

***Media, obesity discourse, and participatory politics:  
Exploring digital engagement among university students***

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**ABSTRACT**

Situated within research on youth, participatory politics, and media framing of obesity, this study examined how undergraduate students in a media literacy course engaged with obesity discourse as a nexus of civic participation. Twenty-nine students enrolled on the course identified frames of obesity in plus-size model Tess Holliday's Instagram posts surrounding her controversial Cosmopolitan cover in 2018. Analysis of these frames – self-validation, injustice of fat-shaming and stigmatization, influences of Instagram celebrities on fat embodiment, and health stereotypes of obese people – enabled the students to critique activist responses to accepted body norms and moral values facilitating weight bias. In efforts to reframe obesity within their social media communities, the students created and shared online media content, prioritizing societal influences in obesity representation. In this process, students cultivated participatory practices of comprehending and sharing (social) media framings of bodies and health. Hence, this article offers contextualized understandings in youth digital engagement learning.

**Keywords:** *participatory politics, obesity discourse, body-framing, media literacy, youth digital engagement.*



## INTRODUCTION

Digital media have expanded opportunities for youth civic engagement as they provide access to more information, capability to reach out to others, and support for a greater level of direct and personal involvement (Papaioannou, 2013). In order for youth to better utilize digital opportunities, many have argued that media literacy efforts are needed within a perspective that acknowledges the ways in which young people incorporate civic activities and media content into their lives (e.g., Jenkins, Ito, & Boyd, 2016). This view recognizes the importance of participatory politics – youth using discursive practices in online networks to participate in public life (Kahne & Bowyer, 2019). Facilitated by digital media, youth engage in participatory politics, circulate and create content while collaborating with others who share their interests and opinions. These practices support not only consumption of information but also production and circulation of content and attainment of public recognition.

While empirical evidence has supported this notion of digital engagement, some questions still need further attention. Youth engaged in participatory politics are still likely to encounter the spread of misinformation through social media (Bakir & McStay, 2017). Educators are only beginning to implement interventions which may strengthen young people's abilities to critically comprehend online information. Furthermore, content-centered educational initiatives tend to emphasize creative expression, encouraging students to produce multimedia narratives. Media literacy educators are concerned with the degree of focus on content in popular culture (Hobbs, 2010), hence, the need to identify strategies to facilitate youth interest in sharing media content and issues of civic significance. Finally, digital engagement cannot be abstracted from the social environment that embeds its development. Beyond affirming the role of media technology in youth citizenship, contextualized analysis of participatory practices and learning is important for leveraging educational interventions.

This paper attempts to offer some understanding on these issues. Using media framing of obesity as a learning context, this study examines how undergraduate students on a media literacy course engaged with obesity discourse as practices of participatory politics. The article proceeds as follows. First, it reviews the literature on youth and participatory politics within the realm of civic learning. Next, it discusses news media framings of obesity, the

possibilities of fat activists using social media to voice their perspectives, and the need to encourage participatory practices among youth aimed at tackling body-shaming. Upon this discussion, it introduces a class intervention guiding students to identify frames of obesity in plus-size model Tess Holliday's Instagram posts surrounding her controversial *Cosmopolitan* cover. Analysis of these frames – self-validation, injustice of fat-shaming and stigmatization, influences of Instagram celebrities on fat embodiment, and health stereotypes of obese people – enabled the students to debate activist responses to accepted norms and moral values facilitating weight bias. In efforts to reframe thinking about weight within their social media communities, the students created and (re)shared online media content, emphasizing environmental-level framings of obesity. In this process, the students cultivated participatory practices of critical comprehension and sharing of (social) media framings of bodies and health. Hence, this article offers contextualized understandings in youth digital engagement practices.

## YOUTH AND PARTICIPATORY POLITICS

The advent of digital media and their potential for youth civic participation have encouraged research on the changing nature of youth civic identity. Bennett (2008) argues that experiencing increased personal responsibility and choice, youth are adopting an actualizing citizen identity. They consider self-actualizing politics more relevant to their individual needs than government and organize their citizen identity around their personal lifestyles. They are drawn to participatory forms of political acts that emphasize direct social action on lifestyle issues, often facilitated by digital media.

Furthermore, Jenkins and colleagues (2016) advocate a participatory culture that validates the ways in which youth express their civic interest through digital media. This understanding encourages participatory politics – “interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern” (Kahne, Hodgin, & Eidman-Aadahl, 2016, p. 2). Core practices of participatory politics include investigation of issues of public interest and divergent perspectives, production and circulation of information in order to shape the broader narrative, and mobilization for social change. These practices highlight competencies and

skills to utilize digital media in opinion-formation and social action which are essential to the dynamics of civic participation.

Hence, educators are urged to provide learning opportunities through which youth acquire digital literacy skills for civic and political participation (Hobbs et al., 2013). Analysis of two large surveys suggests that classroom-based digital engagement learning opportunities indeed increase engagement in participatory politics (Kahne & Bowyer, 2019). However, the results also indicate the need to support media literacy in the area of critical comprehension of online content and skills to collaboratively investigate and address public issues. What is more, a survey of high school students reveals a gap between communication and response (Papaioannou, 2011). While students receive information about civic issues, only a minority engages in research in efforts to support these causes. McGrew and colleagues (2017) argue that purposeful education is needed to cultivate civic reasoning among youth in a social media environment. Youth are increasingly learning about social issues through social media. It is critical to support them in developing skills for evaluating digital content and reaching warranted conclusions about these issues. This study responds to this gap in our understanding. As it is a case study fostering engagement with obesity discourse among university students, the following section reviews media framing of obesity with an emphasis on news media's tendency to promote weight bias. Then, it discusses empirical studies of literacy interventions focused on media, bodies, and health and the need to encourage practices of participatory politics to tackle body-shaming.

