JOURNAL OF GENDER STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2025.2580396

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fat bodies and self-representation in the fatosphere: approaches from the Spanish-speaking context

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ABSTRACT

In response to fatphobia, supportive communities have emerged on social media platforms like Instagram, comprised primarily fat activists. This article aims to explore how these activists use self-representations on Instagram, specifically within the Spanish-speaking context. The study employs an arts-based research methodology, incorporating findings from a 'fat workbook' and interviews. The conclusions underscore the significance of visibility for fat bodies on social media and the journey of radical tenderness that these activists experience.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 19 September 2024
Accepted 20 October 2025

KEYWORDS
Gender; fatosphere; fat studies; digital body; fat body; fat body; fatphobia

Introduction

Fatphobia is a system of oppression and violence that affects all individuals, although it manifests in a more aggressive, violent manner and with severe consequences for those socially perceived as fat. This form of oppression has been challenged since the late 1960s in the United States through activist movements such as the founding of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) in 1969 and the symbolic protest in Central Park, where fat individuals ate ice cream while burning photographs of the model Twiggy (Álvarez, 2014). Emerging within this context was The Fat Underground, a collective primarily composed of feminist and lesbian women who denounced the pathologization of fatness and the medical violence inflicted upon fat bodies. One of their most notable works is the Fat Liberation Manifesto (Freespirit and Fishman, 1973), documented in the eponymous film (Dean & Buss, 1979).

In contrast, fat activism in Spanish-speaking contexts is relatively recent. Since the 2010s, movements have emerged in countries such as Argentina, Chile, Mexico and Spain. Philosopher Laura Contrera has played a prominent role through her translation and dissemination work via the blog Gorda!Zine. In Spain, the 2015 creation of the Facebook group Stop Gordofobia, led by Magdalena Piñeyro, became a fundamental space for digital activism (Castro Roldán, 2024; Castro Roldán et al., 2024). Piñeyro defines fatphobia as 'humiliation, invisibility, mistreatment, inferiority, ridicule, pathologization, marginalization, exclusion and even physical violence exercised against a group of people due to

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a physical characteristic: fatness' (Piñeyro, 2016, p. 48). Likewise, Contrera and Cuello conceptualize it as:

> A complex matrix of oppression that involves a multiplicity of biopolitical control mechanisms directed at the material elimination of fat bodies, understood as a disease (. . .) These mechanisms of control and normative production of bodies become effective. (. . .) Fatphobia acts materially in the ordering of sociocultural systems. (Contrera & Cuello, 2016, p. 38)

This conceptual framework situates us within the field of fat studies, an interdisciplinary discipline that emerged from activism and opposes the use of the term 'obesity' due to its pathologizing connotations, while also questioning indicators such as BMI and epidemiological data that link fatness exclusively with disease (Cooper, 2010). Fat studies critically analyse the representation of fat individuals across various contexts, where they are frequently dehumanized, ridiculed, or portrayed as monsters. This stigmatization is connected to Goffman's (1970/2006) theory of stigma and to experiences narrated by authors such as Roxane Gay (2017), who identify multiple forms of violence against fat bodies. Furthermore, Ahmed's (2015) work provides key insights into the hatred directed towards fat bodies as a result of their recognition as equals to normative bodies, which translates into bullying, rejection and fear of becoming 'the other'.

Within this context, the present study explores how self-representations are generated within digital fat activism. To this end, it employs an embodied methodology (Esteban, 2004) and arts-based research grounded in transfeminist perspectives (Meloni González, 2025) and fat studies (Wann, 2009). Through interviews and the analysis of 'fat workbooks', the experiences of activists from Chile, Mexico, Spain, Uruguay and Panama are examined. The theoretical analysis begins with the social construction of the body and how this contributes to the stigmatization of fatness.

Construction of the body

The fat body has long been represented as grotesque (Bajtin, 1994), a figure marked by excess, grease and a sense of the uncivilized or monstrous. From the fifteenth century onward, fatness was cast as a moral failure – 'fatness is both a sin and a danger' (Vigarello, 2011, p. 54) – even when bodies were not yet shaped by aesthetic imperatives. As cultural ideals shifted during the Renaissance, fatness came to signify clumsiness and ignorance, setting the stage for early forms of diet culture. Terms like 'heavy' began to embody more than physical weight – they indexed intellectual dullness and social inadequacy (Vigarello, 2011, p. 63).

These historical shifts in perception laid the foundation for fatphobia, emerging through a pseudoscientific framework that sought to rank bodies according to white European standards. Fat white women, once distanced from racialized others, began to be cast as lazy and unintelligent, while Black and Indigenous bodies were dehumanized and put on display. The exploitation of Sarah Baartman exemplifies this violence – enslaved, exhibited and anatomized, her body became a site of racist and fatphobic projection (Strings, 2019).

Today, scholars and activists like Sonya Renee Taylor (2019, 2021) trace these legacies by situating the body as a deeply political terrain. Taylor's work on radical self-love insists that such love is not solitary, but grounded in collective care. Similarly, Gay's (2017)

captures the convergence of fatness, racialization, gender and sexuality, emphasizing that vulnerability is not weakness but a form of resistance. Tovar (2018) echoes this in You Have the Right to Remain Fat, where fatphobia is framed as a contemporary language of racism and classism. Through such narratives, fatness is reclaimed, and once-pathologized bodies begin to speak back.

