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Shared Vulnerability – Collectivity and Empathy in Media Reflections of a Finnish theater Monologue *FAT*

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ABSTRACT

This article utilizes the concept of “shared vulnerability” to analyze media reflections of a Finnish fat activist monologue *FAT*. In texts, pictures, and sounds on *FAT*, gaps between differently-sized women are stitched up and a feeling of an all-women’s community is offered as a solution to hurtful experiences. I argue that shared vulnerability can signal a welcomed realization of previously hidden privileges on the part of the more normative subject. Yet, talking about shared vulnerability risks ironing out fat women’s experiences by decentering them or displacing them with those of more-normatively-sized women.

KEYWORDS

Shared vulnerability; fat activism; media activism; feeling; empathy

Introduction

On January 8th in 2016, a theater monologue entitled *FAT. A Greasy Monologue about Fatness* (from now on *FAT*; originally titled *LÄSKI. Rasvainen Monologi Lihavuudesta*, directed by Elina Kilkku) premiered at Theater Takomo in Helsinki, Finland. In the monologue, a white, self-identified fat woman, Raisa Omaheimo, talks about the hurt of living in a society that not only privileges thinness but moreover looks at fat people with contempt and hate. The Finnish media was widely interested in the play. In texts, pictures, and sounds on *FAT*, authors focused on the suffocating grip of beauty ideals, and reflected on their own relation to their bodies. They argued that, regardless of size or other identity factors, almost everyone could identify with the exhausting weight of norms described by Omaheimo.

In this article, I analyze the publicly available media material on *FAT*, ranging from television and radio appearances to articles and reviews in newspapers, and ending with blog posts on the play. While the events described in the monologue are things that have happened to Omaheimo personally, the analyzed material presents the piece as a relatable account of vulnerability to body norms in general. Authors share their reactions to *FAT* and reflect on its meaning for themselves. Yet, as for example fat studies scholars Charlotte Cooper (2016) and Samantha Murray (2008) argue, fat

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activism is not and should not *only* be about feelings of vulnerability. Instead, fat activism is, at its core, about overcoming social structures and inequalities that bring disadvantage to fat people at work, study, healthcare, and personal life.

Taking seriously fat activism's societal objective, I ask what happens when a fat activist piece, such as *FAT*, is discussed in terms of its relatability to not only fat-identified audiences, but to more-normatively-sized people in particular. The article partakes in the current discussion on how activist movements are tamed and commercialized as they become popularized (Cammaerts, Matton & McCurdyn 2003; Earl and Rohlinger 2012). It contributes to the expanding literature on fatness, fat activism, and the media (e.g. Cooper 2016; Kyrölä 2016). To do this and to investigate the media's role in building affective bridges across the experiences of differently-sized and differently-positioned subjects, it utilizes the concept of "shared vulnerability."

My understanding of shared vulnerability derives from feminist philosophy and its discussions on vulnerability (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016; Butler 2016; Cole 2016; Koivunen, Kyrölä, and Ryberg 2019b). With shared vulnerability I refer to feelings of connectivity that are based on the capacity of people to be physically, emotionally, or mentally hurt by something. The materials on *FAT* position body norms as a cause of vulnerability. As they understand these norms to be hurtful for almost everyone, and every woman in particular, they argue that vulnerability unites women in their struggle. Media scholars Amanda Lagerkvist and Yvonne Andersson (2017) similarly write about shared vulnerability to refer to the connectivity of pain and the way that media can help to transgress boundaries between people by covering stories of pain.¹ Lagerkvist and Andersson quote Suzanne Bost (2008) in arguing that suffering can work as an alternate foundation for politics as it helps to form unexpected identifications across gender, ethnicity, and race. While I agree with Lagerkvist, Andersson, and Bost that all subjects share a potential of being wounded, I maintain that not all are similarly vulnerable to outside conditions. Instead, and as several feminist scholars (Cole 2016; Koivunen, Kyrölä, and Ryberg 2019b) claim, people who are seen outside cultural and societal norms are more likely to be emotionally or physically hurt in everyday situations.

