“Not quite the struggle of normatives”

Belonging and entitlement in Swedish “body activism”

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Abstract

A “body activism” movement, with roots in fat activism and body positivity, has developed in Sweden during the last decade. As new forms of activism emerge, boundaries and approaches are being negotiated. Who is the movement for? Who can engage in it, and how? Through semi-structured interviews, we seek to understand how young Swedes who follow and engage in “body activism” on social media experience and reflect on the activism, belonging and entitlement, and their own participation. The informants discussed activism in terms of inclusiveness and political potential, where the most accessible activism is also the one ascribed with the least political potential. Entitlement is linked to collective identity, where an active participation requires belonging to the marginalised group. This article highlights the significance of boundary work in movements, where too narrowly drawn boundaries can lead to decreased participation and result in an unexploited potential for social change.

Keywords: online activism, fat activism, body positivity, boundary work, collective identity

Introduction

Body-oriented activism has established itself as a part of feminism in recent decades. Starting with fat rights movement in the US in the late 1960s, its impact increased with the emergence of social media in the early 2000s (Cooper, 2016). From the outset, fat activism has hosted several partly overlapping orientations; however, labels such as fat activism, body positivity, and body acceptance are often equated, despite their differences (Cooper, 2016). In other types of activism (e.g., those based on class), there is often a relatively clear picture of who belongs to the marginalised group, and who can participate. Within body-oriented activism, however, there is an ongoing debate about who is entitled to participate, and how solidarity should be expressed.

These fuzzy boundaries can be found in the Swedish context too. The notion most often used is “body activism” [kroppsaktivism], which can be seen as an overarching

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label encompassing several strands, such as fat activism, body positivity, and body acceptance (Wikström, 2019). The goal of the activism is to make visible and increase the acceptance of body types that deviate from the norm, especially in terms of size. In some cases, the activism embraces other types of “deviant” bodies, such as trans, aging, or disabled bodies. Swedish “body activists” also often engage in an overarching intersectional feminist activism that draws attention to several identity categories. In other words, if the boundaries between the different strands are blurred in the Anglo-American context, they are indeed also in the Swedish context.

Previous research on fat activism has often focused on issues related to health, body image, and stigma, and there is also a body of work on beauty and “fatshion” blogging (see, e.g., Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Hynnä & Kyrölä, 2019). However, as Cooper (2016) notes, less has been said about fat activism as a political movement. Furthermore, studies focusing on the political content of fat activism have often been done in Anglo-American contexts (see, e.g., Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015; Bordo, 1993; Cooper, 2016; Gurrieri, 2013; Lupton, 2017; Pausé, 2015; White, 2014). Cooper (2012) discusses nationality and culture imperialism in relation to research about fat activism and calls for studies that address multiple or expanding experiences that reflect local identities. Here, studying the Swedish context can offer a valuable contribution. Notably, as body activism is a relatively new movement in Sweden, it is still in a dynamic phase, where boundaries, rules, and approaches are being negotiated. As new forms of activism emerge, it is urgent to study the content and function of participation, as well as the conditions under which people can engage.

The aim of this article is to understand how young Swedes who follow body activism on social media experience and reflect on the activism, issues of belonging and entitlement, and their own participation. We thereby seek to contribute to the research field on body-oriented activism as a political movement, and contemporary online activism, where issues of collective identity, belonging, and entitlement are central.

Fat activism

Fat activism arose in the late 1960s in the US. From the outset, different factions emerged from the lack of consensus about the movement’s core. Some fat activists saw fat rights as linked to other forms of oppression (based on, for example, race and sexuality), while others feared that acknowledging several different markers of identity would draw the focus away from the movement’s core issues (Cooper, 2016). Although factions within the movement have differed in their ideas of how inclusive the movement should be in terms of other types of oppression, the main focus, as the name indicates, is on bodies that transgress norms and ideals of body size.

Fat activism can take many different forms. Cooper (2016) identifies five different types of expressions: political process fat activism, activist communities, fat activism as cultural work, micro fat activism, and ambiguous fat activism. The categories are not mutually exclusive, and the boundaries are also fluid and overlapping. Cooper (2016: 44) stresses that there is no cardinal type of fat activism, or a “typical” fat activist, but rather, fat activists are “intersectional beings who exist in multiple contexts”. The common denominator is the feminist foundation and the aim to combat fatphobia and discrimination against people with larger-than-normative bodies. By drawing attention

to the injustices and prejudices that fat people are subject to, the social movement has gone from operating at the grassroots level to being a high-profile movement that has gained public attention.

The emergence of a broader body-oriented activism

With the ability for activists to publish on their own social media channels, the fat activism movement gained more followers and sympathisers in the twenty-first century. In connection to this, the focus shifted to a broader message of “body positivity”, which promotes self-acceptance and loving one’s body as it is, thus counteracting restrictive beauty ideals (Cwynar-Horta, 2016).

