

Athletic Fat and Disidentification: Reading Gender, Sport/Exercise, and Fatness on YouTube

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Abstract

Considering the gendered, fatphobic cultural assumptions shaping media representations of fat female bodies, alongside the increasing influence of online media on individuals' lived experiences, this study examines *Athletic Fat Starting Today*, a South Korean YouTube channel, to illuminate the discursive construction of fat bodies within the contemporary digital media landscape. Drawing on insights from theories of disidentification and affect, I specifically discuss how social media operates as a space for rearticulating meanings at the intersection of fatness, exercise/sport, and female bodies. Analysis suggests that, through the interplay between bodily representations and audience engagement on the platform, normative ideals of femininity and acceptable bodies are unsettled, opening up possibilities for envisioning new, plural (athletic) femininities.

Keywords

YouTube, disidentification, affect, fat bodies, media representation

Introduction

In contemporary culture, the media is a key site that produces and disseminates body discourses in ways that privilege or marginalize specific body types and appearances. The bodies prominently featured in the media are nearly always thin, fit, and toned—and, importantly, the fatphobic culture these images signify tends to have a more profound impact on women than on men. While the bodies of fat men are often interpreted

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as a sign of social authority or prestige, women's fat bodies are more easily stigmatized and objectified (Bordo, 1993; Harjunen, 2023; Schur, 1983). Fat women are not only deemed morally deficient, unhealthy, and unsuccessful but also unfeminine and pressured to engage in special feminine practices (Giovannelli & Ostertag, 2009). Along with weight-loss dieting, fitness, and other similar physical discipline techniques are typically enforced by the fatphobic media on those bodies as an imperative means of body control and regulation. By participating in exercise and sport, fat women are expected to conform to sizing and assume appropriate femininity, thereby falling within the range of normalized women's bodies (Alison, 2020; Yoon, 2004). Rooted in body rejection and loathing, these physical activities are reduced to compulsory and oppressive actions intended to avoid being fat, rather than for pleasure and satisfaction, underpinned by the stereotype that fat women neither enjoy nor are adept at exercise and sport.

In the digital era, media representations of bodies are no longer confined to traditional platforms but are increasingly shaped by online spaces. With its features of ubiquity and interactivity, digital media reflects and engages diverse lived experiences, serving as a key site for body discourse construction that both reinforces and challenges body norms (Lupton, 2017). Although digital media, as with traditional media, is not exempt from the reproduction of fat discrimination narratives, it is recognized for its potential as a space for "exploring alternative ideas about what kinds of bodies are valuable, capable, and attractive" (Kyrölä, 2021, p. 113). Therefore, on digital platforms like YouTube, the meanings of fat and the body are continuously renegotiated. Building on these considerations, in this study, I examine YouTube content to understand how fat bodies are discursively constructed in contemporary media. To do this, what is focused on is *Athletic Fat Starting Today* (hereafter Athletic Fat), a South Korean YouTube channel featuring female comedian Kim, Min-kyung. Often publicly identified as a fat comedian, Kim attempts various exercises and sports in the show, incorporating humor into her presentation. Defying the prevalent belief that fat bodies, especially fat women's bodies, lack interest and skill in physical activities, Kim engages in them in almost every episode. Given the media's entrenched preference for thin, toned bodies, the achievements of this female comedian have garnered significant support and praise from viewers celebrating her athletic abilities. This study originates from an interest in the counterhegemonic potential manifested in the interplay between media representations and audience engagement. Similar to the multimodality afforded by various digital media today, YouTube serves as a platform not only for sharing video content but also for engaging with immediate audience responses through textual comments (Murthy & Sharma, 2019). Considering that media discourse is shaped both within and by such interactions, this study focuses on how specific media content functions as a space for rearticulating meanings at the intersection of fatness, exercise/sport, and female bodies.

For this approach, I employ the concept of disidentification which Muñoz (1999) defined as "strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (p. 11). As the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology—one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure (identification) nor strictly opposes it

(counteridentification)—disidentification is understood as a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within. In his analysis of the cultural politics of disidentification, Muñoz (1999) draws attention to disidentificatory performances across various cultural domains, emphasizing both their power of critique and transformative potential. For example, in his reading of drag star Vaginal Creme Davis's performances, he discusses how Davis's black and queer self disidentifies with mainstream identities and discourses, thereby complicating any simplistic understanding of class, race, and gender. While Muñoz (1999) primarily developed the theory of disidentification to explain how queers of color identify with ethnos or queerness, disidentification is a broader technique employed by various minoritarian subjects to engage with and survive within dominant cultural frameworks (see, e.g., Ivashkevich, 2013; Jamieson & Choi, 2017; Pepe, 2020). Alongside this, I also draw on Ahmed's (2004; 2015) theorization of affect to explore how personal experiences and emotions circulate on this platform. Recognizing individual feelings not as purely private concerns or psychological states but rather as social experiences mediated through cultural body practices, this study pays attention to affective attachment in the context of the representation and viewer interpretation of Kim's body, as well as its capacity to talk back to mainstream discourses of fat women's bodies (Ellison, 2009; Kim, 2019). In sum, I seek to illuminate digital content in light of these theoretical considerations as it remakes and reimagines representations of athletic fat women by tactically and simultaneously working on, with, and against the cultural hegemony of bodies.