Bakhtin's grotesque, once wielded as a tool of degradation, is refigured in fat activism as a site of connection and flux. The fat body, long deemed dirty, animalistic and ungovernable, challenges capitalist ideals of productivity and conformity. Though this body bears social injury, that wound becomes a source of transformative power – fuelling movements that confront cisnormative and ableist structures.

Within this landscape emerges the concept of the 'pre-body' – the body not yet one's own, shaped by early socialization, family warnings and internalized threats. It hovers between ghost and fantasy, embodying both fear and potential. Often, this pre-body is recalled in intimate environments, where shame is passed down through whispered anxieties: 'Don't become like them'. Such narratives enforce vigilance, pressing individuals to monitor their size, their appetite, their worth.

Sociologist Adrián Scribano (2008) describes these haunting constructs as 'social ghosts' – regulatory mechanisms that sustain the fatphobic and cisnormative order. Melancholia, in this context, is a longing for an idealized body never possessed, a fantasy that disciplines through the promise of love, value and belonging. These ghosts shape affective life, linking personal sensation to broader systems of control.

Yet as participants in fat activism begin to reject these fantasies, they also begin a process of reappropriation. The abject body – first seen as illegitimate, undesirable and unworthy – is reimagined. Thinness no longer functions as an absolute ideal, but as a symbol to be dismantled. In its place, fat identities emerge, rooted in resistance and re-signification.

This framework, which sees the body as a racialized, gendered and historically contingent construct, allows us to understand how fat bodies shift from being sites of shame to sites of agency. Through critical consciousness, the grotesque becomes generative, the pre-body a site of becoming – and in that becoming, we find resistance, visibility and the radical potential of living unapologetically in one's flesh.

Anti-fatphobia cyberactivism

Social media has been, and continues to be, a vital tool for fat activism in Spanish-speaking contexts. Though these platforms offer visibility and connection, they are not inherently safe spaces. Activists work to shape environments where fat bodies can be affirmed, but their efforts unfold within corporate systems governed by algorithms and commercial logic – conditions that often suppress critical or non-normative content. Still, social media remains a contested terrain, full of tensions yet rich with possibilities for embodied politics.

A growing body of research has shown that platforms like Instagram and Facebook can heighten body dissatisfaction, depression and anxiety (Keyte et al., 2021), distort self-perception and acceptance (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013) and increase vulnerability to eating disorders (Alfonso-Fuertes et al., 2023). Yet these platforms can also function as spaces of care and recovery. In particular, TikTok

and Instagram have become sites for support communities centred around eating disorder recovery and collective healing (Greene et al., 2023; Goh et al., 2022). Rather than reduce these spaces to merely harmful or helpful, we should recognize their ambivalence. They are sites where violence is made visible, where stories are told, where political messages foster solidarity, shift narratives and even shape broader structures. For many women and LGBTIQ+ people (Heuer et al., 2022), these platforms are places where feminism is lived and resistance becomes embodied (Li et al., 2020).

Within this digital landscape, anti-fatphobic activism has found voice and community. Over the past decade, blogs such as WeLoversize have documented the everyday experiences of fat people – from medical encounters and intimate relationships to clothing and public life – while Facebook pages like STOP Gordofobia, co-founded by Magdalena Piñeyro, have served as early references in the movement. Groups like Orgullo Gordo, Cuerpos Empoderados and Stop Gordofobia have built discursive bridges between feminist and fat activism in Spanish-speaking contexts (Casadó-Marín & Gracia-Arnaiz, 2020; Calvete et al., 2023; Castro, 2020, Castro Roldán et al., 2024).

Instagram remains a central platform for this work, with its visual grammar of reels, stories and static posts. Piñeyro (2016), author of Stop Gordofobia, continues to be a prominent voice, using her digital presence to denounce fatphobia and educate through accessible discourse. Activist accounts on Instagram form a growing network that not only circulates content online but also fosters offline actions such as World Day Against Fatphobia (March 4) and International No Diet Day (May 6). These presences help forge support and resistance networks while affirming fatness not as lack, but as embodied agency. This presence also asserts the right of fat bodies to participate in digital practices on equal terms with normative bodies, producing a spectrum of representations – from politically engaged critiques to more apolitical body-positive expressions (Castro Roldán, 2021).

Through these networks, fat individuals document everyday violences – medical, familial, institutional – while reclaiming fatness as identity. This digital terrain has come to be known as the fatosphere: a collective environment where mutual care, affirmation and radical tenderness are cultivated. Dickins et al. (2016), in a qualitative study based on 44 interviews, highlight how participants in these online spaces experience inclusion and support, pointing to the creation of a shared digital body. The fatosphere becomes a porous and shifting space composed of multiple selves – where intimacy meets recognition, and where the physical body becomes visible and reshaped through digital expression. As Zafra (2010) writes:

> If circulation through certain physical spaces allows the creation of bonds of belonging, one might wonder if circulation through virtual spaces also allows us to create these bonds and make them our own places (. . .) the creation of these possible bonds comes from the repetition of going back and forth (. . .) it is the circulation that contributes to establishing a symbolic value, a collective meaning through the repetition of a shared association. (Zafra, 2010, p.41)

The digital fat body thus becomes a common body: one that reclaims the insult 'fat' as identity and resistance. Here, tenderness becomes a political force – a way of approaching, transforming and loving oneself through fatness.

Fat methods

The objective of this research was to understand how the representation of the digital fat body is constructed within the context of the fight against fatphobia in the Spanish-speaking cyberactivist space on Instagram, known as the 'gordesfera'. The findings of this study allowed the identification of cyberfeminist strategies of resistance and mutual support. I analysed self-representation practices of fat bodies in digital environments through selfies, illustrations, photographs, texts and videos, identifying the main discourses emerging from fat activism.