While body positivity is sometimes seen as more inclusive than fat activism, as it focuses on acceptance for all bodies (not only fat ones), others see it as weakening the movement (Pausé, 2015). Body positivity has also been criticised for increasingly consisting of normative bodies – that is, slim, white, able-bodied cis-women – who take up space at the expense of others (Pausé, 2015; Shackelford, 2015). Despite working for the disruption of traditional body ideals, some researchers maintain that the body positivity movement may instead contribute to upholding those ideals (see, e.g., Sastre, 2016). As the body positivity movement attracted people whose bodies did not really deviate from the normative, representatives of the fat rights movement argued that the most marginalised bodies were again rendered invisible (Cwynar-Horta, 2016), in a process Cooper (2016) parallels with gentrification.

In addition to the criticisms that body positivity dilutes the fat activism movement and trivialises the marginalisation that fat people are exposed to, body positivity has also been criticised for being politicised and commodified (Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Johansson, 2021; Sastre, 2016). Body positivity is here seen as going hand in hand with postfeminist culture and neoliberalism, connecting empowerment to individualism and choice. The movement’s focus on an individual’s self-expression and self-acceptance makes it less likely to acknowledge power structures, and it is therefore considered as hampering the movement’s main objectives.

Online activism

During the last decades, the content and form of political participation has changed. While participation in traditional politics has declined, there has instead been an increase in participation in issues such as the environment, human rights, and equality (Zukin et al., 2006). As for form, political engagement is often described as individualised, based on personal interests, and being performed through digital media (Bennett, 2012).

Research on online activism has often focused on the opportunities that digital media provide, such as making activism more accessible. George and Leidner (2019), for example, state that when activism was confined to real-life environments, the threshold to participate was high enough to make recruiting, organising, and retaining participants difficult, meaning that only the largest and best-supported movements would succeed. In contrast, online activism enables participation regardless of geographical, social, or cultural position. The lowered threshold for activists to promote, hinder, or influence

political or social change outside of organisational frameworks is here being offered as a partial explanation to the increased participation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Leong et al., 2019).

With their unregulated nature, digital platforms have been praised for bringing more visibility and potential for influence to people from marginalised groups and allowing them to make their voices heard beyond the channels of traditional mass media. In addition to serving as a non-institutional channel that gives those without power opportunities to make their voices heard, social media is also unique in that it places individuals at the centre of networks, thus promoting the self-organising of grassroots (Leong et al., 2019).

Digital platforms such as blogs and social media have been especially important for young feminists and fat activists (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015; Harris, 2008; Keller, 2012; Lupton, 2017; Pausé, 2015). Fat activism and body positivity largely take place online in the so called “fatosphere” – a loosely interconnected network of online resources that offers tools to engage in and disseminate activism and to find kindred spirits to form communities with (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Johansson, 2021).

While public space has historically granted visibility to slim, white, able-bodied individuals, one of the goals of fat activism is to challenge this privilege. One central strategy has therefore been tied to visibility and recognition; hence, a large part of the activism consists of narratives and photos shared on blogs and social media, especially Instagram and Twitter. In their analysis of “fatshion” blogs, Guerreri and Cherrier (2013) found that the studied “fatshionistas” renegotiated notions of beauty through three performative acts: coming out as fat, mobilising fat citizenship, and flaunting fat. These acts in turn consist of experiencing and describing an awakening and questioning of common beauty norms; joining forces with others in the same situation; and challenging beauty myths by transgressing the norm that fat people should not draw attention to themselves by showing skin or dressing in eye-catching, tight, or colourful clothing. In their analysis of body positive blogs and their comments, Hynnä and Kyrölä (2019) identified three areas that were especially sensitive for fat people, and therefore empowering to address: exercise, fashion, and sex. By increasing visibility and recognition of these and other aspects of fat people’s lives, blogs, Facebook groups, and hashtags allow otherwise dispersed individuals’ accounts and postings to be perceived as parts of a larger whole (Stewart & Schultze, 2019). The “fatosphere” thereby serves an important function in relation to community and identification, as it provides safe spaces where fat individuals can “counter fat prejudice, resist misconceptions of fat, engage in communal experiences and promote positive understandings of fat” (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013: 279). It should, however, be noted that there are also critics of these “flaunting” practices, especially of their heteronormative bias. For example, Murray (2005) opposes the way the mere existence of fat bodies in public seems to be seen as subversive. In fact, she says, events such as fat pool parties and fat lingerie parties can even serve to reproduce the power of aesthetic ideals.

In addition to offering tools for organisation and community, online activism can lead to further political engagement. Previous research has shown how those who participate in discussions about public affairs are more likely to participate in political activities, as the discussions not only promote the exchange of information, but also provide interpretative frameworks to process the information. By dealing with different

ideas and reflecting on and shaping arguments around them, individuals may become motivated to participate in social and political contexts (Valenzuela, 2013).

