

## Analyzing Intersectional Ableist and Fatphobic Discourses in Digital Spaces. The Case of TikTok<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Medicalized definitions of obesity and disability classify them as conditions under which people experience serious physical and psychological pathologies affecting the body, having severe implications in their daily lives, and forcing them to face inequalities at the personal, social, political, and cultural levels. There is currently no agreement on whether obesity is a disability; nevertheless, ableism and fatphobia frequently intersect, accentuating weight and disability stigma in offline and online environments. As Goffman points out, stigma is “an attribute that is deeply discrediting”, and it is caused by stereotypes and mental models embedded in society. Hate Speech against fat people has been attested in literature, especially concerning their representation in the press and Social Media Spaces (SMSs). Indeed, although social media have become places where counteracting narratives around these issues are shared, and several anti-discrimination laws have been implemented over the years, Hate Speech Online (HSO) is still pervasive. Despite the abovementioned research, to the best of our knowledge, no investigations have been conducted so far on fatphobia at its intersection with ableism in SMSs. Accordingly, this paper will examine an under-researched form of HSO, namely discriminatory behaviors against fat people with disabilities (henceforth, FPWD), through a quantitative and qualitative approach to provide insights into how hateful intersectional discourses on disability and obesity/fatness are construed and enacted, focusing on how social media users participate in the process of meaning production.

**Keywords:** Ableism, Fatphobia, Hate Speech Online, Intersectionality, Social Media, TikTok

### 1. Ableist and Fatphobic Discourses: Hate Speech in Social Media Discourse

There are complex relations between obesity and disability. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Obesity Report,<sup>2</sup> the rates of people living with overweight or obesity are constantly increasing, with serious health risks associated with rising levels of obesity.<sup>3</sup> In fact, obesity is one of the key risk factors for a number of noncommunicable diseases and the leading risk factor for disability.<sup>4</sup> Disability, on the other hand, which can be experienced by almost everyone temporarily or permanently at some point in life, is similarly increasing partly due to population ageing as well as to risk of developing comorbid conditions, among them obesity. Therefore, despite intervention efforts, both obesity and disability remain major concerns worldwide. While medicalized definitions of obesity and disability classify them as conditions under which people experience serious physical and psychological pathologies affecting the body,<sup>5</sup> the inequalities people are forced to face at the personal, social, political, and cultural levels, merge into forms of discrimination representing not merely a public health concern

<sup>1</sup> This study is part of a wider interdisciplinary research project that was funded by Parthenope University and that takes into account issues concerning obesity within the school context (from a medical perspective) and the presence of stigma and discrimination, both at school as much as within society, which leads to offensive language, body-shaming and fat-shaming practices. Although both authors conceived and worked on the paper collaboratively, Maria Cristina Nisco is responsible for sections 1, 4.3.2, 4.4, 4.5, and 5.1, while Annalisa Raffone is responsible for sections 2, 3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3.1, and 5.2.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization, “WHO European Regional Obesity Report 2022”, WHO (2022), [www.who.int](http://www.who.int).

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization, “Obesity”, WHO (2022), [www.who.int](http://www.who.int).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.; Rebecca M. Puhl et al., “Policies to Address Weight Discrimination and Bullying: Perspectives of Adults Engaged in Weight Management from Six Nations”, *Obesity*, 29.11 (2021), 1787-1798.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.; World Health Organization, “Disability”, WHO (2022), [www.who.int](http://www.who.int).

but also a social justice problem leading to social bias and prejudice, which then results in varying forms of stigma.

In a classic formulation, stigma has been defined as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting”, something that reduces the stigmatized person “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one”.<sup>6</sup> In this view, stigma can be described as “a special kind of relationship between an attribute and a stereotype”,<sup>7</sup> as something that is embedded in a “language of relationships”.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, stigma can be said to occur as a discrepancy between ‘virtual social identity’ (namely, how a person is characterized by society) and ‘actual social identity’ (the attributes really possessed by a person).<sup>9</sup> Stigmatized individuals would thus experience a deviant condition, society identifying them as flawed or spoiled (see also Jones).<sup>10</sup> Besides locating stigma at the dimension of the individual, some definitions have further stressed the fact that if stigma is an attribute or feature that conveys a devalued social identity within a specific context, this identity is then construed by identifying who belongs to a particular social group and whether a certain characteristic may lead to a devalued social identity in a given context. It can be conceptualized based on the processes of cognitive categorization; in other words, it takes place when a mark links an individual via attributional processes to undesirable characteristics that are collectively deemed as discrediting. As such, stigma does not appear to be located entirely and exclusively within the stigmatized person, but also within a social context that defines an attribute as devaluing.<sup>11</sup>

As a situational threat, stigma directly affects FPWD via mechanisms of discrimination, expectancy confirmation, and stereotype activation, and indirectly via threats to their personal and social identities.<sup>12</sup> It may then result in forms of ableism and fatphobia which increasingly appear as pressing issues nowadays, because they influence individual and collective acceptability. More specifically, ableism and fatphobia are two systems of oppression which have received less theoretical and empirical attention compared to other such systems.<sup>13</sup> Ableism draws on a set of beliefs and practices that devalue and discriminate against people with disabilities (PWDs) and often rests on the assumption that PWDs need to be ‘fixed’, to some extent.<sup>14</sup> Fatphobia refers to a dislike of fat/obese people based on their body size, having severe implications on employment, education, interpersonal relations and so forth.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, ableism and fatphobia frequently intersect and interact,<sup>16</sup> perpetuating a web of bias and injustice rooted in a variety of different negative feelings such as intense dislike, superiority, disgust, recrimination, shame or fear.<sup>17</sup> These sentiments can all trigger violent actions/reactions, strengthening

<sup>6</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 2009), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>10</sup> Edward E. Jones, *Social Stigma: The Psychology of Marked Relationships* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Crocker et al., “Social Stigma”, in Daniel T. Gilbert et al., eds., *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Fourth Edition (New York: Oxford U.P., 1998), 504-553.

<sup>12</sup> Brenda Major and Laurie T. O’Brien, “The Social Psychology of Stigma”, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 56 (2005), 393-421.

<sup>13</sup> Laurie Cooper Stoll and Justine Egner, “We Must Do Better: Ableism and Fatphobia in Sociology”, *Sociology Compass*, 15.4 (2021), e12869.

<sup>14</sup> Zawn Villines, “What is Ableism, and What is its Impact?”, *MedicalNewsToday* (2021), [www.medicalnewstoday.com](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com).

<sup>15</sup> Matt Lowe, “Your Guide to Understanding & Combating Fatphobia”, *All about Obesity* (2021), [www.allaboutobesity.org](http://www.allaboutobesity.org).

<sup>16</sup> Stuart W. Flint and Jeremé Snook, “Disability Discrimination and Obesity: The Big Questions?”, *Current Obesity Reports*, 4.4 (2015), 504-509.

<sup>17</sup> Giuseppe Balirano and Bronwen Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate: Critical Discourse Studies of Hate Speech, Discrimination and Inequality in the Digital Age* (Napoli: Paolo Loffredo Editore, 2020); Maria Cristina Nisco, “Online Abuse and Disability Hate speech: A Discursive Analysis of Newspaper Comment Boards on Harvey’s Law”, in Balirano and Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate*, 75-91; Mark Sherry et al., *Disability Hate Speech: Social, Cultural and Political Contexts* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021); Bronwen Hughes and Maria Cristina Nisco, eds., “Special Issue on Disability, Shame and Discrimination”, *International Journal of Language Studies (IJLS)*, 16.4 (2022); Annalisa Raffone, “‘Her Leg Didn’t Fully Load in’: A Digitally-mediated Social-Semiotic Critical Discourse Analysis of Disability Hate Speech on Tiktok”, in Bronwen Hughes and Maria Cristina Nisco,

and accentuating weight and disability stigma both in offline and online environments, and often converging in forms of hate speech.