Despite pervasive negative assumptions about fat and the body, it is important to note that a specific sociocultural context makes the meanings assigned to the fat body more complicated and diverse (Shaw & Kennedy, 2025). This Korean case study is one such attempt to better understand that the concept of fat and the meanings surrounding it are in flux, as well as the role of digital media in the process. In doing so, the aim is also to challenge and unsettle the common stereotypes that fatness is a dominant narrative only in Western cultures and that Asian women are supposed to be tiny and skinny, which accordingly leads to the belief that "there is no such thing as a fat Asian" (Hui, 2016, para. 11).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section provides a review of the relevant literature, focusing on gendered fatness and the representation of fat bodies in the media. This is followed by an overview of the selected YouTube channel, emphasizing its relevance and significance as a research subject. The methodological approach is then outlined, leading to a discussion of how the selected digital content disidentifies with dominant ideologies surrounding fat women's bodies.

Literature Review: Fat Female Bodies in the Media

Numerous previous studies have suggested that while slim bodies are normalized and even praised as the ideal beauty, fat bodies are readily conceptualized as objects requiring transformation because they are seen as a result of moral failings (Harjunen, 2023; Lim & Kim, 2012; Nam & Koh, 2011). However, this has not always been the case. Being fat was once considered a symbol of fertility, wealth, and beauty. In South

Korea, for example, until the country industrialized in the 1960s, people struggled to make a living and therefore regarded fatness as a marker of wealth, indicating access to an ample food supply (Cho & Lee, 2015). Today, however, in many societies, fat is problematized and oppressed through various intertwined systems of power such as the neoliberal economy, the public and private health sectors, the education system, the media, and more (Silk et al., 2011). Notably, as fat is not only abnormalized and undesired but also gendered and associated with femininity, such power does not function equally for all individuals (Bordo, 1993; Rinaldi et al., 2019). In comparison to men, societal standards for body size and physical norms are enforced more rigorously on women (Harjunen, 2023). Such regulation and constraint, governed by the male gaze, have become deeply entrenched in media representations of women. Reality shows focusing on weight loss and dieting, in particular, exemplify the intense body control and surveillance imposed on fat women. Once gaining global popularity, such television programs (e.g., *The Biggest Loser*) bifurcated bodies into categories of success or failure, good or bad, using the weight-loss competition format (Silk et al., 2011). Comparable shows in Korea, including *Diet War* and *BIGsTORY*, similarly reproduced such fragmented bodies while also revealing that the body politics of fat matters more to women. Reflecting patriarchal cultural norms in which appearance is crucial to determining a woman's worth, most participants in Korean shows in the 2010s were women (Choi, 2019; Kwak, 2017). While a common feature of most weight-loss television shows is their self-government effects regardless of country or gender of participants, Korean programs tend to heavily focus on and, in doing so, hierarchize women's bodies. For example, fat women participants are placed on stage alongside female celebrity mentors who weigh in the low 40–50 kg range, and their "different" bodies are contrasted part by part, often in close-up shots (Lim & Kim, 2012). Such programs constantly reaffirm standards of normalcy and deviance in women's appearances as a form of media power that contributes to the reinforcement of weight and appearance stigma. Serving as "a practical, direct locus of social control," as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault have pointed out (cited in Bordo, 1993, p. 241), female bodies become docile bodies in the media and beyond.

In addition, when fat women are mediated, funny stereotypes often mark their representation. According to Cooper and Heldman (2022), fat women are more likely to be portrayed as funny as their thinner counterparts in films and television. Fat female comedians, in particular, are consistently presented as ridiculous characters with excessive, uncontrollable appetites. Despite eating being one of the most natural, repetitive, and essential acts for human survival, when performed or displayed by a fat woman, it is frequently depicted as a deviant practice that explains her abnormal status—more precisely, her divergence from normative femininity (Lee & Jang, 2018). A woman's appetite has thus been both a target of suppression and linked to a "general rule governing the construction of femininity" (Bordo, 1993, p. 171). Alongside dieting, sport, fitness, and exercise serve as powerful normalizing mechanisms imposed by the media for the improvement or transformation of fat bodies (Schuster & Tealer, 2009). Media depictions of fat women and their performance of (often involuntary) exercise occur in the context of restoring health and ultimately

obtaining an ideal feminine figure through weight loss. Shaping up women's bodies is carried out in a way that conforms to the specific femininity demanded and expected by society, which is commonly heteronormative (Lee, 2018; Toffoletti et al., 2021). Since achieving a "beautiful body" that aligns with heterosexual ideals becomes the ultimate goal of weight loss, it inevitably involves the rejection of the current body, which might be deemed socially unacceptable. This is reflective of Shin's (2020) argument that, although thin body, healthy body, and beautiful body each represent entirely different values and implications, they tend to be conflated in Korean society. That is, the fat female body is often perceived as a state of lost femininity, particularly in relation to men, as it deviates from socially sanctioned norms of desirability. As a result, a thin body is readily equated with a beautiful body and slimness becomes normalized as an essential component of physical attractiveness. Furthermore, echoing the universalized obesity discourse that pathologizes fat bodies, public narratives often associate fatness with metabolic diseases, while thin bodies, in contrast, are widely perceived as healthier than fat bodies (Rich & Evans, 2005). As Kim (2001) points out, this cultural logic has emerged as one of the dominant public obsessions in Korea, assigning women the responsibility of maintaining a thin, healthy, and beautiful body. Importantly, the media functions as a key apparatus in the normalization of such healthism.