Digitalisation has brought opportunities for digital engagement and activism, but there are also drawbacks. For example, compared with traditional political participation, online participation is claimed to tie identities and opinions closer together (Ekström & Sveningsson, 2019), so that online, “you are what you say”. This has consequences for participation; for example, Ekström and Sveningsson found one of the most important reasons why young people refrain from participating in political discussions online to be their concerns about getting into conflict or being held accountable for their utterances. Thus, the lowered threshold does not necessarily lead to increased participation. Some researchers believe that it has even contributed to increased gaps (see, e.g., Schradie, 2018).

Connective action and collective identity

To describe participation in online activism, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) use the concept of connective action. Unlike traditional collective action, which involves participation within established organisations, connective action is based on personal action frames and self-motivated participation. While participation may focus on the same issues (social rights, environment, equality, etc.), connective action’s mechanisms for organising participation are more personalised. Connective action relies on networks, which may vary in terms of stability, scale, and coherence, the common denominator being that they are individualised and organised through digital media, where ideas are spread through individuals’ sharing (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

In connective action, shared objectives may exist; however, actions are not organised on the basis of social-group identity, membership, or ideology, and individuals are not required to adapt to such common collective identities. This is a stark contrast to previous research on social movements and activism, where collective identity has been an important concept. The term “collective identity” points to the idea of an “us” who belong to a collective and a “them” who do not. The shared sense of “we-ness” has been regarded as a distinguishing feature of social movements, but also as a condition for collective action to take place, as individuals’ sense of belonging in movements largely decides whether or not they participate (Flesher Fominaya, 2010). The experience of collective identity from individuals who work towards a shared goal has therefore come to be seen as decisive for a successful social movement (Soon & Kluver, 2014). While fat activism is better described as connective action rather than a unified collective, and while participation is not tied to formal membership, the movement’s focus on community-building points to the existence of, or a need for, at least some degree of collective identity. In fact, Stewart and Schultze (2019: 1) argue that members’ perceived sameness is particularly important for “new social movements” or “identity movements”, in order to bring coherence to otherwise fragmented aggregations of activists. According to Stewart and Schultze, the concepts of solidarity, collective identity, and collective action should therefore not be abandoned – they are still important, but may take new forms.

Melucci (1995) describes the creation of collective identity as a process consisting of three parts: cognitive definition (the ends, means, and fields of action, as defined

and embraced by the group); active relations (how the group members communicate, influence, and interact with each other); and emotional investments (how individuals connect to the group and feel like part of a community). The latter is emphasised by Polletta and Jasper (2001), who state that merely sharing interests and experiences is not a sufficient cause of individual motivation: For solidarity and commitment to evolve, there needs to be emotional ties to the group or movement, and a perception of a shared status or relation. Therefore, even when participation is individualised, the activists are not isolated; they should be seen in relation to the networks to which they are connected and the emotional ties they have to them.

Method

We performed semi-structured interviews with eight persons (women and non-binaries) who follow and engage in body activism on social media. The informants were selected based on two criteria: first, they needed to have an interest in, and a positive attitude towards, feminism and social movements in general and body activism in particular; second, they needed to be reasonably well-acquainted with body activism and follow at least some accounts within body activism, fat activism, or body positivity. Our goal with these criteria was to find individuals who were within the intended audience for – and potential participants of – the body activist movement. We did not make any delimitations based on the extent to which the informants actually participated or identified with the movement and its different strands, since such questions were rather asked during the interviews. Neither did we make any delimitations based on body size – some of the informants had norm-sized bodies, while others were or had been larger than normative.

The informants were identified through snowball sampling, based on the criteria above, and were recruited from our own social circles, where acquaintances directed us to their acquaintances. We followed several such “snowballs”, meaning that no informant knew more than one or two other informants; thus, they did not constitute a circle of friends.

All informants lived in or near one of Sweden’s largest cities, and their ages ranged from 18 to 25. All of them followed various types of socially engaged content and activism on social media: body activism, anti-racism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ in general, as well as accounts discussing mental health. Although the informants did create and post content on their own social media accounts, they cannot be described as influencers or opinion leaders, but rather regular social media users with an interest in social justice. The informants consumed content related to body-oriented activism on one or several platforms, mostly Instagram and Twitter.

The informants are not representative for young Swedes in general, neither are they for Swedish body activists. However, we believe that the type of experiences described by the informants are quite common among young Swedes with an interest in body activism, as there are quite often discussions on social media about such activism’s purpose, expressions, and boundaries.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 60 minutes each. The interview guide was organised in three parts that corresponded to the research questions. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008).

