"A GIRL LIKE ME" THE REPRESENTATION OF FAT FEMALE CHARACTERS AND FATNESS IN THREE COMEDY FILMS

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Tämän tutkielman aiheena on tutkia lihavien naishahmojen ja lihavuuden representaatioita komediaelokuvissa. Aineisto koostui kolmesta elokuvasta, joissa on lihava naispäähahmo: *Isn't It Romantic* (2019), *Sierra Burgess is a Loser* (2018) ja *Dumplin'* (2018). Lisäksi kahta lihavaa sivuhahmoa analysoitiin lyhyesti. Tutkielman tarkoituksena oli selvittää, kuinka näitä naishahmoja ja lihavuutta representoidaan kyseisissä elokuvissa.

Tutkielma on laadullinen analyysi, joka hyödyntää kriittistä diskurssianalyysia. Analyysi huomioi hahmojen visuaalisen ulkonäön ja ilmeen, heidän käytöksensä sekä hahmojen romanttiset suhteet. Hahmoja analysoitiin yksityiskohtaisesti elokuva kerrallaan, ja tavoitteena oli tarkastella elokuvia ja hahmoja keskittyen lihavuuteen. Yksittäisten analyysien jälkeen hahmojen ja lihavuuden representaatioita verrattiin keskenään lyhyesti.

Analyysi osoitti, että lihavien naishahmojen representaatioissa oli samankaltaisuuksia. Päähenkilöt esitettiin elokuvissa viisaina ja hauskoina. He pukeutuivat melko peittäviin ja kotoisiin vaatteisiin. Päähahmoilla oli joitain stereotyyppisiä piirteitä, joita yhdistetään lihaviin naisiin. Yhdessä elokuvassa oli fyysistä, lihavan naisen kehoon liittyvää huumoria. Elokuvissa naiset olivat romanttisia kohteita, mutta he osoittivat epävarmuutta ulkonäöstään ja kehonsa koosta romanttisiin suhteisiin liittyen. Jokainen päähahmo päätyi elokuvassa parisuhteeseen. Lihavilla sivuhahmoilla ei ollut romanttisia suhteita. Vaikka lihavien naisten representaatio on parempi kuin ennen, ovat tulevat tutkimukset lihavuuden representaatioista muissa kulttuurituotteissa tarpeen.

Asiasanat – Keywords Representaatio, lihavuus, lihavuustutkimus, naishahmot, elokuvat

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1   INTRODUCTION

We live in a dietary world where people's weights are constantly under criticism and the diet culture blossoms: one can eat Christmas chocolates until New Year but then the diet starts, and before summer one needs to diet to wear a bikini on the beach. The media is full of weight loss tips, and news about celebrities losing weight makes headlines from time to time. More recently the weight-losses of Rebel Wilson and Adele have made the news multiple times (e.g., Respers France 2020a; Respers France 2020b).

Weight is a topic much debated, and many have opinions on the matter. Children still get bullied because of their weight, and adults can experience discrimination because of their physical appearance. Criticism of physical appearance is something that women in particular deal with. Society supports a certain kind of idea of the ideal woman and even young girls view their bodies as something to be changed, modified, and corrected to fit that ideal (Mills, 2010, p. 34).

Our beauty standards and what popular culture shows as attractive are thin bodies and these ideals of beauty can be very harmful to a viewer who may feel dissatisfied with themselves because of the representation. Almost every celebrity picture we see has been modified, even in films. The problem is that this creates concerning expectations for people who do not recognize that these imagines have been tampered with; they are not real. Instead of seeing them as modified, people start to think they should aspire to look like these celebrities. (Bordo, 2003, p. xviii.)

Popular culture products offer a wide variety of representations that we consume on a day-to-day basis. These representations are important because representations help produce meaning and they are used to say or represent something meaningful about something to other people (Hall, 2013, p. 1). Omitting a group of people from these representations can send a message that they are less important than others. One of these often omitted groups has been fat people.

When it comes to the representation of fat women, it is severely lacking (Fikkan & Rothblum 2011). It is still, to this day, quite rare to see a bigger girl as the main character. The representations we have can often be harmful because their weights are often used in jokes or as something to be 'cured' from. There seems to be one type of story told through the representation of bigger characters and that is that they are insecure and feel uncomfortable in their own body. It is also very upsetting when the representations we do get of fat people are still more 'normal' weight. For example, Amy Schumer is shown as fat and insecure in *I Feel Pretty* (2018) when she is 'normal' sized woman.

The representation of women has been studied previously in the field of feminist film theory that emerged in the 1960s (Kaplan, 2000a, p. 1), and there are many Master's theses done on the subject too. Most of the previous research that has been done about fat female characters have been content analyses of different television shows and sitcoms. These analyses have found that fat female characters and fat characters, in general, are often the objects of humor (Greenberg et al., 2003; Himes & Thompson, 2007), and are rarely involved in romantic situations (Greenberg et al., 2003; White et al., 1999) and when they are, they are often humiliated (Giovanelli & Ostertag, 2009). They receive and make negative comments about their size (Fouts & Burggraf, 1999; Himes & Thompson, 2007), are shown in a more negative light than their thin counterparts, and they are more likely to be shown eating (Greenberg et al., 2003). Because of this, it is worthwhile to examine what kinds of representations fat female characters have had in popular culture in recent years.

Often, when popular culture products represent fat people they are represented in a way where losing weight plays a part. There are multiple products where after losing weight the character becomes attractive. Losing weight is constantly applauded and shown as the only solution, and most stories featuring fat characters depict the characters as either insecure about their weight or trying to lose it.

In this study, the focus is only on comedy films. Comedy was chosen as the genre to be analyzed because of the previous hurtful representations of fat people the genre has had. Comedy is also the genre that has the most distinct fat characters (Plotz, 2020, p. 7). In comedy, when the point is to be light and funny, fat people can be ridiculed, and it can be justified as being just a joke for the film. Seeing people break chairs or squishing someone because of their weight shows people that it is acceptable to laugh at the expense of fat people. One cannot forget the fat suits of the early 2000s either, when even men put them on to portray female characters, creating a potential intersection of both gender-shaming and fat-shaming.

In sum, fat female characters are rare in popular culture products, and the stories they are a part of usually involve their weight. Most of these stories seem to either end in weight loss or self-acceptance of their body, and one rarely sees a representation

where the message does not include one of these aspects. Whilst self-acceptance as a message is good, the problem arises when the representations only involve this message or weight loss. On the other hand, living in the current society where fat is bad and horrid, and fat people get treated differently because of their weight, size acceptance stories are important. Because of the lacking representation and taboo nature of weight and fat, I will examine the representation of fat female characters and fatness in three recent comedy films in my thesis to view what kinds of representations fatness and fat women have in these films. The films will be critically analyzed with the help of critical discourse analysis, and the study is especially situated in the field of fat studies with the aim to observe what these representations communicate in these contexts about discourses regarding body size and fat women. Though there are previous studies of fat characters, there do not seem to be detailed studies that closely scrutinize only fat female representation and fatness.

Here, I use Harjunen and Kyrölä's (2007, pp. 15–16) work to support how I define which characters are fat: fat is used to refer to bodies that are bigger than our societal and cultural norms 'allow'. *Fat* is the term used here because the terms *overweight* and *obese* are more medical and they are usually determined through BMI. Using the term *fat* allows research and analysis to secede from the medical definition of being *overweight* since fat is not 'over' anything. The health and medical perspective has been left out of the scope of this study.