Today's media landscape is expansive, producing and delivering messages across various digital platforms. Over the past 20 years, the rise of internet news and social media has dramatically changed the realm of representation with increased public voices and information sharing (Bruce, 2016). Reflecting such change, a multilayered understanding of the discourse of athletic bodies constructed within new and diverse media is necessary. As previous studies have pointed out, traditional media is male-centered, and the representation of women engaging with sport and exercise is thus filtered through a male gaze (Bruce, 2013). Specifically, sportswomen receive less coverage than their male counterparts and are "routinely aestheticized, sexualized, and trivialized" (Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 361) when they are covered. This tendency is likewise present in South Korea, as demonstrated by numerous studies investigating sport and women in media (see, e.g., Cho, 2008; Kim & Kwon, 2005; Kwak & Lee, 2014; Nam, 2004; Nam & Kim, 2003; Park et al., 2015; Xue et al., 2019).

Researchers focusing on digital media share a perspective similar to that of those studying traditional media, noting both the presence of online misogyny and online platforms' feminist potential to disrupt and challenge male-centered gender ideologies (Toffoletti et al., 2021). Prior work in this area has discussed how women engage with physical activity through digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and personal blogs (see Lee & Kim, 2017; MacKay & Dallaire, 2014; Olive, 2015; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2012; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021). While there is a limited amount of research to date on athletic female bodies on YouTube, a few studies have shed light on the ways these bodies are constructed and consumed in the digital arena. For instance, McCarthy (2022) examined misogyny and abuse in the YouTube comments sections of professional women's street skateboarding competitions. Lee and Kwak (2020) focused on home training content on South Korean YouTube channels and noted

that these channels largely aimed to engage female viewers, with a primary emphasis on dieting and weight loss. Yoo and Kim's (2012) research, while not centered solely on women, delved into the prevalence of fat stigmatization within digital spaces by analyzing YouTube videos.

Pepe's (2020) analysis of Titica's performances on YouTube aligns more closely with the present study given its engagement with disidentification. By framing Titica as a disidentifying subject, this study explores how the Kudurista performer challenges dominant normative ideologies surrounding gender, sexuality, and race and reshapes the meaning of being a Black trans woman in popular culture through music, dance, and digital media. Similarly, Jamieson and Choi (2017) rely on Muñoz's concept of disidentification to analyze the career of Lorena Ochoa in the US-Ladies Professional Golf Association. They conceptualize disidentification as "the process of actively refusing an identification strategy and set of conditions in order to choose something different, not only for one's own striving but for the survival of whole communities" (p. 174) and illuminate the strategic and embodied ways in which Ochoa refuses to perform the Other for the white/ened public sphere.

Several scholars have drawn on affect theory, which serves as another key analytical lens in this study, to explore discourses surrounding the body in media contexts. For instance, Toffoletti and Thorpe (2021) have taken an affective approach to analyze gendered bodies in a women's online fitness community. They investigate how emotions such as pride, vulnerability, and shame are generated and circulated through fitspirational body images, and how affective expression functions to connect and compel the women involved. In a related vein, Pavlidis and Fullagar (2012) focus on online roller derby sites and discuss how affect is mobilized in the mediated lives of girls and women. Rinaldi et al. (2020) have applied a feminist perspective on affect within the field of fat studies. Referring to Sara Ahmed's theorization of emotion, they conceptualize *fatmisia*—defined as "hatred of fat, fatness, and fat persons" (p. 37)—as a complex affective force. While their study focuses on how antifat sentiments circulate and operate to erase fat life, Hynnä and Kyrölä (2019) turn to the affective politics of body positivity. By exploring body positive and fat activist blogs as sites of online fat activism, they argue that such digital spaces offer alternative ways of "feeling" one's body. As Kyrölä (2021) aptly points out, the popularity of body positive content online reflects a broader cultural fatigue with humiliation-based reality TV and a growing desire for the inclusion of a more diverse range of bodies in mainstream media and beyond. In digital media spaces, where meanings attached to fatness and the realities of living in a fat body are persistently contested and reshaped, users are able to reimagine alternative narratives of the body and fatness. And further, such practices contribute to wider political, social, and cultural discussions about how we make sense of bodies (Rich & Evans, 2005). Accordingly, this study positions itself as a timely intervention that examines the counterhegemonic potential of YouTube content. Building on the theoretical insights and scholarly interpretations from the body of literature above, it

aims to offer an additional feminist perspective for understanding contemporary bodies in relation to gender, fatness, and physical activity within digital spaces.