### **MEDIA FRAMING OF OBESITY AND LITERACY INTERVENTIONS**

Much concern is expressed in news coverage of a putative obesity epidemic which is affecting many countries and generating public anxiety about fatness, particularly among youth. Although critical analysis of the medical and public health discourse of obesity increasingly points away from individual behaviors toward medical and societal factors that contribute to the cause of and solution to obesity, mainstream journalism has been slow to incorporate this understanding (Stanford, Tauqeer, & Kyle, 2018). In the process of disseminating information and transferring social norms about bodies and health, news media have been criticized for their role in moralizing weight and

stigmatizing fat bodies (Monaghan, Rich, & Bombak, 2018).

Obesity has received frequent media coverage in recent years; however, relevant reporting manifests bias both in the selection and description of the issues they choose to report. Despite reports of declining prevalence in Western nations (Ogden et al., 2015), obesity news demonstrates media inclination for problem frames and fatalism (Shugart, 2011), emphasizing the magnitude and (anticipated) impact of obesity (Nimegeer, Amy, & Patterson, 2019). The latter study also concludes that focus on regulative, environmental solutions to obesity correlates with a decrease in the issue's salience in the media. Descriptors such as "looming catastrophe" and "epidemic" portray obesity as a form of social and economic threat "as dangerous as terror," hence, fuel public panic (Saguy & Riley, 2005). A content analysis of obesity news from 2011 to 2013 in the United States reveals that 43% of newspaper items depict obesity as an epidemic and only 10% describe it as preventable (Thomas et al., 2017). Such practices illustrate news values of spectacles and conflict, hence, the dramatization of obesity (Roy et al., 2011). Audiences need to be critically aware of the role of media when governments and agencies are reinvigorating the global war on obesity, with populations being advised to become and remain conscientious weight watchers (e.g., WHO, 2018).

Furthermore, obesity news more frequently focuses on individual-level than environmental-level framings, prioritizing personal responsibility, endorsing the thin body, and denying obese individuals an identity unless in weight-loss stories.

Obesity news typically includes institutional information sources such as health/medical reports and opinions of health professionals, but the dominating themes focus on individual nutrition and physical activity (Ata & Thompson, 2010). Media attention to obesity statistics has facilitated public acceptance of population data on individuals' height and weight to calculate Body Mass Index (BMI) and the associated health risks for different weight categories. Weight-centric discourse tends to use this information to encourage individuals to fit into the normal health categories through exercising personal responsibility for weight control. Such reporting often includes literature on nutrition and energetics without necessary consideration of medical, social factors in weight management, conflating with assumptions of a causal relationship between weight and illness or weight as a determinant of health (Greenhalgh, 2015). Selective use

of biomedical knowledge lends news stories credibility and contributes to the establishment of weight-based health norms. Appeals to health and normality promote stereotypes about weight loss and perpetuate negative, latent or manifest, portrayals of obese individuals in the media as slothful, ignorant, unhealthy, and costly (Saguy, Frederick, & Gruys, 2014). Such stigmatizing framings in turn encourage public discourse about moralizing weight and blame for obesity (Monaghan, 2017).

Body weight is “as much to do with a social and cultural response to particular kinds of bodies as it has to do with health” (Gard & Wright, 2005, p. 177). Media play a role in portraying the undesirability of fatness through endorsing the thin body, exerting pressure especially on young women to conform to standards of body size/weight (Braun, Park, & Gorin, 2016). The thin body is often presented recursively with attractiveness, happiness, and societal success, contributing to the “thin body ideal” stereotype (Ferreira, Pinto-Gouveia, & Duarte, 2013). Although media campaigns challenging the thin body ideal are present, entertainment news, fashion media, and advertising across popular media typically portray slim bodies as beautiful and sexually desirable.

With media attention to the (alleged) obesity epidemic, “scary-skinny, self-starving female body” in celebrity reporting has been replaced by the spectacle of the fleshy fat body (Lupton, 2017). Obesity news often incorporates images of “headless fatties” (Cooper, 2016) and inanimate objects associated with unhealthy lifestyle. Research suggests that visuals accompanying online news on obesity often feature isolated body parts of obese individuals engaging in unhealthy behaviors (Puhl et al., 2013). Moreover, it is usually in weight-loss stories that those who manage to lose weight are given a positive voice among the more commonplace, negative media portrayals (Couch et al., 2015). This lack of identity and portrayals of unhealthiness and unattractiveness marginalize obese people and encourage (internalized) stigmatization.

Conversely, alternative frames (e.g., body positivity) along with activist responses are present in news and social media, driving public attention to the harms of weight bias and stigmatization. Some social, political, and technological changes might have contributed to this phenomenon. First, citizen activism is increasingly moving from the political margins toward mainstream acceptance as legitimate representation mechanisms for an expanded range of social and cultural causes (Papaioannou, 2018). Activities advancing social

change by fostering ethically, morally, and politically inspired lifestyle choices have become more acceptable as they refer to broader social processes and values such as social equality and control.

