still very much insignificant when compared to standard fashion. Lastly, Instagram allowed for a sense of validation in their participation of fashion as they are contacted either professionally or personally by others reinforcing their self-presentation through fashion. However, the opportunities gained are small and outside of niche communities they still face criticisms for being fat.

In answering the second research question, I found two patterns of presenting through fashion these men use. Conforming which sees the participants adhering to hegemonic standards of masculinity and countercultural which presents against these

same standards. In order for these men to be able to present through either fashion, they had to gain the confidence that led to the conceptualization of their fashion identity. The ability for these men to present through fashion is influenced by consumer culture. Their ability to create a fashion identity points to them successfully managing fat stigma as fatness is outside the normative standards of consumer culture. The fifteen men who used fashion to conform found that as they aged more opportunities to physically, sexuality, or heteronormativity adhere to masculine standards become available. While the seven men that used fashion counterculturally did so through restrictions from their multiple marginalized identities that prevented them any benefit from masculine standards. This leads into answering the third research question as all participants coded using fashion as countercultural were Black gay men.

Given the findings I argue that fashion has reproduced and maintained the perception of fat bodies through normative standards based on which these men sit outside of. Their position counter to standards has insured these men experienced and felt the disadvantages that come with their fatness as they interact with fashion. In their ability to conceive a fashion identity, most fat men rely on their ability to conform to masculine standards. In contrast, Black gay men with intersecting marginalized identities are unable to do the same, resulting in their own distinctive ways to their fashioned identity. This need to down play their fat identity helps manage the stigma of their bodies as they reconstruct the information they are trying to give out.

### **Contextualization**

These findings are consistent with prior research on fat bodies involvement with fashion. The contemporary fashion industry has included bigger sizes and expanded the

types of bodies found on runways and modeling for brands (Czerniawski 2011). Opportunities to purchase fashion has also increased with the growing market of online shopping (Acar et al. 2017) However, even with the expansion to include more fat bodies, the industry is still restricting these bodies as it maintains reproducing normative standards that largely places fatness in marginalized position (Peters 2014). Online digital website has provided the majority of inclusivity to these bodies, when they try and participate in fashion (Limatius 2020). Whereas the majority of these studies focused on women's interacting within fashion, I show that these same constraints can be found in men's use of fashion as well. The increasing notion that fashion has been more expansive in the inclusion of larger bodies has been a shared sentiment throughout all twenty-two interviews. Men expressed brands now having designated "plus-size" sizing and that online has provided them with more options to find clothing. Issues with sizing and not being offered the same options as standard bodies were still prominent even as quantity in options increased. There were still desired styles and brands not producing fashion that would work for these men, leading them away to select fashion choices, usually with brands they already purchased from.

Similar to fashion blogs, these men found validation and confirmation of their fashion presentation on Instagram. Online these men formed groups focused on "plus-size" fashion where they were able to find work in fashion. In all the dimensions of fashion that fat men interacted with, there is a clear body size hierarchy that has privileged bodies closer to normative standards. In-standard participants showed to receive the most opportunities professionally and within Instagram were the most popular profiles. Given that fashion works to maintain and reproduce normative standards, the

restrictions found with fat women in the literature and fat men with this study is not a surprise. With fashion being praised in their current trend of incorporating larger sizes, it is important to note how it is still maintaining the separation between “plus-size” and standard size individuals. New sizes and options still do not bridge the gap between body types in fashion and majority of what is considered fashionable leaves out “plus-size.” The industry’s incorporation of “plus-size” models has only served to reinforce masculine standards and reproduce what fashion deems as appropriate fat bodies. Notions of hegemonic masculinity are reproduced as ideal acceptable male bodies sit as the face of the “plus size” industry, even when majority of “plus-size” consumers are outside of this body type. Instead of pushing forward the inclusion of fatness, “plus-size” fashion has restricted these men by prompting hegemonic masculinity that deems what “plus-size” bodies are appropriate.

Furthermore, the literature stressed the role masculinity plays when it comes to the self-presentation of men. I found this role consistent within my own research, with added significances to the role masculinity played in the use of fashion. Men are typically expected to have limited interest in fashion other than for practical purposes (Frith and Gleeson 2004). Coupled with the expectations of fatness, it seems especially unlikely that fat men would use fashion in their self-presentation. Stigmatized fat individuals have been shown to avoid situations and participate in activities that might heighten or expose their fat identity to criticism (Steven 2018). However, participants in my study have instead chosen to use fashion and claim a status beyond the stereotyped expectation. These men have placed themselves in a public position to be judged and criticized for their bodies. This in itself can be seen as one of the ways these bodies manage stigma as