Contextual Background: Athletic Fat as a Subversive Cultural Text

YouTube content Athletic Fat is a spin-off of *Delicious Guys* on Comedy TV. Starting in 2015, *Delicious Guys* is a so-called *mukbang* show. Mukbang, a combination of the Korean words “muk-da” (eat) and “bang-song” (broadcast), is a popular broadcast genre known to have originated in South Korea, particularly thriving on digital media platforms like YouTube. In the series, four big-sized comedians visit restaurants in the country to try various dishes. Similar to other mukbang shows, the cast members typically consume large amounts of food at a time for entertainment purpose, which has raised health concerns among viewers. In response to such medical considerations, Athletic Fat was conceived as a “health project to eat better and healthier” (Naver, 2024). In the show, host Kim, Min-Kyung learns a variety of sports and exercises from experts in fields such as weight training, Pilates, jiu-jitsu, mixed martial arts, arm wrestling, golf, soccer, spinning, baseball, dance sport, and cycling. Breaking the commonly perceived incongruity between fat women and athletic bodies, Kim’s exceptional performance in these physical activities has become a key factor in the show’s popularity. As a Korean-language program produced in South Korea, the channel’s subscribers are predominantly Korean. Despite this regionally and linguistically limited audience, most videos have garnered over a million views. In particular, the channel’s first workout, which featured weight training, achieved an average of 2.63 million views across its 11 videos. Fans of Athletic Fat cheered her challenges and achievements, wittily dubbing her the “exercise genius” or “*Taereung*’s lost talent” (Kim, 2022). *Taereung* comes from the official name of South Korea’s Taereung National Training Center, a facility dedicated to the specialized training of elite athletes on Team Korea. Kim’s notable athletic ability is well demonstrated by her later representing South Korea as a member of the national team in the 2023 International Practical Shooting Confederation (IPSC) Handgun World Shoots.

While traditional mainstream media often normalizes misogyny, including the mockery of fat women, Athletic Fat tends to avoid this narrative. The show makes it clear that Kim does not exercise to lose weight to confirm to dominant aesthetic standards; instead, its purpose is to develop a healthy body to enjoy eating better. Indeed, after exercising, Kim and the cast members often dine together, either in a restaurant or in the studio. Each episode concludes with the cast saying, “Today, again, we had fun and ate well!” This approach seems to subvert the common myth that exercise for fat women is solely associated with weight loss, conveying that exercise is not merely a means to achieve a slender body. Such counterhegemonic implications of this channel have garnered not only a dedicated fan base but also positive recognition from the press. Numerous news outlets have reported on the channel’s success,

highlighting how it disrupts societal weight stigma and resonates with the public, particularly women. Furthermore, some reports have noted that “an increasing number of women are now working out not to achieve a ‘thin body’ but to build a ‘healthy body,’” attributing this shift in perspective to the influence of shows like *Athletic Fat* (Kim, 2020a).

Significantly, the success of the show is primarily credited to the host, Kim, Min-kyung. Since making her television debut in 2008, Kim has been regularly perceived as an overweight female comedian, frequently cast in roles that overemphasized her body size or portrayed her with a big appetite for humor. For example, in 2015, on the Korean comedy show *Gag Concert*, she played a “deluded fat woman.” According to Kyrölä (2021), this trope refers to fat female characters who perceive themselves in ways that differ from how others see them, typically in an overly positive or exaggerated manner. In the sketch, Kim’s character, who lives in apartment 302, mistakenly believes that the man in apartment 301 is romantically interested in her, even though he shows no such signs and, in fact, mocks her fat body in his monologue. Her misinterpretation of his attitude is framed as absurd and laughable, positioning her self-perception and desire as inherently delusional. Within the male-centered, heteronormative media industry, as well as the broader hegemonic social structures in which it operates, she remained confined to these limited roles—like other fat female comedians—contributing to the perpetuation of the objectification of fat women. On *Athletic Fat*, however, her identity is newly framed as she reclaims her body through exercise and sport, incorporating an athletic character into her persona as a comedian. Kim spontaneously creates humor while learning a new exercise or sport. For instance, she often amuses the audience by unexpectedly demonstrating impressive strength or quickly picking up new techniques. Even when she is exhausted or struggling, she maintains a playful attitude, exaggerating her reactions with dramatic sighs or witty quips like, “This isn’t meant for humans!” However, she never gives up and continues to push herself, which evokes a strong sense of support and admiration broadly shared among viewers. Building on this, her performance has been recognized for challenging stereotypes about fat (women’s) bodies in addition to “contributing to the formation of a positive image of plus-size female comedians” as noted by a pop culture critic (Kwon, 2020, Para. 14). In an interview, Kim, Min-kyung affirmed, “Who says only thin and pretty women can do Pilates? I wanted to show that I can do it too,” and added that she feels a deep sense of joy when viewers share how watching her boosted their confidence (Kim, 2020b, Para. 7). The show’s defiant and empowering quality is similarly evident in an interview with its director, Lee, Young-sik, who remarked,