In the discussion on *FAT*, and in the Finnish context where fat activism and body positivity are fairly new endeavors, shared vulnerability works as a viable tactic to explain the political aspects of size for the general public. However, as I claim in this article, this tactic risks turning the attention away from practices of structural marginalization and the differences in experiencing and inhabiting vulnerability. In the analyzed materials, the authors' and Omaheimo's bodies meet in empathetic encounters. Yet Omaheimo's normativity with regard to factors such as race and gender, and the fact that in several materials her eating disordered past becomes an object of interest, are what make Omaheimo a relatively easy target of empathetic relating.

FAT and fat activism in Finland

Although fat activism, a social movement that strives to enable “livable lives” for fat people (Cooper 2016, 2), remains an understudied object of inquiry, the number of publications on the subject has in the last few years increased. While the majority of studies still focus on the Anglo-American context and see fat activism to be organizational or sometimes cultural work dedicated to fighting the stigma of fatness (Altman Bruno 2017; Bock and Squires 2019; Cameron 2019; Schoppelrei 2019), the understanding of what counts as fat activism is becoming more varied. Scholars increasingly study the movement in locations such as Sweden (Rugseth and Engelsrud 2017), Spain (Casadó-Marin and Gracia-Arnaiz 2020), and Finland (Hynnä and Kyrölä 2019; Puhakka 2019), as well as pay attention to the multiple and less obvious forms of activism.

Finland’s first official fat activist and/or body positive organization, Body Posi Finland, was founded in 2018 to “support and maintain a positive body image” (Body Posi Finland website). Yet already the 1990s saw the start of some non-organizational “micro fat activism” or “ambiguous activism” (Cooper 2016, 53–94) in Finland. Finnish fat studies scholars Hannele Harjunen and Katariina Kyrölä, as well as fat activist Anu Hämäläinen (Harjunen, Hämäläinen, and Kyrölä 2007, 277–283) explain that the earliest ideas of size and weight as political questions traveled to Finland through books, such as Wendy Chapkis’ *Beauty Secrets* (1986), Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* (1990), and Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight* (1993). As readers became inspired by the texts, they turned their ideas into practices, such as making the decision to stop dieting, sharing information to others by passing the books along, or including bits and pieces of them in personal conversation. While most people inspired by the texts acted alone, the meeting of like-minded people sometimes led to small local groups that developed a political understanding of the actions. Unfortunately, however, these groups were often short-lived and loose (Personal e-mail with Harjunen 2019.)

Despite the former endeavors, fat activism and/or body positivity as concepts did not become widely known to the Finnish public until the end of the 2010s (Omaheimo and Särmä 2017). Here, *FAT*, which was an instant hit and played to full houses during the winter and autumn of 2016, had an important role. After an avalanche of immediate media publicity, all 22 shows of *FAT* for January and February 2016 were quickly sold out. Three shows were added in August in Helsinki. *FAT* also toured four separate shows in the cities of Tampere, Turku, and Riihimäki.

In the play, Omaheimo and her body take center stage as a locus of knowledge and experience. Omaheimo starts the monologue with clichéd fat jokes. Soon the atmosphere changes and she proceeds to some of her most painful memories of different people assuming to know her based on her body. After

sadness comes anger. Omaheimo delivers with conviction all that is wrong with Finnish society that treats fat people as second-class citizens. Finally, it is time for peace and purification: the monologue ends with a ballet-dance choreographed especially to suit the needs of Omaheimo's body (Interview with Omaheimo 2019.)

Methods

For this article, I have analyzed all retrievable, public media material on *FAT* that has been published between January 1st and December 12th in 2016. All in all, this includes 37 pieces: six theatrical reviews, six newspaper/journal interviews, two stories in an online journal, four radio interviews, four television interviews, fourteen blog posts, and one podcast. Due to ethical reasons, I have not included social media posts, other than publicly available blogs, in the study. While blog posts are usually written with an audience larger than one's immediate social circle in mind, social media comments, such as the ones on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, are often directed at specific groups and may more often be public despite their authors' conscious intentions (Franzke et al. 2020).