they place themselves in positions not expected of them, especially as they present themselves and their fashion online. The assumption of their body image is that of a fashioned self. With the body central to identity and fashion central to consumer culture they show an ability to downplay and manage fat stigma by adhering to other identities (Jagger 2000). Masculinity is identified as an important aspect with determining how and why they use fashion (Frith and Gleeson 2004). Men that used fashion to conform relied on presenting in heteronormative and gender conforming in order to boost their masculine identity and downplay their fat identity. These men relied on their presentation adhering to what fat men were expected to present in. There was pressure for them on their stigmatized bodies to present through conformity as to manage fat stigma. I further argue that masculinity was not just used in determining what they wore but also in the conceptualization of their fashioned identity. These men were able to build confidence and downplay their fat identities as they felt validation of their bodies from adhering to hegemonic standards of masculinity. Through notions of physicality, sexuality, and heteronormality, fat bodies were validated which allowed to then feel validated in their participation through fashion. In doing so these men where able to manage fat stigma by the downplaying their fat identity with masculine norms. Since notions of masculinity play such a critical role with the self-presentation of men, the demasculinized stereotypes around fatness causes these individuals to be perceived as unvalidated participants. Through dressing in ways that give off a semblance of fitting into these standards these men can associate their bodies with masculinity. What is being reproduce as these men find confidence is concepts of hegemonic masculine standards, which these bodies are against. In upholding these standards these men are reproducing what has marginalized

them in the first place. Fashion to these men were less about their own personal enjoyment but focused on making sure they presented within masculine standards either through the clothes they wore themselves or the reasoning behind their involvement.

Moreover, I have found that racial and sexual identities are impacted by masculine standards that have implication on men's social hierarchical positions, with past research also consistent in these findings. Fatness is costlier for Black and gay individuals given masculine body standards are placed highly on the social hierarchy of these groups (Foster-Gimbel and Engeln 2016; Grimm and Schwartz 2017). Black men have come to use notions of hyper-masculinity to assert a degree of power over their marginalized racial position (Cole 2019). However, fatness can be shown to emasculate men which would affect these men's ability in asserting power. Similarly, in gay communities' bodies fitting within masculine standards are able to alleviate stigmatized positions related to their sexual identity (Foster-Gimbel and Engeln 2016; Joy and Numer 2018; Grimm and Schwartz 2017; Robinson 2016). Fat bodies are not granted this notion and are judged more harshly by men in gay communities because of this. This places fat gay men low in the social hierarchy within gay communities. (Foster-Gimbel and Engeln 2016; Robinson 2016). Standard size gay men have been shown to utilize fashion and intersectionality to assert statements about who they want to be perceived as (Cole 2019). These notions related to the disadvantage positions of these men cannot be clearly seen as within the past literature since these men had already negated the effects of their fatness against their masculinity, given they been presenting through fashion for some time. Their conforming presentation of masculine standards in their fashion has allowed for both these groups to have the most popularity within Instagram and also those coded as

In-standard easy entry to fashion professionally. However, looking at men that share in these racial and sexual marginalized identities we see the role intersectionality plays in preventing these men to conform to masculine standards. Their inability to do so has kept many of these men from finding popularity or success in the realm of fashion but has also allowed them to use fashion counterculturally. These men have pushed the boundaries on the expectations of body and gender presentation. Although Black gay men push for more progressive notions of fatness and gender acceptance these men are missing from the professional aspects of fashion and go unnoticed within online platforms. Given that the majority of these men share at least three marginalized identities with their bodies emasculating them and their racial and sexual identities offsetting any benefits to adhering to masculine standards these men are hyper-marginalized and largely missing from fashion realm because of it.

### **Explanation**

While it is beyond the scope of this study to explain fully why these men chose to use patterns of conformity and countercultural in their presentation of self through fashion there is reason to suspect that those patterns reflect the ability to adhere to hegemonic masculine standards, influenced by their other identities. Fashion's adherence to masculine standards means that the stereotyped notion of fat bodies being emasculated prevents these most of these men from forming a fashioned identity. It is through conforming to masculine standards that these men gain validation in their bodies and confidence that downplays their fat identities. This notion to use masculine standards was not available for all participation as those who shared multiple marginalized identities were unable to conform to these standards. Instead, these men presenting through

counterculture pushed boundaries on their presentation. As previous research has shown the role masculinity informs not only presentation but also placement in the societal hierarchy. Hegemonic masculinity has been described by Robinson (2016) as the dominant position in a given interactional pattern of gender relations. While Cole (2019) described fashion as not a matter of conscious choice but the expression of structures. In this case the structure of masculinity plays a crucial role in the presentation through fashion of these men.

### **Alternative explanations**

This research is in no way intended to be the definitive answer in interpreting the reason behind the patterns found in the presentation of these men through fashion. Other possibilities for these findings could be that these men have a general enjoyment in fashion and are not influenced but structural restraints related to hegemonic masculine notions. Rather their self-presentation is based on their own perception of what works best for their bodies, while being viable to their income. Fashion could also be seen simply used in practicality for these men who only engage in fashion on the basis of occasion and setting. Those explanations are consistent with prior research that have shown that men can navigate restricted positions that fatness places them in through other means. Saguy (2011) has pointed that men could compensate for their bodies stigmatized position through class, status and fame. This takes the needs for the use of fashion away from these men as negative fat notions has been dispelled already. The engagement in fashion by these men then would be more in line with their own reasons and patterns of self-presenting through fashion, since the use of masculinity to downplay their fat identities is no longer needed, fashion could be simply for practicality.



