

# Round Body into a Square Hole

## Non-Heterosexual Women's Fatphobic Language in Dating App Profiles

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*Societal ideologies teach us that fitness is not a desirable quality in dating. We learn the rules to be sexually successful through our social environment and interactions. In examining dating app profiles of non-heterosexual women, we illustrate the fatphobic language that is being used by daters. We categorized three types of daters: the Lifestyle Dater; the I'm Fat, but...Dater; and the Body Positive Dater. Our dating world is guided too much by image and not enough by the person themselves.*

### Introduction

We learn the rules to be sexually successful through our social environment and interactions (Clark 15–18; Gagnon and Simon 21–30). We are punished for behaviours that are deemed wrong and praised for behaviours that are acceptable (Forsyth 81–103; Gagnon and Simon 4–6; Glassford et al. 425.) Societal ideologies teach us that fitness is not a desirable quality in dating. This paper will focus on how the language used in current non-heterosexual women's dating app profiles is fatphobic.

The apps that are available to daters do not vary much (Paska 2545–2546). We make some sort of a profile with a description of ourselves. Most folk comment that they hate writing “these things” but they offer a brief understanding of the person being shown in the picture. Few of the apps limit the number of words or characters that we can use to describe ourselves; however, articles on how best to write a profile say not to be too wordy (Lee) or “be as short and sweet as possible” (M). The predominant gaze stands on the image, less so on the text.

The measure of a dater's desirability exists in the social

mores. The standards of beauty, for women, in today's zeitgeist is the perky breasted, small waistline, long legged, white woman (Conte 67–71; Lane 239–247; Moradi et al. 420–421). The media enforces the image that we are to be attracted to and the image that we are to conform to (Hooks 61–62; Karsay et al. 9; *Deadly Persuasion*). We reinforce these standards on ourselves and on one another. We have all been privy to a conversation judging another person on some superficiality; this gossiping behaviour is meant to enforce the norm—i.e., beauty standards (Conte 67–71; Goldstein and Cialdini 167–169; DiFonzo and Bordia 273–275). If we follow them, we will not be the subject of ridicule. The dating app is a place where we are meant to achieve these standards to be desirable—to be dateable.

The standard of beauty—specifically, being skinny—is deep-rooted in our society (Conte 67–71; Felkins 181; Silvestrini 305; Stoll and Egner 1–16; White 2). Fatphobia (biases against fat folk) is entrenched in our language, our images, and our self-image (Conte 67, 2017; Silvestrini 305–306; Stoll and Egner 1–16; Taylor 459–460; White 2). Our study of non-heterosexual women's dating app profiles allows us to illuminate this phenomenon.

Our research was performed in a textual analysis paradigm. We gathered our data from available readings, such as profiles accessible to anyone with a dating account (Humphreys 78–100; Lane 143–145). Texts are open to interpretation and steeped in meaning and rhetoric (Scotland 9–14). It is through their analysis that we can expose the roots of their construction (Kuckhartz 39–56). It would be socially unacceptable to write that you are only interested in dating skinny folk. Instead, we use language

that indicates a preference for an active partner. Diet culture is made up of the language and symbols that tell us that decreased caloric intake and high levels of activity results in a healthy—a.k.a. skinny—body (Jovanovski and Jaeger 1–3). Therefore, the dating profile requesting a partner with an active lifestyle will be read as skinny.

We reviewed 225 profiles on the dating apps *OK Cupid* and *Tinder*. Our parameters were women between the ages of 25 to 40 who were seeking non-heterosexual women. We performed an iterative textual analysis on the profiles.

Our first iteration of the data found 40 profiles had some relevance to fatphobia. The second iteration allowed us to parse the profiles into 3 categories of individuals.