For this research, the Instagram account @lagordesfera was created, through which digital ethnography was conducted alongside dissemination activities, the promotion of an open-access library, and the strengthening of the Spanish-speaking fat activist network. This platform also enabled the dissemination of messages to recruit participants for interviews and an exploratory survey, with the aim of gathering data that would facilitate the organization of group techniques and contact with interested individuals (Castro Roldán, 2021). Epistemologically, this study is grounded in the paradigm of situated knowledge and transfeminist theory (Ahmed, 2015; Haraway, 1995, Harding, 2002; Meloni González, 2025), with my own fat body and personal experience forming an integral part of the process – thus constituting an embodied and activist research approach.

Since this research is situated within the digital sphere of anti-fatphobia activism, the techniques employed were also digitized. The study was designed using a post-qualitative methodology, incorporating techniques such as autoethnography, digital ethnography, online semi-structured interviews, 'fat workbooks', and creative online group narrative methods, including the digital body mapping technique (Castro Roldán, 2023). These methods position the research within the post-qualitative framework, allowing for the exploration of new epistemological, methodological and ethical approaches that centre the body (Hernández-Hernández et al., 2019). The study integrates art-based techniques to investigate non-exclusively verbal discourses, specifically the 'fat workbooks' and 'digital body maps' (Castro Roldán, 2023). Art-Based Research (ABR) reformulates the relationship between researchers and participants, involving the latter in the process from design to analysis and the return of results (Carrillo, 2015; Leavy, 2009). This article focuses on the findings from the semi-structured interviews with activists and the 'fat workbooks'.

Fat workbooks

The participant sample was obtained through an open-access questionnaire published on the @lagordesfera Instagram account. One of the study's objectives was to build a flexible, diverse sample. As a result, participants varied in geographic location and age.

Once contact was established, participants were informed about the research process. There was ongoing communication to evaluate which aspects of the techniques were most comfortable for their participation. An informed consent form was presented and signed prior to participation, and there was space for suggestions, questions and feedback at each stage (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

Participants were situated in the intimacy of their own safe physical spaces, typically connecting from their personal rooms (Zafra, 2010). Each individual came from a different physical context, including Chile, Mexico, Spain, Uruguay and Panama. However, the primary selection criterion was that participants identified as anti-fatphobia cyberfeminists. Ultimately, nine individuals participated in the 'fat workbook' process. The decision not to specify the cultural differences of each participant, as each comes from different geographical contexts, is due to a lack of representativeness or discursive saturation to carry out a comparative analysis. At the same time, this cultural comparison falls outside the scope of the research objectives. However, it is important to note for future, broader research or for replicating the study. As this is a more intimate, qualitative study, the focus was intended to be on the experiences of digital activism and the space for engaging in artistic and creative techniques.

The 'fat workbooks' consisted of individual tasks sent to each participant. These activities were designed to encourage personal reflection on their own fat bodies. They were inspired by autoethnography, particularly by reflections on the self-concept of my own fat body, and by Sonya Renee Taylor's workbook Your Body Is Not an Apology (Taylor, 2021). The exercises aimed to evoke intimate reflections on the body's exposure on social media as part of activism. A total of two workbooks were created and completed by each of the nine participants, resulting in 18 workbooks in total.

Nine individuals participated in the individual exercise techniques, ranging in age from 23 to 39. All identified with the pronoun 'she', except one who identified as 'they'. Although national context was not one of the research objectives, specific features of each country emerged during the group processes, such as different names for body parts or forms of insult. However, these elements did not appear in the workbooks due to their individual format. The focus remained on online activism practices beyond national borders. While a geopolitical analysis could be valuable, it will be reserved for future studies.

All participants shared common characteristics: a medium to high level of education, some degree of socioeconomic precarity, and experiences with fatphobic violence at various stages in their lives. They were active fat activists on Instagram and expressed a strong interest in participating in the study. Many also later took part in the digital body mapping groups (Castro Roldán, 2023).

The workbooks were sent individually and created using PowerPoint, providing a fast, dynamic and accessible format for all participants, thus avoiding any digital divide. Each exercise contained specific tasks, such as reflection questions and requests to submit photos or drawings. Upon completing the first workbook, the second one was sent.

To protect participant privacy, their images were not shown in the findings. Only those associated with more public profiles already visible on social media – and aligned with their professional identities as artists – were included.

Methodological overflow: challenges and reflections

This section, written in a reflective tone, presents the possible limitations and blind spots of the 'fat method' proposed here.

First, the foundation of the research comes from my own fat experience. Therefore, I deemed it necessary to carry out autoethnography, adhering to criteria of validity and quality, including constant epistemological vigilance and a dense description that could provide intellectual and political distancing. In this way, methodological triangulation was carried out, incorporating additional techniques into the research.

Second, the exercise workbooks presented here were developed based on criteria of transparency, reflexivity and the pursuit of generalization.

Lastly, the blind spots we encounter are acknowledged, in the sense that my own body forms part of both the researcher and researched subject. However, when we encounter research on marginalized populations, such as the one being addressed here – fat people – we don't often see respectful treatment or recognition of their own voices and realities. Therefore, it is essential to have research where the voices of fat people are represented with respect.

Regarding the limitations, we can present them as possibilities for replication in future research. It would be interesting to approach these investigations in more concrete contexts, such as social class and territory, not only by country, but also distinguishing between rural and urban environments. Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore how digital content influences the life stories of participants based on the offline context they belong to.