When dealing with the issue of hate speech, whether it be offline or online, two conflicting principles emerge: freedom of expression and freedom from discrimination.<sup>18</sup> In fact, if the value of free speech and expression is undeniable, the uncontrolled manifestations of those who engage in hateful, discriminatory acts can hardly be recognized as harmful, especially in the digital ecosystem: “[t]he definition of hate speech online and the laws curtailing such forms of speech are in constant flux due to the supranational character of the internet, the slippery nature of online harassment, and the porous relationship between actual violence and discriminatory speech”.<sup>19</sup> Hate speech against fat and disabled people, just like other cases of discrimination, tends to draw on the cultural illusion of ideal people, confining the ‘Other’ to the status of ultimate inferiority: indeed, hate pertains to the intentional devaluing of the ‘Other’ so that the superiority of the majority is confirmed, it is drawn out by rejected traits, characteristics, and non-conforming bodies.<sup>20</sup>

In this context, digital communication represents a double-edged sword since if, on the one hand, it connects different people, groups, and societies on a broad scale, on the other hand, the anonymity afforded by the screen may lead to derogatory and offensive behaviours which reflect the explicit intention to vilify, humiliate, or incite hatred. The expansion of Social Media Sites (SMSs) has transformed the ways in which people can interact, not merely offering an alternative way of engaging in communication but, most importantly, providing a number of different communicative dynamics and structures which have the potential to empower minority or stigmatized groups by granting them access to a public sphere, thus providing them with a voice.<sup>21</sup> SMSs, however, have also served to replicate and perpetuate the social discrimination and inequalities that people already experience in ‘real’ life, leading to prejudicial attacks and stigmatization against lesser represented groups (in this case, fat and disabled people), thus generating some discriminatory discourses that reach larger audiences (see Lupton)<sup>22</sup> and then turn into ableist and fat-phobic practices and attitudes within society.

Among the different SMSs, TikTok was specifically chosen for investigation in this case-study for a number of reasons. Initially launched in 2016, TikTok grants users the possibility to create short-form videos, to upload entertaining content and to share funny moments. According to statistics, in the last few years, TikTok’s usage has exploded, with 1.5 billion monthly active users in 2023 and an expected 1.8 billion by the end of 2024.<sup>23</sup> The platform is said to feature a 180% growth among those aged 15-25 during and soon after the Covid-19 pandemic (namely from 2020 onwards), because people spent more time on social media during quarantine, in fact it was the most downloaded app in 2021, beating long-

eds., *Disability, Shame and Discrimination, Special Issue of International Journal of Language Studies (IJLS)*, 16.4 (2022), 17-42; Annalisa Raffone, “Sex, Love, and Stigma: A Social Media Critical Discourse Analysis of Sexual-Emotional Disability Discourse on Reddit Posts”, in Margaret Rasulo and Jan Engberg, eds., *The Emotional Valence of Innovation and Change: Discourses of Societal Transformation, Special Issue of the Identity, Language and Diversity Journal (I-LanD)*, 1.2022 (2022), 113-131; Maria Cristina Nisco, “Framing Disability and Sexuality: An Analysis of Instagram Users’ Comments”, in Paola Catenaccio et al., eds., *Dimensions of Framing: Representation, Cognition, Interaction*, Special Issue of *Textus*, 1.2023 (2023), 157-178.

<sup>18</sup> Balirano and Hughes, *Homing in on Hate*.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., vi.

<sup>20</sup> Katharine Quarmby, *Getting Away with Murder: Disabled People’s Experiences of Hate Crime in the UK* (London: Scope, 2008); Leah Burch, “‘All Parasites Should Perish’: Online Disabilist Hate Speech and a Welfare Rhetoric on ‘Reddit’” (Liverpool: Liverpool Hope University, 2016); Sherry et al., *Disability Hate Speech*.

<sup>21</sup> Philip Sargeant and Caroline Tagg, eds., *The Language of Social Media Identity and Community on the Internet* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Deborah Lupton, *Fat*, Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> David Curry, “TikTok App Report 2024: Holistic Overview of the Most Popular App of Past Three Years”, *Business of Apps* (2024), [www.businessofapps.com](http://www.businessofapps.com).

time favorite social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat.<sup>24</sup> Although, as of January 2024, TikTok ranked (by number of monthly active users) as the fourth most popular platform worldwide (falling respectively behind Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram),<sup>25</sup> it was deemed of central importance among the social media platforms that are most popular with younger generations – especially with users aged 11-17<sup>26</sup> – as data show that they spend nearly two hours per day on TikTok, making it the social media platform they use most.<sup>27</sup> This makes it a significant SMS for engaging in a global dialogue<sup>28</sup> and extremely interesting for this research, since it offers a wide range of views on the online presence of ableist and fatphobic discourses, across geographical areas, showing diverse viewpoints and perspectives on the intersecting issues of disability and obesity. In fact, unlike other platforms, TikTok's short-form video content allows for the quick and engaging dissemination of information,<sup>29</sup> with micro-narratives evolving into a trend of expression, telling stories using digital tools that combine text, images, videos, and sound. Indeed, while it offers the chance to showcase oneself, share personal experiences, and connect with others,<sup>30</sup> thus democratizing content creation, it simultaneously runs the risk of perpetuating or reinforcing entrenched stereotypes.

In order to explore the above-mentioned dynamics in the digital realm, this study delves into the complexities of disability and weight bias in social media discourse, positing that meaning is construed and negotiated through social interactions, in the ongoing interplay between individual actions and societal structures. More specifically, this research aims to investigate 1) whether social media interactions on TikTok perpetuate or curb the stigmatization of weight and disability, and 2) how fatness and disability – and FPWD – are discursively portrayed in TikTok users' comments. It is the authors' belief that such key research questions require empirical evidence from social media discourse since people are embedded in a process of meaning-creation, which has significant consequences on how fat and disabled people are discursively construed and socially perceived on the basis of some prevailing – and contrived – categories. If such categories operate by perpetuating social inequalities, to what extent can they be unearthed, reconfigured, and deconstructed to foreground social change? Indeed, social media may exacerbate experiences of stigma or they may serve to provide a space to build solidarity, reduce isolation, and increase awareness of inherent bias and prejudice.

The way language constructs, reifies, and often conceals realities through subtle but pervasive power mechanisms reveals covert layers of assumed 'truth' present in the text<sup>31</sup> which bear hierarchical relationships assigning specific values to identities (see Derrida).<sup>32</sup> Such mechanisms provide the boundaries for classification on the basis of social, cultural, and political norms and practices; people are, therefore, labelled not so much (or not necessarily only) as a result of an internal/individual condition, but rather as a result of a social assignment. Accordingly, FPWD are assigned various forms of social designations, they are created and maintained in and through words, in a continuous discursive exchange and construal that make up human interaction and then, in turn, reality. By emphasizing the

<sup>24</sup> Laura Ceci, "TikTok: Usage during COVID-19", *Statista* (2022), [www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com).

<sup>25</sup> Stacy J. Dixon, "Most Popular Social Networks Worldwide as of January 2024, Ranked by Number of Monthly Active Users", *Statista* (2024), [www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com).

<sup>26</sup> The investigation could thus take into account the age-group targeted by the Parthenope-funded research project.

<sup>27</sup> Jack Shepherd, "25 Essential TikTok Statistics You Need to Know in 2024", *The Social Shepherd* (2024), [www.thesocialshepherd.com](http://www.thesocialshepherd.com).

<sup>28</sup> Laura Ceci, "Distribution of Tiktok Users Worldwide as of January 2024", *Statista* (2024), [www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com).

<sup>29</sup> Shuwei Zeng, *Chinese Female Representation on Short Video Applications and Their Perception: Douyin (Tiktok) as a Case Study* (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2023).

<sup>30</sup> Jingfang Li et al., "Exploring Cultural Meaning Construction in Social Media: An Analysis of Liziqi's YouTube Channel", *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 23.4 (2023), 1-12.

<sup>31</sup> The term *text* is used in the broadest sense possible, referring both to written material and to everyday-life contexts, daily situations and activities through which meanings and identities are produced, reproduced, and possibly contested.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins U.P., 1976); Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

role of language and discourse as pivotal elements in the daily construction of fatness and disability, this study seeks to investigate public understanding of such concepts.<sup>33</sup>

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Starting from the premise that a multidisciplinary approach to the study of the relationship between language and ideology would yield significant insights into data analysis and findings,<sup>34</sup> the theoretical and methodological foundations of this work are represented by the combination of Corpus Linguistics (CL)<sup>35</sup> and Critical Discourse Studies (CDS).<sup>36</sup> Beginning with Baker et al.,<sup>37</sup> merging corpus linguistics techniques and critical analytical tools has proven significant<sup>38</sup> with both small and large corpora.<sup>39</sup>

Whereas CL, due to its quantifiable nature, allows for greater objectivity,<sup>40</sup> Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) enables the in-depth exploration of the context-based motives underlying speakers' linguistic choices.<sup>41</sup> Concerning the investigation of HSO as a social phenomenon, van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach<sup>42</sup> is particularly suitable for the present research since it is founded on the idea that society, discourse, and cognition are interrelated and assumes that people's attitudes and behavior are shaped by 'ideologies' or abstract mental models that are expressed and reproduced through discourse. Thus, discourse structures help unveil how ideologies and power are exerted over people and, in this case, minority groups. Indeed, research has demonstrated that minorities are the primary targets of hate speech.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, this study will also consider how the extensive use of SMSs reinforces and amplifies discursive power dynamics which are "more subtle and complex" in digital environments.<sup>44</sup> These dynamics frequently result in perpetuating prejudice and negative stereotypes and in the emergence of novel forms of group dominance and contrast between in-groups and out-groups, displayed through linguistic and digital cues.