Accompanying the technological trend of freer and wider access to information, the media landscape – comprising mainstream, alternative, and independent media formations and increased communication flows and interactional capabilities – has made the wider dissemination of contentious action possible. These changes have expanded opportunities for people to engage in resistant or activist responses to biased portrayals of their bodies. In this sense, social media have facilitated representations of conflicting perspectives on bodies (Lupton, 2017). “The Fatosphere”, a collection of fat activist and anti-fat-shaming digital platforms have proliferated, especially in response to obesity epidemic. However, research shows (Rich, 2018) that young people learn about “healthy” practices through social media about diet, weight, and fitness; they also learn to judge themselves and others as good, healthy, thin, and desirable bodies. Another study indicates (Chou, Pretin, & Kunath, 2014) the predominance of derogatory framings of obesity in social media, pointing out the importance of critical comprehension of online content and harnessing social media in tackling body-shaming.

With increasing awareness of the role of media in public health, there have been interventions focusing on media, health literacy, and obesity education. In line with the broader conception of media literacy, health literacy education promotes cognitive and social skills to obtain, understand, and use information in ways which enhance individual and public health (Trültzsch-Wijnen, Murru, & Papaioannou, 2017). Among media and education interventions about obesity, common themes concern media consumption and physical activity, body regulation, and dietary habits (Kite et al., 2018). Media use encourages a sedentary lifestyle although relationships between sedentary behavior and health are likely to be explained using multiple markers of inactivity besides TV viewing or video/computer game use. There are research and health interventions investigating whether (social) media use displaces time spent on physical activities (Mazur et al., 2017).

Advertising is held to promote unhealthy consumption. Many health campaigns in this area examine childhood consumption of advertisements as food is the most frequently advertised product on children’s television. Research shows that foods featured in television fiction are most often low-nutrient

drinks and snacks (Cezar, 2008). Additionally, consumption of (often unhealthy) snacks is said to increase during media use. While approaches may differ, healthy diet and physical activity have become prominent topics of health education in schools, particularly in the Western world (Rich, Monaghan & Bombak, 2019).

Regarding social perception of body weight, much health education in the past studied the potential effects on females of unrealistically thin images. Images of and research into obese people in the media tend to be ambiguous or contradictory. Some evaluations of public education campaigns claim that interventions informing of the health risks of obesity have not led to increased endorsement of weight-based stereotypes (Kite et al., 2018). Other research (e.g., Saguy, Frederick, & Gruys, 2014) shows that negative media attention to fatness influences social perception, associated policies, and prejudice.

Lupton (2015) discusses the ethical, moral, and political implications of using unpleasant images to promote lifestyle change in media interventions. She critiques the assumption that the public lack knowledge, the use of unpleasant images to motivate lifestyle change and the empirical inaccuracies of paternalistic health promotion pedagogies that present behavior change as easily achievable. Alternative body pedagogies are also emerging, utilizing approaches of critical health education and challenging weight-based health norms associated with obesity discourse. These approaches tend to face skepticism among students, pertaining to the complications and contradictions between content of students' health-related education and fat acceptance (Rich, Monaghan & Bombak, 2019). Furthermore, media campaigns and interventions can be effective; however, most studies examine how such interventions can affect children. Research into adult interventions shows that those who participate in media health campaigns tend to be women from higher socioeconomic groups who are already engaging in healthy practices (Stanford, Tauqeer, & Kyle, 2018).

Considering the preceding literature, this study investigates how university students in a media literacy course engaged with obesity discourse as practices of participatory politics. Participatory politics refer to activities that are interactive, peer-based and through which individuals and groups aim to express voice and influence on issues of public concern (Kahne & Bowyer, 2019). They can be placed within digital engagement literacies as the capacities for investigation and research, dialogue with information stakeholders, production and

circulation of information, and mobilization for change (Kahne, Hodgins, & Eidman-Aadahl, 2016). Investigation and research activities focus on youth analyzing and evaluating information to learn about public issues. The required competencies have implications for educators in order to support youth to engage in investigation of multiple perspectives and information creation. This research focuses on analyzing and sharing (social) media framings of body weight. Through a case study of students analyzing framings of obesity in plus-size model Tess Holliday's Instagram posts surrounding her controversial *Cosmopolitan* cover in 2018, this study explores these questions:

- How did university students in a media literacy course engage with obesity discourse as practices of participatory politics (if any)?
- What frames did the students identify in Tess Holliday's Instagram posts?
- How did the students interpret these frames?
- How did comprehension of (social) media framings of obesity facilitate student sharing of their perspective on bodies and health?

## METHOD

Media Literacy and Youth Culture is a third-year requirement course at a European university for students studying communication/journalism and an elective course for those studying psychology and sociology. Prior to taking this course, students majoring in communication had taken radio/video production courses. In Spring 2019, 16 female and 13 male students took the course, ranging in age from 19 to 21 years old. All of them were from European countries, 19 were communication majors. All students were Facebook and Instagram users, five had blogs, and six had uploaded videos on YouTube.

To introduce the project, the author/lecturer shared research addressing the relationship between body weight and media, including dominant framings of obesity in news media, fat activists using social media to challenge weight-centric discourse, and literature critiquing media interventions of obesity. Students were asked to work in groups/pairs and share online content on bodies and media, illustrative of their analysis of media framings of bodies. This intervention intended to engage students in participatory practices of analyzing information framing through collaboration with peers, jointly creating and distributing information online.