The purpose of a thematic analysis is to identify recurrent patterns in the material; it can be inductive, creating themes from the bottom up, or it can depart from preexisting themes inspired by theory and previous research. We utilised a combination. Our three research questions framed and delimited the analysis to certain subject areas. Within these preexisting frames, an open coding of the interview transcripts was done, where codes were attached to the informants' utterances. In the next step, the codes were revised and reorganised: Some were found to have enough in common to be merged, whereas others were broken down into separate themes.

One advantage with thematic analysis is its ability to grasp key features of a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2008). By capturing and describing aspects of data in codes, from which patterns are created, we can get an idea of the bigger picture and see "what it is all about". Another advantage lies in the method's flexibility, where the level of detail can vary depending on the need. Finally, thematic analysis allows data to speak for itself. Even if researchers are active in identifying themes and patterns in the material, and connecting them in certain ways, the method encourages them to stay open to insights along the way.

All interviews were held in Swedish, and the quotes have been translated. All names of informants have been changed to maintain their privacy.

Results

We present the results in three sections that correspond to the research questions: how the informants perceive body-oriented activism; how they reflect on issues of belonging and entitlement; and how they feel about their own participation.

Perceptions

As pointed out by Cooper (2016), fat activism and body positivity are often conflated. This blurring of boundaries between forms of body-oriented activism was also brought up by our informants. When asked how they perceived body-oriented activism and its strands – body activism, fat activism, and body positivism – one overarching theme was uncertainty. This was expressed in several ways: uncertainty of the strands' relation to each other, their content, and their target group.

When the informants tried to distinguish between the strands, they recurrently referred to which bodies are included:

Anne: I'd say body activism is not quite the struggle of normatives, you know. While body positivity, on the other hand, is rather that all bodies should be celebrated and that everyone should be acknowledged, I think.

Cecilia: The other activations are probably more for the non-ideal body, while positivity is more "I look like this and it's okay".

Hannah: Body positivity doesn't require so much from yourself. It's more like: "I am. I'm allowed to be."

The informants specifically discussed the strands' relation to norms of size, where they perceived fat activism and body activism as more exclusionary and body positivity as

more inclusive. They also discussed the degree of inclusion of additional “others”, where they felt that body positivity and body activism include non-binary, trans, and gender-queer people to a greater extent than fat activism, which targets a more specific group.

Georgie: Fat activism is very centred around, you know, fat people. Which is reasonable because it’s been necessary, and it still is. But it’s also very much just fat white middle-class women, who, in my experience, don’t do so much to make room for people who are not as privileged as they are.

Separatism is a strategy that occurs relatively frequently within various activist groups, and it has been singled out as crucial to the emergence of the feminist movement (see, e.g., Freedman, 1979). Separatism means that individuals from a marginalised group join forces and share experiences to empower the members within the group, rather than trying to blend in with and achieve the status of equal members in the surrounding society. While such separatist communities may not solve the problem of harassment and inequality, they provide marginalised individuals with safe spaces where they can speak freely, seek support, and organise action against injustices (Clark-Parsons, 2018). Separatism may not be an entirely consistent description of fat activism, as many fat activists work to influence public opinion and legislation in the category that Cooper calls “political process activism”. However, it fits all the better with the category “activist communities”, where a central purpose is for fat people to recognise themselves as part of a community and to “convert abjection into an asset” (Cooper, 2016: 61–62).

Related to separatism is Spivak’s (1988) concept of strategic essentialism. The term refers to a political tactic in which different marginalised groups mobilise based on a common identity: gendered, cultural, or political. Although there may be major differences between the members of the group – different viewpoints or even conflicts – it is sometimes beneficial for the group to temporarily “essentialise” itself, that is, to present its group identity in a simplified way in order to achieve its goals. One recent example of an essentialising label being utilised is the #metoo movement’s mobilisation of “women” who united in their fight against sexual harassment. In a similar way, essentialism can be beneficial for fat activism. As it downplays other grounds of discrimination, it highlights the discrimination that comes specifically from being fat, thereby demonstrating the spread and impact of the movement (see also Cooper, 2016). However, as Maor (2013) points out, there lies a danger in reducing people to just being “fat”. As the quote above suggests, too narrow of a focus risks excluding allies, as well as fat people who are not white or middle class, thus affecting the movement’s ability to attract people who engage in the struggle.

Another perceived difference between the strands concerned political power: Body positivity was understood as “softer” both in relation to who can participate and in terms of demands made on society. This, said one informant, is visible already in the movements’ names, as the word “positivity” is less charged than “activism”:

Georgie: In body activism, the goal is to make a bigger difference. Because it’s activism, it’s people who make a real difference in a way that people in body positivity don’t do. Because there, it’s more like “we need to accept ourselves,” while body activism is like “we need to do this”, it’s more practical.