The program started as a way to promote healthier eating, but seeing many women become inspired by Min-kyung’s workouts and decide to build muscle rather than simply aiming to become prettier gave me a sense of purpose. I hope that women who watch this program will no longer define beauty based on others’ standards, but rather their own. (Cho, 2020, Para. 8)

Given this background, the YouTube channel, which centers on a fat woman's athletic experiences, serves as an intriguing text for understanding how intersectional elements surrounding women's bodies such as fat, muscles, strength, health, appetite, eating, and femininity are culturally constructed in contemporary Korean society—which, like many other nations, is not free from a fat-obsessed culture (Murray, 2007). In contrast to traditional weight-loss shows that allegedly promote a fat-hating ideology, *Athletic Fat* invites the audience to reimagine the host comedian Kim as “a relatable realistic woman rather than relegating her to the margins of exaggerated and distorted comedy performance” (Lee & Jang, 2018, p. 175). Accordingly, the show recontextualizes exercise and sport, shifting away from typical oppressive and coercive disciplining practices. Taking into account the situation in Korea, where women trainers and their exercise demonstrations on YouTube are sometimes consumed like pornography, with close-ups of their breasts, buttocks, and genitals under the male gaze (Shin, 2020), the sociocultural meanings of a show hosted by a fat female comedian become even more distinctive and important. Altogether, I argue that such content is a potentially subversive cultural text that allows the envisioning of a new (athletic) femininity.

Methodology

The YouTube series *Athletic Fat* has aired every Wednesday since February 20, 2020, with episodes running approximately 10–20 min each. Season 1 concluded on February 20, 2023, with the final episode covering training for the IPSC Handgun World Shoots. This study examined episodes that aired up until February 24, 2021, the start date of this research. I collected and reviewed a total of 54 videos, excluding commercial and other videos not focused on exercise or sport performances. The physical activities covered include weight training, mixed martial arts, Pilates, arm wrestling, golf, soccer, baseball, cycling, dance sports, jiu-jitsu, and aerial yoga. Each episode generated a substantial number of comments, ranging from approximately 1,000 to over 5,000, reflecting the show's popularity. To make the data manageable, the top 30 comments per video—ranked by YouTube's algorithm, which considers factors such as the number of likes and replies among others—were selected, yielding a total of 1,620 comments for analysis. While the following sections will provide a more detailed analysis of the collected comments, a brief overview of their general characteristics reveals that they predominantly convey positive emotions, such as support, admiration, and empathy. This does not necessarily mean that there were no negative comments, including hateful or objectifying remarks, among those posted on the channel's videos. With reference to Kyrölä's (2021) account of the rise of body positivity in online spaces, I rather understand the abundance of positive emotional responses as an indication that the program received widespread appreciation from the public and that the comments emerged from such fandom-driven engagement. YouTube's machine learning algorithms, designed to filter out spam and harmful comments, might have also played a role in shaping this comment landscape to some extent (Tian, 2023). The comments were often accompanied by reactions such as likes/

dislikes or replies. However, due to the overwhelming volume of sampled remarks, a systematic analysis of likes/dislikes or replies was not conducted; thus, the scope of this analysis included main comments only. Given the dynamic and ever-changing nature of YouTube, I organized and saved the comments along with commenter names in a Microsoft Excel file.

The collected data were analyzed using feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA). As Kim (2001) points out, the body exists not as a naturally given biological condition but rather as a cumulative effect of discourses that render it understandable and acceptable in a particular society. Feminist critical discourse analysis, which brings a feminist perspective to critical discourse analysis, is particularly effective in capturing the complex dynamics of power and ideology within discourse that contribute to maintaining gendered social hierarchies (Lazar, 2007). In addition, a key aspect of FCDA approaches is recognizing that gender intersects with other identities (Delia et al., 2025). In this study examining gendered fat in the media, FCDA is thus a useful tool for unpacking the complex links among femininity, fatness, and exercise as constructed in discourse. In line with FCDA's critical analysis of language along with other semiotic modalities, I reviewed titles, dialogues, closed captions, gestures, and visual images of the collected videos. Following this, sampled comments were analyzed and interpreted to gain deeper insights into audience reactions. Drawing on the work of Pavlidis and Fullagar (2012) and Toffoletti and Thorpe (2021), I do not aim to produce generalizable findings but rather focus on the disidentificatory practices emerging within this online space and the affective connections formed therein. Specifically, I consider not only Kim's performances themselves but also the expanded terrain of body discourse production, where her performances and audiences' linguistic reactions intertwine and various emotions are mobilized, to examine how they collectively serve as a form of disidentification. Given that affect is not simply generated on digital media but circulates and reshapes how bodies, identities, and communities are understood and acted upon (Hynnä et al., 2019), attending to the flows of affect is crucial for a better understanding of the disidentificatory process within this space, namely the ways in which the intersection of athletic performance and audience commentary complicates the meanings attached to fat women's bodies (Muñoz, 1999). Employing this theoretical and methodological bricolage, three key themes were generated, which are presented sequentially in the following sections. When comments are included in the results, only the first one or two initials of each commenter's name were disclosed to ensure anonymity.