In Chapter 2, the background and theoretical framework of the current study will be introduced along with previous research on fat characters. Chapter 3 introduces the aims, research questions, and the data of the study. Chapter 4 analyses each of the characters in subsections. In Chapter 5, the findings of the study will be discussed, and in Chapter 6 the study will be concluded with suggestions for future research.

2   BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, the theoretical framework used in this thesis will be introduced. First, narratives will be briefly introduced since films are narratives. After that, selected insights from gender studies will be introduced with a particular interest in popular culture. After gender studies, the history of feminist film theory and criticism will be explained. After feminist film theory, the framework will introduce fat studies and previous studies on fat characters. The present study is carried out at the intersection of these relevant fields.

2.1   Narrative

Narrativity is related to the need to moralize reality; the need to identify it within the social system. Narratives are deployed in both factual and fictional storytelling. (White, 1981, p. 14.) Narratives have a beginning, a middle, and an end, there is a setting, characters, and often some kind of drama that needs to be resolved. Narratives also usually have a moral. There is a teller, someone who tells the story to the addressee: the narrative has a narrator. (Toolan, 1988, pp. xiii, 1–3.) Films, such as the ones analyzed in this study, are an example of fictional storytelling; they have a script that has been written by someone, they are not documentaries, and the characters and events in them are purely fictional. In addition, films are visual, and thus the cast of actors, lighting, camerawork, sound, and cutting of the movie all affect the narrative; in film, these resources are combined to express a strand of discourse (Bateman et al., 2017, p. 336). In fact, everything heard and seen on film might be planned; even the tiniest detail may have been designed to be a part of the film (Bateman et al., 2017, p. 327).

      According to Barthes (1977, p. 79) narratives can be articulated by written or spoken language, gestures, moving or fixed images, or a mixture of all of these.

Narratives can be found in fables, legends, tales, comedy, drama, paintings, news, cinema, mime, and so on. Narratives are present in all societies, in every place, and in every age. Narratives are analyzable and systematic since they share a common structure. (Barthes, 1977, pp. 79–80.) Narrative can be defined in a minimalist way as a sequence of events that are connected. Event here is used as a term referring to a set of conditions or some state that is recognized, and that state changes when something happens. (Toolan, 1988, p. 7.)

Narratives have plots, and these plots impose meanings on the events of the narrative. Narratives can be in either chronological order or the order of the events can be changed within the narrative. (White, 1981, p. 19.) The plot of the narrative is the comprehensible whole that guides the succession of events in the narrative. Stories are made of events, and plots make these events into stories. (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 167.)

The poetics of narrative has been split into two subjects of study, in Chatman's terms 'story' and 'discourse', but other narrative poeticians have used differing but roughly equivalent terms for these, like Barthes' *histoire* and *discours*, and the Russian formalists' terms *fabula* and *sjuzhet*. 'Story', and the equivalents of story in those other terms, refers to the basic description of the events of a story in chronological order, featuring a basic inventory of the characters and their roles in said story. 'Discourse', *discours*, or *sjuzhet* on the other hand, denotes and looks at the techniques different authors bring to the varied presentations of the basic story and its versions. (Toolan, 1988, pp. 9–10.)

Story is also a deep structure, meaning that whilst surface structures might be different, there is an underlying deep structure behind them, and they are simply rearrangements of it (Toolan, 1988, pp. 12, 263). The story is the representation of all essential information about the characters, settings, and events (Toolan, 1988, pp. 12–13). Stories have characters, and these characters are read by people. Their actions, reactions, and descriptions, whether implicit or explicit, all affect how they are interpreted by people. These insights and references help readers conceive a 'person' from the text. There is an assumption that what is shown of the characters is limited and selected, and that there is more underneath the surface of the text, that the conceived 'person' has a whole life. (Toolan, 1988, p. 91.)

While in the written text the details and descriptions are narrated by the narrator, in film this is quite different. The details are in each shot and scene, only presented to the viewer to see and hear. The viewer then tends to consider the details that are relevant to the plot as they see it. Film narratives have copious amounts of visual details, but narrative films rarely give time for the viewer to linger on these details. The narrative and its events move on without pause. (Chatman, 1981, pp. 121–122.) With films' enormous number of visual details, the dominant mode of saying

something is showing it. Film narratives dominantly present, or rather depict, the state of affairs instead of asserting them. (Chatman, 1981, p. 124.)

Chatman (1981, p. 118) argues that narratives have double time structuring, meaning that they merge the plot events and their time sequence known as 'story-time' with the time that presents these events in a text known as 'discourse-time'. These orders are independent. For example, in realistic narratives, the story-time is fixed where the order of discourse-time might be different. This means that when following a life of a person, the story-time follows the course of life: birth, childhood, adulthood, old age, and death. When it comes to discourse-time however, the narrative can have 'flashbacks' and 'flashforwards' with the story taking place at any time of the person's life. This double-time structuring of narratives is true in all mediums. This also allows for the transfer of these narratives into different mediums, as can be seen from popular tales that turn into films, ballets, comics, and so on. (Chatman, 1981, p. 118.)

Other literary critics, like Herrnstein Smith (1981, pp. 209–211), have criticized and challenged this two-leveled narrative structure model and its narrative properties. Herrnstein Smith argues that narratives have an unlimited amount of "other narratives that can be *constructed in response* to it or *perceived as related* to it" (p. 217) instead of them having a single story beneath. Further arguing that the many versions of a narrative (like adaptations and translations) are not the only ones that can be constructed in response to a narrative, since retellings such as 'interpretations' and 'plot summaries' are also versions of the narrative. (Herrnstein Smith, 1981, pp. 216–217.) She questions whether the temporal disparities of 'discourse-time' and 'story-time' or both of them together, require the existence of two independent and distinct time orders for all narratives, or on the other hand, can they be understood in terms that do not assume the dual-leveled model. She argues that the descriptions of the dualistic model of narrative discourse are logically weak, empirically debatable, and methodologically distracting, and suggest a model where narratives should be seen as structures as well as acts (Herrnstein Smith, 1981, pp. 220, 227.)

As it is apparent that films are narratives, a short background introduction of narratives was needed. The current study analyses how fatness is represented in the selected films through the plot and the characters themselves, and thus the visual aspects of the films as well as the dialogue of the characters will be included, occasionally stopping to analyze the scene as a whole, and sometimes just what is said to get a comprehensive view of the representation and message of the films.

2.2   Gender Studies and Expectations for Women

The concept of gender was created by early feminists to show that maleness and femaleness were social constructs, not just about biology. A distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' needs to be drawn here. 'Sex' refers to biological differences between men and women, where 'gender' refers to the categories of feminine and masculine that are socially constructed as well as the socially assigned behaviors and attributes that are set for these categories. This can be seen in the fact that certain attributes or behaviors are linked to either men or women when there is no natural reason for it. Certain behaviors are seen as typically feminine or masculine but that is about convention. Those characteristics and actions are socially constructed to belong to a certain gender. (Milestone & Meyer, 2012, p. 12.) These ideas of what is appropriate for certain gender are still circulated in society by parents, lawmakers, teachers, media, and so on (Connell, 2002, p. 4). Already in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir (1997) famously wrote that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 295). We become men and women, we are not born men and women, meaning that our gender is something we do, not what we are. However, this is also a limited way of looking at things. The distinction between sex and gender gives off the perception that there are only two genders and two sexes; men and women (Milestone & Meyer, 2012, pp. 12, 14.)

Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) argue that gender is something individuals do continuously. They see gender as a status that is achieved, as a construct that is built through social, cultural, and psychological means. Doing gender is routine, a "recurring accomplishment." (West & Zimmerman 1987.) According to Judith Butler (1990) people do gender through performances: they perform gender since gender is performative, but for Butler, in culture, certain acts have been fixed to be either feminine or masculine, and thus there is no subject, no-one doing the 'deed'. (Butler, 1990, pp. 24–25, 136). Gender is a repeated performance (Butler, 1990, p. 140).

Gender has been analyzed through representation in popular culture. Focusing here on the representation of women, women have often been represented in a way that focuses on romance and their love life. These representations have maintained the notion that women want committed relationships whilst men want sex. Being family-orientated has been attached to femininity for a long time. (Milestone & Meyer, 2012, pp. 87, 90.) More is also required from women's appearance and bodies than men's. In popular culture, women are scrutinized for everything when it comes to their physical appearance: their bodies, skin, hair, clothes, and age. Physical appearance defines women when it does not define men, at least not to the same extent. (Milestone & Meyer, 2012, p. 93.) These ideas are already presented to young girls. Angela McRobbie (2000, pp. 67–69) analyzed *Jackie Magazine*s to see what the magazine's ideology of teenage femininity described as important for girls, and found

that how to lose weight, look good, get a boyfriend, and cook were prominently featured. It is no wonder since, for years, popular media has told girls what kind of appearances they should have. With social media, body image ideals are even more accessible than before, and the mainstream media is still very much dominated by the thin ideal (McComb & Mills, 2021). There is a requirement for feminine bodies to be small. Women should not take up a lot of space, they should contain themselves and be as small as possible because real women are thin and nearly invisible. (Bartky 1990, p. 73; Hartley, 2001, p. 61.) Fat is against the beauty ideal of a tight, toned, and lean body, and thus seen as unattractive and unhealthy, and often also represented this way in popular culture (LeBesco, 2001, pp. 74–75).

Body ideals are formed by what kinds of bodies we see represented. The images and representations we see in the media produce opinions and knowledge of body ideals. The body norms and ideals we see in the media affect how we decide what kind of bodies are 'good' and better than others. (Kyrölä, 2006, pp. 107–108.) Over the years, different cultures have had different attitudes towards women's sizes. Larger body sizes were valued and honored at one point, where now, since the 1980s and 1990s, slenderness has been attached to success and beauty quite universally. (Bordo, 2003, p. 102.)

Bartky (1990, pp. 66–67) points out that dieting and monitoring one's appetite, as well as exercise, are disciplines that are imposed on the body, especially a woman's body. With exercise, it can be hard to determine what is just for physical exercise and what is done in order to obey the requirements society has for femininity. Women's bodies need not only be the right size, but they must also be smooth and hairless, with no signs of aging. It is all a part of "the ideal body of femininity." (Bartky, 1990, pp. 69–71.) Some feminists argue that this is a part of the patriarchal requirements and standards for women and their bodies, and these standards and requirements have been internalized by women too. They have internalized that they should be thin and feel shame for being fat. (Bartky, 1990, pp. 76–77.)

There has been a shift toward a different kind of body ideal: the fit. This ideal still requires women's bodies to not have soft or fat bits, and to only have a certain amount of muscle: being 'too' muscular is seen as a masculine trait. Having 'too' much fat or muscle violates women's sexual role that sees them as subordinate to men. (Hartley, 2001, pp. 61–62.)

Body ideals in media have certainly not stopped affecting women. A recent study done by McComb and Mills (2021) shows that social media imagery of the 'slim-thick' body ideal the Western society currently has, where curves in certain places of a woman's body are admired, causes more weight and body dissatisfaction for women as well as less satisfaction with their own appearance, than the imagery of the thin-ideal. Whilst 'slim-thick' allows women's butts and thighs to be bigger, their waist and

abdomen still need to be small and tight. Beauty influencers and celebrities, like the Kardashians and Beyoncé, have helped popularize this body type. McComb and Mills (2021) conclude that this ideal is not a good, positive alternative to the fit and thin ideals to promote a positive body image, but in fact more harmful to women's appearance and body satisfaction than those two.

People are affected by society's beauty standards and the gorgeous, flawless people seen on media. This drives 'normal' people, especially women, toward the idea of correcting and changing their faces and bodies. (Bordo, 2003, p. xvi.) The need to fit those beauty ideals can be seen in cosmetic procedures. In 2020, In the United States of America, around 15.6 million cosmetic procedures were performed. Around 2.3 million of those procedures were surgical and 13.2 million were minimally invasive. Overall, this means over 16.7 billion US dollars' worth of cosmetic procedures were performed in 2020. Most of these were done on women. In fact, women got 87% of surgical procedures and 93% of minimally invasive procedures. (Connect 2021.)

Here, a rather concise overview of gender studies has been introduced, and the focus has been on popular culture since the current study analyses films. As the study also analyses women, the expectations set for women in society have been discussed. Thus, for the current study, it is relevant to know what these beauty standards are and how fat women break these expectations to lay the groundwork for their representation in popular culture.

2.3   Feminist Film Theory

Women's liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States created a new way to look at films: from a feminist perspective. Whilst still concerned with gender differences in general, women's perspective was chosen as a particular interest. Women have, over the centuries, resisted their position and silencing in patriarchal societies and have worked hard against it. Feminist film scholars have had different goals and interests over the years and thus these different studies have offered a lot of knowledge about women's representation. (Kaplan, 2000a, p. 1.)

The feminist perspectives for studying film developed in multiple places at the same time. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, different journals and books created the foundation for feminism and film studies in The United States, Britain, Germany, and France. This new research area of feminist film criticism has been a huge area of study within film studies since its development. (Kaplan, 2000a, pp. 3–4.) Feminist works in film have concentrated on the representation of women. These works have examined the roles, stories, and stereotypes these women have portrayed in cinema. (Cowie, 2000, p. 48.)

In the 1970s, sociological approaches were used to study women in Hollywood films, analyzing how female characters were stereotyped, how they related to the era, were they active or passive, did they have screen time, and how and what kind of models, positive or negative, did these characters serve for the female audience (Erens, 1990a, p. xvi). In Britain, another approach centered on semiotics, psychoanalysis, and Marxist ideology took form. This approach has its focuses on the text of films and how the meaning in them was produced, how the viewing subject was constructed through the text, and how cinematic production itself affected the representation of women, reinforcing sexism. This led to a new form of feminist film criticism that introduced semiotics to the field and argued that women, especially in Hollywood movies, are not representing themselves on screen but that they are rather only "signs for all that is non-male." (Erens, 1990a, pp. xvi–xvii.) Cinema was filled with stereotypes. The stereotypes of women in film have often later been seen as "repressive and manipulative". (Johnston, 2000, p. 22.) Sexist ideology in commercial cinemas' history is the reason for women's stereotypical roles whereas men have had much more differentiation in the roles they play (Johnston, 2000, p. 23). Within Hollywood cinema, which is dominated by men, women are presented as what they represent to men (Johnston, 2000, p. 24) instead of presenting "women as women" or "fully human" (Cowie, 2000, p. 49; Johnston, 2000, p. 25).

To counter this sexist ideology in cinema, Johnston (2000, pp. 28–30) brings forth the idea of a counter-cinema, where women's cinema could work as an alternative and interrogate the male cinema, challenging the sexist ideology of the dominant cinema of Hollywood. Johnston's counter-cinema idea was taken up by filmmakers to encourage their audiences to critique and question manipulative editing and images on the screen (Erens, 1990a, p. xix).