## Framing analysis

Upon student discussion of project topic, a common interest emerged in media/public reaction to American plus-size model Tess Holliday appearing on the cover of the October 2018 issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine in the UK. Holliday was the first plus-size woman to be a (best-selling) cover in *Cosmopolitan*'s 46 years of history. The model received widespread praise with audiences claiming to have bought the magazine after years of seeing thin bodies in fashion media. However, the cover also instigated public debate of *Cosmopolitan*/Holliday promoting an unhealthy lifestyle and arguments between Holliday and Piers Morgan, the *Good Morning Britain* host, who criticized her as sending misguided messages in the name of body positivity and glamorizing obesity amid Britain's ongoing obesity crisis<sup>1</sup>. The controversy generated much media coverage and audience reaction, particularly on Holliday's Instagram page.

Upon selection of the case, the students conducted a framing analysis of Holliday's Instagram posts surrounding her *Cosmopolitan* controversy. First, the students collected 192 messages concerning *Cosmo*/cover-girl/fat/weight/body/health/obesity that Holliday posted between 31/08/2018 when she announced her upcoming cover appearance and 31/1/2019, five months after the announcement. Holliday's Instagram page had two million followers at the time of data collection, each of these posts had between 20,000 and 180,000 likes and an average of 800 comments. The data only captured texts.

Second, the author discussed the theoretical conception of framing and illustrated how to identify frames embedded in texts. Derived from Gitlin's concept of frame as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual" (1980, p. 7), framing is about the empirically observable presentation of issues in a public space. Activists and journalists present issues as meaningful through a framing process of selection, emphasis, and elaboration "in such a way as to promote particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

In conducting the analysis, the students adopted the method of reconstructing frame packages – starting from a series of texts to reconstruct the frames applied therein (Van Gorp, 2016). In this inductive framing analysis, each frame is presented as a frame package in a text, consisting of framing devices and the central frame. Framing devices consist of the implicit and explicit causal reasoning connected to the issue being discussed: description and definition of the problem, causal interpretation of the problem, responsibility and solution and moral evaluation. They also include manifest components of a text, lexical choices that may activate the frame as an abstract idea in the minds of the readers. Finally, there is the central frame, the organizing theme that provides the frame package with a coherent structure and reinforces the central narrative emphasis. The reconstruction of frame packages requires a qualitative, text-centered, open-coding, using the method of constant comparison against the devices in a frame package in order to locate frames in a text. The frame matrix is considered complete when no additional frames could be detected in the texts.

Upon illustration of examples, the students together with the author identified the framing devices within a framing package (Table 1). The students then worked in groups/pairs to identify frames in Holliday's posts. They presented their results in class, debated any disagreements, and revised their coding accordingly. This process was repeated until they agreed on the frame matrix. Subsequently, they wrote essays interpreting these frames and offering suggestions for using (social) media to improve public understanding of weight issues.

## Thematic analysis of students' responses

The author examined 11 student essays to identify common themes – topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that were repeatedly expressed. This thematic analysis followed a six-step process: familiarization with data; coding; generating, reviewing, and defining themes; and writing analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The author read all essays thoroughly before coding the data, highlighting sections of text – usually phrases or sentences – and creating shorthand labels or "codes" to describe their content. While collating all the sections that fit into each code, notes were taken surrounding the context of the coded text. After reviewing the codes and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/morbid-obesity-double-britain-poverty-education-employment-study-a8369731.html>

their associated extracts, the author collated the codes into broader themes. All the extracts related to the codes were reviewed in order to explore whether they supported a theme, if there were contradictions, and if themes overlapped.

This review ensured the final themes were accurate representations of the data. Once the themes were defined, the author also identified descriptive examples in texts, the overall meaning of each theme, and how it related to other themes.

Table 1. *Devices of the framing analysis*

	<b>Framing device</b>	<b>Explanation of framing device</b>
<b>Narrative frame</b>	Problem description/Definition	Portrayal of obesity/obese people (e.g., obese people as “headless fatties”); description of obesity-related claims (e.g., obesity is unhealthy; obesity is a cause for stigmatization)
	Causal interpretation and claim	Explanation of factors causing/contributing to obesity (e.g., a sedative lifestyle leads to obesity); sources/perspectives used in justifying/interpreting the definition (e.g., governmental reports, opinions of medical/health professionals or obese people)
	Treatment recommendation/Responsibility and solutions	Explanation of who is responsible for obesity and providing solutions (e.g., as opposed to reflecting the interactions of biology and environmental factors, weight-centric discourse tends to emphasize personal responsibility)
	Moral evaluation	Social, cultural resonance, moral reasoning and judgment of obesity (e.g., obese people are self-indulgent); moral and emotional basis for obesity-related claims (e.g., weight stigmatization is social injustice)
	Lexical choices	Key, recurring phrases within a text

## RESULTS

The students identified the following frames in Holliday’s posts – self-validation, injustice of fat-shaming and stigmatization, influences of Instagram celebrities on fat embodiment, and health stereotypes of obesity (Table 2). Analysis of these frames enabled the students to debate activist viewpoints in terms of framing definition, causal interpretation, treatment recommendation, and moral evaluation of obesity. The students argued that social media have facilitated the dissemination of divergent perspectives on obesity, offering audiences access to information not (sufficiently) represented by mainstream media. Thus, it was critical to examine body representations in media and understand how they (re)produce or challenge dominant norms and moral values endorsing weight bias.