I received help in gathering the material from Omaheimo, who has held track of most media discussion on *FAT*. I also did searches on Google and on the Audiovisual Institute in Finland's (KAVI) search engine to ascertain that I have most relevant material on *FAT*. Based on the searches, I added one theatrical review, three newspaper/journal interviews, three blog posts, and one podcast to the initial 29 pieces of material that were mentioned by Omaheimo.²

Although the analyzed materials differ from one another in their production and in their authors' connection to media corporations, I am reading them side by side. They all convey audience reactions to *FAT* and are therefore descriptions of how the monologue was felt and understood by its viewers. I am aware that the articulations in the materials may not be fully encompassing of all their authors' reactions during or after the play, and that they most likely do not represent all possible ways in which *FAT* was experienced by different audience members. Yet, as so often with cultural analysis of audience reactions (Paasonen 2014, 2), they are the primary material available for scholars to work with.

My analysis process consisted of several rounds of close-reading, close-listening and close-watching the materials, during which I paid specific attention to all verbal articulations of feelings by the authors. During the first round, I wrote down all excerpts where authors expressed how the monologue had made them feel. During the second and third rounds, I zoomed in on these excerpts and focused on which feelings were mentioned and what kind of words were used to describe the viewing experience. I noticed that authors

mostly mentioned feelings of shame, anger, empathy, and hurt. In the article, I understand these feelings to coincide with what I see as an umbrella term, feeling vulnerable. During the second and third rounds, I became interested in how many authors expressed similarity to Omaheimo. Therefore, during the fourth round, I reviewed the whole pool of material and concentrated on who exactly the authors saw vulnerable to body norms and whether or not they understood there to be differences in the ways that differently-positioned subjects inhabit vulnerability.

Due to space limitations, I am quoting only a small number of materials in this article. I have chosen the quotations because they are representative of the material as a whole. I therefore ask the reader to view the quotes as instructive of the discussion on *FAT* in general.

***FAT* and vulnerability as collective experiences**

In the introduction to the book *The Power of Vulnerability. Mobilizing Affect in Feminist, Queer and Anti-Racist Media Cultures*, Koivunen, Kyrölä, and Ryberg (2019a) discuss vulnerability as a new language that has, in recent years, stabilized its role in public discussions about power, agency, and the media. Simultaneously the new language has made expressions of vulnerability more acceptable, as vulnerability has become associated with not just powerlessness or victimization, but with agency, power, activism, and collective efforts (see also Butler 2016; Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016; Gilson 2016). While several feminist scholars (Cole 2016; Kafer 2013) argue that vulnerability's theoretical function lies in the way that it helps to differentiate between the privileged and the marginalized, or the vulnerable and the already wounded, public discussions often focus on vulnerability's unifying qualities. As popular media and general discussions elevate intimate, confessional stories, they simultaneously treat them as indicative of communal experience (Berlant 2008, vii–x; Winch 2013; Kanai 2019).

In the discussion on *FAT*, authors regularly reflect on their body and its distance or proximity to norms. While in 10 out of 37 pieces the authors identify as fat, in 12 out of 37 the authors state that they are not fat but recognize the feelings and experiences of being somehow “wrong” as performed by Omaheimo. In 14/37 pieces, authors do not offer any kind of self-reflection or information of their bodies but, instead, discuss the play on a more abstract level. In 1/37 pieces of material, the author explicitly says that they are thin and cannot, in any way, relate to the subject matter.

The prevalence of self-reflection is often indicative of the medium and the type of the material analyzed. While in 13/14 analyzed blog posts and 1/1 podcast, the authors offer a reflection of their body, only 1/6 newspaper/journal article does the same. A reflective part is further included in 3/6 theatrical reviews, 2/4 radio interviews, 3/4 television interviews, and 1/2

online articles. While blogs and podcasts are often personal in nature, newspaper/journal articles presume a more distanced, objective-seeming author. In the case of radio and television interviews, theatrical reviews and online articles, the presence of the author-journalist largely varies according to the style of the program or the publisher.

Bodily reflections work to emphasize the importance of the play in the Finnish context not only when the author identifies as fat but also, and maybe especially, when they are more-normatively-sized. As the latter share their experiences of vulnerability, size-discrimination starts to look less like a fat issue and more like an all-women's issue. Through bodily reflections, not just fat women but women in general can "feel their way into" (Papacharissi 2014, 5) Omaheimo's experiences.