Body positivity is here seen as an example of individualisation (Bauman, 2001), where the responsibility for achieving social change is placed on individuals rather than on society. This, says Johansson (2021: 129), carries the risk of reproducing neoliberal stories of success, where “the stigmatised person is assumed to struggle to overcome the inner obstacles of shame and self-hatred to become a ‘positive’ person who loves one’s body and accepts oneself”.

According to Georgie’s understanding, body positivity frames the problem as individuals not liking themselves enough, while body and fat activism rather see it as a question of systematic discrimination that needs to be solved on a structural, societal level. Thus, of the three strands, fat activism is perceived as the most exclusionary, and also as demanding more from society to end discrimination. Body positivity, on the other hand, is perceived as more open and inclusive, and with lesser demands on participants; however, it also demands less from society, and thus carries the least potential for political change. The Swedish body activism movement is placed somewhere in between, sharing characteristics with both other strands.

Belonging and entitlement

The previous section discussed how the informants perceived the different strands of body-oriented activism, including the question of aim and target group. In this section, we take a closer look at how the informants reasoned about belonging and entitlement: Who can participate and speak in the movement? The first answer to that question, which all informants agreed on, was that the interpretative prerogative belongs to those who are marginalised:

Fiona: I mean, it’s those who are exposed in the first place. Those who are exposed to the norms and ideals of society, those who don’t fit into the box.

In Maor’s (2013) discussions on the boundary work of fat activism, she argues that boundaries are most often drawn based on either the members’ stable identities as resisting subjects, or on body size. For our informants, the factor that determined belonging seemed to be body size. A focus on bodies that are larger than “the ideal” may seem simple, yet, as Maor (2013) acknowledges, such boundaries may be difficult to draw, as body ideals vary: culturally, socially, and temporally. Diana reflects on this, drawing attention to the problem that anyone who is “worse” than others “wins” the interpretative prerogative, and this can exclude or inhibit less marginalised people from engaging. The process can be described as a spiral, in which the boundaries of who belongs to the group, and thus is entitled to speak, becomes narrower and narrower. It also, argue the informants, leads to uncertainty about who is “sufficiently” marginalised – because even if you deviate from the norm, there is always someone who deviates more.

Anne: It’s a question of judgment, after all. I’ve seen that people who post photos, even though they are uncensored and imperfect, sometimes get reactions where people argue it’s a mockery of those who have even more non-normative bodies.

The movement’s perceived degree of inclusiveness played a major role in the informants’ experiences of interpretative prerogative, as the strand with a more narrowly defined target group (i.e., fat activism) was also perceived to have narrower limits for who was

permitted to participate and speak within the movement. Body positivity, on the other hand, was experienced as being more open to participation; however, the ostensible inclusiveness can also lead to uncertainty as to who should participate and take up space.

Some argue that the inclusiveness of body positivity has led to a dilution of the movement, where people who are not marginalised take up space and push out those who are more marginalised (see, e.g., Cooper, 2016; Pausé, 2015). The informants were well aware of this discussion:

Georgie: Well, it's become quite watered down, because body positivity doesn't adhere to a specific group, and that's also the point of it. But there's a lot of skinny white women coming in and “Well, but we don't like our bodies either”. When that's not really the point. And they're taking over that space.

Several of the informants talked about non-marginalised persons “taking over” the space, where especially influencers were pointed out as not really belonging in the activism:

Bodil: For example, influencers, just because they have so many followers. They might use the platform to actually reach out with something good about loving your body. But then there's a photo of a tanned body on a sandy beach in Bali, taken at the perfect angle and perhaps even edited. It just doesn't feel right to me.

In today's society, many women engage in the search for the perfect body. However, part of the nature of beauty ideals is that they are extremely difficult to achieve, and few women describe themselves as beautiful or physically attractive (Etcoff et al., 2004). Therefore, it is no wonder that women with normative bodies also feel the need for support in withstanding the pressure to constantly improve their appearance. The informants acknowledge that beauty ideals concern everyone; they believe that all people are, more or less, affected by injustices and inequalities based on body norms, and should therefore be allowed to participate in body activism. However, they are also well aware that some people suffer more than others, and that people who are not marginalised should not act as if they were.

Bodil: There's too many who don't know enough about this who speak and express themselves. It gets like a reverse effect and I hate it. If an influencer with 300,000 followers, with a thin tanned body, publishes a photo of herself, saying that you should love your body. When people see that, they might think “well, maybe I can love myself too, but not until I look like that”. That's where things go wrong.

Emily: I feel sorry for people who post ideal photos and insist that it's body activism, because I think that those persons don't have a clue about what other people are going through and have to endure.