One of the best-known essays of feminist film theory is Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, which used psychoanalytic theory to look at Hollywood cinema. The very known concept of the 'male gaze' comes from Mulvey's essay. (Erens, 1990b, p. 3.) The 'male gaze' means that the point of view in films has often been masculine, from the male perspective, portraying females as sexual and desirable objects for both the male lead and the male audience (Mulvey, 2010, pp. 18–20). Women were seen as passive, something to be looked at whereas the men were active, doing the looking (Mulvey, 2009, p. 19). Kaplan (2000b) also argues that on screen, women are sexualized all the time: "no matter what the woman are doing literally, or what kind of plot may be involved" (p. 120). Like Kyrölä (2006, pp. 114–115) notes, Mulvey's writings brought up the idea that the society's patriarchal deep structures affect the conventions of how women are depicted, and popular media serves those power structures set on the female body.

Doane (2000) argues that "it is precisely the massive reading, writing, filming of the female body which constructs and maintains a hierarchy along the lines of a sexual difference assumed as natural" (p. 87), noting that contemporary filmmaking aims to decode and deconstruct images and expose the values attached to femininity as a cultural construct. Doane (2000) also argues that "the body is always a function of discourse" (p. 89) since femininity is attached to the natural body indicating sexual difference, and sexual difference and the "order of things" related to those differences are rooted in patriarchy's reasoning of itself, and thus it is that body that needs to be refused (Doane, 2000, p. 89).

Images of women in cinema have been repressive and oppressive, so much so that the idea of feminist filmmaking seems impossible (Doane, 2000, p. 86), even when in the 1970s, women also joined filmmaking, starting with mostly documentary films. Documentaries were cheaper to make, and they allowed women to address issues that had not previously been discussed on film. Finally, women could address issues concerning them, like abortion, job discrimination, and rape, from their perspective. (Erens, 1990a, p. xviii.)

Above, an overview of feminist film theory has been provided. Since the current study also analyses women in films, it was relevant to present how women have been studied in Hollywood films. In this study, intersecting with fat studies, feminist film theory will be used as a background to see how the characters are represented not just as women but as fat women, especially since just as 'thin' women have played stereotypical roles, so have fat women as the funny sidekick.

2.4   Fat Studies

Fat studies is a newer field of study than the previous two. It is harder to pinpoint when the field was born, but Marilyn Wann (2009, p. xi), who is a known fat activist and author, would argue that the field emerged in 2004, though fatness has been studied before. It was born to differentiate from obesity research, which has been the main field to study fatness (Harjunen & Kyrölä, 2007, p. 15). In Wann's foreword for *The Fat Studies Reader* (2009, p. xii) she briefly discusses which term to use when it comes to talking about heavier people. She, like other writers and researchers in the field, has opted to use the word *fat*, since it is just a descriptive word and is not negative or rude unless someone makes it so. Thus, here it is also used as a neutral adjective.

Fat studies is an interdisciplinary field that criticizes negative stereotypes, stigma, and assumptions about fat and fat people (Rothblum & Solovay 2009, p. 2). Research has been done about the discrimination and inequality fat people face in real life, how

fat people are represented in popular culture and media, and fat related to health and medicine (e.g., Fikkan & Rothblum, 2011; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). This work has been done mainly in The United States. Fat studies aim to better the lives of fat people by increasing their social acceptance in society as well as seeing fat as an attribute that is a part of and modifies one's identity (Harjunen & Kyrölä, 2007, p. 15). One of the problems with fat studies tends to be the fact that it is America-centric since it was originated there and has become a popular field in the United States. Because of this, the fat studies field is quite isolated within America and thus lacks a multicultural perspective and can be alienating and exclusive. (Cooper, 2009, pp. 327–330.)

Being fat has been mostly discussed from a health and demographic policy point of view. Medicine and healthcare fields have dominated the discussions and information regarding fat, and it has been seen as a clear problem. This has caused the experiences of fat people to be mostly dismissed. The focus has been on reaffirming the norms our society has about body size and weight. People judge and value other people based on their body shape and size. Sometimes this happens subconsciously because of the beauty standards and cultural norms our society has for body size. Stigmatizing and criticizing fat people are not frowned upon, and disrespectful comments and opinions can be masked as worry, no matter how hurtful someone is being on purpose. (Harjunen & Kyrölä, 2007, pp. 9–10, 12.) Fat is seen as a moral quality; fat is associated with being lazy, being unwilling to conform, and lacking discipline (Bordo, 2003, p. 195).

As already mentioned in Section 2.2, one needs to note that the norms for body shape and size have been different depending on the culture and time. Fatness and the fat female body have been admired when food was scarce, and fatness has been a sign of fertility. In the Western world, the ideal body has also changed in the 1900s from the highlighted corset waist to 'boyish' slenderness to the hourglass figure inspired by Marilyn Monroe, all the way to the lean fitness body of the 1990s. (Harjunen & Kyrölä, 2007, p. 22.) In the 1980s and 1990s, the slender body ideal got slimmer and slimmer. Any excess flesh needed to be 'attacked' and anything soft or loose had to be eliminated. The ideal body became thin and tight. Dietary ads target those loose bits of the female body and weight-loss surgeries, like liposuction where 'normal' weight people can get rid of their flabs, become more popular, showing just how much people detest any fat. (Bordo, 2003, pp. 189–191.)

Dieting and losing weight are considered to be natural goals for a fat person (Harjunen, 2007, p. 207) even as a child. In a short piece written for *Koolla on väliä!* (2007), journalist Anna-Stina Nykänen writes how she was ordered on a diet for the first time in her life when she was only six years old. It is apparent that already as children, women learn that there is something wrong with their bodies, that they are already flawed. At a young age, women are starting to come to the realization that

their bodies must be molded and changed to fit an ideal. This realization happens after children start understanding the differences between the sexes. After this, it is not surprising that women's body images get damaged, and women feel self-hatred toward their own bodies. (Hartley, 2001, p. 60.)

The societal norm we have for bodies is narrow. This narrow definition of what is 'okay' and 'acceptable' leads to the bodies outside this norm being seen as something unnatural or bad. This, then, can have an extremely negative impact on a fat person who might experience unfair treatment because of their body size. (Harjunen, 2004, p. 243.) As the ideal slender body becomes thinner and firmer, more people are excluded from it. Fatter bodies and on the other side of the spectrum, anorectic bodies, are seen as disturbing because they do not conform to cultural norms. Even more disturbing to those who try to be accepted and 'normal' seems to be the idea that a fat person could be happy. (Bordo, 2003, pp. 202–204.) Of course, the idea of having a 'tight' body does not only affect women. The aesthetic, ideal body for men is a muscular one with six-packs and well-toned muscles that require upkeep. The same way body ideals affected young girls; these ideals now affect young boys. They are having the same eating disorders and body image problems girls have, but on top of that, they might also be taking steroids. (Bordo, 2003, p. xxiii.)

Harjunen (2004) studied fat, stigma, and gender and through her research material found that being fat was socially remarkable for women, and they lost weight to better their body's social acceptance. Losing weight would also better their social acceptance overall. In her material, along with health reasons, women cited "to look better," the societal pressure to be thin, and relationships as reasons they lost weight. From her material, it is apparent that looks play a big part in the romantic relationships of women. Fat women feel pressure to lose weight in order to be accepted in society. The 'acceptable' body size is much narrower for women than it is for men (Cossrow et al., 2001).