In the pieces of material that do not include bodily reflections, the prevalence of vulnerability to body norms is implied most often through the story of how the monologue was sparked to life in a conversation between the normatively-sized Kilkku and fat Omaheimo. This is told in 3/6 newspaper/journal articles, 2/4 radio interviews, 1/4 television interviews, and 1/6 theatrical reviews, but in none of the blog posts, podcasts, and online articles. For example, the newspaper interview in *Nyt* (Kytölä, Jan 8, 2016) puts it into the following words:

Raisa told me about the comments that she has received of her looks. I became upset. I started to think whether a stranger's weight is really such a big problem in our society, Kilkku ponders.

On the other hand, Kilkku could relate.

Although I have never been overweight myself, the feeling of being insufficient is recognizable to me. I believe that the feeling that one is of wrong size or does not look like one is supposed to is something that follows most women throughout their lives.

The story of *FAT*'s creation weaves together the experiences and feelings of fat and more-normatively-sized women. The idea of feeling the same as other women makes bodily insecurities more manageable: although feeling insufficient is, in itself, unpleasant, the idea that one shares the experience with so many is enjoyable. Cultural scholars (Berlant 2008; Kanai 2019) note a similar tendency in other products directed at women. While "women's narratives" often discuss vulnerability to beauty norms, they simultaneously offer a view of a united sisterhood, which is experienced as empowering.

Additionally, fat-identified authors discuss *FAT* as a collective women's play. Although all ten are somewhat hesitant over the ability of the more-normatively-sized to understand fat marginalization, they nonetheless express a wish to belong with them. In the theater blog *Teatterikärpäsen puraisuja* ("Talle" Feb 8, 2016) this is formulated in the following way:

What if everyone else at the theatre is going to be average-sized and I am the only fat person going to see FAT?

[. . .]
I was sitting in the front row, and when it was time for the round of applause, I too stood up with tears in my eyes to show my appreciation to Raisa. As I was preparing to leave, my eyes locked, just for a split second, with a blonde average-sized woman. She also had tears in her eyes and she looked like she wanted to hug me. I wish she had hugged me. But already the look in her eyes said a lot.

For Talle, being accepted into the public space of the theater is something liberating due to an earlier experience of being harassed at a concert venue, which she had discussed elsewhere in the post. Fitting in or not being signaled out offers a welcome breather from marginalization. Other fat-identified authors in the material agree. “The collective experience is empowering” although not every woman in the audience necessarily understands the “inside jokes about pantyhose or fitting rooms” (Pessi, a theatrical review in *Turun Sanomat* Dec 6, 2016).

Empathetic identifications

If in public discussion, vulnerability is a unifying category, then so is empathy. In cultural imagination, empathy is “a technology of belonging” (Berlant 2004, 5) or “an affective bridge” (Pedwell 2014, 21) between two subjects with social and cultural differences. It is through empathy that the one who can potentially be injured by fat prejudice can relate to the one who has been injured by it. In feminist discussion, the ethics of empathy is a much-debated idea. Lauren Berlant (2004) discusses empathy as a technology that denotes privilege. The capacity of the empathizer to feel empathy derives from a privileged position. The empathizer resides elsewhere, away from suffering. This gives them the ability to feel empathetic. Sara Ahmed (2005) similarly criticizes empathy’s ethicalness. Empathy is about the appropriation of the other’s suffering. The empathizer claims to understand their suffering, yet they can never truly know what the other one is feeling. While empathy’s conflation to vulnerability can help to pinpoint some of the problems in understanding vulnerability as a shared characteristic, I suggest that empathic identifications and their expressions in discussions, such as the ones on *FAT*, can also signal a heightened awareness of previously unrealized privileges.

In *FAT*’s media material, 13/37 authors express a shock of learning about fat marginalization. Seeing the play has made them realize the difficult position of fat people. 7/13 say that the societal treatment of fat people makes them feel angry and ashamed. 5/13 are concerned over whether or not their response to the monologue has been ethically sound.

As the more-normatively-sized authors cite their privileges and admit that they are not able to fully grasp how fat-marginalization feels, they turn to

empathy. Empathy is signaled by descriptions of shame and anger over hearing about Omaheimo's experiences. For example, in her blog *Puistojatkot*, which analyzes cultural phenomena from a feminist viewpoint, Hanna Rätty (Jan 13, 2016) discusses her reactions to *FAT*:

Omaheimo's monologue begins with fireworks of fat jokes that make me feel somehow uncomfortable: am I, as an average-size woman, allowed to laugh along? It feels wrong to be amused by a fat person who cannot fit into the biggest pantyhose available at a store. *FAT* is directed exactly at people like me that have thus far thought that pantyhose and sporting clothes are made of some magical material that somehow stretches out forever, and that department stores sell clothes in all sizes.