<sup>33</sup> For the purposes of this study, authors will employ both the terms 'overweight/obese/obesity' (which are mostly preferred from a medical perspective) and 'fat/fatness' (terms many activists prefer to adopt when referring to their body size).

<sup>34</sup> Debbie Orpin, "Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis: Examining the Ideology of Sleaze", *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 10.1 (2005), 37-61.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Baker et al., "A Useful Methodological Synergy? Combining Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics to Examine Discourses of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK Press", *Discourse & Society*, 19.3 (2008), 273-306; Paul Baker, "Acceptable Bias? Using Corpus Linguistics Methods with Critical Discourse Analysis", *Critical Discourse Studies*, 9.3 (2012), 247-256.

<sup>36</sup> Majid KhosraviNik, "Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS)", in John Flowerdew and John E. Richardson, eds., *Handbook of Critical Discourse Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 582-596; Teun A. Van Dijk, "Discourse and Cognition in Society", in David C. Mitchell and David Crowley, eds., *Communication Theory Today* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1996), 107-126; Teun A. Van Dijk, *Discourse and Power* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Teun A. Van Dijk, *Discourse and Knowledge. A Sociocognitive Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2014).

<sup>37</sup> Baker et al., *A Useful Methodological Synergy?*

<sup>38</sup> Alan Partington and Anna Marchi, "Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis", in Douglas Biber and Randi Reppen, eds., *The Cambridge Handbook of English Corpus Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2015), 216-234; Mark Nartey and Isaac N. Mwinlaaru, "Towards a Decade of Synergising Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis: A Meta-Analysis", *Corpora*, 14.2 (2019), 203-235.

<sup>39</sup> Baker et al., *A Useful Methodological Synergy?*

<sup>40</sup> Pascual Pérez-Paredes and Niall Curry, "Epistemologies of Corpus Linguistics across Disciplines", *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, 3.3 (2024), 100141.

<sup>41</sup> Baker et al., *A Useful Methodological Synergy?*

<sup>42</sup> Van Dijk, *Discourse and Cognition in Society*; Van Dijk, *Discourse and Power*; Van Dijk, *Discourse and Knowledge*.

<sup>43</sup> Audun Fladmoe and Nadim Marjan, "Silenced by Hate? Hate Speech as a Social Boundary to Free Speech", in Arnfinn H. Midtbøen et al., eds., *Boundary Struggles: Contestations of Free Speech in the Public Sphere* (Oslo: Cappelen, 2017), 44-75.

<sup>44</sup> KhosraviNik, *Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS)*, 584.

### 3. Corpus Design

#### 3.1 Data Collection

The *Fat&Disabled* corpus, named after the hashtag used to search data on the TikTok platform, was collected between July and August 2023. The hashtag *#fatanddisabled* was selected due to its highest number of postings about the subjects of inquiry at the time of data collection. Six posts were chosen for data analysis as they exhibited the highest views and comments.

After being separated into several files named according to the number of the post (e.g., comments belonging to the first video were saved as TT1), data were submitted to a semi-automatic cleaning procedure involving a long process of duplicate and non-English post removal.

#### 3.2 Participants

The comments were retrieved from videos of (young) FPWD sharing their lives and experiences on TikTok while also raising awareness on the critical topics of fatness and disability:

1. Data from the TT1 file belong to a video (deleted at the time of writing), posted by user @superchloeyeah, who has more than one TikTok account. In their current active account, which counts 100.8k followers, they describe<sup>45</sup> themself as follows: “I’m disabled I’m an adult I have Bipolar 2 and Anxiety I am Australian She/Her”.
2. The TT2 file comprises comments from a video posted by user @big.dee, who has 126k followers and defines themself as “just a big fat giantess kicking a\*\* #fredabelly ”.
3. Data for TT3 were retrieved from a video by user @mtndewguy44, who has 142.4k followers. In the caption, the person describes themself as “Hi I’m Tim”. The caption also incorporates their email and a hyperlink leading to the webpage of their brand.
4. The TT4 file includes comments from the video posted by the official TikTok account of *TLC (Travel and Living Channel)*, an American television network focusing on lifestyle choices and personal stories.
5. TT5 comprises comments from the video posted by user @yurvyo, followed by 294 people. The video caption only contains a blinking emoticon: ;).
6. Finally, data from TT6 were collected from a video (deleted at the time of writing) by user @jordallenhall, who has 161.7k followers. The caption of the account only says: “No bio yet”.

#### 3.3 Data Analysis

An integrated approach was adopted for data analysis to ensure a consistent and reliable framework. Basic corpus linguistics analyses<sup>46</sup> were combined with thematic analysis<sup>47</sup> and CDA.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> The captions from the TikTok accounts of the corpus were not edited and are reported as shown on the platform.

<sup>46</sup> Baker et al., *A Useful Methodological Synergy?*; Baker, *Acceptable Bias?*; Adam Kilgarriff et al., “The Sketch Engine”, in Geoffrey Williams and Sandra Vessier, eds., *Proceedings of the 11<sup>th</sup> EURALEX International Congress* (Lorient: Université de Bretagne-Sud, 2004), 105-115; Adam Kilgarriff, “Getting to Know Your Corpus”, in Peter Sojka et al., eds., *Text, Speech and Dialogue*, Volume 7499 (Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer, 2012), 3-15.

<sup>47</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology”, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3.2 (2008), 77-101.

<sup>48</sup> KhosraviNik, *Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS)*; Van Dijk, *Discourse and Cognition in Society*; Van Dijk, *Discourse and Power*; Van Dijk, *Discourse and Knowledge*.

Each sub-corpus was uploaded to Sketch Engine<sup>49</sup> for the quantitative analyses, and a wordlist analysis was performed to identify potential discourses. Figure 1 displays the 50 most frequent words per sub-corpus.