Fat people face discrimination in real life and in many situations. Gortmaker et al.'s (1993) study, using National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) data, included 370 overweight adolescents. The data was obtained in two parts, with the follow-up data collected seven years after the original. The follow-up data showed the women who had been fat in the original data were less likely to be married, had completed fewer years of school, had lower household incomes, and had higher rates of household poverty compared to the women who had not been fat. The income difference here can be explained by the fact that these fat women were less likely to be married. However, a longitudinal study was done by Baum II and Ford (2004) analyzing how obesity affects wages by examining NLSY data. The study showed that fat people's wages are less than a non-fat person's, with fat women receiving less pay than fat men. Their results show that people with BMI of 30 or more receive

significantly less pay. For obese men, their wages were 3.4% lower and obese women's wages were 6.1% lower than a non-fat person's of the same sex.

The current study analyses fat characters and fatness from the point of view of fat studies. Since fat people face discrimination in many aspects of life, and fatness is stigmatized, it is relevant to critically analyze how they are represented, and whether these representations also present fat as a moral quality. Thus, the most stereotypical traits associated with fat people and fat characters will be of interest in the analysis. Fat studies also include perspectives on health (e.g., *Health at Every Size*), but for the purpose of this study, the health and medical perspectives have been left out of the scope, and thus not introduced here.

2.5   Previous Research on Fat Representation

Representation and its analyses have been a big part of gender studies and fat studies, and the representation of female characters has been a popular topic. However, when it comes to fat characters, the representation is still very lacking (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2011; Fouts & Burggraf, 1999; White et al., 1999). There is a weight-based stigma there, where thin bodies are shown as the norm and fat bodies are underrepresented and fat-shamed. Thin bodies have been represented as desirable and beautiful in popular media for a long time and those bodies are shown as the ideal body type one should aspire to. (Lupton, 2017.) Even when fat bodies are represented, they are often hurtful stereotypes of fat women (Bernstein & St. John, 2009, p. 263).

Fat has been present in popular culture but not always in the form of having a fat actor. Fat suits have been employed to have fat characters in film and TV without having to hire a fat actor to play them. Most recently, Sarah Paulson wears a padded suit to play Linda Tripp in *Impeachment: American Crime Story* (2021), and Renée Zellweger wears a fat suit to portray Pamela Hupp in *The Thing about Pam* (2022). Fat suits have been used for fat jokes, but they have also been used to serve the narrative apparent in the weight-loss discourse of "inside every fat person is a thin person" trope (Mendoza, 2009, p. 281). Fat suits have been deployed as a plot device for a quick makeover where the previously fat character loses weight in a few months and comes back as thin and beautiful, like in *Insatiable* (2018-2019).

One place where bigger-sized people are represented, however, is weight-loss shows where fat people aim to lose weight whilst the world watches. In these makeover shows, fat bodies are, in fact, overrepresented and thus visible. These shows' only target is to eliminate that weight, and not only help these contestants lose their weight, but also to help the world with the "obesity epidemic". (Raisborough, 2014.)

This, again, shows the idea that fat is something to be 'fixed', and it is obviously problematic if this is the representation fat bodies mostly get.

Frater (2009) studied five Chick-Lit novels that have fat heroines. She found that, though Chick-Lit is a genre where fat characters are more often found, concern about losing weight was still present. Size- and self-acceptance seems to be the message of these novels, even after weight loss. Frater also notes that characters are very often size 16, EU 46, and do not go beyond that, saying that "Once a character reaches size 20, it seems that they are past the point of self-acceptance and are now considered unhealthy." (Frater, 2009, p. 237.)

Studies done about TV shows that actually have fat actors playing characters have shown that bigger women are less likely to find love, they are often the object of humor, and more likely to receive derogatory comments from men: Himes and Thompson (2007) did a content analysis of fat stigmatization on commercial television shows and movies between 1984-2004 and found that fat commentary was mostly verbal, and the comments were most likely made by men than women. Another content analysis done by Greenberg et al. (2003) about portrayals of overweight and obese characters on commercial television between 1999–2000 showed that overweight and obese female characters were less likely to be considered attractive, show affection, or have romantic interactions. They were also associated with more negative characteristics and were more likely to be eating. Another content analysis done by White, Brown, and Ginsburg (1999) found that female characters are more often slim figured, and when they are bigger, they are less likely to wear revealing clothing or be involved in romantic situations.

Giovanelli and Ostertag (2009, pp. 289–290) argue that mass media and constant panopticism control women's bodies. Panopticism refers to social control where people feel someone is constantly judging and observing them and thus changing their behavior. They see mass media and television, which their research is based on, as a panopticon that tells what kind of physical appearance women should have and dictates the beauty standards in society. They used content analysis to analyze primetime television in 2005 and studied two different fat female characters in two different shows. They also found that there were only a few fat female characters in general and that they did not really portray romantic or sexual interest nor were they a romantic or sexual interest. When they showed interest, they were romantically humiliated. These characters were also loud, dowdy, and crass, and wore covering or modestly conservative clothing.

In her book *Fat on Film* (2020), Barbara Plotz analyzes fatness in American cinema, studying 56 films to observe how fatness also intersects with gender and race. Plotz analyzes how the fat male body is demasculinized, and how the fat female body is not the normative feminine body, with portrayals of fat women often having 'masculine'

traits such as physical aggressiveness in comedic contexts, using their fat bodies when enacting violence, and behaving in an 'unladylike' way. Plotz also analyzed these films for the tropes of 'the fat funny body', 'the fat eater', and 'the fat outsider'. She found that the fat body is presented as a body out of control, which is part of the comedy, showcasing the fat body as clumsy and unfit. The discourse of fatness being a result of eating the 'wrong kinds' of foods was apparent in her analysis, with the films showing characters eating foods associated with fatness, overeating, or eating in 'wrong places', sometimes lacking self-control when it comes to eating. (Plotz, 2020.)

Overall, women's bodies are regulated by others, and certain sizes are seen as 'acceptable' whilst others fall outside of such ideals. These bodies have often been treated unfairly in many aspects of life. In film, women's bodies and women, in general, have been something to view without agency. However, bigger female characters are less likely to be represented in the same way as thinner female characters. Examining three films with three main female characters and almost entirely a female cast, the current study adopts some of these previous findings on fat characters in its aims and analyses whether the three movies of the study carry similar representations of fatness.

3 METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the research questions and aims of the present study will be introduced and discussed. After explaining the aims of the study, the method of analysis, which is a critical discourse analysis, will be introduced. At the end of this section, the methods for data selection and collection will be introduced and discussed.

3.1 Aims and Research Questions

The aim of the study is to look at the representation of fat female characters and fatness in three comedy movies from the United States. The study is especially situated in the field of fat studies, aiming to see what these representations communicate about discourses regarding body size and fatness. The main focus will be on how these characters are depicted and what kind of role, if any, weight plays in these films. The characteristics of these fat characters will be analyzed to examine whether they are represented in a stereotypical way, since, for example, fat characters are often portrayed as shy and insecure or funny and loud. I will also be examining what kind of story arcs the characters have since weight often plays a part in the story, and size acceptance seems to be a common outcome when the main character is fat (Frater, 2009). The visual appearance will also be discussed as well as how these characters are portrayed romantically since fat characters are often shown as undesirable and without love interests (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2011).