Reconceptualized Eating and Exercise Dynamic

As previously discussed, traditional weight-loss competition television shows, which predominantly feature women, have typically presented exercise as a means to slim down and embody idealized notions of femininity. However, in *Athletic Fat*, this old cliché of exercise as a method for weight loss is avoided. In the first episode on weight training (Week 2), trainer Yang, Chi-seung's explicitly states, "This [show]

is not about weight loss,” thereby clarifying that the program does not promote ideals of thinness or conventional beauty.

Furthermore, along with their often extreme emphasis on exercise, this genre of shows highlights dieting as an additional disciplinary practice. Eating itself is associated with concepts such as addiction or intemperance and is stigmatized as the direct cause of obesity and poor health. It is thus framed in contrast to physical activity as if the two are inherently opposed. Especially for women, physical activity is often regarded as a means of achieving a lean and toned physique, casting appetite as something that must be controlled and suppressed to attain this goal. However, in *Athletic Fat*, food is instead treated as “a reward for hard work in exercise” (Mixed Martial Arts; Week 20), as is clearly reflected in the show’s format: each episode starts with learning and practicing a sport and ends with eating. The show further introduces ways to enjoy food more fully or to cook it better without adhering to the traditional diet formula of reducing fats and carbohydrates while increasing protein intake. With such disidentificatory potential, the purpose and meaning of exercise and eating are reclaimed. Further to this, Kim’s expressions such as “Another successful stomach bulk-up today!” (Weight Training, Week 2 & 7) and “Everything tastes good after exercise” (Weight Training, Week 9) seamlessly integrate exercise and eating into a cohesive, unified experience. These rhetorical practices playfully subvert normative cultural constraints that condemn the desire for food in fat bodies by positioning the act of eating within an intimate relationship with exercise. Clearly, exercise is framed not as a means to slim down or as a corrective measure imposed on fat bodies with presumptively excessive appetites. It is rather reappropriated as a condition for the enjoyment of eating well, creating a paradox in which food becomes the very purpose of exercise. Such energies of resistance and positivity influence other bodies, encouraging them to move, act, and respond (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021). That is, viewers confront fatphobic assumptions and practices by advocating for the reconceptualization of the relationship between food and exercise: “Most fitness programs focus on turning ‘fat’ into ‘thin,’ forcing people to follow strict diets and shed weight ... but this one doesn’t, and I love it” (K*****, Weight Training, Week 4); “I’m really enjoying this show. The highlight is finishing the workout and then happily eating afterward!” (C*****, Weight Training, Week 6). Further to this, the movement of supportive sentiments often leads to more engaged body affirmation, evoking emotions of self-acceptance and a sense of purpose, as seen in the following comments:

Rather than exercising to become slim, I now want to live confidently, loving myself, and exercising while enjoying delicious food for my health. This show has taught me so much. Because I’m overweight, I’ve always felt the pressure to lose weight, leading to cycles of starving, binge eating, exercising, then feeling guilty and stressed, which only made me eat more and lose confidence. I was really stuck in a negative cycle, but this show has helped me change my mindset. Min-kyung is truly inspiring. (S***, Weight Training, Week 6)

The intentional integration of exercise and eating in this show, along with the circulation of emotions it generates among viewers, carries disidentificatory effects. That is, rather than simply adhering to or rejecting dominant ideologies surrounding exercise, food, and fat women's bodies, the show instead recycles and remakes these ideologies through a reconceptualization of their relationship (Muñoz, 1999). Such encoding is further collectively reinforced in the comment section with the affective force of emotions at play. Through this process, natural appetite mechanisms are normalized, challenging the cultural hegemony that has privileged thinness in women's bodies and mandated rigorous exercise and appetite control.

Emergence of “Strong Athletic Unnie”

In a contemporary society that assumes fat women are uninterested in exercise and incapable of physical competence, Kim's body, skillfully performing various sports and exercises, emerges as norm-violating and disidentificatory, much like the title *Athletic Fat* itself. The oppressive gaze on fat women's bodies is thus unsettled by Kim's passionate and adept performance of various physical activities in each episode. Another tactic for complicating stereotypical portrayals of fat women in this show is presenting Kim as a physically strong woman. In a society where a woman must “appropriately bear the feminine burden and display physical abilities significantly inferior to men to be readily recognized as a woman” (Shin, 2020, p. 55), a strong woman image is commonly associated with deviance. One way to emphasize Kim's image as a strong woman is through her juxtaposition with the show's director. The conflict between Lee, Young-sik, the male director of the program, and Kim, Min-kyung—often dubbed “Skeleton versus Robocop” or “Anchovy and General”—serves not only as a key source of humor but also as a crucial narrative device that elevates Kim as a woman whose strength exceeds that of men. Director Lee is almost the antithesis of Kim: while Kim is portrayed as a strong, fat woman, Lee is depicted as a thin and weak man. In various episodes, the director repeatedly displays his own clumsiness and frailty alongside Kim, Min-kyung's muscular strength and athletic prowess. For example, in an episode featuring weight training (Week 2), Kim grumbles about the heavy weight while doing trap bar deadlifts with her personal trainer, then challenges Lee to give it a try. He appears with the on-screen text “Hidden weakling, 61kg” and attempts the deadlift at the same weight. His awkward form elicits comical scolding from both Kim and the trainer, followed by his surrender. This strong-woman-versus-weak-man dynamic culminates in a battle of the sexes between the two a few weeks later. After undergoing training, they competed to determine who could lift more weight across various exercises, including the chest press, shoulder press, incline press block, leg extension, and leg press. In the final cumulative weight tally, Kim lifted a total of 706 kg, while Lee lifted 430 kg (Weight Training, Week 10).