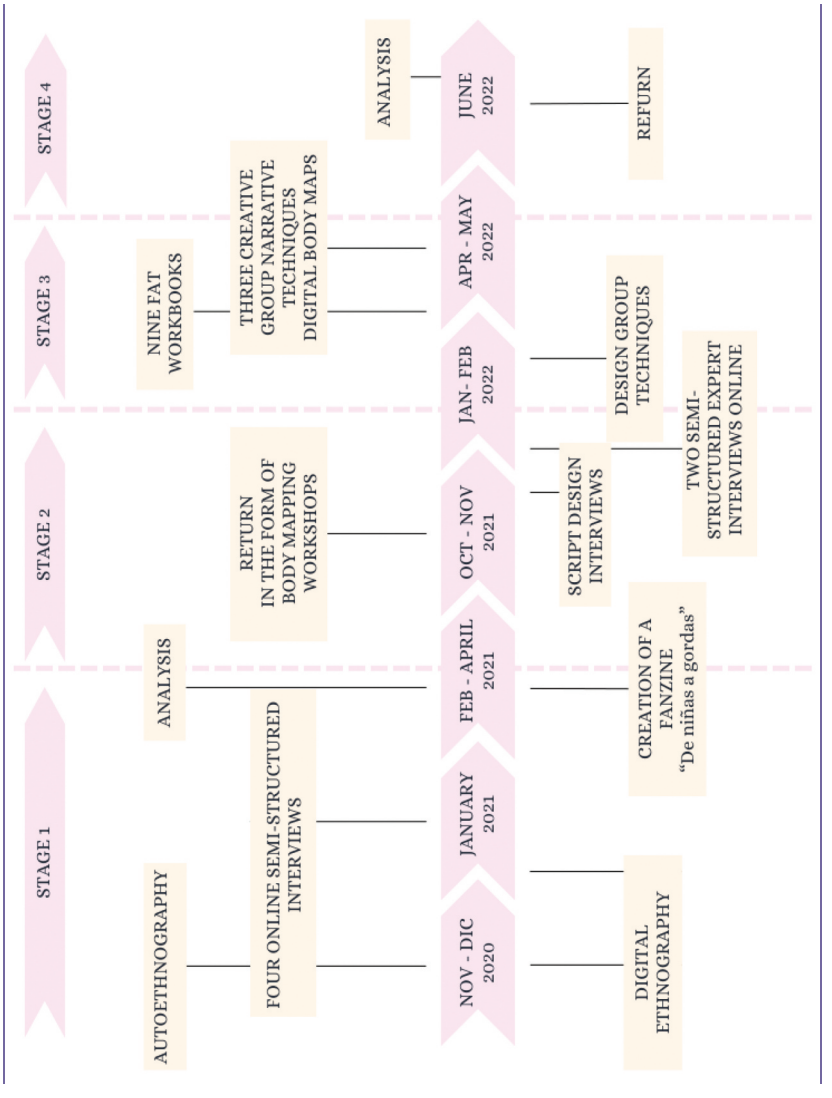
In conclusion, the proposal of a fat methodology is nothing more than a process of conscious and reflective techniques throughout the entire research process. This is limiting due to the time it requires and its slowness. However, at the same time, these are inherent qualities that add value to research carried out with respect and radical tenderness. As shown in Table 1, the research process unfolded through a reflective and structured sequence of stages designed to ensure methodological rigor while remaining consistent with the principles of a fat methodology.

Findings

From the pre-body to the first insult

Body awareness among the fat activists interviewed in this study emerges through a sequence of early experiences that precede full embodiment: what we can call the 'pre-body' and the moment of the first insult. The 'pre-body' refers to the threat made by family members towards the participants – warning them that they might end up having the body of a relative perceived as grotesque and a failure due to having a fat body. During the interviews, comparisons with family members and the fear of embodying that ghost body (Scribano, 2008) often emerged. In addition to the threat of the pre-body, body awareness in fat activists can also arise from facing insults. This often happens when the body is publicly marked as something negative, positioning the individual as 'the other' (Ahmed, 2015). From an early age, this social marking shapes a self-concept in which the body is experienced as wrong, excessive and something that must be controlled. In this sense, one becomes aware of their

Table 1. Research timeline.



body in a violent way: not through a gentle development, but through confrontation with rejection and discipline. Identifying these moments of embodied rupture is, therefore, central to this study, which seeks to understand how fat activists first become aware that they 'have' a body – and how that awareness is entangled with stigma, fear and inherited narratives.

Various moments arise, such as public exposures of the body where individuals feel unsafe, leading them to perceive their bodies as fat – bodies that must be covered, hidden, or concealed. This recurring experience constitutes what we call the 'pre-body': an inherited threat of becoming like a fat family member whose body is stigmatized and regarded as a failure. Simultaneously, this threat is counterbalanced by a fantasized ideal of embodying the successful, thin relative, highlighting the tension between a feared bodily inheritance and aspirational bodily norms.

Therefore, it is essential to highlight how fatphobia is a system of discrimination and oppression that seeks the eradication of fat bodies by framing them as unattractive, unproductive and pathological, thus generating discrimination in all aspects of daily life (Contrera & Cuello, 2016; Piñeyro, 2016). The pre-body conditions our present body, but throughout the history of the fat activist body, there is a reinterpretation in which the pre-body comes to be experienced as something positive, as will be shown later.