#### *The Lifestyle Dater*

#### *The I'm Fat, but... Dater*

#### *The Body Positive Dater*

### **Discussion**

#### *The Lifestyle Dater*

The Lifestyle Dater usually has a picturesque outdoor scene photo showing them at the top of a mountain or them in a canoe. Their profile photos are all showing activities. These daters tend to be “skinny” and have full length photos in active poses. This dater builds their profile in seemingly innocuous language that speaks of being fit, active, living a healthy lifestyle, etc. These words and phrases are based in diet culture (Davidson 1–9; Felkins 181–183; *Deadly Persuasion*; Murray 1–7). The more active we are, the more weight we lose—therefore active persons are skinny persons (Kianpour 120; Lazuka et. al. 85–86). In turn, this narrative links fatness to laziness, inactivity, and ill health (Conte 27–48; Davidson 9; Taylor 461–462; White 1–3). The diet culture is one that we have lived in for years. We may not seek to define our self within this fatphobic language, our words are often spoken without careful thought. Despite our intention, the message is heard. This type of dater is advertising themselves as “healthy and fit” but they are also calling for the “healthy and fit” partner.

My ideal days involve gardening, swimming, kayaking and riding my bike. I would love to meet more paddle buddies and buddies to paddle.

This dater is speaking of their lifestyle but also indicating that they wish to share their level of activity with a potential partner. While it is not always stated that their ideal partner possesses these same lifestyle characteristics, it is implied.

Lover of chunky animals and hunky humans.

The framing of the above dater’s introduction places the emphasis that animals are allowed to be chunky while humans are not. Perhaps this dater is going for the rhyme but the fatphobia is there.

Health Fitness Personal Growth lover, looking to connect with likeminded inspiring men/women.

Active, athletic, intelligent woman...In my spare time I enjoy curling, playing guitar and flute, reading, cross-country skiing, yoga, and most recently rock climbing.

We both live a great active lifestyle...Staying active. Moving, hiking, walking, biking, exploring.

The above daters are shaping (pun intended) who fits best into their life. Dating rules tell us that we are supposed to seek someone like us (Essig 63; Lee et al. 669–670; Liu et al. 95). We listen for things that we have in common to assess suitability. The fat person need not apply. We have leagues that we are supposed to date within (Lee 669–670; Shaw et al. 942). Comments are made when a couple is not matched. Why is she with him? She is out of his league. The colloquial language of dating is filled with social norms—we conceal the fatphobia. We have grown to a place where we are not supposed to state our prejudice directly. Although some people do...

This person should be healthy but even I enjoy a good burger now & then 😊

A groovy waistline will open doors.

#### *The I'm Fat, but... Dater*

The I’m Fat, but... Dater has photos that are cropped and angled to focus the gaze on their face as opposed to their “not skinny” body. These daters often have group photos. The curated collection of photos that this dater displays might be read as a lack of confidence regarding their body.

This category of dater is broader (again, pun intended) than the previous. It contains a number of profiles that share the view that fatness is a package that needs to be wrapped in a prettier bow.

Short, curvy, and sassy.

I am 5.3 with curves in all the right places.

\*Authors' note: we didn't know that curves were hanging out in the wrong places.

Strong, self-made, independent, well-educated, world-travelling, curvy woman here. Extremely active.

Language is beautiful. We can use it in a myriad of ways without intention, as with our lifestyle daters, and with intention, as with the daters shown above. We internalize the knowledge that our type of body is not desirable (Felkins 180–185; Haines et al. 181–182;), then we poeticize our language to make our bodies sound less objectionable. Dating is a meat market (last pun, we promise). We are selling ourselves as tasty, consumable. If we are not the Grade-A cut of beef (Bliswhitecries), we add a flourish of language—red, plump—that salivates in a different manner (Bliswhitecries; Del Gigante).

In similar fashion, these daters can finesse their profile by indicating their drive to change their body. This dater expresses that they are working on their weight. They have internalized the message that skinny is beautiful and are indicating that they are aware of their lack of skinny, but that they will one day fit that standard. We are trying to put our round bodies through a square hole. Perhaps the daters believe that if they are skinny/ier, they will be deemed more dateable.

I would be what's considered a bbw [big beautiful woman] but, despite that I've embarked on a journey to get more healthy.

Currently I'm a sexy extra-curvy hourglass figure.

Currently my main focus is getting back into fitness (mostly cycling, walks and hikes atm)...