If Kim's showdown with a man portrayed as weak and thin is an intended spectacle with humorous intent, her multiple victories in arm or leg wrestling against muscular men clearly demonstrate her strength and athletic abilities. Although this man–woman

rivalry narrative is consistent with gender binary logic, resignifying fat bodies as athletically skilled serves to dismantle the normative articulation of fatness as merely large and lacking athletic prowess (Sykes & McPhail, 2008). Additionally, the contrast operates as a witty and powerful reversal of traditional gender stereotypes, particularly the notion that women are weak and fragile.

The affective capacities of such representations are evident in the comments as well. A woman who defeats men is circulated as a cool *unnie*, someone others admire and aspire to emulate: “Unnie, it’s incredible that you’re stronger than men. Totally respect you for that muscle power!” (Weight Training, Week 3); “Watching you being strong is so awesome! I was always the one sitting on the sidelines during PE class, so you’re truly someone I admire, unnie” (Weight Training, Week 10). Unnie is a Korean term used by women to address an older sister or a slightly older female friend. The word expresses warmth, respect, and a sense of closeness and is commonly used even in fandom contexts, where a younger female fan may refer to an admired female celebrity as unnie. Following Ahmed (2004), unnie functions as a “sticky sign” here, attaching itself to emotions such as admiration, awe, and aspiration, as demonstrated in the comment section. This attachment fosters connections and empowerment among different individuals, ultimately participating in reconstructing the boundaries of normative women’s bodies. That is, these performative and linguistic signs contest the symbolic conflation of fatness with unathleticism—an association more readily applied to fat women’s bodies—and, by extension, challenge a misogynistic discourse portraying a strong (fat) woman who outperforms men as a deviant figure. These stereotypes are not merely rejected but rather recycled as “powerful and seductive sites of self-creation” (Muñoz, 1999, pp. 27–28), resulting in Kim being resignified as a strong, athletic unnie.

Embraced Vulnerability: Building Motivation, Empathy, and Comfort

On Athletic Fat, many of the exercises and sports in which Kim participates have long been perceived as masculine domains. By actively engaging in and excelling at these activities, she challenges both fatphobic and gender-based stereotypes. In this light, her attempt at Pilates might appear to be an act of conformity to normative gender expectations, given that it is commonly regarded as a feminine physical activity dominated by slender-bodied women invested in maintaining such physiques. However, Kim’s successful execution of challenging poses complicates the sexist notion, fueled by fat stigma, that Pilates is merely an easy, leisurely physical activity suited primarily for already slim and flexible women. At the same time, Kim openly displays her struggles while practicing Pilates. For example, she occasionally collapses onto the floor, complaining about the heat, or directly grumbles to the camera, saying, “This is too hard.” The combination of Kim’s visible vulnerability and eventual success resonates with audiences, evoking inspiration, support, and a sense of motivation. The flow of these positive sentiments, operating as affective forces, influences other bodies to

take action, or at least fosters a desire to act with a sense of confidence (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021):

As someone who's been plus-sized for 20 years, I feel incredibly grateful watching you on Athletic Fat. I used to feel small and lack confidence wherever I went because of my size. But watching you work out like this gives me the feeling that I can do it, too. Thank you so much! (K*****, Pilates, Week 5)

I've been doing Pilates for 16 months and am amazed every time I see you. All my friends at the Pilates center realized how much we have to improve after watching you; Min-kyung unnie is our role model. I want to be a spine beauty like you. (M*****, Pilates, Week 5)

“Spine beauty,” a rhetorical expression used in comments to describe Kim, strategically reworks normative discourses surrounding beauty and the female body. The coined term suggests that beauty is not limited to outward appearance but is instead associated with strength and resilience, symbolized by a durable spine. Rather than completely rejecting conventional ideals of beauty, this linguistic innovation—in line with other instances discussed above—reappropriates them (Muñoz, 1999), disrupting the traditional association of female attractiveness with slimness and fostering new conceptualizations of femininity. Through this disidentificatory move, Pilates is decoupled from its narrow association with thin, flexible bodies and reimagined as an inclusive space that affirms the diversity of women's embodied experiences.