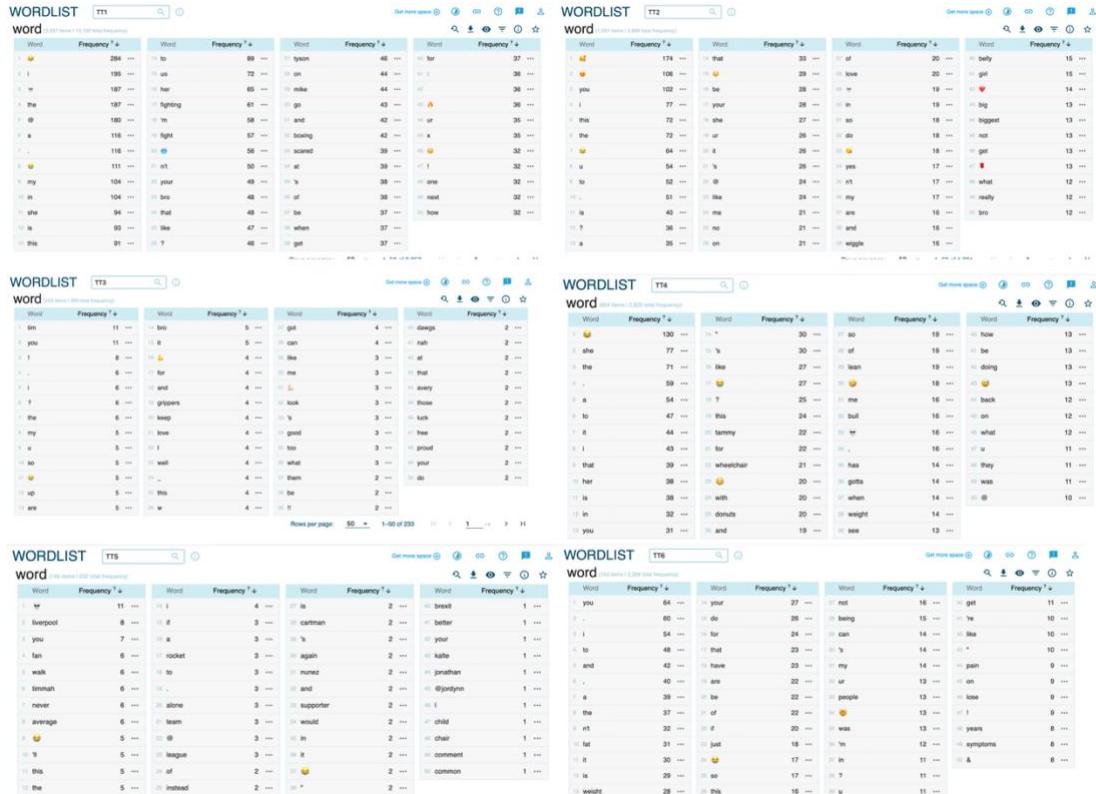


Fig. 1: Sketch Engine word list analysis per sub-corpus

Since, as expected, most of these words were function words and emojis, only the first 50 content words per sub-corpus were initially considered for the analysis. Nonetheless, although providing some interesting insights into data, they were not adequate to gain a deeper understanding of or to identify the topics around the hate against fat and disabled people. However, the thematic analysis performed through a close reading of all sub-corpora allowed for the identification of four main themes, some of which were further divided into subthemes related to the hateful discourses emerging around fatness and disability. One theme comprising positive comments of support and appreciation for several protagonists featured in the videos was also identified. The resulting themes and subthemes were named as follows:

1. *Dehumanization* (and its subthemes (a) *Zoomorphic metaphors*, and (b) *Fictional and non-fictional characters*);
2. *Unsolicited derogatory advice*;
3. *Harmful jokes* (and its subthemes (a) *Food-related jokes*, (b) *Healthy lifestyle jokes*, (c) *Body or fat-related jokes*, and (d) *Disability-related jokes*);
4. *Personal attacks and negative characterization*;
5. *Positive comments of support and appreciation*.

<sup>49</sup> Kilgarriff et al., *The Sketch Engine*; Kilgarriff, *Getting to Know Your Corpus*

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Dehumanization

Dehumanization has been identified as a primary form of hate speech, and it is used to create, establish, and enhance the distinction between a dominant in-group and a subordinate out-group.<sup>50</sup> It encompasses intentional verbal and non-verbal ways of portraying specific people or groups by assigning them non-human characteristics that deprive them of human dignity. Dehumanization contributes to the process of ‘othering’ (i.e., the voluntary differentiation between more and less powerful groups resulting in the establishment and maintenance of social distance),<sup>51</sup> often involving the use of metaphors as ideological tools<sup>52</sup> to create “ideological cognitive representations”<sup>53</sup> through which certain groups exert power and impose their socio-cognitive standards on other groups.

In the corpus,<sup>54</sup> the macro theme *dehumanization* was further divided into the subthemes *zoomorphic metaphors* and *fictional and non-fictional characters*, both of which include figurative language used by haters to address the protagonists of the videos.

The use of zoomorphic metaphors has already been proven to be frequently employed by TikTok users to address and ridicule PWDs negatively.<sup>55</sup> Zoomorphism consists in assigning animal characteristics to human beings. Even though the use of zoomorphic metaphors can reflect a positive attitude towards the establishment of a likeness between humans and animals, in the context of HS(O), animalizing people is a means of demonizing and insulting them and, for this reason, “only a discursive reading of a zoomorphic metaphor can serve as a reliable indicator of its cognitive properties”<sup>56</sup>. Dehumanization in the form of animalization represents a ‘discursive practice’ – that favors the negative construction of people deemed inferior and undesirable – and a ‘cultural fact’, originating from one’s experience and knowledge of the external world, which is then used with harmful intentions such as dominating, oppressing, and excluding people.<sup>57</sup> Some examples from the corpus are:

1. Damn another **beached wale** (TT2)
2. **cows** stand on two feet? (TT2)
3. Well well well! Tim no longer wants to be an **elephant** good for him  (TT3)
4. **bear**  (TT1)
5. Tammy your one lazy animal ... Just like a **bull**? (TT4)

The idea behind haters’ usage of zoomorphisms is that humans are superior to animals. They linguistically construct their viewpoint by comparing the protagonists of the videos to large animals (*beached wale*, *cows*, *elephant*, *bear*, *bull*) to criticize them for their weight. This contributes to the

<sup>50</sup> Babak Bahador, “Classifying and Identifying the Intensity of Hate Speech”, *ITEMS: Insights from the Social Sciences* (2020), [www.items.ssrc.org](http://www.items.ssrc.org).

<sup>51</sup> Giuseppe Balirano and Bronwen Hughes, “Fat Chance! Digital Critical Discourse Studies in Discrimination Against Fat People”, in Balirano and Hughes, eds., *Homing in on Hate*, 3-50.

<sup>52</sup> Van Dijk, *Discourse and Knowledge*.

<sup>53</sup> Marina Díaz-Peralta, “Metaphor and Ideology: Conceptual Structure and Conceptual Content in Spanish Political Discourse”, *Discourse & Communication*, 12.2 (2018), 130.

<sup>54</sup> All excerpts from the corpus have not been edited.

<sup>55</sup> Raffone, ‘*Her Leg Didn’t Fully Load in*’.

<sup>56</sup> Svetlana A. Petrenko and Alexander P. Petrenko, “Zoomorphic Metaphor and Its Correlation with Linguistic Worldview in British Fiction”, in Natalia G. Bogachenko, ed., *European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences*, Volume 111 (London: European Publisher, 2021), 717.

<sup>57</sup> Charo Lacalle et al., “‘Seals’, ‘Bitches’, ‘Vixens’, and Other Zoomorphic Insults: The Animalisation of Women as an Expression of Misogyny in the Spanish Manosphere”, *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 11.1 (2024).

stigmatization of fat people and the creation of a distinction between an in-group – *Us*, in van Dijk's<sup>58</sup> words – represented by *fit* people, and *Them*, the out-group, comprising *fat* people, considered different and lesser because they do not adhere to the standards of *normativity*. Indeed, despite the increased attention toward and support of what is defined as 'positive body image', the standards of the perfect body – muscled for men and thin for women – still prevail, often having detrimental effects on people's mental and body health with severe implications for social relationships.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, the comparison with fictional and non-fictional characters perpetrated by haters aims, on the one hand, to ridicule the TikTokers for their body shape and, on the other, to feel empowered over them through derogatory humorous speech acts:

6. **Avengers** level threat (TT1)
7. The next **Mike Tyson**, right here (TT1)
8. **Muhammad Ali** been quiet since this one (TT1)
9. **Powerless rangers** (TT1)
10. Wat **pet sim update** is this (TT1)
11. You're gonna be the next **Incredible Hulk** except you'll be called incredible fat (TT2)
12. You're going to be your next **Mickey Mouse** called Mickey fat (TT2)

In the online environment, dehumanizing metaphors have the power to normalize such behavior, counting on the role played by humor in figurative language to mitigate the offense and blur the line between a joke and the speakers' true intentions.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, in the abovementioned cases, the speakers rarely lessen the offensiveness, as the potentially covert HS becomes overt due to the additional linguistic content provided. In (6) and (9), haters compare the TikTokers to two well-known groups of heroes: *The Avengers* (*Marvel* superhero characters known for their superpowers, friendship, and intuitive personalities that help them overcome challenges from their enemies) and *Power Rangers* (legendary superheroes predating the *Marvel* characters, identifiable by their color-coded suits and recognized for their strength, agility, and super abilities). However, this comparison is performed through mockery. When mentioning the 'Avengers level threat', the speaker refers to a catastrophic event or enemy that poses an enormous danger and could potentially destroy the entire world or universe. In this case, the speaker's real intention is to convey the idea that the person in the video is so unfit that they could be a danger to the world and have the ability to destroy it. On the other hand, when using the Power Rangers' name by distorting it (*powerless*) through minority comparative, the speaker aims to indicate that the person has no physical power due to their body size.

Increased adiposity has been demonstrated to reduce mobility and impact muscle strength.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, medical investigations and research findings often become an excuse for enhancing the stigmatization of marginalized groups. Indeed, in (7) and (8), the speakers compare the TikTokers to two famous non-fictional characters, namely two professional American boxers (*Mike Tyson* and *Muhammad Ali*) renowned for their physical strength and agility, suggesting that fat people lack both. This perpetuates the still pervasive and harmful stereotype that fat people are clumsy and unable to be physically active.