Outi Suoranta, in a theatrical review in a newspaper *Aamulehti* (Jan 10, 2016), similarly ponders over the appropriate reaction to *FAT*:

Nobody is fat by their own choice, yet one's body always feels wrong. And that is why Omaheimo's words hurt so much. I feel hurt and angry for her. I feel sorry for her. I would like to go and give her a hug, yet it feels somehow wrong. I don't know why. But I say thank you. Most of all, I feel happy of all the lumps in my body, of my very own naked truth. I am not ok with it but . . .

Feminist critique (Ahmed 2005, 2014; Berlant 2004; Pedwell 2014) suggests that expressing empathy necessarily puts the more privileged subject's feelings in focus, and presents them to be the same as the marginalized ones. Yet, as the above examples imply, when the more-normatively-sized authors think about the ethicality of their responses, feelings are also directed toward the marginalized one. The privileged subject is concerned about how their responses affect the marginalized, therefore making their experience another locus. While Suoranta supposes Omaheimo to feel hurt, she herself is angry and hurt for Omaheimo. Rätty similarly expresses shame over her own ignorance, rather than comparing her feelings to those of Omaheimo. In these instances, empathy is more a feeling of an other's expected feeling, rather than an appropriation of the other's experience.

Although the realization of one's privilege is an uncomfortable one, discomfort can be an extremely productive feeling. According to Ahmed (2006), discomfort and its associated feelings of being out of place can open up new worlds for the subject, as they push the subject to reorient themselves in the new surroundings. This can happen to the more-normatively-sized authors, whose discomfort leads to anger about fat marginalization. Shared vulnerability or empathy, therefore, do not necessarily lead to self-centeredness or wallowing in guilt. They can also mobilize new kinds of affects in relation to the vulnerability of others.

Speaking for other others

The debate on the ethics of empathy is closely related to another feminist discussion on whether a more privileged person has the right to speak for

a marginalized other. In her well-known article, “The problem of speaking for others,” Linda Alcoff ([1991] 1992) states that speaking for the marginalized should always be done out of concrete analysis of power relations starting with one’s desire to speak. If one’s words could, despite their well-intended meaning, end up hurting the marginalized, one should refrain from speaking. Alison Phipps (2016), more recently, criticizes speaking for others when it is done to create political gains for the already privileged. In these instances, speaking is a sign of “selective empathy.” Only those whose experiences can be used to further conservative politics are seen worthy of empathy.

In the material on *FAT*, authors that identify as normatively-sized or close-to-the-norm treat Omaheimo and her experiences as sites of knowledge. Although they share their own experiences and viewpoints, they do not leave Omaheimo’s story untold, neither do they question its validity. Yet, talking about the feelings of the more-normatively-sized subject takes space from other fat subjects’ experiences. Although 13/37 explicitly say that they do not know fat-marginalization, sharing stories of their own vulnerability stretches out the parameters of understanding fat-oppression and fat activism: Authors that are “not that fat” say that size-based discrimination feels “strikingly personal” to them (“Katri” in a theater blog *Paljon melua teatterista* Feb 2, 2016a). In order not to be crushed by one’s feelings, they suggest that one should start looking oneself in the mirror and “say only nice things to one’s reflection” (“Katri” in a theater blog *Huminaa* Jan 10, 2016b).

When fat activist and/or body positive spaces and discussions feature more of more-normatively-sized subjects’ narratives than fat subjects’ narratives, their activist character becomes unclear. Although the spaces may originally have been created with fat people in mind, weight biases and power imbalances are present. (Gill and Elias 2014; Sastre 2014) This applies to body size as well as to other identities and positions, such as race. As nonwhite fat studies scholars (Johansson 2020; Shaw 2006) importantly point out, body positive and/or fat activist spaces are majorly white in character. Whiteness conceals the significance of race to fat marginalization and makes it difficult for non-white subjects to participate in discussion.