## **Limitations**

Like all research, this study is limited in some ways. Given the importance of body type when determining success professionally in “plus-size” fashion and popularity on Instagram, the lack of in-standard Black gay men might be the reason behind the low number of likes produced by this group. While it would have been ideal to include more of these men in the research the data still allowed me to get a sense of their hyper-marginalized status which could explain if these men are actively choosing to not come out within digital spaces. Future research would try and control for body variations within “plus-size” categories of men. Although this research tried to get an even distribution, it still had fat coded men overly represented within the subgroup of Black gay men. Additionally, the research points out the stigmatized position of man within their participation in fashion as compared to standard size men. However, this research is limited in truly grasping the experiences of standard bodies as they interact with fashion. A cross reference with men outside of “plus-size” categories would further strength the argument of their disadvantage position in fashion. Yet this research still allows us to see that these men have much less agency in the fashion choices and opportunities, while they go unnoticed within in their participation in fashion on and offline. Future research should look to include more studies of standard size men in fashion industry profession and in personal use. Since men are stereotyped as bystanders it should allow for a cross reference in their process to use fashion compared to fat men.

## **Implications**

Despite its limitations, this study still has important implication for future research, including the importance of hegemonic masculinity to be a key point of study

when looking at the use of fashion by fat men. As previously discussed, this study shows that masculine standards are not just simply presented through the clothing these men are wearing. They also effect the ability for these men to use fashion, as the adherence to masculine standards allowed these men to validate their bodies and downplay their fat identity. This allowed the gaining of confidence to participate in a realm that enforces masculine standards, since now they can feel validation as their fat identities get downplayed. These findings suggest that the importance of masculinity goes beyond the use of it in presentation. Looking at the emasculated positions these men are in because of their fat identities would provide a better understanding as to their use of fashion in their self-presentation.

Furthermore, the analysis of intersectionality is also key to point out for future studies. Their other identities besides fatness played a crucial role in their experiences with fashion. As straight Black men and non-Black gay men benefited the most from using hegemonic masculine stereotypes of physicality, sexuality, and heteronormality in association with their identities resulting in their high position within “plus-size” fashion communities on Instagram. However, these benefits did not translate to Black gay men, were their multiple marginalized identities prevented them from validation in accordance with standards of masculinity. These men use fashion counterculturally since they gained no benefits from conformity to these masculine standards. These findings suggest the role of intersectional identities being critical in their social positions and their use of fashion.

## **Conclusion**

As this study has shown fat men participate in fashion even when their bodies resulted in them dealing with multiple restrictions as they engage with different

dimensions of fashion. Consumption of fashion sees participants limited in the choices of clothing both in quantity and quality, with a lack of standard sizing making it much more difficult for “plus-size” men to be consume fashion. While online shopping, purchasing power, and creativity has allowed these men more agency in this process they are still restricted with issues related to sizing, money, and time. Professionally, “plus-size” males have not gained much success within the industry and the men that have are not typically seen as representing fat men. In-standard bodies success in fashion points to a body size hierarchy that sees an acceptable notion of fatness being reproduced as these bodies adhere closer to hegemonic standards. Fat men have found that online communities have allowed them to bypass body standards in fashion while also validating their fashion. However, these bodies are still very much invisible in their participation, and the body hierarchy can also be seen within this space. Fatness is still largely criticized outside these communities as wrong. While these men have seemed to be more engaged in fashion in all dimensions it is still largely restrictive to them.

This study has further shown that masculinity and intersectionality play a crucial role in these men’s ability to participate in fashion and also how they participate. The two patterns found in which these men use rely on their ability to adhere to masculine standards and downplay their fat identities. Conform in patterns sees these men adhering to masculine standards of physicality, sexuality, and heteronormality, to validate their participation in fashion. Counterculture use of fashion sees these men unable to benefit from masculine standards due to their multiple marginalized identities, this group was made up of all the Black gay men. These men pushed the boundaries of body and gendered presentation through their fashion that pushes fashion forward for men away

from standards of hegemonic masculinity. However, Black gay men are largely invisible within fashion, having little involvement professionally while also seeing little in terms of popularity within spaces like Instagram.

Given those arguments, I conclude that fashion continues to adhere to standards of hegemonic masculinity even when producing bigger sizes and including “plus-size” models professionally. Instead, fashion has created a standard for acceptable male participants that largely relies on them reproducing and maintain masculine standards in their presentation and as they rely on masculine standards to validate their participation. Although they might have found validation to participate their bodies are still marginalized in the fashion realm which led to the multiple restrictions shown in the research that these men must contend with. While Black gay men pushed the boundaries of fashion both in body and gender presentation, these men have largely been ignored given fashion’s continued adherence to masculine standards.

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