Alongside inspiration and motivation, feelings of empathy and comfort are also generated and reiterated within this digital space. Kim performs outstandingly in most of the exercises and sports she attempts, though not always. As in Pilates, Kim does not conceal her struggles, occasionally shedding tears from the intensity, moments that are captured up close by the camera. In similar reality shows, participants who struggle are often confronted by shouting coaches and coercive encouragement, turning their hardships into voyeuristic entertainment for audiences (Gordon, 2020). However, in *Athletic Fat*, Kim's mistakes and moments of vulnerability are not treated as sources of amusement, nor does the show induce discomfort by promoting excessive exercise routines. As an example, while learning track cycling (a bicycle racing sport), Kim falls repeatedly and eventually sits on the ground in tears, muttering, “Why can't I do it?” Rather than pressuring her, the coaches respond empathetically, saying, “It's okay not to be able to do it,” and “Wouldn't it be a miracle if you did everything well right away?” (Track Cycling, Week 1). Kim nods, quietly encourages herself, and continues participating. In response, viewers share their own struggles with learning to ride a bicycle, expressing empathy and offering words of comfort for Kim's challenges:

Seeing Min-kyung unnie crying because she feels sad and sorry breaks my heart. The way she puts her heart and soul into everything she does is truly impressive. Even people who

know how to ride bicycles struggle with thin-wheeled ones at first; starting off with that was extremely difficult right from the beginning. (Bi**, Track Cycling, Week 1)

I totally understand how you feel, unnie. I've been learning to ride a bicycle recently too, and it's not easy at all. I get so scared, and it's frustrating, but seeing unnie going through the same process really comforts me. I felt the same way, wondering why I couldn't do it, why it was so scary ... I still can't balance well on my own, but I'll keep trying, thinking of you. (Cha**, Track Cycling, Week 1)

These collective feelings of empathy, support, and comfort shift the focus away from the voyeuristic attention placed on fat women's bodies and instead facilitate a supportive environment in which vulnerability is affirmed rather than ridiculed. Circulating among multiple bodies, these emotions function as affective glue that sticks and connects people together, demonstrating how, within this context, fat female subjectivities are renegotiated. Thus, the previously stigmatized fat female body is resignified as a "confidently displayed new spectacle" (Lee & Jang, 2018, p. 189), suggesting the possibility of imagining new and plural forms of femininity.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined how fat women's bodies are discursively represented and negotiated on YouTube. Given that digital media functions as a site where identities are disassembled and reconfigured (Pepe, 2020), the analysis focused on how the selected content rearticulates meanings emerging at the intersection of fatness, exercise/sport, and female bodies. Specifically, to explore the strategic and resistant self-making of fat women's identities in this digital space, disidentification theory was employed as a central framework. I also drew on Ahmed's theory of affect to investigate "what emotions do" within such disidentificatory practices. In doing so, the analysis has identified three key themes through which the content disidentifies with dominant ideologies surrounding fat female bodies. First, the show challenges the fatphobic dichotomy between appetite and exercise by presenting food not as something to be rejected but as an enjoyable, rewarding part of physical activity, thereby legitimizing the body's natural appetite and pleasure responses. This resistant practice, further reinforced by audience reactions that convey body affirmation and self-acceptance, ultimately disrupts the oppressive ideology that has long equated female beauty with thinness and demanded strict exercise and appetite regulation to uphold that ideal. The show also enables a resistance to fatphobic discourse on women's bodies by emphasizing the physical strength of fat women. Through her outstanding performances across various exercises and sports, Kim's body is portrayed as capable, powerful, and athletically skilled. This representation evokes affective responses, particularly admiration and aspiration, as seen in the comment section, where she is celebrated as a "strong unnie." While Kim's performance advances an alternative understanding of fatness by associating it with strength and physical skill, she occasionally reveals moments of vulnerability, which invites audiences to

share their own bodily narratives. Imbued with empathy, comfort, and support, these emotional reactions stick to some bodies, fostering a sense of connection and reinforcing solidarity among them.

As demonstrated, Kim uses her athletic body to disidentify with dominant ideologies surrounding fat women's bodies. By actively engaging in diverse sports and exercises, she complicates normative discourses on fatness, and her body is thus constructed as an empowered site for positive fat femininity (Sykes & McPhail, 2008). Kim's body becomes a public spectacle in this online space, "but on her own terms" (Pepe, 2020, p. 1207). While Kim's physical being is a central point of disidentification, the reception and interpretation of her performances in the comment section generate and circulate a range of emotions. As Ahmed (2015) suggests, emotions "do" something beyond private states. In this context, emotions move through the virtual space and stick to some bodies, drawing them together and participating in the strategic reconstruction of fat female subjectivity. The various bodily and linguistic signs circulating in this internet-based space jointly engage in disrupting traditional myths imposed on fat women's bodies. Normative ideals of femininity and bodily acceptability are thus unsettled and reimagined. In addition, prevailing notions of what exercise, appetite, and beauty mean for fat bodies are undergoing critical reevaluation and are being reframed. While it is not my intention to generalize from this single case study that digital media unquestionably serves as a site for producing counternarratives against hegemonic body discourses, this discussion highlights its role in negotiating a phobic, majoritarian public sphere that targets fat women's bodies. To gain deeper insight into this dynamic, further research is needed to explore how more varied digital platforms and different sociocultural contexts influence the construction of fat bodies.


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