Whiteness and normativity are a problem also in the material on *FAT*. As authors do not reflect on race or other positions, it is impossible to intently analyze authors’ articulations of empathy from their perspective. Yet, whiteness shapes the boundaries of the conversation. The experiences of nonwhite subjects are pushed farther into the margin, and their “worthiness” for empathy (Ahmed 2014, 2005; also Pedwell 2014; Sontag 2003) remains indefinite.

Despite normativity, the discussion on *FAT* is important in that it unambiguously represents Omaheimo as someone to feel empathetic for. Representing any fat person as worthy of empathy is not self-evident in a culture that considers fatness to be the subject’s “own fault” (Harjunen 2017; Murray 2008). As Omaheimo herself states in the monologue, in

Finnish public discussion, fat people are repeatedly talked about, yet they are seldom allowed to talk. Against this background, it is interesting that 13/37 pieces of material on *FAT* mention Omaheimo's past as a compulsory dieter and a recovered eating-disordered person. I claim that the purpose of this is to invite empathy toward her experiences. For example, in a current affairs program, *Inhimillinen tekijä* (episode first aired March 22, 2017), Omaheimo is interviewed together with a Finnish fat activist, artist and scholar Säärä Särmä, and a former athlete, sports doctor and television host Pippa Laukka. Although each guest is interviewed separately, their stories are discussed together under one rubric: "Women that have released themselves from the restraint of dieting." As Omaheimo and the normatively-sized Laukka talk about their pasts with eating disorders, their situations start to look comparable: Both have attended therapy to recover and are now more in tune with their bodies' needs. Omaheimo also mentions that she is still learning healthy ways of eating and is, therefore, still losing weight.

According to Berlant (2004), empathy involves anxieties over which subject deserves to be viewed empathically and which subject can be denied this positive judgment. In the material on *FAT*, talking about Omaheimo's past with an eating disorder, and the fact that she is becoming smaller in size, validates her as worthy of empathy. Simultaneously, however, the reading of the fat body as sick and disordered is a common trope in a fat-phobic society (Murray 2008). Emphasizing Omaheimo's past with a disorder makes her seem less threatening for the status quo and, therefore, partly denies her agency.

Conclusions

In this article, I have used the theoretical concept of shared vulnerability to analyze the public discussion around a Finnish fat activist theater piece titled *FAT*. I have argued that, in a context where body size has only recently become understood as a political question, identification and empathy can help to mobilize allies as well as to make them feel for the marginalized.

While more-normatively-sized subjects' empathetic identifications to the experiences of fat people are problematic in that they claim space from the latter, I have argued that empathy itself can be an operative feeling for a privileged subject that is ignorant of fat marginalization. While facing one's own privileges can be unpleasant, it can also lead to new revelations and solidarity, where the marginalized stands as the rightful authority over their own experience.

Although shared vulnerability, in the discussion on *FAT*, accentuates similarities between women that come from various positions and backgrounds, I conclude by emphasizing the need to study the structures that shape one's social life and work behind all realizations of vulnerability. Already happened

injuries of marginalization on fat bodies need to be held separate from the more-normatively-sized subjects' feelings of vulnerability to body norms (Cole 2016). Although many people are hurt by body norms, it is the fat people whose livable life continues to be in jeopardy because of structural fat-marginalization.

Notes

1. "Shared vulnerability" is used also in psychology and sociology where it relates to the interconnectedness of psychological features, and studies a person's susceptibility to psychopathology (Sampedro et al. 2019). In this article, I do not understand the concept in this way.
2. Besides the analyzed materials, local *Radio Helsinki* channel (January 18, 2016) and Swedish *Sisuradio* channel (November 3, 2016) interviewed Omaheimo on *FAT*. However, despite my attempts, I was unable to retrieve these materials for analysis.

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Notes on contributor

Kaisu Hynnä-Granberg is a doctoral candidate of Media Studies at the University of Turku, Finland. Her dissertation project looks for new ways to think about the relation of mediated bodies to media users' lived and felt bodies. Hynnä-Granberg approaches body positive media as affective media that moves its audiences' bodies in multiple ways. She analyzes the ways in which media users sensually, vividly, and carnally feel their material bodies in relation to their surroundings when they come into contact with body positive media.

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