Moreover, comprehension of body-framing facilitated critical consumption and production of relevant media content. The students used their production skills and social media to create, comment on, and distribute information in collaboration with peers, expressing their opinion in the obesity debate. These contents reflected their framings of bodies and health, focusing community attention on effects of body-shaming and stigmatization and multifactorial basis of obesity and weight management.

## Students’ framing analysis

Student analysis revealed that self-validation was expressed in Holliday’s posts as part of her “Eff Your Beauty Standards” campaign on Instagram. This frame advocated that all body sizes and shapes should be accepted; people should not be made ashamed of their bodies. Instead of presenting fat bodies as culturally deviant, Holliday validated fat women/herself as beautiful.

She argued “self-validation is when a person accepts their body, own internal experience, thoughts, and feelings .... Fat women are beautiful as thin women, but negative media (representation) and stigma have made this opinion invisible.” Calling herself a “fat Barbie,” She wrote that even though she was “always the fattest person in the room” when attending events, she was confident, “always brought out the glamour.” Holliday argued that society’s thin body ideal was harmful and unhealthy, causing feelings of inadequacy and shame or eating disorders among women. Rebuking the social disadvantages that the thin body ideal imposes on (fat) people and against accusations of glamorizing obesity, she reiterated “my message isn’t let’s all be fat. My message is let’s love yourself, regardless how you look in your current body. Because your mental health is far more important.”

Table 2. *Frames in Tess Holliday's Instagram posts*

Frame	Problem description /Definition	Causal interpretation and claim	Treatment recommendation/Responsibility and solutions	Moral evaluation	Lexical choices
<b>Self-validation</b>	All body sizes/shapes should be accepted; people should not apologize for their bodies.	Negative media representation and stigmatization have marginalized fat women. Furthermore, the thin body ideal harms mental and physical health; body acceptance nurtures mental health.	Society should adopt weight-inclusive beauty/body standards. Destigmatizing fat in media will encourage women to love their bodies with confidence.	People should not be made ashamed of their bodies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I was the fattest person in the room, but as always, brought the glamour!</li> <li>• Your mental health is far more important.</li> <li>• If I saw a body like mine in this magazine when I was a young girl, it would have changed my life &amp; hope this does that for some of y'all.</li> </ul>
<b>Injustice of fat-shaming and stigmatization</b>	Social injustice toward obese people includes body-shaming comments and actions, derogative jokes, and media stereotypes of obese people.	Body stereotypes in media facilitate weight stigma.	Positive media representation can help reduce weight bias.	The rights of obese people should be respected.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When someone tries to tell me that fat girls don't get laid or that no one will ever f*** me.</li> <li>• ...Don't make people feel bad because they can't lose weight.</li> <li>• People who think I'm glorifying obesity are glorifying stupidity.</li> </ul>
<b>Instagram-celebrity influence on fat embodiment</b>	Holliday uses Instagram to create an online community for positive fat embodiment.	Social media celebrities can influence public opinion and engage followers in activism.	Followers' support enables Holliday to advocate her cause although public opinion is divided.	Holliday is empowered by Instagram to celebrate fat bodies; this also makes her susceptible to criticism.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What good is my platform if I'm not using it to help others.</li> <li>• ...Thank you for all of the love these past few days, it's overwhelming in the most beautiful way.... We still have so long to go, and that people are eager for change &amp; I'm grateful to be part of moving things forward, for everybody.</li> <li>• I know this photo will piss people off, it will be shared worldwide while being mocked &amp; judged.... &amp; I'm prepared for that. It's your minds that need to change.</li> </ul>
<b>Health stereotypes of obesity</b>	Weight-based health norms facilitate health stereotypes and damage mental and physical health.	People assume weight is under personal control.	Health should not be used as a reason to shame obese people.	It is wrong to make assumptions about people's health based on their weight.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyone saying I'm a burden to British healthcare.</li> <li>• ...(I) work out but still (am) fat, also many times of attempts to lose weight.... My body has always felt like a war zone, but I've made peace with that. It's your minds that need to change.</li> <li>• It's not okay to assume.</li> <li>• Health is everyone's personal decision.</li> </ul>



Presenting her cover as a first step to de-stigmatize obesity in fashion media, she urged society to embrace weight-inclusive beauty/body standards and encouraged (fat) women to celebrate their bodies unapologetically.

The second frame the students identified was injustice of fat-shaming and stigmatization. In numerous posts, Holliday denounced stigmatizing practices including body-shaming comments or actions, derogative jokes, and stereotypes of obese people in media. She interpreted all these acts as social injustice and violation of obese people's rights and called on her audience to support positive fat embodiment in media. Holliday shared several stigmatizing experiences in her life, expressing sadness and anger about how "society can be very judgmental and verbally abusive toward fat people." In one post, she recalled as a child being laughed off stage at a children's beauty pageant because of her weight. In another, she disclosed being told that no one would find her sexually attractive, "fat girls don't get laid." Holliday wrote that her followers frequently shared experiences of being ridiculed as lazy, self-indulgent, and socially incompetent because of their weight.