This learned shame of being in a fat body becomes visible in everyday moments. Often, individuals avoid wearing swimsuits or tight-fitting clothing. Awareness of being in a fat body can appear in childhood, but also during adolescence, when socialization around desire begins to develop. It should also be noted that some bodies are not fat during childhood but become so during adolescence or adulthood. Thus, the experience of being fat varies according to each person's life trajectory. In this study, all participants have been fat throughout their lives, since childhood. Therefore, the life curve revealed consistent patterns among participants (Table 2).

In conclusion, the first insult or the labelling of the fat body as something negative and shameful is often key to remembering the moment when one becomes aware of their body. It is when one learns that having a fat body is something taught to be unacceptable:

> I realized that I had a body from a very young age, when they started telling me that it wasn't acceptable, that I needed to reduce it, that as I was, I wasn't good enough. (She, 30, Chile)

All these experiences contribute to the shaping of the body – both the activist's own body and the inherited and social body. In the eyes of society, the activist's body is a grotesque body that has not been tamed. It is animalistic, uncivilized, invalid. In fat activism, the insult is re-signified to weaken the power of those who hate, thus transforming language into a bodily experience (Butler, 2004). As Contrera and Cuello articulate, the word 'fat' represents: 'The word. The insult. The wound' (Contrera & Cuello, 2016, p. 68). In this way, everything related to fatness within fat activism takes on a political meaning, becoming a rebellious, anti-capitalist and untamed body.

One way to insult fat people is by denying them recognition within the binary gender system. In the case of women, they are not considered 'women' unless they conform to traits that the collective imagination deems essential to femininity. A woman, even if she is fat, must have large, round buttocks, large, round breasts, a defined waist and a stomach that does not protrude more than the chest. Additionally, she must be white. It is important to note that most of the participants are racialized as non-white, and from their surroundings, they express the racism they experience for not being white. The accounts of Tovar (2018) and Mason (2017), as well as the historical link between racism and the origins of fatphobia (Strings, 2019), reveal a form of bodily colonialism that imposes a model of being not only thin but also white.

> I think you start asking yourself those questions when you realize you have a body that isn't considered a "body" (or rather, what society understands as a "body"). Personally, I believe we are bodies, but because my body (sadly) defines me in the eyes of society. I also think society believes we "have" a body, because when you have something, it means you can change it at will. We can't change ourselves at will (nor do we want to); we are bodies. We are fat. My body is fat. (She, 24, Spain)

Table 2. Life curve analysis of the participants.

Furthermore, not fitting into the binary system is also linked to transphobia within our dominant cisgender social structures. Being identified as a trans person is still seen as an insult. Being fat can lead to someone not being perceived as a woman, which in turn brings more discrimination and harassment.

Thus, many participants have observed how self-hatred emerges. Internalized fatphobia operates throughout life and is always lurking, ready to resurface despite the fat activist's daily efforts towards body acceptance (Gay, 2017). It is also linked to body dysmorphia, which often hinders practices of self-representation.

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First photo: coming out of the closet

Recognizing oneself as a fat person has been described as coming out of the closet. Coming out is interesting because you are always seen as grotesque; you know you are fat but do not recognize yourself as such. However, you cannot hide the fact that you are fat. Being a person means being both invisible and very visible at the same time.

This is because there is no fat identity that one wants to adopt due to the stigma associated with fat people, who are seen as embodying a type of personality that they identify with. Moreover, we wouldn't talk about being fat, but rather about being in a fat state. The body is conceived as an external agent in a state of constant change. Thanks to fat cyberfeminism, 'coming out of the closet' is done at your own pace, and the individual has control over their process. In this way, it becomes a digital closet, flexible, where you can fit in and out, where you can enter and exit, explore. This is how it is the first moment of taking the first activist photo. A play between the physical safety of one's own body and public virtuality. For many, this first activist photo marks a pivotal moment of reclaiming visibility and agency. As one participant shared:

> I like this photo very much because it was the first photo I unknowingly published as an activist. I felt a rage and a very mobilizing force, and I wanted to start talking about fatphobia, about weight stigma. It all started with this photo. This photo is important to me because that day I felt rebellious; I was able to shout to the world, I am fat, I am free. I was able to shout to the world that I am fat, free from judgment about myself and redefining the word for me as a descriptor instead of an insult. (She, 30, Chili)

> Although I had already posted pictures on my social media where my body was visible, the first time I felt it as an activist statement was during a photo session with a plus-size photographer who focused on parts of my body where I struggled to see beauty, and I ended up seeing it. The session was beautiful; we spent our time exchanging thoughts on how we felt as plus-size women. Seeing the images for the first time was MOVING. I started to cry because, while I saw in those photos a body that wasn't "how it should be", I recognized it as mine and saw it as beautiful, and it was a completely one-way journey. (She, 35, Uruguay)

Thanks to digital environments, particularly to cyberfeminism, fat activists have been able not only to make public denunciations of fatphobic events but also to make their bodies visible, fostering personal growth and helping other fat people begin to accept their bodies. A fat activist profile is also a personal profile of self-reflection. Throughout the life of a fat activist, full-body photos are rarely posted on social media; the body is often covered or not included in group photos. Thus, self-representation through this reflective exercise is very powerful.