Humor in metaphors is primarily used to ascertain their effectiveness.<sup>62</sup> This is especially evident in (10, 11, 12). In (11), another reference to *The Avengers* is made by mentioning the *Incredible Hulk*, a

<sup>58</sup> Van Dijk, *Discourse and Knowledge*.

<sup>59</sup> Emilie Lacroix et al., "Normative Body Image Development: A Longitudinal Meta-Analysis of Mean-Level Change", *Body Image*, 45 (2023), 238-264.

<sup>60</sup> Luke Munn, "Alt-Right Pipeline: Individual Journeys to Extremism Online", *First Monday*, 24.6 (2019).

<sup>61</sup> David J. Tomlinson et al., "The Impact of Obesity on Skeletal Muscle Strength and Structure through Adolescence to Old Age", *Biogerontology*, 17.3 (2015), 467-483.

<sup>62</sup> Lacalle et al., 'Seals', 'Bitches', 'Vixens', and Other Zoomorphic Insults.

green-skinned, muscular humanoid with immense physical strength. This characteristic is compared to the absence of the same feature by the target of the comment to such an extent that the speaker distorts the superhero's name and refers to the TikToker through the epithet *incredible fat*. Similarly, the speaker in (12) chooses the character of *Mickey Mouse*, an anthropomorphic mouse known for his agility, to mock the person in the video by calling them *mickey fat*. Finally, instance (10) can only be fully understood by referencing the video game *The Sims*, a gamified version of real life with numerous expansion packs adding features to the open-ended gameplay. From a discursive viewpoint, this metaphor, alongside the one in (12), can be considered amid 'fictional characters' and 'zoomorphic metaphors' as it refers to the fictional pets that a gamer can find in the social simulation game. Since its first appearance in the 2000s, *The Sims* has undergone numerous updates. Thus, the commenter mocks the person in the video by comparing them to a newer, updated version of pets in the game. The result is the objectification and vilification of fat people and a devaluation of their bodies and human dignity, which ultimately leads to their marginalization and increased alienation.

#### 4.2 Unsolicited Derogatory Advice

Although SMSs can be a helpful and valuable means of disseminating positive messages concerning the risks connected to an unhealthy lifestyle, their resonance and innate feature of allowing the immediate spread of information can play a pivotal role in worsening weight stigma.<sup>63</sup> Cook et al.<sup>64</sup> have identified an ecological system of weight stigma characterized by three levels: (a) the structural level, referring to the negative mental models about weight that are embedded in societal systems; (b) the interpersonal level, involving the stigma created through interactions, which media environments can intensify;<sup>65</sup> and (c) the intrapersonal level, which refers to the internalized negative beliefs held by people, which can impact upon their personal lives and influence their perceptions about their capabilities and self-worth.

People frequently think that making fat people feel ashamed of their (potentially unhealthy) lifestyle choices and the size and shape of their bodies will somehow contribute to their weight loss.<sup>66</sup> Contrarily, fat shaming serves to perpetuate the prejudices against fat people – including being "morally and emotionally impaired", "alienated from their sexuality", and "discontent with themselves"<sup>67</sup> – and to degrade them by harsh criticism for not meeting idealized body standards.

Things worsen when weight stigma intersects with disability. PWDs are often blamed for being a burden on society,<sup>68</sup> in addition to being considered unattractive, undesirable, and unable to engage in community activities.<sup>69</sup> Intersectionality refers to the discrimination faced by individuals and groups who have multiple overlapping identities, such as sex and race, disability and fatness, and gender and religion, to name but a few. It offers a significant framework for understanding the mental models

<sup>63</sup> Olivia Clark et al., "Weight Stigma and Social Media: Evidence and Public Health Solutions", *Frontiers in Nutrition*, 8 (2021), 739056.

<sup>64</sup> Jonathan E. Cook et al., "Intervening within and across Levels: A Multilevel Approach to Stigma and Public Health", *Social Science & Medicine*, 103 (2014), 101-109.

<sup>65</sup> Clark et al., *Weight Stigma and Social Media*.

<sup>66</sup> Kris Gunnars, "The Harmful Effects of Fat Shaming", *Healthline* (2024), [www.healthline.com](http://www.healthline.com); Alice E. Schluger, "Body Shaming: The Effects and How to Overcome it", *HelpGuide.org* (2022), [www.helpguide.org](http://www.helpguide.org).

<sup>67</sup> Christian S. Crandall, "Prejudice against Fat People: Ideology and Self-Interest", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66.5 (1994), 883.

<sup>68</sup> Donna Lero et al., "Introduction to the Special Issue on Disability and Work: Toward Re-Conceptualizing the 'Burden' of Disability", *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 32.3 (2012).

<sup>69</sup> Raffone, *Sex, Love, and Stigma*.

encoded in society that shape people's experience of the world.<sup>70</sup> Research<sup>71</sup> has shown that labeling obesity as a disability could lead to the pathologization and stigmatization of fat people and the incrementation of anti-fat bias, i.e., the construction of fat people as individuals with negative personality traits.<sup>72</sup> In the corpus, several instances have been identified in which fatness and disability are discursively pathologized, which perpetuate negative perceptions against FPWD:

13. Pls stop. ur **body** needs help (TT2)
14. You need to lose weight ur at high risk for a **heart take** (TT2)
15. waw it's not **healthy** (TT2)
16. straight outta **cancer** (TT1)
17. the reason, in and of itself, a disability...? Bruh **your lazy not a disability**. Damn **stop with all the excuses for being fat**. (TT6)
18. **take responsibilities for your actions**, there's people that are born disabled and can't change **you made yourself disable** and you can change it. (TT6)
19. Being overweight isn't a disability **you can choose to be fat** and you can lose weight I have a disability **you are just lazy** So it's fluid retention? How fyckin much are u drinking? Lose weight (TT6)

These kinds of comments relate to the concept discussed by Balirano and Hughes as 'the pathologizing discourse',<sup>73</sup> in which they explain how stigma and shame towards fat bodies are perpetuated when medical viewpoints on what is 'normal' and what is 'pathological' are spread and widely accepted as universal truths, thus enhancing the in-group and out-group differentiation in society. Indeed, the examples reveal a significant use of medical terminology (such as *heart take*, *healthy*, *cancer*, *lose weight*) to offer unsolicited derogatory advice to encourage the TikTokers to lose weight.

Although medical research has demonstrated the strong impact of obesity on the development of cardiovascular diseases<sup>74</sup> and cancer,<sup>75</sup> framing it as a moral failure reinforces the enduring narratives of fatness as 'wrong conduct', 'ugly', and something that needs to be eradicated through medicalization.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, in instances from (13) to (16), haters blame the TikTokers for being fat, bringing life-threatening illnesses upon themselves because of their unhealthy behavior. Nevertheless, there are numerous reasons for weight gain, from psychological to underlying medical factors, and discursively shaming people for their weight while hiding behind anonymous accounts only perpetuates the stigma against them. Also, it can lead fat people to adopt unhealthy weight-reducing eating habits to seek acceptance in society.

Considering the nature of the TikTok videos created by FPWD, an interesting aspect of the hateful comments is that the pathologizing discourse is primarily applied to obesity rather than disability. Indeed, users blame the disabled people in the videos for causing their disability by being 'too lazy' to lose weight. They urge them to 'take responsibility for [their] actions' and 'stop with all the excuses for being fat', thus equating fatness to disability. The immediate consequence is that users impose a double identity on the TikTokers, considering one to be the result of the other. Despite this, the individuals

<sup>70</sup> Symeon Dagkas, "Problematizing Social Justice in Health Pedagogy and Youth Sport: Intersectionality of Race, Ethnicity, and Class", *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 87.3 (2016), 221-229.

<sup>71</sup> Rabia Belt, "The Fat Prisoners' Dilemma: Slow Violence, Intersectionality, and a Disability Rights Framework for the Future", *Georgetown Law Journal*, 110.4 (2022), 785-833.

<sup>72</sup> Emily B. Kramer et al., "Reducing Anti-Fat Bias toward the Self and Others: A Randomized Controlled Trial", *Journal of Eating Disorders*, 12.1 (2024), 46.

<sup>73</sup> Balirano and Hughes, "Fat Chance!"

<sup>74</sup> Tiffany M. Powell-Wiley et al., "Obesity and Cardiovascular Disease: A Scientific Statement from the American Heart Association", *Circulation*, 143.21 (2021), e984-e1010.

<sup>75</sup> Tim Byers and Rebecca L. Sedjo, "Body Fatness as a Cause of Cancer: Epidemiologic Clues to Biologic Mechanisms", *Endocrine-Related Cancer*, 22.3 (2015), R125-R134.