While criticizing society for its unfairness toward obese people, Holliday recognized the importance of raising awareness of media stereotypes, hence, supporting positive representations although initiatives were still limited. She mentioned an incident when she went to a celebrity-only event and she was the only fat person in the room. When being asked whom her fashion-icon was, she ironically replied "Dolly Parton," protesting body/beauty stereotypes still prevalent in fashion media. Her cover was a trending topic for months; but much public opinion argued that the cover promoted an unhealthy lifestyle. Amid such criticism, Holliday maintained that obese people's rights to social justice should be acknowledged.

The third frame centered around the influence of Instagram celebrities on positive fat embodiment. Holliday claimed that her status helped her establish community support for body positivity although it also attracted criticism. She repeatedly said that her two million followers empowered her to draw attention to fat-shaming and use Instagram as a space where fat bodies are presented positively. In many posts, Holliday presented herself as a "happy, fat covergirl," encouraging women to celebrate their bodies. She thanked her followers for their support and expressed her determination to continue her cause, "... we still have so long to go, and that people are eager for change

& I'm grateful to be part of moving things forward, for everybody."

Yet she was aware that the political aspect of her posts might not comply with audience expectations associated with the entertainment/fashion culture on Instagram. She commented that discussion of political injustice could be "heavy" but argued "it's for achieving the goal to help others feel comfortable in their own skin." She discussed that her cover story attracted mockery and criticisms including glamourizing obesity, promoting an unhealthy lifestyle, and negatively affecting youth. She counter-argued that her intention was to de-stigmatize obesity in media and advocate body confidence. On the last on-sale date of Holliday's cover, she shared a post by Farrah Storr, *Cosmopolitan's* UK editor, about the backlash the cover created:

For the entire month of September this has been "news." ... We had people cancel subscriptions because of it, Piers Morgan raging about it, every columnist on almost every newspaper thrash out its meaning and even had it hoisted high above Times Square. I've had people call for my resignation, dozens of social media tantrums (both from men and women showing this is not a gendered debate) as well as death threats.

Storr claimed that all this negative attention "did not even touch what Tess has to deal with on a daily basis." Nonetheless, she and Holliday argued that many people have responded positively to the issue and shared their experiences about "what many still clearly feel deeply uncomfortable about: FAT (a word that Tess is thankfully helping to destigmatize)."

Lastly, through the frame of health stereotypes of obesity, Holliday argued that weight-based health norms facilitated health stereotypes of obese people. In a society demonizing obesity, this could lead to eating disorders and harm mental health. She shared audience comments of her health, including that she must be laden with health problems, morbid, a burden to British healthcare (she lives in America), and she would die an early death. She questioned these assumptions in posts like this one, "there are people that are perfectly healthy that are big. There are skinny tiny people they have diabetes and high cholesterol. It's not okay to assume." Furthermore, Holliday shared that she had attempted many times unsuccessfully to lose weight and finally accepted that body weight might not be strictly under personal control – "I've made peace with that. It's your minds that need to change."

Additionally, she endorsed followers' experiences such as this from @littlejournalina:

[...] After having surgery for a condition that had me sick my entire life, I gained weight [...] my grandma [...] was worried about me gaining weight so quickly after being so skinny and she went into overdrive with exercise and diets and things to get me skinny again. Nothing worked. I've been a pudgy girl/woman ever since.

Holliday also presented health/weight as subject to individual understandings and beliefs, emphasizing that health was a personal matter and society should not use health to legitimate body-shaming. This could be seen in this excerpt:

Health is everyone's personal decision. I think that should be respected. There are a lot of reasons people are over or underweight. We're all at different places in our journey. I think it's crap that I can't do something amazing and be celebrated and have people talk about the changes I'm making instead of focusing on my size.

Among these four frames, injustice of fat-shaming and stigmatization largely resonated with the students. The students shared Holliday's criticism of the media perpetuating stereotypes of obese people, which in turn encourages body-shaming and prejudice. In reference to relevant research, the students wrote about the ways often stigmatizing portrayals of fat embodiment circulated in news and popular media including reality, talk shows, and computer games – "where overweight people were described as 'unintelligent and undisciplined architects of their own condition'" (Chou, Prestin, & Kunath, 2014, p. 314). They argue that such content often frames fatness in moralizing terms, contributing to weight stereotypes about personal responsibility and character deficiencies. Furthermore, negative media attention may cause reinforcing effects – victims of shaming are more likely to suffer from physical and mental health comorbidities as highlighted by Holliday.

The students also noted that social media have helped shape attitudes toward body stereotypes both in negative and positive ways. Discussing online content that indicates commonplace attempts to deride fat people and portray slim bodies as desirable and healthy, the students argue that such representations help reproduce body stereotypes. For example, one group of students described a series of popular YouTube videos entitled "Epic laughs – Funny fat people fails." Each video mocked obese people and attracted millions of views. The students then juxtaposed these contents with the most-viewed videos released by the "Top 10 fashion female influencers on Instagram", which featured slim, attractive women giving advice on fashion, diet, fitness,

and self-care. They wrote, "such online presence legitimates prejudice and emphasizes personal choice in the construction of body image."

Conversely, the students stated that the prevalence of social media has granted celebrities/influencers increased ability to impact public opinion. Activists like Holliday with high online presence are now able to challenge negative portrayals of fat bodies and establish communities where people can share weight-related experiences in a supportive context. Below is an excerpt:

Holliday's posts generate on average 100,000 likes from her followers. They praised her cover with comments like "You're a role model," "beautiful," and "inspirational," and posted photographs celebrating their own bodies. Encouraged by her posts describing society's prejudice toward her and her struggle with weight, hundreds of thousands of people liked and shared stories of being body-shamed or having difficulties to lose weight.