> My profile is activist because I am constantly talking about these issues, posting my reflections on what it means to inhabit my fat body (. . .) I am interested in fat people feeling beautiful; fat vanity is important; it is something we have been denied. I also do collaborative lives with other accounts about intuitive eating, stereotypes, and weight stigma. I repost stories with scientific content. I make dancing videos and post photos of myself in various ways because it is important for fat bodies to be seen so that people start to normalize them in their imagination. I feel it is necessary to show my body to free others from those arbitrary

> rules and impositions, just as women who showed their bodies without shame freed me and inspired me to be authentically me. (She, 30 years old, Spain from Interview)

One reason why fat activism has more presence in digital environments is due to the shame of inhabiting a fat body and taking up physical space with it. Virtuality provides protection in this regard because of its fluid nature, allowing individuals to explore at their own pace.

> The first thing we did was form a private group because, of course, we were very ashamed to talk about this. Because as a fat person, you are taught to feel ashamed of your body and to always show a willingness to change it. That is part of fatphobia; for people not to laugh at you and humiliate you more, you have to show a willingness to change or say, 'My fat is hormonal', or 'I am dieting and will always be dieting to try to lose weight'. (She, 35 years old, Spain from Interview)

> The first time it was important for me was when I took a full-body photo in a swimsuit that exposed my legs, my belly, and my cellulite so closely and noticeably. At first, I was afraid to take off the cover to do it; my weight had certainly increased more during the pandemic. Nevertheless, I wanted to do it. I wanted to make my debut in this new world of resistance and struggle, where that photograph would be, so to speak, my sword and shield against a patriarchal system that oppresses us and dictates how our bodies should look. (She, 39, Panamá)

Self-representations

In this section on self-representations, the importance of taking photos from an intimate space is emphasized, whether alone or with trusted company. This intimacy with one's own body becomes political when fat bodies are made visible on their own terms. As one participant noted:

> If I had seen bodies like mine in the media when I was a child, I wouldn't have hated my body so much. I feel it is important to use my fat body and show it because representation matters. If I had seen bodies like mine in the media when I was a child, I wouldn't have hated my body so much. (She, 34 years old)

It is important to highlight not only the value of photographs but also of self-portraits created through drawings. This exercise, which was required of the participants, facilitated self-knowledge and provided a more effective way to express their feelings. Art-based research techniques allow us to explore discursive layers that we might not be able to address through conventional dialogue.

Figure 1 shows a drawing created by one of the participants that reflects the violence experienced within the university environment, illustrating how these self-portraits serve as both emotional and political statements.

Self-portraits, including drawings created by participants, also became powerful tools for self-knowledge and emotional expression. As one participant from Uruguay explained:

> I felt good, but that's because I've been on the path of self-portraits for years. In fact, they have been a wonderful tool for getting to know myself, recognizing myself, and accepting myself. (She, 35, Uruguay)

Figure 1. Drawing created by a participant that reflects the violence of the space in the university environment.

The intimacy created by engaging in these exercises not only fosters self-knowledge but also promotes self-regulation and emancipation in terms of what participants are willing to express, thus granting them greater control.

> The first thing I drew was an unpleasant situation where my weight was pointed out. I reacted in the worst way and wanted to offer other response options because it's something quite common, but there isn't enough information on how to prepare and respond. (She, 28, Mexico)

Several participants shared self-representations created through photography, drawing and digital media. These works challenge dominant visual norms and reinterpret fat embodiment from feminist and activist perspectives. As observed in Figure 2, the fat representation created by @paranipani links the fat body with feminist activism, revealing how these visual practices challenge the lack of bodily diversity within the feminist movement itself and expose the political tensions surrounding visibility:

As observed in Figures 3 and 4, the bodily representations delve into the participants' self-perception and self-affirmation, transforming the exposure of their own fat bodies into a political gesture of resistance, disobedience, and visual reappropriation in the face of the fatphobic gaze.

These practices of self-representation deepen self-awareness and help challenge distorted perceptions of the body. As for the self-perceptions and body self-awareness questioned in fat exercises, it is evident that body perception is blurred. That is, there are two moments when individuals are aware of having a body: when they receive insults for being fat and when they reaffirm themselves as fat individuals. Despite sometimes experiencing dysmorphia, they begin to calmly become acquainted with their bodies. There often exists a period in the lives of fat activists during which they have been unaware of their own bodies.

Figure 2. This image belongs to @paranipani, who integrates the feminist movement with her fat body. The feminist movement is criticized for lacking bodily diversity and ultimately executing the same invisibilizing practices as patriarchy.

Figure 3. The present images correspond to the self-representation process of @_lidiallamas. To self-portrait, she made a video of her naked body and selected the sections of images she was interested in to later draw them. She reflects on the process, choosing moments where she sees her body as beautiful and sexy (Lasén, 2012) and would like to experiment with the idea of taking parts of the body that do not have sensual or sexual connotations to experiment with the idea that the body is just a body, it is neutral.

Figure 4. Photo of an artistic self-representation process carried out by the participant @_lidiallamas.