<sup>76</sup> Samantha Murray, "Pathologizing 'Fatness': Medical Authority and Popular Culture", *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 25.1 (2008), 7-21.

featured in the videos might not align with this identification and the labels imposed on them. Consequently, they are subjected to a process of cross-identification and cross-categorization shaped by the standards imposed by society.<sup>77</sup>

#### 4.3 Harmful Jokes

##### 4.3.1 Food-related Jokes and Healthy Lifestyle Jokes

The macro theme *harmful jokes* comprises the highest number of comments. Data analysis showed that the butt of haters' harmful jokes was once again directed more at fatness than disability, as if disabled people deserved more respect than fat people based on the assumption that being fat or becoming fat (thus, turning fatness into a disability) is a choice, whereas having or developing disabilities is not.

The first two subthemes of the macro theme were entitled *food-related* and *healthy lifestyle jokes*. *Food-related jokes* comprise the so-called military metaphors,<sup>78</sup> including the verb *to fight*. According to research,<sup>79</sup> military metaphors are frequently employed in daily interactions, especially in healthcare settings, where individuals with diseases are often described as *fighting for* their lives and engaging in a *battle* to overcome their *struggles*.

As shown in the following excerpts, military metaphors involving the verb *to fight* are used in the corpus in a twofold way:

20. Fighting for the **last bucket of kfc** (TT1)
21. Fighting for the **bigmac** (TT1)
22. She fighting for some **nuggies** (TT1)
23. Bro is practicing to knock her **vegetables** off her plate (TT1)
24. let me guess, that's a **diet coke** she drinking. It's nice to see her happy. Is she still alive? (TT4)
25. training to fight some **salad** (TT1)
26. okay then is she **fighting the over cabbages off**? (TT1)
27. Disability to eat **vegetables** (TT6)

On the one hand, the phrasal verb *to fight for* (meaning *to struggle to get something*) is followed by terminology related to junk food such as *kfc*, *bigmac*, and *nuggies*. These instances can be understood by considering the intended goal of some of the videos in which the TikTokers' purpose is to show their weight loss journey. Accordingly, the haters' idea is to mock them by implying that their workout does not aim at weight loss. Instead, through the metaphor, they intend to state that the TikTokers only use the treadmill (shown in the videos) to reach this type of food more rapidly.

On the other hand, the verb *to fight*, used without the preposition or as a phrasal verb (*to fight off*, meaning *to push away*), is accompanied by vocabulary related to healthy food, such as *salad* and *cabbages*. In this case, haters lay further blame upon the TikTokers by implying that they are fat because they avoid healthy food. Moreover, in (23), the speaker mocks the person in the video showing their daily workout by stating that natural food such as *vegetables* has been *knocked off* the plate. The imagery resulting from the metaphorical representation of physically exercising to push away vegetables from a plate serves to ridicule the person, adding to the disrespectful use of the slang *bro* – an epithet usually shared between friends – to overcome the existing social and spatial distance between the speaker and the target of the comment. In (24), the speaker sarcastically uses the expression *let me guess* (i.e., let me

<sup>77</sup> Anna Mollow, "Disability Studies Gets Fat", *Hypatia* 30.1 (2015), 199-216.

<sup>78</sup> Edward Raupp, "Military Metaphors: Inappropriate Lessons from the Language of Violence", *International Journal of Social Science and Education Research Studies*, 2.2 (2022), 61-65.

<sup>79</sup> Denisa Drăgușin, "Metaphorical Gender Stereotypes in Written Medical Discourse", *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, 4.1 (2014), 1224-1262.

say what I think it is), followed by a mention of a beverage some people drink when dieting (*diet coke*) to imply that the person in the video fools themselves by drinking something that is supposedly sugar-free, but that, in reality, should not be consumed given their current ‘body condition’, as its ingredients are still dangerous for the health. The implication becomes overt with the negative expression *Is she still alive?* which aims to state that with all the junk food and sugar intake – known to cause not only weight gain but also health problems such as heart disease and diabetes<sup>80</sup> – it is unlikely that they are still alive. What is further indicative of offensive mockery is the instance (25) in which the speaker derogatorily makes fun of the disabled person by pointing out that their disability is not ‘real’ and that their only disability is the inability to eat healthily.

Despite their distinct discursive use, the way in which military metaphors are employed in the corpus reveals a cultural orientation towards what is considered ‘the good’ and ‘the normative’ (being thin) and what should be fought and eradicated (fatness). The findings are consistent with research<sup>81</sup> highlighting the central role of metaphorical representation in attributing the causes of fatness to various factors, particularly individual behavior and the food and beverage industry.

*Healthy lifestyle jokes* represent a specific subtheme as it involves comments that do not directly address and focus on the people in the videos but on their viewers, namely the commenters themselves. Through derogatory jokes in the form of ‘fat talk’ and ‘diet talk’ based on diet-culture myths – such as the belief that being thin will make one more attractive or that exercising a lot will give the appealing body one wishes for – they attempt to distance themselves from what they believe to be the unhealthy lifestyle of the TikTokers:

28. **motivation** to continue my fast (TT2)
29. **Watch this when I want a late night cookie** (TT2)
30. motivation to **work out** (TT2)
31. Wow you’re really **inspirational**, you’ve successfully **inspired me to not eat today**. (TT2)
32. my **motivation** to go to the **gym** (TT1)
33. 3am **motivation** (TT1)

Fat talk consists of making negative statements about one’s body or weight, while diet talk involves discussing dieting, such as which foods lead to weight loss and which do not, or what should be eaten or avoided. However, diet talk is not centered on pursuing a healthy lifestyle for well-being but rather on changing one’s appearance to achieve an (occasionally) unrealistic weight and body shape in line with societal physical and beauty standards. These comments portray fasting and avoiding food intake as positive behaviors compared to being fat. Contrarily, it is well-established that a healthy lifestyle involves consuming nutrient-dense food, adequate proteins, and a balanced exercise routine.<sup>82</sup> Also, when fasting is not medically supervised and controlled, such as in the case of intermittent fasting, it can pose serious health risks and lead to the development of eating disorders.

By stating that watching their videos will *inspire* them to go to the gym for muscular improvement or *motivate* them to restrict their food intake for weight loss, haters contribute to spreading the previously mentioned culturally-based weight bias, promoting and disseminating the dangerous culture of ‘thinspiration’<sup>83</sup> and ‘muscularity’<sup>84</sup> through SMSs, while sarcastically criticizing the TikTokers for not

<sup>80</sup> NHS, “Sugar: The Facts”, *Nhs.uk* (2022), [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk).

<sup>81</sup> Colleen Cotter et al., “Framing Obesity in Public Discourse: Representation through Metaphor across Text Type”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 174 (2021), 14-27.

<sup>82</sup> NHS, “Eating a Balanced Diet”, *Nhs.uk* (2022), [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk).

<sup>83</sup> Clark et al., *Weight Stigma and Social Media*.

<sup>84</sup> Vajisha U. Wanniarachchi et al., “Fat Stigma and Body Objectification: A Text Analysis Approach Using Social Media Content”, *Digital Health*, 8 (2022), 205520762211174.

adhering to these expectations. These mocking comments reflect the speakers' disdain for fatness, contributing to fat shaming and encouraging self-deprecation through fat and diet talk.

#### 4.3.2 Body or Fat-related Jokes and Disability-related Jokes

Two additional sub-themes were included in the macro theme 'Harmful Jokes', which were named 'Body- or fat-related jokes' and 'Disability-related jokes', depending on the specific content of the comments. However, it is worth noting that, in some cases, comments could actually fit both sub-themes, since they appeared to have a twofold nature striking the chord of both fatness and disability, which hindered a straightforward distribution into one single sub-theme.

A huge number of jokes centred on fatness could be retrieved and, in almost the totality of instances, fatness could be said to stand in for other personality traits, such as overindulgence and sloppiness, through the use of metaphors describing the TikTokers by means of ironic and sarcastic references to jelly candies (34), to their 'seemingly' pregnant bellies (35 and 36), or their bodies in general (37 and 38).