However, the students observed that Holliday's arguments also attracted a great deal of negative, even abusive responses. Besides the criticisms mentioned in Holliday's own discussions, conflicting views on body acceptance, medical risks of obesity, personal responsibility for weight control and accompanying moral culpability were largely present in audience commentary. The students stated, "although audiences generally sympathized with fat-shaming, many also expressed the belief of obesity as unhealthy." This raises the challenge of fat activists establishing online communities against body-shaming while facilitating public understanding of obesity, especially in relation to physical and mental health. More discussion of these points is provided at the end of this section.

Regarding the frame of self-validation, the students agreed that the social construction of body image has a (self) evaluating dimension for many (young) women and it is influenced by media, among other social factors. In advocating self-validation, Holliday celebrates body acceptance that is less acknowledged, and challenges accepted norms and moral values about beauty/body and health. On the latter point, the student's opinions conflicted. On the one hand, they acknowledge that there is growing public acceptance of weight-inclusive beauty/body standards although some students admit that they would not consider a size-26 woman beautiful or healthy. They view self-validation a message of activism, drawing attention to body-shaming and alternative opinions of self-presentation of bodies culturally designated as unacceptable. Within this argument, some students referred to the backlash in

social media of a widely circulated body-shaming advertisement from Protein World. The advertisement depicted a slim model in a bikini, asking the public “Are You Beach Body Ready?” They commented:

In contrast, Holliday tries to set an example of fat people making their own choices about the way they portray themselves. Her posts and photos are used for activism against the notion that people should conform to accepted norms of attractiveness.

On the other hand, some students argued that Holliday prioritizes the psychological well-being of obese people within her understanding of idiosyncratic health, conversely suggesting bodies do not need intervention and regardless of external dictates.

Holliday frames self-validation within arguments that weight stigmatization harms physical, mental health whereas body acceptance nurtures mental health. Furthermore, she criticizes society using (physical) health to justify fat-shaming. However, the students argue that despite sharing health stereotypes of her/obese people, in none of her 192 posts does Holliday address the medical risks of obesity.

Referencing medical research, the students presented studies of correlations between high body weight and serious morbidities including diabetes, coronary heart disease, and a range of cancers. However, social environments that permit weight stigma may make weight management more difficult. They suggest that obesity prevention needs to be promoted beyond a focus on personal responsibility, acknowledging personal and social determinants of (long term) health including employment status, food security, and healthcare. One group of students wrote “This (understanding) exposes misinformation which circulates in media and becomes the basis for assumptions and judgments about obesity and health.”

Furthermore, some students suggested that when debating the negative impact of body-shaming, Holliday should discuss non-stigmatizing practices for people to manage their health and weight, a need also expressed in the audience commentary and should be considered as well. These students expressed their view that instead of prioritizing psychological well-being – “let’s love yourself, regardless of how you look in your current body. Because your mental health is far more important” – society should support people to maintain a balance of mental and physical health. In this sense, they interpret the conflicting views of Holliday’s posts as part of a debate in which concerns for the psychological well-being of obese people are positioned against the need to

address the physiological dimension of their health which conflates with weight-related stigma.

### **Creating and (re)sharing media content**

Public concerns with the (alleged) obesity crisis have increased the relevance of health as well as conflicting framings and interpretations. When asked how fat activists or mainstream media can better represent obesity in order to improve public understanding and health, most students adopt the perspective that energy, physical activity, medical, societal, and environmental factors interact with genetic conditions to produce weight gain, presenting unique concerns for each affected individual (Stanford, Tauqeer, & Kyle, 2018). This understanding recognizes obesity as a multifactorial issue and shifts attention to social, environmental influences on obesity, different health approaches, reducing (internalized) stigmatization, and providing better care for those who choose to lose weight. The students agreed that responsible media representations of these issues will foster a more balanced view of attribution, health, and weight management among the audience.

Furthermore, they note that Holliday’s articulations are mostly framed within personal experiences; she does not discuss social factors contributing to fat-shaming other than negative representations in fashion media. Across Holliday’s posts, students detect missing information sources such as relevant research or testimonies of obesity specialists, health and media professionals, policymakers, educators, parents, or fellow activists/influencers. They suggest that incorporating credible evidence from various perspectives will strengthen her arguments against weight bias which circulates across media, family, school life, and other social contexts.

With increased media fragmentation and young people’s preference for social media, strategies to achieve more comprehensive media messaging about bodies also requires raising awareness of the multidimensional basis of obesity and weight stigmatization within their social media networks.

Upon discussion of their analyses, the student produced and (re)shared the following contents (Table 3 and Figure 1).

Table 3. *Contents produced and (re)shared by students*

Media	Content
Student Facebook and Instagram pages	Shared and commented on Holliday’s posts and video clips/photographs/stories of the students producing and presenting their projects. Shared arguments and links to information/perspectives on obesity: effects of body-shaming (e.g., opinion pieces on the website of psychcentral and psychologytoday), social media campaigns against body-shaming (e.g., #EveryBodyisBeachBodyReady in response to the controversial advertisement from Protein World entitled “Are You Beach Body Ready?”), and multifactorial basis of weight and health management (e.g., articles examining socioeconomic influences on food choice and obesity on the blog “Food politics by Marion Nestle”, discussions among eating-disorder experts of weight-inclusive vs. weight-normative approach to health on the blog “Empowered Eating”, and journal articles addressing medical and societal factors in obesity prevention).
Student blogs and project website	Uploaded (abstracts of) student analyses of Holliday’s Instagram posts.
Radio-streaming via a London-based internet radio station in collaboration with the university	Produced and streamed two radio shows: a discussion of body images in video/computer games and body-shaming among students and two psychologists; a discussion of the complexity of weight management among students and three faculty members in the medical school and psychology department of the university.