Within this group of profiles, we stumbled upon the self-denigrating person. Humour can take on many forms: sarcasm, puns, mockery, etc. (Larkin-Galiananes 4–16). One form of humour used in dating is self-denigration. Self-denigration is in its simplest terms, putting yourself down with a gesture toward humour (Cann et al. 452–453; Larkin-Galiananes 4–6). It is used to maintain social hierarchies (Cann et al. 452–453; Schnurr and Plester 309–311). We are maintaining the norms by humourizing the aspects of our self that do not fit the desire. Negging has become a prevalent form of flirting. Negging is the use of insults when flirting that are hidden in a praising statement (Green et al. 3–5). For example, “those earrings are really nice, I like to shop at the dollar store too.” Self-denigration and negging seem to fall along the same lines. Using negative phrasing and

language to be sexually successful. Humour is an attractive quality for a mate (Bressler and Balshine 29; Cann et al. 452–453; Cann et al. 1–3). Humour is often a trait that is developed to gain higher social desirability (Cann et al. 452–453; Cann et al. 1–34). We found instances of this self-denigrating humour in the profiles.

I'm an artsy chunky trans masc with no respect for the gender binary or myself.

I'm a tall and chonky non-binary ghost pokemon trainer with no time and lots of feelings about volleyball (anime) and whose current hairstyle is a wild purple-ish mullet...

Tall + I like to call myself athle-thicc

Turning toward a more positive note, the dater that uses flourishing language can also exist in a body positive mindset.

Unashamedly curvy

#### *The Body Positive Dater*

The Body Positive Dater displays their fat. The rules of hiding or wrapping fat in a prettier bow are unabashedly ignored. These daters “unapologetically” acknowledge their fatness. The anti-fatphobia movement has brought about the message that bodies of all types are beautiful (Lazuka et al. 85–86).

I appreciate kinky people who are sex and body positive

I am perfectly content in my fat body.

Unapologetically fat as fuck

Queer fat femme slut <3...I'm fat. I love being fat. Don't message me if you aren't into all bodies...

The fat positive daters seem to be rising in numbers. There is an intersection with feminism, social justice, and body positive folks' profiles. All the social justice acronyms are present on most of the profiles.

ACAB, anti-fascism, anti-colonialism, anti-racism, pro fat, pro sex work, and pro radical kindness, are all super important to me.

So much for not talking about politics on the first date. We all should concern ourselves with garnering a better



Original Artwork by: Crystal Shannon

understanding of the social constructions that constrain anyone from fully engaging with society.

### Conclusion

In order to determine someone's worthiness, we are taking very superficial routes. We are increasingly being turned into flashes across a screen with few words. Pervasive fatphobic ideologies have been solidified into our everyday. The language that we use carries so much meaning in it. We often try to deny our own prejudices by cloaking them in something else. "I'm not fatphobic, I just have a preference for smaller folk." This preferential language is an excuse that we give ourselves to get out of confronting the pillars upon which our knowledge is built. The difficulty in not examining our own biases is not only that they control how we assess others but also how we assess ourselves.

Humans are extremely complicated; more than a visual inspection is required to reach our milk chocolatey goodness inside. Our weight, in a society that hates fat, should not be something that is considered when searching for people of value for our lives. The most valuable information about a person cannot be seen. In the short number of words that we use to describe ourselves in a dating profile, why does weight seem to be given such weight?

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## YVONNE TRAINER

### Betrayal

This February my body betrayed me  
It was always wanting to lie down or waddle into the living room  
and sit in a cushioned chair to spill its pale full moon over  
the horizon of my waistline  
My thighs just sat there like two dumb stone-boats  
bearing the weight of this four-million-year-old lunar object

Outside the trees grew tall as towers without leaves  
The footprints in the snow appeared as long and narrow  
as the milky way in a thin line of sky  
Every picket in the fence stood long and lean  
as if to mock my curved spine burdened by layers of flesh

Then slowly March staggered in  
The sky became weighted down with cold  
The Canada geese grew heavy                      They flew low  
Chickadees grew round and full                      It was as though they might burst  
The roofs of houses sagged with tons on snow  
After three tries    I hoisted myself up

I was a mountain waiting to topple  
My round face looked out the window    The earth’s face looked back.

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S. Kasaei. Mixed media on canvas. 20 x 60 cm