The research questions for this study are as follows:
1) **How are fat female characters represented?**
2) **Does the character's weight play a role in the film? How and what kind?**
2) **How is fatness portrayed in the films?**

3.2   Method of Analysis

The present study is a qualitative study analyzing the representation of fat female characters and fatness in selected comedy movies. Each movie will be analyzed on its own, but a short comparison of the characters will be done in Chapter 5 to see how the representations differ, whether they all have the same characteristics and if these characters share the same kind of storyline within the films. In the analysis, attention will be paid to the characteristics and behavior of the characters, whether they are involved in a romantic situation, and what kind of role, if any, weight plays in these movies. To do that, critical discourse analysis will be used in the study since the study looks at moving image that has sounds, visuals, non-verbal and verbal communication and clues.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Within discourse studies, language is seen as a resource. In fact, language, action, and context and the interaction between these three are at the core of discourse analysis. The focus is not just on the textual level of language use, but on the discursive and social levels as well. (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2009, pp. 15–18.) Discourse is not just text or language use. In critical discourse analysis, discourse has been used in two different meanings. The first use, discourse, refers to language use as a social action. The other way to use the word, a discourse, refers to recognizable ways of making meaning and describing things, phenomena, and events from a certain point of view in a certain way that have been quite resilient through history and are used from interaction to interaction. (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2009, pp. 26–27.)

Representation is one of the main concepts when talking about discourses. Representation literally means re-presenting: presenting something again. New representations build on previous representations. Representation is meaning making with language or other kinds of meaning making systems. (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2009, pp. 56–57.) When it comes to representation, choices have been made to determine what to exclude and include, what to 'foreground' and 'background' (Fairclough, 1995, p. 4). Fairclough (1995, p. 5) argues that any text, and every part of said text, is representing, building identities, and setting up relations simultaneously. Examination of the choices that have been made in representation, signification, and construction of reality as well as the social motivations for them, are important in the analysis of discourses and representation. As the interest is on how, for example, people, relationships, and events are represented in a media text, it is important to

understand that in media, these representations are affected by the interests, social positions, and objectives of the people who produce said media texts. Therefore, analyzing representational processes is about what choices have been made. (Fairclough 1995, p. 103–105.)

As we saw in Chapter 2.5, fat characters have been represented differently compared to other characters. As fat people face discrimination and stigma in real life (Harjunen, 2004; Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2007, p. 10), it is no wonder that beliefs about fatness and discrimination are also a part of their representation. One needs to note that a person who is not fat, does not know the lived experience of a fat person, and thus representations can often be stereotypical.

Critical discourse analysis has often been used to study texts and spoken language. The focus has not been simply on the text but also on the situation it happens in and interest in how visual language is used to communicate meaning has increased. Critical discourse analysis has been interested in the relationship between language, ideology, and power. CDA analysts see language as something that shapes society but is also shaped by society. (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 1–5.)

According to Fairclough (1995), language use – and therefore any text – is "simultaneously constitutive of (1) social identities, (2) social relations and (3) systems of knowledge and belief" (p. 55) and therefore, every text helps shape these aspects in society and culture. Whilst language use reproduces and maintains these existing social identities, relations, and systems of knowledge and belief, it can also transform them in creative ways. Emphasis has also been put on what is left unsaid in texts: absences are presences within texts are both important. (Fairclough 1995, pp. 55, 58.) Fairclough (1995, p. 58) mentions that in order to analyze identities, representation, and relations, one should focus on the following three categories: 1. Ideational function – representations and recontextualizations of social practice, 2. Interpersonal function – constructions of identity and social relations, and 3. Textual function – construction of the relationship between the writer and the reader.

Discourse is to be understood more broadly: it is a communicative event that includes written text and conversational interaction but also images, gestures, facework, and other multimedia dimensions of relevance (van Dijk, 2001, p. 98). Fairclough (1995, p. 54), too, uses discourse not only to refer to written and spoken use of language but also to other meaning-making types, such as images (film, photos) and non-verbal communication. The current study adapts these observations, paying attention not only to what characters say, but also to their appearance, behavior, expressions, and gestures, thus multimodality will also be of interest. Multimodality approaches interaction, communication, and representation as more than just language. It is used to "extend the social interpretation of language and its meanings to the whole range of representational and communicational modes or semiotic

resources for making meaning with employed in a culture". (Jewitt, 2014a, p. 1.) In fact, language is just one of the parts that make up the multimodal ensemble (Jewitt, 2014b, p. 15).

Whilst language is often considered the most meaningful communication mode, multimodality proceeds on the idea that communication and representation draw on multiple modes. All of these modes can then influence meaning equally. This is one of the assumptions central to multimodality. The second assumption in multimodality is that each of these modes is realizing differing communicative works. Modes in these multimodal ensembles have been shaped by their uses culturally, historically, and socially in order to realize social functions. Non-linguistic modes, such as images, have a specific role in that specific time and context. The third assumption of multimodality is that through selecting and configurating their modes, people organize meaning. The fourth and last assumption central to multimodality is that the meanings of signs are social. Norms and rules have affected their shaping at the time they have been made. (Jewitt, 2014b, pp. 15–17.)

Analyzing these aspects of the characters will answer the question of how fat female characters are represented in these movies.

3.3   Data Selection and Collection

This study analyses three comedy movies that feature fat female characters. The movies chosen needed to have a fat female character as the lead. IMDb (imbd.com) was used for the data selection and collection of this study. It was chosen on the basis that it is a well-known website when it comes to movies for the general public. The website allows one to refine the search results by movie or TV, genres, keywords, IMDb rating, in theatres, and release year. To find relevant data, three keywords were used as search terms. The searches were done in December 2021. The keywords used were 'fat-woman', 'overweight-woman', and 'plus-size'. The distinction of 'woman' was made to the first two to make sure the results were relevant for the current study. No distinction between sexes was made for 'plus-size' since only 22 movies had 'plus-size' as a keyword overall. To further narrow the results, the following requirements were set: the movie needed to be a feature film, comedy genre (but this did not exclude films that are other genres alongside comedy), and they had to be released between 2018-2020. The results were then further examined to exclude movies that did not have a fat female character as the lead, English as their language, and the United States as at least one of the countries of origin.

From each search with the abovementioned keywords, one movie was chosen for the study. These movies are *Isn't It Romantic* (Todd Strauss-Schulson, 2019), *Sierra*

Burgess is a Loser (Ian Samuels, 2018), and *Dumplin'* (Anne Fletcher, 2018). These movies were watched multiple times during March and April 2022, first to familiarize myself with the story and second to make notes about them. Currently, these films are available on Netflix and that is the platform used to watch them. For the textual elements of the films, the closed captions offered by Netflix were used for *Isn't It Romantic* and *Sierra Burgess is a Loser*, and thus those are also used in the study. Netflix did not offer closed captions for *Dumplin'*, so the scenes were watched multiple times, and the lines were written down to use in the analysis here.

Next, I will briefly introduce these films and the characters that will be analyzed in the next chapter.

3.3.1 Isn't It Romantic

Isn't It Romantic (2019) is a comedy movie directed by Todd Strauss-Schulson. The movie is also tagged in the romantic and musical genres. The movie stars Rebel Wilson as Natalie, the main character, Liam Hemsworth as Blake, and Adam Devine as Josh. The movie is also fantastical in that the main character, who hates romantic comedies, finds herself trapped inside a rom-com after getting mugged in a subway station, hitting her head, and waking up in a hospital. In the parallel romantic comedy universe, Blake starts showing an interest in her, but she slowly starts to realize she is interested and has been interested in Josh, and Josh has been interested in her, trying to ask her out previously. However, in this parallel universe, he starts dating another woman, Isabella (Priyanka Chopra Jonas). After Natalie tries to stop Josh and Isabella's wedding, she gets into a car accident, wakes up in a hospital again, back in her normal life now, and is told that she was in a medically induced coma for 18 hours and had her romcom experience during that coma. In the end, Natalie and Josh get together in real life, after Natalie realizes that Josh has always been interested in her too.