Figure 1. *E-posters produced by students*

## DISCUSSION

This study explores how a digital-literacy intervention engaged university students in practices of participatory politics. The results indicate that the students researched news, social media framings of obesity, identified frames embedded in Holliday’s Instagram posts, and analyzed conflicting perspectives on fat embodiment. Furthermore, comprehension of activist responses to accepted norms and moral values about weight and health facilitated expression of their perspective. The students shared within their social media networks information links, blogs, and radio-content, prioritizing structural influences over individual behaviors in obesity representation. Hence, students cultivated participatory practices of comprehension of information framing and content creation. These practices enhanced their understanding of media representation of beauty/bodies and health – not guided by deference to mainstream media and accepted social norms – and developed and expressed their opinions in efforts to reframe dominant thinking about weight. The students used social media to investigate weight issues and divergent perspectives, producing and sharing content in order to encourage community deliberation. Such efforts augmented digital literacies for utilizing social media in opinion-formation through which students not only engaged with processes of learning but established a sense of civic agency.

As a case study, this article offers contextualized understanding of how to foster digital engagement, particularly analyzing online information and generating user content for civic purposes. It also demonstrates the

possibility of adapting social media for media/health literacy interventions. Focusing on specific practices renders clarity regarding required competencies and the efficacy of varied approaches. Considering youth often access (health) information online, investigating representations of bodies in social media provided a context in which the students acquired competencies to identify frames and biases embedded in texts, assessing perspectives regarding framing definition, cause and consequence, and moral judgments of obesity. By conducting media analysis, the students explored how media messages “frame” social perceptions of bodies and health, hence, engaging in critical comprehension of media content and civic reasoning.

Furthermore, this intervention drew attention to learning across dominant and alternative media discourses within popular culture and everyday life. Engagement with media involves learning whereby subjects, meaning, and their affects are framed and negotiated within a dynamic “dominance/resistance dyad” (Evans et al., 2011, p. 337). The students examined conflicting frames with awareness that media inform and legitimate weight-centric norms and practices as well as providing spaces for challenging them. By analyzing information framing, students recognized that alarmist and individualizing frames within promotion of health imperatives typically circulated in media while (social) media have also enabled audiences to criticize body/health stereotypes and articulate self-empowerment. Mediated by their engagement with these discourses and in consideration of each frame expressed in Holliday’s posts, the students accepted and rejected aspects of activist responses and negotiated an understanding of weight and health beyond a focus on individual factors.

For example, through researching individual-level framings of weight in media content which facilitate weight bias and stigmatizing practices, most students supported Holliday’s articulation of weight stigma as social injustice and recognized the negative impact of body-shaming on obesity intervention. However, they questioned her arguments of body acceptance without addressing the (assumed) medical risks of obesity and non-stigmatizing approaches to health and weight management. They viewed self-empowerment as encouraging acceptance of different health practices and opportunities for various people. Subsequently, they adopted a perspective supporting a more balanced view of attribution and health. In this process, comprehension of the complexity of media messaging shaping body images and social, health practices was cultivated rather

than linearly transmitting knowledge, reinforcing pre-existing perceptions about bodies and health. This demonstrated the importance of enhancing digital engagement as offering “resources for understanding rather than recruiting students to particular points of view” (Gard, 2016, p. 249).

Moreover, comprehension of body-framing facilitated interest and user participation. The students leveraged their production skills and social media to create, comment on, and distribute information in collaboration with peers and specialists in their local community, participating in the obesity debate. These contents reflected their framings of bodies and health, focusing community attention on the effects of body-shaming and stigmatization, the multifactorial basis of obesity and weight management, the influences of food politics on obesity, and diversity in body image. Through investigating media representation of obesity, students engaged in civic learning related to collaboration, critique, and expression. Hence, by connecting media framing of body weight with participatory practices for opinion-formation, this study illustrates a case-study approach to operationalize participatory politics through social media and engage youth with systems of representation. Future research may include comparative studies of media messaging and intervention target audiences, providing more basis for generalization of results and the scaling up of this practice of media literacy and participatory politics to other contexts or younger students. Moreover, the author’s and students’ subjectivities may have influenced the results and interpretation. In addition to media analysis, discourse analysis of student interview data may reveal some underlying assumptions and contextual factors in their understanding of media representations of obesity.

## CONCLUSION

This paper examines how undergraduate students engaged with obesity discourse through cultivating participatory practices – investigating and sharing (social) media framings of bodies and health. Such practices promote media literacy for understanding media representations of social issues and how they shape perceptions of divergent perspectives as in the case of media framings of obesity. Young people now have opportunities to create and share content via social media concerning social issues they care about. This paper illustrates the potential of classroom-based digital engagement learning opportunities to foster youth

participation in information analysis, content creation, and civic expression, enabling them to develop a sense of agency associated with these activities.

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