> The first thing I did as an activist was to put the word FAT below my name on my social media profiles. Then I made the manifesto video calling morras through the Facebook group Stop México, and thus 4 G was created, which you already know :) and then I made some YouTube videos that I published everywhere, and gradually I began to connect with more of the community. (She 32, Mexico)

Sharing these representations online often exposes activists to hate, which in turn shapes how and what they post. One participant reflected on her gradual process of liberation from self-censorship:

> This has also been a process. I feel that at the beginning I was much more calculated about the photos I posted and the texts I shared. I was much more 'gentle' and had a softer, milder tone in my messaging. I tried not to make people 'too' uncomfortable because I was afraid of what they might say to me or the hate I might receive. However, little by little, I started to free myself, and I realized that the more authentic I was and the less I censored myself, the more I connected with the people who read me. The more real I was, the more I felt I could actually help others. So I continued down that path, trying to break through my own comfort zones one by one, and that really helped me build more confidence. (She, 24, Spain)

Experiencing online backlash can deeply affect how activists present themselves. As one participant explained, her path toward authenticity was gradual and challenging:

> I mean, if you get one fatphobic comment a day, it upsets you a little, and that's it. But there were waves, where it was clear our content had been posted on places like Forocoches or something, and then a whole wave would come. So yeah, reading 20, 30, 40, 50 comments a day like: 'that's disgusting', 'that's garbage' — it definitely affected us, because come on, that's a lot, right? So we would take breaks from managing the page. I'm actually on a break from it right now, for example. (She, 34, Spain from interview)

In this work conducted by the participants, the fat reality is portrayed not only from the pride of identifying as fat people but also from the difficulties that the experience of living

as fat individuals can entail. It is important to highlight both the positive and negative aspects of this reality (Cuello, 2016; Murray, 2008). All of this leads to an approach to radical tenderness as a personal and, consequently, political stance (Carol Rolla, 2020).

'We are one body. We are a whole'. digital fat bodies building networks of support and fat love

The digital fat body is the common body that constitutes the fatosphere network. In this body, there is always the possibility of approaching, transforming and loving oneself through radical tenderness. These technologies of the self are also used by those considered monsters, that is, fat bodies, who seek to infect the system through activism, utilizing these tools and barriers to make themselves visible and reach popular discourse, as seen in cyberactivism and cyberfeminism that penetrate the matrix (Zafra and López-Pellisa, 2019).

Regarding the cyber body, it is also considered from the ambivalence of the system of being neither masculine nor feminine bodies. Plant explained that feminine identity is a virtual reality, similar to what we encounter on computers (Plant, 1997). Sadie Plant, from a cyberfeminist perspective, discusses the digital body, emphasizing that we cannot escape the body. Our digital identities are through the body; discussing the digital body is pertinent in fat activism, as within the fatosphere, it traverses through digital identities that can be multiple and shared. This means that there can be several profiles, multiple selves for one body, or several bodies for one self. Our self, our identity, is not fixed; it is multiple, and within digital spheres, multiple relationships with the body can be established.

Thus, as Haraway (1995) describes, we are continuously crossing boundaries between the physical and the virtual, as well as between the biological and the technological. Additionally, everything has an effect; that is, online identities impact offline spheres, affecting the physical body. Fat activists use self-representations, such as selfies or self-portraits, to make their bodies visible. The process of creating these images occurs from the intimacy of a quiet, comfortable space (Zafra, 2010) and is exposed to the world. Despite the empowering potential of digital representations, the relationship with one's body remains complex and sometimes painful. However, despite this self-reflection on their bodies, fat activists often experience dysmorphia. Anne Balsamo (1995) in 'Forms of Technological Embodiment' explains the impact of digitalized representations of bodily identity on material bodies. Establishing the representation of the physical body to the digital realm involves complications, as does establishing the agent of representation.

Through cyberactivist environments, fat bodies gain visibility in multiple forms – self-image being the most prominent. These digital spaces serve as platforms to denounce fatphobic incidents, commemorate key dates and share testimonies from lived experience. They also foster networks of care and radical tenderness, as seen in the Spanish-speaking fatosphere. Based on the interviews and creative exercises, key life moments were identified, such as the 'coming out of the fatness wardrobe', the exploration of non-normative sexualities, and the vindication of fat desire. These narratives also highlight the everyday violence of inhabiting a fat body, as well as the collective care strategies that emerge in response.

With this, different conclusions were reached, such as the life history of the activist fat body, the detection of the different types of violence received and the self-representation of the fat body in the fatosphere that is constantly confronted with body self-consciousness. The strategies that are developed in order to avoid cyber-bullying and the support network that weaves a space of care and radical tenderness.

This journey towards body acceptance is reflected in the words of one participant:

> I was aware [of my body] in my childhood when I was in school. We are one body. We are a whole. My body is wonderful! It is my main working tool since I am an actress and it allows me to do everything. From being on stage, to running or hugging my loved ones. For many years I punished and mistreated it and I regret it. I like its texture, what it can do, I like most of my body, I just like it. I still have problems with my belly, although I reason that it is also beautiful and that all the negatives that everything negative that I associated with it was something imposed on me, I still have a hard time with it. (She, 39, Panamá)

Ethical reflections

When conducting research on vulnerable situations or with vulnerable individuals, such as in the case of fat individuals who experience fat-shaming in their daily lives, there are several considerations to keep in mind. First, we must contemplate whether our research may inadvertently re-victimize the participants (Gandarias, 2014). The methods and techniques employed in our research must be conducted with utmost respect. It is important to recognize that obtaining informed consent, while a necessary bureaucratic process, does not inherently ensure the ethical conduct of our research; it merely scratches the surface of ethical considerations.

The current research has obtained signed informed consent from all participants. Throughout this journey, my primary concern has been to ensure the respect of the participants. As such, the process followed their preferred pace and included technical aspects that they wanted to be involved in. The design of the questionnaire was also developed with consideration for allowing participants to raise any doubts or concerns and express their needs, topics they did not want to discuss, special considerations, limits and questions they did not wish to answer at certain times. This approach aimed to establish a safe space with continuous communication, leading to smaller group sizes for a more intimate setting. All materials presented have consent for display.

Feedback is consistently sought as this research is related to a form of activism in which I am involved as a fat activist; emphasizing that the information does not belong to me but rather to my peers, as it is their work. Consequently, I actively participate in various groups where future actions related to my research are being planned.