- 33. **jellybelly** (TT1)
- 34. Congratulations on the **18 month baby** (TT2)
- 35. You look **24 months pregnant** (TT2)
- 36. **she has enough oil in her body** to end the use of fossil fuels   (TT4)
- 37. **i don't think humans are meant to be your size** cause we didn't come w wheel chairs we had to create them for ppl like u to feel better (TT6)

A widespread negative perception emerging from comments is the one according to which fat people 'get what they deserve', namely they are held responsible for their weight because they lack willpower and thus deserve their 'plight', which triggers antipathy and stigma. From a micro-linguistic perspective, the use of the second person pronoun, which allows TikTok viewers and haters to directly address the protagonists of the videos, seems to imply a more straightforward form of personal criticism, although they are not referred to by proper names. By choosing second person pronouns, haters try to build a direct connection with the TikTokers, they want to get the message across, engaging with the person who is being spoken to. Indeed, the second-person has a rich range of readerly effects: it increases involvement, it demonstrates familiarity, effectively creating an accusatory tone and tension between the writer and the reader (the protagonist of the video). The use of personal deixis, which is the act of referring to another person, appears a very widespread strategy within the comments of the *Fat&Disabled* corpus to shade the tone and intent of the speaker/writer. Considering the surrounding social circumstances, personal deixis can also encode the social identities and relationships of the participants to a communicative event, which also makes it relevant in terms of social deixis.

Abusive and insulting language, rife with sarcasm and mockery, could also be detected in the many jokes that concentrate on disability; in fact, the TikTokers are teased and made fun of for their disability, their perceived awkwardness and their non-standard traits. In such cases, disability itself is treated as a joke, it is ridiculed by employing name-calling which is meant to be disrespectful and insulting towards the target of irony (as 39 to 41 show). The term *chromosome* is metonymically used as a form of figurative language on the basis of its contiguity with the concept of disability; by changing and substituting a name, metonymy can create new imagery, new – and more powerful – word choices, bringing along a range of vivid and complex semantic associations. Similarly, the TikTokers are also mocked for the mobility aids they use (see 42).

- 38. Rocky 7: loss of the **chromosome** (TT1)
- 39. Extra **chromosome** took the ropes here (TT1)

---

- 40. She's fighting the **chromosome** away 😅 (TT1)
- 41. if only that wheelchair manufacturer built the twin towers (TT4)

Additionally, jokes were based on the most noticeable external characteristics or genetic characteristics, sometimes associating down syndrome with stupidity, once again making disability stand for something else (43 and 44).

- 42. i think she's missing a **chromosome** (TT1)
- 43. look it's avery down syndrome (TT3)

Many of the instances retrieved feature a linguistic formulation based on the use of the third person pronoun which, in such cases, seems to suggest an exclusion of the mocked person from the community of TikTok users who are commenting the videos, which acts like a segregation, a symbolic seclusion occurring in the virtual space and reflecting social dynamics in the real space. Third person pronouns can also be said to fall within personal deixis, although they designate the non-narrated participant, someone who is not positioned within the communicative event. By means of this manipulative strategy, explicit forms of ableism are enacted, denigrating and classifying a specific group of people as 'less than', as lacking something, as defective, which is, in itself, a verbal aggression implemented by resorting to derision, cynicism and sarcasm, characterizing forms of interaction maliciously directed at a target who is laughed at.

The use of sarcasm is extremely common in the comments included in this sub-theme. If, as Goffman claims,<sup>85</sup> people tend to be stigmatized for three main reasons – namely, for being a tribal out-group member, for possessing a character flaw, or for possessing a physical abnormality – distinct psychological mechanisms underlying specific types of antipathy and hostility can be triggered, which, in turn, leads to social exclusion. Weight and disability stigma seems to be encompassed by two of the above-mentioned reasons: in fact, FPWD can be perceived – and stigmatized – both for their physical abnormality and their character flaws. This dual perspective, rooted in physical as well as in mental-behavioral stigmas, seems to generate increasing forms of hostility for bodies and personalities/identities that do not conform to an ideal norm. In fact, sarcasm is often employed to express judgment towards something/someone that is deemed negatively, it conveys ridicule, mocking or teasing in an offensive and aggressive manner with the aim to reprimand or indirectly criticize someone. Accordingly, the comments retrieved from the *Fat&Disabled* corpus appear to deploy such sarcastic and cynical traits through a verbal – as much as social and cultural – assertiveness and dominance.

#### 4.4 Personal Attacks and Negative Characterization

A remarkable number of comments expressing the viewers' repulsion, their emotional response to the TikTokers' videos, and their sense of rejection were retrieved from the corpus (as 44 to 50 show). In the comments included in this sub-theme, a rather explicit evaluation of the people in the videos as worthless, defective and, above all, repulsive can be noticed, since the lexical items and linguistic formulations used appear extremely sharp, direct and harsh.

- 44. **I shat myself** after watching this (TT1)
- 45. **This thing is so disgusting** 😕 looking at it makes me sick to the stomach (TT2)
- 46. **I'm uncomfortable** (TT2)
- 47. **Shameful, disgusting, unhealthy & disgraceful** (TT2)
- 48. **I may throw up** (TT2)

---

<sup>85</sup> Goffman, *Stigma*.

49. can u get off my for u page pls (TT3)  
 50. **This woman makes me want to throw up.** Bottom of the barrel. She's not going to see 2024 (TT4)

A worrying number of TikTok users and haters expresses intense distaste or disgust, especially in reaction to fatness (rather than disability); disgust, in particular, can be seen as a strong predictor of negative attitudes and behaviours towards fat people, as a central component of weight bias (see Vartanian).<sup>86</sup> In such cases, ‘physical disgust’ and ‘moral disgust’ appear as two separate but overlapping functional domains, jointly eliciting verbal aggression, stigma and hate speech especially through the mechanism of shaming and blaming that was enacted by many haters. As one of the strongest emotions that a person can experience, shame is used as a way to manipulate or control subjects, carrying an intrinsically negative message which triggers the feeling of being worthless, humiliated, rejected. Shame is then converted into blame, when negative judgement affects social esteem (how a person is valued in a community) and social sanction (the person’s low social esteem is attributed to their choices and actions, it is their responsibility). This seems particularly true in the case of fatness, which is viewed as a consequence of people’s poor choices that do not comply with dominant, normative expectations. Therefore, the TikTokers are treated with contempt and exposed to public shaming and blaming with strategies that focus on the target’s physical appearance as well as on their character and behavior, with specific emphasis on their mental and/or moral qualities.

Such inferences to a somewhat ‘substandard’ psychological character (which lead, for example, to deem some individuals as lazy, undisciplined, untrustworthy or weak-willed because they engage in blatantly self-destructive behaviours) or, additionally, inferences based on perceptions of ‘substandard’ physical appearance (as in the case of fat people or people with physical disabilities, both possibly perceived as deformities) result in widespread and pervasive prejudice (see Van Leeuwen et al.).<sup>87</sup> Therefore, perceptions of fatness and disability align with a perspective which regards fat and disabled people as blameworthy for their outcome, thus deserving discrimination.

The instances from the corpus suggest that as a multifaceted emotion, disgust appears to be elicited by a range of stimuli associated with specific bodily reactions, such as nausea, avoidance and withdrawal (namely, distancing from the elicitor of disgust), rejection (namely, physical and/or social rejection). Such reactions invariably lead to stigmatizing behaviours mostly targeting people for their fatness rather than their disability. Indeed, obesity appears to elicit not only physical disgust but also moral/social disgust, as a response to persons who seem to have broken social norms or moral codes.<sup>88</sup> Fatness is thus viewed as a moral failing, a betrayal of the community for selfish reasons, which constitutes a threat to its public health and its economic life, something that ‘disturbs’ and disgusts TikTok viewers, as their comments show.

#### 4.5 Positive Comments of Support and Appreciation

The last sub-theme that could be identified for analysis comprised positive comments, expressing support and appreciation for the TikTokers, for what they were trying to do by posting videos to engage with issues of (self-)acceptance and recognition. An extremely low number of comments in the *Fat&Disabled* corpus, in fact, conveyed approval and advocacy for their courage in speaking up, appearing in public, trying to increase general awareness about these issues. Roughly 4% of all the

<sup>86</sup> Lenny R. Vartanian, “Disgust and Perceived Control in Attitudes Toward Obese People”, *International Journal of Obesity*, 34.8 (2010), 1302-1307.

<sup>87</sup> Florian Van Leeuwen et al., “Is Obesity Stigma Based on Perceptions of Appearance or Character? Theory, Evidence and Directions for Further Study”, *Evolutionary Psychology*, 13.3 (2015), 1474704915600565.

<sup>88</sup> Joshua M. Tybur et al., “Microbes, Mating and Morality: Individual Differences in Three Functional Domains of Disgust”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97.1 (2009), 103-122.

comments retrieved showed some kind of empathy and sympathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of other people and to relate to other people's experiences and lives (as 51 to 55 show).