The informants talked much about the question of interpretative prerogative – who is allowed to participate and express themselves, and in what way. They expressed an underlying moral that privileged people, such as influencers, should be good role models: They should not contribute to increased body dissatisfaction in their followers, and they should show solidarity with those who are marginalised “for real”. The question is, however, complex. The informants talked about the ignorance and naïveté of some

of the people participating, expressing that an “improper” approach can do more harm than good. But, they also felt the importance of allowing people to participate in order to demonstrate the movement’s broad support. In the next section, we look at how this ambivalence manifests itself in the informants’ reflections on their own participation.

Participation

When we asked the informants about their participation in body activism, their first response was to reflect on their identification with the activism. In line with their previous reasoning about body size as the determining factor for belonging, discussions on identification dealt mainly with the extent to which their own bodies deviated from norms and ideals:

Interviewer: Do you see yourself as entitled to participate in these movements?

Georgie: Yeah, I guess I do. But I think it’s mainly because I’m queer. Because I feel like if I’d been a cis woman, I wouldn’t have taken that space, given that I have a norm body. Regardless of my history of eating disorders and stuff. I’m slim, I’m white, I’m middle class.

Cecilia: I wouldn’t say that I use my accounts to share so much, and it’s mainly because I feel that as a white, young woman with a normative body, in many ways I’m one of the privileged. It has mostly turned out that way, even though I really support the issues that the movement works for.

A recurring reasoning in the interviews is that an active role in body-oriented activism is only for those who, physically, belong to the marginalised group. In contrast to an active role, people who do not see themselves as part of the marginalised group, yet support the activism and want to contribute, can do so in a passive role. Most of the informants felt that they did not have sufficient authority to post their own content or talk about themselves, and instead participated with more indirect actions such as sharing content from more marginalised people “who know what they are talking about”.

Georgie: I feel that if there are people who are actually marginalised and have better things to say about this than I have, they should be allowed to take up that space. And I can help them to be heard by more people.

In Stewart and Schultze’s (2019) classification of online activism, the first level, “ceremonial behavior”, refers to the visible actions of a social movement’s members, and consists of three types: practices of protest, sharing, and amplification. As our informants do not post their own content, they do not participate in practices of protest or sharing; however, the retweeting and sharing of content from others fits with the description of amplification. It should here be noted that even if amplification may seem like a minor form of participation, one should not underestimate its importance. Practices of amplification in social media, say George and Leidner (2019), extend the reach of the content, bringing awareness of the group’s actions to those outside the boundaries of the in-group. By rendering public others’ acts of protest by liking, commenting, or sharing social media content, algorithms calculate a page rank, which increases the post’s

visibility. Thus, even if engaging in practices of protest and sharing content that displays one’s own protest are seen as braver forms of participation, the practice of amplification is also important, especially for a movement that mainly takes place in online spaces.

The degree to which informants considered themselves to be of a normative size largely determined their degree of identification with the group, and thus their perceived entitlement to speak. This, in turn, determined their mode of participation: active or passive. However, as one of the informants previously pointed out, an underprivileged position in other areas – such as sexuality, gender expression, race, or class – could to some extent compensate for having a normative body, and thus justify a somewhat more active participation. The more privileged groups the informants belonged to, the more they seemed to feel required to keep a low profile.

Several authors have noted how the fat activist movement is largely white (see, e.g., Pausé, 2015; Shackelford, 2015). Johansson (2021) discusses how many Swedish body positivity advocates call for diversity but seldom acknowledge that by being white, they actually contribute to maintaining the dominant gendered body and beauty ideal. In contrast, our informants seemed very aware of this fact, and several of them expressed that as white women, they should stand back and not take up space. However, even if this is an act of solidarity, it is also problematic, as the silence of allies and potential participants can make the movement seem weaker than it is. This should be seen in light of the media’s framing of women’s movements, which have often been portrayed as conflict-ridden and weak, delegitimising them in the eyes of the public (Mendes, 2011).

One issue that complicates the question of belonging and entitlement as dependent on body size is the fact that marginalisation is not always visible, for example, for people who were previously fat but no longer are. One of the informants reflected on this:

Bodil: I feel that I really know what I am talking about from my own experience, but since people don’t know that I have those experiences, I too would probably be misunderstood and judged by a lot of people.

Although boundary-drawing can be complex in all activism based on body attributes – such as skin colour, disability, or size – it is especially problematic for the bodies of fat activism, as the attribute of being fat can change (Maor, 2013). We see an example of this in the quote above, where Bodil reflects that although she does have experiences that should justify her participation, and despite identifying with the purpose and struggle of the movement, she is afraid that she will be perceived as a privileged, normative person trying to take over space from those who are more entitled to it. This concern is reflected in several other interviews:

Fiona: I think I’d be afraid to get comments that I have no right to express myself because I look the way I do. I used to retweet things, but it’s been a while now.