Furthermore, since conducting the study, I have participated in street events, conducted workshops and contributed towards educational efforts combatting fatphobic discrimination. Ultimately, throughout this project, I aimed at conveying my commitment both towards fat activism and towards the well-being of all participants while acknowledging the responsibilities associated with my role as

a researcher – these elements serving as foundational principles throughout the work

This type of research, which involves the exploration of bodies and emotions, carries inherent risks that require our vigilant attention (Kara, 2018). We should continuously pose questions without seeking a single definitive answer but rather acknowledge that sometimes there may not be a clear-cut solution. It is crucial to collectively evaluate each stage of the research with the group, as the appropriateness of certain techniques may be context-dependent and could give rise to ethical dilemmas (Kara, 2018). Ultimately, ethical considerations are ongoing reflections that need to be incorporated into our research to ensure transparency and enable potential replication or modification of procedures in future endeavours.

In a manner similar to Hua Ma's (2025) study, 'Negotiating Beauty: Exploring Beauty Narratives of Chinese Women in Different Life Stages', my own body closely resembles those of the participants. In this context, I identify as a fat activist, navigating between activist and academic positions. Therefore, the respect I maintain for the participants is crucial for conducting an activist-oriented research project. Consequently, the developed methodology must align with a transfeminist approach and feminist affective epistemologies (Pons, 2019), being mindful of my hierarchical position relative to the participants. It is important to recognize that we do not grant agency but rather acknowledge the agency that participants already possess. We do not have the power to confer agency, but we do have the responsibility to communicate the knowledge they provide.

Conclusions and reflections

Fatphobia profoundly affects the lived experiences of fat bodies. The self-concept of such bodies is shaped by various forms of violence, including familial, medical, educational and public discrimination, as well as internalized fatphobia. The 'coming out' process, as described by participants, represents a challenging yet transformative journey towards confronting new realities and the repercussions of these violences, such as eating disorders, body dysmorphia and difficulties in personal and social interactions. Daily encounters with fatphobia further compound these issues.

In response to these daily experiences of fatphobia, many individuals turn to digital platforms as spaces for community, resistance and redefinition of their identities. The transition to fat activism is significantly supported by information available on social media, particularly within the digital fatosphere. This cyberfeminism is predominantly present on Instagram, where numerous activist profiles offer a range of content from private and group pages to artistic, reflective and theoretical-critical content.

Building on this, the fatosphere operates as a dynamic support network that enables the articulation of resistance and fosters a sense of collective identity. The fatosphere functions as an online support community that offers the possibility of creating a safe space to express everyday experiences of violence, develop resistance strategies and foster body acceptance. These resistance strategies include disseminating anti-fatphobic content, denouncing violence and creating safe spaces with group oversight. Some activists use private accounts to avoid cyberbullying, while others publicly report hate comments, fostering a chain of accountability within the fatosphere. Additional strategies include blocking and restricting content sharing to mutual followers.

In this context, the fat activist body is both represented and reflected as part of a collective, engaging in self-representation. This process fluctuates between internalized fatphobia and self-love, with self-love emerging from radical tenderness practiced within the fatosphere. It is an ongoing and fluid process, influenced by persistent societal fat-hatred. Fat activism, therefore, represents a collective body that embraces all aspects of itself, driven by critical thought that challenges systemic binary ideologies. The political discourse of fat activists is collective, politically charged and seeks to dismantle normative constraints on bodies.

Self-representation through photography or self-portraiture is conducted from a safe, private space. This process involves confronting and accepting the body, sharing images on social media to contribute to the digital fat collective. When not using self-photography, activists may rely on supportive peers. Artistic representations, like drawing, offer a slower, more constant practice that can directly address body dysmorphia by providing a more tangible sense of body volume.

The fatosphere serves as a battleground where fat activists operate, sharing testimonies of fatphobic violence, denouncing discriminatory events and educating on body diversity. This digital space fosters an interconnected support network, which extends into more private digital communities. The ultimate goal of fat cyberfeminism is to transcend online boundaries and occupy offline spaces, as inhabiting publicly denied spaces is a political act.

Beyond the analysis of activist practices, it is essential to reflect on the embodied approach that shaped this research and informed its insights. Moving beyond traditional social research methods, the study emphasizes embodied research approaches. Embodied and enfleshed research (Esteban, 2004, 2016) encourages reflection on our positionality and influence on the field and analysis. Recognizing the embodied nature of research allows for overcoming barriers and exploring new, more nuanced and respectful research methods.

This research process involves a progressive awareness of the social system. My experience as a body that dissents from normative bodily standards has enabled me to identify systemic limitations, affirming my identity as a dissident body that resists conforming to norms of body control. My body, both subjective and objective, has made it possible to analyse categories reflected in the participants' testimonies in this study, while maintaining validity and quality in the research through methodological triangulation.

Acknowledgments

This effort would not have been possible without the commitment of anti-fatphobia activists, whose love greatly facilitated the establishment of a safe environment. Their efforts not only helped us shed light on violence through radical tenderness, but also empowered us to actively participate in shaping a world in which we feel included. Sincere thanks to Red 4 G, the intersectional transfeminist collective Mondonga, Magdalena Piñeyro and all the anonymous participants for their invaluable contributions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the research project "Cartographies, Itineraries and Mechanisms of Expulsion/Exclusion in the Healthcare System" (Project No. [PID2022-138513OB-I00], funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities.

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