51. These comments don't pass the vibe check. Y'all need to chill (TT1)
52. so good darling (TT2)
53. you got this Tim keep it up (TT3)
54. you're wonderful for explaining this! this world is missing compassion. Absolutely blows my mind how apathetic ppl can be (TT6)
55. ur so right its good to spread awareness and speak out abt these issues (TT6)

In such cases, the authors of comments blame other TikTok users and viewers for lacking compassion, for their inability to alleviate other people's suffering. The use of adjectives with a positive connotation to express appreciation for the protagonists of the videos conveys a sense of concern and care for their feelings, a sense of kindness of which the great majority of comments were devoid. Moreover, in these online interactions, TikTok users prefer to use the video-makers' proper names (for instance, Tim, Tammy), something which has crucial implications. Indeed, names play a pivotal role as far as identity and emotions are concerned; the act of calling a person by their name can have a subtle impact reflecting intimacy, respect, and even power relations and dynamics in so far as it is an explicit way to identify someone. Addressing individuals by their name may give rise to affective bonds or lead to agreement and, to some extent, closeness and proximity, due to the sense of sharing that is created as a powerful relationship-developing strategy which conveys attention, acknowledgment, and a wish to engage personally. Therefore, far from being a mere coincidence, the choice of calling the TikTokers by their names bears considerable socio-cultural implications, especially in terms of identification and identity representation. The issue of proper names appears extremely important to understand reference, since naming is the initial way to construe and designate general relationships between words and the world or reality, it is a semiotic index. In contrast with the previously mentioned use of second and third person pronouns, the pragmatic use of proper names realizes the phenomenon of reference by providing the TikTokers in the videos with their socio-cultural identity: names function not only as tools for identification but also as tools for the social classification of individuals, they tell the community who those individuals are and what their place within that community is.

## 5. Conclusions

### 5.1 Final Remarks: Part One

The internet and social media serve as a powerful tool for FPWD, enabling them to make their voices heard and engage with society. However, SMSs are still steeped in a high level of abusive behavior both online and offline, which is often under-reported and under-prosecuted; indeed, online space has increased the venues where such abuse occurs, and, since it can actually reach people in their homes, it can intensify their sense of isolation stemming from a wider culture that is hostile to FPWD, society as a whole portraying them as farcical, foolish or villainous.

Deeply ingrained as prejudice is in societal values, it surfaces in online interactions in SMSs, releasing negative and prejudicial attitudes and behaviors, which results in FPWD confronting both ableism and fatphobia and finding themselves in intertwined threads of discrimination which create a battlefield where self-acceptance and social acceptance collide. Such a collision concerns their inherent characteristics as much as their cultural/symbolic value, namely it mostly pertains oppression. FPWD seem to fall below (or beyond) the threshold of acceptability, of what is considered culturally acceptable, therefore they are repeatedly exposed to mockery, bigotry and hatred.

Through the shame and blame mechanism that could be detected in some of the comments retrieved, the need to claim moral high ground could distinctly be noticed, especially in relation to fatness – haters implicitly construing themselves as resisting temptation, doing the right thing, complying with a regulated social and healthy behavior. Indeed, they stress the *others'* personal or moral failings. An interesting aspect emerging from analysis in relation to this mechanism concerns the fact that the TikTokers video-makers gain visibility, expose their fatness and their disability, forcing viewers to confront their discomfort when watching; therefore, they cause a sort of short circuit: they overturn the hierarchical relationships that assign specific values to certain identities and deconstruct them.

This study is meant to be an invitation to implicate ourselves in the ongoing discursive and social construal of the Other, in this case FPWD, contributing to the daily reaffirmation or denial of some defining categories. If individuals derive meaning from social interactions and construe their identities through these interactions, as it seems to be the case, the TikTokers employ social media to present and project a version of themselves that does not necessarily align with societal prevailing and normative views and standards, but rather disrupts them. By taking into account the overt and covert assumptions emerging from the haters' comments, this paper tries to engage with dominant hierarchical systems dismantling them, unraveling alternative subjectivities offered by the video-makers in the very act of negotiating their identities within the digital realm. The TikTok videos selected for this study can be seen as points of entry, spaces where the ableist and fatphobic logic can be accessed and then deconstructed, only to admit multiple meanings, to reconfigure anomalies as spaces of opportunities. In doing so, the intersecting dichotomies fat vs. 'normal-sized' body and ability vs. disability can be dissected and collapse inwards upon themselves, acknowledging the complexity of socially encoded stereotypes that entrap individuals.

As we explore the intricate and evolving landscape of social media discourse and interactions in search of improved forms of inclusion and equality, intersectionality – where ableist and fatphobic discourses intersect – remains a critical area to unravel the many nuanced realities faced by different groups and thereby contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of social media representations. Such understanding might be achieved by recognizing a crucial need to be collectively exposed to diverse narratives and representations, to enhance media literacy and strengthen education and awareness on varying forms of discrimination and hate speech.

## 5.2 Final Remarks: Part Two

The development of media literacy is crucial for counteracting hateful narratives and harmful practices based on enduring stereotypes contributing to the perpetuation of the marginalization and alienation of minority groups such as fat and disabled people, particularly when intersectional discourses overlap.

The identification of 'in-group' and 'out-group' representations is crucial for understanding power dynamics and controlled practices enacted in SMSs where social distance is shortened through textual and digital features and sensitive content easily spread.

TikTok is a peculiar SMS since it allows the creation of evolving communities around the most diverse topics through trends (i.e., viral short videos characterized by specific moves, sound effects, and/or hashtags), connecting people worldwide. Although TikTok<sup>89</sup> has implemented various *ad hoc* policies over time to contrast harmful behaviors, people's aggregation based on negative mental models, prejudice, and standardized labels is complex to arrest. Indeed, the present study has highlighted how the affordances of SMSs, such as the anonymization behind fake accounts, along with the use of metaphorically damaging and abusive language, interact to (a) disseminate false information and promote harmful advice about dieting and (b) spread negative portrayals of fatness and disability as

<sup>89</sup> TikTok, "Countering Hate Speech & Behavior", *TikTok* (2024), [www.tiktok.com](http://www.tiktok.com).

moral failures and shaming conduct, with disability also represented as caused by obesity. Accordingly, the hashtag *#fatanddisabled*, positively used by the TikTokers to both interact with people who are in similar situations and raise awareness about the capabilities they have *despite* their circumstances, turns into an aggregator of haters derogatorily pouring their disdain and attempting to impose on them their ‘normative’ viewpoints on the body, which is almost always associated with being healthy, thin and/or muscled and, thus, attractive and desirable.

There is a fine line between humor, sarcasm, irony, and offense;<sup>90</sup> however, in SMSs, they overtly become significant pragma-linguistic strategies to exercise power over minorities (in this case, FPWD) and *otherize* them. The various epithets haters chose to address the people in the videos can undoubtedly quickly spread from TikTok across other SMSs and enter the hateful vocabulary of those sharing the same adverse views, which results in keeping a “negative semantic prosody”<sup>91</sup> around fat and disability.

The deprecating discourses and glossaries developed around fat and disability – propagated through digital environments – can drastically impact real-life subordinating and hegemonic processes over FPWD, feeding that part of society believing firmly in the ‘abnormality’ of these bodies and attempting to make them adhere to ‘normativity’ through offensive, discriminating, and alienating attitudes in various aspects of social life.

Contemporarily, this paper has shown that FPWD use SMSs to confront and challenge these viewpoints expressed through the discursive micro-level of the comments they receive and the broader macro-level of societal imagery and representations around fatness and disability to which the comments align. This is pursued with various means, from managing their social media account features (e.g., deleting all the negative comments) to regularly posting content (i.e., they continue to release videos without deleting the hateful comments), to even taking practical counter-actions. An example is represented by one TikToker from the corpus who created their brand, *Trisomy21*, based on their disability. As the brand’s name shows, it combines the person’s name (Tim) and their disability (i.e., Trisomy21 *aka* Down syndrome or DS) to promote a positive image of Down syndrome and raise awareness about adopting orphans with DS.

The critical discursive analysis of the digitally-based *Fat&Disabled* corpus has hopefully provided meaningful insights into the enduring negative values around fatness and disability – particularly when they intersect – that manifest through the linguistic strategies adopted by haters on TikTok to address them and through which damaging ideologies are constructed, enacted, and spread, which result in group differentiation and marginalization in both online and offline environments.

<sup>90</sup> Balirano and Hughes, “Fat Chance!”

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 46.