3.3.2 Sierra Burgess is a Loser

Sierra Burgess is a Loser (2018) is a comedy-drama movie directed by Ian Samuels. The movie stars Shannon Purser as Sierra, Kristine Froseth as Veronica, and Noah Centineo as Jamey. Sierra, the title character, is seen as a loser in school, and Veronica, the most popular girl in school, verbally bullies her. Jamey, a jock who goes to another school, approaches Veronica to get her number, but Veronica gives him Sierra's number. Sierra and Jamey end up texting each other constantly, though Jamey thinks he is texting Veronica. Sierra and Veronica make a deal, and Veronica helps Sierra continue her relationship with Jamey (without him knowing about the mistaken identity), and the two girls slowly develop a friendship. In the end, Jamey finds out

about Sierra's catfishing, and he is mad, but they eventually make up. Veronica's mother Trish is also a fat character, and though her role is very minor, she will be briefly analyzed.

3.3.3 Dumplin'

Dumplin' (2018) is a comedy-drama film directed by Anna Fletcher. The movie is based on a novel of the same name (2015) by author Julia Murphy. It stars Danielle Macdonald as Willowdean, the main character, Jennifer Aniston as Rosie, Odeya Rush as Ellen, Maddie Baillio as Millie, and Luke Benward as Bo. Willowdean is the daughter of a former pageant queen Rosie, who calls Willowdean "Dumplin'", thus the title of the movie. Willowdean was largely raised by Rosie's sister Lucy (Hillary Begley) who died six months ago. Willowdean works at a local diner, Harpy's, with Bo, whom she has a crush on. After a fight with her mother, Willowdean finds Lucy's registration form for the Miss Teen Bluebonnet pageant that she never enrolled in. Willowdean is confused by this since Lucy was fat and proud, and she was always confident. Willowdean decides to sign up for the pageant as a protest and to finish what Lucy could not, and other, 'less-desirable', contestants join her. *Dumplin'* also has another fat character, Millie, in a supporting role, and thus, she will be included in the analysis.

4 ANALYSIS

In this chapter, *Isn't It Romantic* (2019), *Sierra Burgess is a Loser* (2018), and *Dumplin'* (2018) will be analyzed individually to answer the research questions of this study. Certain scenes from the films will be analyzed in detail. These scenes have been chosen because of their relevance to the representation of the characters and fatness. Since these movies have fat main characters, scenes need to be considered and read with a particular focus on fatness, and it is precisely because these characters are fat that their behavior, appearance, and actions need to be analyzed with that in mind as well as how they are treated by others. Thus, each character will be analyzed in terms of 1) visual appearance, 2) behavior, and 3) romantic situation as well as whether they are portrayed in a stereotypical way since these are relevant to the representation of fat characters. The underlying messages of the films will also be analyzed. One cannot know whether these characters would be the same if they were 'thin' or 'normal' sized instead, and therefore, such alternative scenarios and reflections are left outside the scope of this study.

4.1 Isn't It Romantic / Natalie

Natalie is the main character of *Isn't It Romantic* (2019). She is portrayed by Rebel Wilson, a white Australian actress. Natalie is a fat character, she has been fat since childhood, and she is the only fat female character in the film.

The movie starts with Roy Orbison's song "Oh, Pretty Woman", as, according to IMDb (n.d.a), a young 12-year-old Natalie (Alex Kis) is happily watching *Pretty Woman* on TV. Natalie's mother (Jennifer Saunders) comes into the room and tells Natalie to wake up, and forget about men and love, saying: "In real life, girls like us don't get that." The scene continues with the following conversation:

Natalie's Mom: They'll never make a movie about girls like us. You know why?
Natalie: Why?
NM: Because it would be so sad. They'd have to sprinkle Prozac on the popcorn or people would kill themselves. You see, Natalie, love's not a fairytale. There's no happy endings.
N: There is always gonna be a happy ending.
NM: No, darling. Someone might marry you for a visa, that's about it.

Already as a child, Natalie is told that she is not good enough to have love in her life and that someone might marry her for a visa, but not for love. Her mother also describes that her life would be so sad that people would need medication used for depression if it was a film. Since Natalie's mother is also bigger and she equates this to be about looks by saying "We're no Julia Roberts", further mentioning her smile, and her not having a mustache above her lip, I interpret this to be about the way Natalie looks, which her size is a part of. Natalie's mother portrays Natalie's future and appearance as something totally undesirable, sad, and something that would stop her from finding real love.

Natalie's *visual appearance* seems to be typical for a fat character since fat characters are likely to wear covering clothing. She wears jeans, long sleeved shirts or cardigans, and flat shoes. However, her wardrobe changes when she ends up inside the rom-com. Her clothes are more colorful, and more formfitting but still very moderate. In the rom-com version, her clothes are more feminine, and she mostly wears dresses or skirts that are all knee-length or longer. Here, she also wears clothing that does not cover her upper body as much. Her hair is blonde, and outside the rom-com universe, she wears a normal amount of makeup.

Natalie has stereotypical fat character traits. When it comes to her *behavior*, Natalie is shown to be insecure, both in her work life and in her love life. She is smart and funny, and she later describes herself in these words, but Natalie does not stand up to herself. At work, people are constantly using her and making her do tasks for them, even making her throw their trash away. She is about to have a big pitch meeting and tells her work friends Whitney and Josh that in those big meetings people cut her off, saying: "and everyone just thinks I'm the coffee bitch. Which is unfair, 'cause sometimes I bring donuts as well." The way she is treated bothers her, but she makes it into a joke with the comment about donuts. She also uses the derogatory term *bitch*, here used in a way as *Collins Dictionary* (n.d.a) defines: "a person who acts as subordinate or slave to another person". This is further emphasized in the next scene, where Natalie goes to the big pitch meeting. Blake, already sitting in the room, thinks Natalie is an assistant and asks for another coffee after first taking her coffee cup from her hand and drinking it. She futilely tries to argue against it, but her boss looks angry and so she leaves to get Blake another coffee. She has submitted to her role in the office and is used to being invisible and not taking up space. Only after waking up from her

coma and going back to work does Natalie start standing up for herself, telling her co-workers to do their job and clean up their trash themselves. She takes charge in the next meeting, shooting down Blake's assumption of her being an assistant straight away.

The movie does not explicitly say anything about Natalie's *romantic life* before, but one can gather from her actions that she has not dated and has not had a meaningful relationship before despite being 37 years old. When talking to Josh about Blake, Natalie expresses how she is invisible to a guy like that, and further elaborates: "You know, a nice guy with a nice life… Like, super rich, like, super successful, a super hunky guy. I'm just extra invisible to a guy like that, you know?" Indicating that Natalie herself does not believe that men see her, and Josh comments how she would not notice if men noticed her because she is "blind to love". Later, when she is inside the parallel rom-com universe, she is confused when a dog walker walking by calls her beautiful, and she looks around her to see whom the walker is talking to. She is also confused about Blake's interest in her. When she sees Josh and he asks her if she is okay, she says no, and mentions "guys look me in the eyes" as one of the reasons, indicating once again that she is not used to men paying any attention to her. Even later on, in the rom-com universe, she describes how she tried to get Josh to fall in love with her "but that's not on the cards. Not for a girl like me." She is portrayed in a way that getting attention from a man is foreign to her and that if someone calls her beautiful, they must be talking about someone else.