Emily: The reason why I don’t participate more... I don’t really know. I think you can be judged, the “why should a white woman express herself”-thing. It feels like people would overanalyse my actions, and that makes me insecure.

The informants talked about experiencing a harsh and judgmental climate in body activism, and they felt that the focus has shifted from the issue at hand to questions about who should participate, where accusations and criticism dominate the debate. In connection

to this, they discussed the specific conditions for communication on social media, which they felt implied a particularly high risk of misunderstandings, attacks, and criticism.

Diana: You can't read either tone or body language, and it feels like you can get so much hate on social media compared to in reality. You're very exposed when you share something on social media.

Here, different platforms seem to have different affordances. As Hynnä and Kyrölä (2019) note, much body positivity and fat activism used to be found on blogs, however, the activism today mainly takes place on Instagram and Twitter. One of our informants explained that many profiles in body positivity and fat activism have a presence on several platforms, which are used in different ways and for different purposes. Because of its stricter word limit, Twitter is predominantly used to draw attention to content on other platforms. Being mainly a visual medium, Instagram is mostly used to post images, and the focus consequently becomes on what Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013) call "flaunting fat", that is, normalising the fat body by increasing its visibility. This, along with the public availability, said the informant, makes activists more vulnerable to hateful comments. This informant also provided a contrasting example of an influential person within the body positivity movement who, in addition to having other platforms, also managed a mailing list for subscribed members where she could develop thoughts and arguments more extensively. This also allowed her to have more control over the comments. Here, however, visibility is largely restricted to those who are already part of the movement – a common dilemma for separatist communities and safe spaces.

The informants' concerns about making mistakes and enduring criticism online are reflected in previous research. As Ekström and Sveningsson (2019) show, one factor that influences young people's participation in online political discussions is their unwillingness to be held accountable for their opinions, where the perceived risk of getting into conflict with others often makes them disinclined to participate in political discussions online at all.

On the whole, our interviews were imbued with a view of body-oriented activism as complex and contradictory. Informants felt that the difficulty in determining who belongs and is entitled to speak, together with the fuzzy boundaries between the strands of activism, often result in admonitions, criticism, and conflicts. This was believed to result in exclusion as well as self-censorship, where people want to contribute to the struggle but do not dare to.

Conclusions

With this study, we aimed to understand how young Swedes who follow body activism on social media understand and reflect on the activism, belonging and entitlement, and their own participation.

Although the informants expressed uncertainty about how the different strands – body activism, fat activism, and body positivity – relate to each other, they did experience the strands as different. We identified two dividing lines between, on the one hand, the perceived target group and degree of inclusion, and on the other hand, the attribution of responsibility. Fat activism was placed at one end of the spectrum, being perceived as narrow and exclusionary in terms of target group, but also as more action-oriented, making demands on society to counteract discrimination. At the other end of the spectrum,

body positivity was perceived as demanding the least from participants, but also from society, thus carrying less potential for political change. In other words, the activism considered by the informants as most accessible for participation is also the one with the least perceived potential to make a difference.

The question of belonging and entitlement (i.e., who the movement is for and who can speak within it), was closely linked to collective identity. The informants made a distinction between active and passive participation, where active participation required belonging to the marginalised group. Despite the broad focus of Swedish body activism and the inclusion of several types of non-normative bodies (aging, trans, disabled, etc.), body size was perceived as the primary measurement for interpretative prerogative, although belonging to other marginalised groups could sometimes compensate and justify taking up a certain space. Throughout, the informants stressed the importance of showing solidarity and allowing room for marginalised people. There was, however, a certain ambivalence, as they also stressed the importance of making it possible for more people to participate in order to show that the movement has broad support, and thus increasing the chance of influencing public opinion.

Our third and final question concerned how informants felt about their own participation. The informants perceived body activism as complex and contradictory, and felt that it was not evident who belonged to the marginalised group. Most of our informants considered themselves “not marginalised enough” to participate. Although other categories such as gender, sexuality, and colour may also have unclear boundaries, body size norms are even more fluid, as they vary culturally, socially, and temporally (Maor, 2013). This results in uncertainty about how fat you need to be to call yourself a “body activist” and to participate actively in the movement. Furthermore, even if you are non-normative, there are always others who are more so, who are “more entitled” to the space. The informants felt that the uncertainty tied to belonging and entitlement, along with the strands’ unclear boundaries, largely resulted in criticism and conflicts. They especially addressed the harsh climate in social media as a contributing factor to their own reluctance to participate, and they felt that the focus of body-oriented activism had been replaced – from the issue at hand to questions about participants’ right to participate and speak.

Several authors (see, e.g., LeBesco, 2016; Murray, 2005) have criticised fat activism for its lack of inclusion, and for not leaving room for doubt or ambivalence. In her discussion on boundary work within fat activism, Maor (2013) argues that boundaries have most often been drawn based on participants’ stable resisting consciousness, or on body size. This, she claims, excludes those who are ambivalent regarding their status as activists on the one hand, and those who, at the moment, are not fat enough on the other. Cooper (2016) acknowledges that while separatism has been necessary in fat activism to create safe spaces and protect against hatred and fat phobia in the surrounding society, the boundary-keeping has sometimes had negative consequences. For example, an overly limited view of what fat activism is, and how it should be manifested, affects individuals and contributes to the mood of the movement. This type of conflict, says Maor (2013), risks creating internal hierarchies within the movement and distancing potential allies. This was something that we could see in our results: Several informants talked about the current climate in body activism leading to the exclusion of allies, as well as self-censorship, where people who are passionate about the issue and want to contribute more actively do not dare to do so.

The abstention from active participation is likely to have consequences for people's ability to identify with and see themselves as part of the movement. Melucci (1995) describes collective identity as consisting of three parts: cognitive definition, active relations, and emotional investment. Applied to our informants, we could see that they shared the interests, frames of reference, and problem descriptions of the movement, and they had a strong sense of the cause's morality as well as a strong emotional commitment; however, what they lacked was active relations. Melucci (1995) points out how theories on identity work stress the importance of human interaction and argues that collective identities work in a similar way. For a collective identity to emerge, individuals must be able to be seen and confirmed within the framework of the movement, where the upholding of participants' commitment requires ritualised reassertions of collective identity, without suppressing difference (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Bennett and Segerberg (2012) talk about the underlying economic logic of digitally mediated social networks. Compared with participation in traditional collective action, the cost of participation in connective action is lower – in fact, they say, participation becomes self-motivating, as personal content is shared with, and recognised by, others in one's social network, who then repeat the activities. When our informants refrain from posting their own content, they miss out on recognition as well as the self-motivation that comes from sharing content in one's personal network. Consequently, they also miss out on the experience of collective identity and community that could lead to a continued and strengthened commitment.

Activists and researchers have acknowledged how certain types of fat activism and activists get much attention, while others – typically those who are already socially marginalised, based on gender, race, and class – are marginalised even further (Cooper, 2016; Pausé, 2015). It is certainly unfortunate if those who are already marginalised are being pushed out; however, alienating people with a more ambiguous affiliation with the group also involve risks – for the individuals, the movement, but also society at large. The question of who is entitled to speak is – like the issue of a harsh climate of debate – ultimately a democratic issue. If boundaries are drawn too narrowly, it can lead to decreased participation, resulting in an unexploited potential for social change. We can here draw parallels to the conditions of online activism in countries with authoritarian rulers, where citizens' use of social media is monitored. Unlike such contexts, participation in contemporary social movements in the West is generally practiced by people who already have these fundamental rights to mobilise and make their voices heard. As our analysis shows, however, censorship or pressure does not have to come from external actors; voices can also be silenced by the movements or the potential participants themselves.

Some researchers have questioned the optimistic view of online activism, stating that for activism to lead to change, it must be accessible and involve a larger scale of society (see, e.g., Ghobadi & Clegg, 2015). The question is whether it is really the online setting that is the problem here – or if it is a question of the dynamics of social movements in different phases. Similar patterns to what we have seen in this study have been observed in other contemporary movements, such as LGBTQ+ activism, where there has also been debates about who should participate, and in what way. For example, in their study on the Pride movement, Peterson, Wahlström, and Wennerhag (2018) show how the relationship to participants from outside the marginalised group

is a complex one. On the one hand, the movement wanted allies, but on the other, they also feared that having too many of them would “de-gay” the movement. One possible explanation for these patterns is – compared with, for example, movements based on class – that these are relatively new movements, actively working to chisel out their core and identity by drawing boundaries. Such boundary work creates a sense of “we” that is separate from “the others”. Though this may be necessary in the early stages of a movement, once the movement is established, it will likely gain from a broader participation base, where access is no longer restricted to the “idea of sameness, shared interests and safety” (Cooper, 2016: 162). As LeBesco (2016) suggests, a large part of the problem may be that we’re not quite “there” yet.

On the whole, our study points to the importance of collective identity for social movements and shows how movements’ boundary work can be crucial for individuals’ participation. It also shows how the idea of online media’s lowered participation barriers is a simplified image. Even when there are no formal obstacles, it is far from certain that people will choose to participate. Our results should, however, be interpreted with caution, as our informants were few, as well as forming a relatively homogenous group in terms of age and ethnicity. Although we did have some variety in terms of gender identity and sexuality, further research would need to include people from a more diverse group, such as aged, trans, or disabled people, to investigate how these people experience body activism and how they feel about their participation. Something that our study points to is how belonging to other marginalised groups alongside body size can affect the perceived entitlement to speak. Here, it could be interesting to investigate how the intersection of various other identities matters.

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