Natalie is also portrayed in a sexual light, as in the movie she ends up having sex with Blake. However, since this happens in the romcom universe, we see them kissing, with Natalie ripping his shirt open before it cuts to the next morning. Confused by this, Natalie tries again, and once again it cuts to the morning, and she tries a third time by jumping on Blake, who is coming out of the shower in a towel, knocking Blake to the ground. These scenes showcase a level of sexual aggressiveness by a fat female character that has been found when analyzing other comedy movies (see Plotz, 2020). Bordo (2003, p. 110) argues how women's hunger has been associated with their sexual hunger. Plotz (2020, p. 92) then notes that since female desire and hunger have been associated together, fatness can carry hypersexual connotations seeing as fatness is often seen as something resulting from giving in to hunger, making the fat female a desiring subject in both terms. Here, the fat woman's sexuality is not shown in a negative light, however, as has been the case in other films, often showing her sexuality with connotations of disgust, threat, or fear (Plotz, 2020, p. 93).

It is also very stereotypical for fat characters' eating habits to be included in their story, especially foods that are associated with obesity: sweet, processed, or/and fattening foods (Plotz, 2020, p. 200). Natalie is shown to have a sweet tooth, for example having whipped cream in her coffee. When Blake takes her coffee in the big

meeting, he is disgusted that someone would put whipped cream in their coffee and asks her to bring him a normal coffee (which she does). A while later, in the rom-com universe, she describes her coffee as "my cup of whipped cream with a dollop of coffee." This indicates that her cup is basically all whipped cream. Before her first date with Blake, Natalie screams that she needs to know the restaurant they are going to so she can look at what she wants, and she needs to know whether they have a dessert menu. On the date, when asked about dessert, Blake declines and Natalie says that they are about to have their first fight. The fat-eater is a common stereotype in comedy movies (Plotz, 2020, p. 189) where a fat character eats or orders excessive amounts of food. Here not taken to that extent, Natalie's love of sweet food items is still stereotypical.

Another stereotypical trait associated with fat people is laziness (Bordo, 2003, p. 195), and the fat body is often associated with being unfit (Plotz, 2020, p. 132). In the movie, Blake asks Natalie for a stroll and Natalie says: "Ah, funny, my Fit Bit sometimes vibrates and says, 'Wanna stroll?' But when you say it, I don't wanna smash you." reinforcing the stereotype that fat people are lazy and do not work out. It is a small contradiction that she does not want to move but yet, she has a Fit Bit, which is an activity tracker. Having a Fit Bit indicates that she does exercise in some way, and this goes against the stereotype of the unfit fat body. However, during the film, she does not wear the Fit Bit on her hand in any scene. Later, she runs to stop the

Image 1. Natalie runs to stop the wedding.

wedding of Josh and Isabella. In the close-up shots of this scene (image 1), Natalie's facial expression is clear. Her face is grimacing, indicating that the physical exercise of running is strenuous for her. At the same time, the scene makes fun of slow-motion scenes in romantic comedies as a portion of Natalie's run is in slow-motion. Running being strenuous for her is further elaborated by the next scene, where Natalie runs straight into the church and needs to catch her breath before she can talk. She comments how she "just ran, like, a half marathon." There is no way to know how

long the run actually was since it is only a short scene in the film. Put together, these instances give an ambiguous understanding of Natalie's physical fitness; the indication that she exercises is present, but her comment about her Fit Bit suggesting 'a stroll' and her then wanting to hit the band as well as her facial expression supports the idea that fat people do not exercise, even though working out and exercising is something one cannot always tell from the outside (Burgard, 2009, p. 46). Plotz (2020, p. 134) notes how in 'fat slapstick' the fat character being physically unfit is both a common trope and cause of slapstick and these scenes can be read as comedic. Slapstick comedy is physical comedy that usually features mild, comical violence, such as smacking one's head or falling down (Bromley, 2019). Fat slapstick then "turns fatness itself into the basis of the comic effect" (Plotz, 2020, 10). More humor is brought to the running scene with Natalie needing to lift her pants whilst running and then as the scene changes to slow-motion, by Natalie's facial expressions (image 2) whilst she says out loud how dumb slow-motion is, and her needing to hold on to her breasts whilst running.

Image 2. Natalie running in slow-motion.

The film also features clear physical humor at the expense of Natalie. At the beginning of the movie, in a scene where Natalie is leaving for work, a street vendor yells at her to stop his cart that is rolling down the street. Natalie is confused, and the street vendor yells at Natalie:

> Street vendor: Stop the cart!
> Natalie: What?
> SV: Stop it with your body!
> N: Me?
> SV: Do it!
> N: No, I can't!
> SV: My cart is valuable!
> N: I can't!
> SV: Stop the cart!

The street vendor is suggesting that Natalie should use her body stop his cart and that the cart is valuable, placing more value on his cart than on Natalie as a fat person. Despite yelling that she can't, Natalie does not move out of the way, the cart hits her, and she falls to the ground whilst the cart stops moving in a typical slapstick comedy fashion. The street vendor catches up and says: "Wow! You're built like a cement truck." Cement trucks are trucks with big, round containers to mix cement in. The street vendor is clearly calling Natalie's body fat to her face in a very insulting way. The scene aims for humor at the expense of Natalie, and she continues it by responding with "Yeah. Thank you. That's what all the guys say."

Image 3. Natalie posing on the ground.

As Natalie says this, she puts her hand on her hip whilst still lying on the ground, posing for the street vendor (image 3). Her facial expression is grimacing, further adding to the bodily humor and the verbal humor of the scene. Another example of physical slapstick comedy in the film is when Natalie gets mugged in the subway, the man mugging her hitting her in the stomach, and trying to steal her purse. The pair fight over the purse, and Natalie ends up on the ground holding on to the purse as the mugger drags her across the floor trying to steal it. As she gets her purse back and is leaving the station, she runs into a metallic post, hitting her head and falling to the ground with a thud, unconscious. After the mugging, she wakes up in the rom-com universe, and more bodily comedy follows. Natalie tries to jump a turnstile at the subway station, but her legs get caught and she falls to the ground with a thud. This happens again when she is singing karaoke in a bar, walking on top of a table. She falls from the table with a thud and is shown lying on the floor, surrounded by nachos, and continuing to sing with the sound muffled. Natalie is the only character who falls to the ground during the film, which is no surprise as fat characters are often participants in the physical comedy of slapstick, either highlighting the size of their body or presenting them as unfit or clumsy (Plotz, 2020, pp. 130, 132). Natalie's size is

also a part of comedy later when in the rom-com universe her work colleague and friend Whitney (Betty Gilpin) is suddenly her enemy. Natalie mentions that they are friends and talks about how the two of them shared a t-shirt: "And I stretched it out and you said, 'You can have that one now'" making Natalie's size and her stretching out a shirt that was too small for her humorous.

Towards the end of the film, in a scene that follows Natalie's run to the church, the message of the movie becomes clear: as Natalie is asking Josh to love her, she realizes that she loves herself, commenting out loud; "I love me", as she is thinking back on everything that has happened in the rom-com universe. After realizing this and leaving the church, she drives her car into an obstacle on the road and wakes up in a hospital. Natalie now, with her realization of self-love, does not let other people walk all over her. As an architect, she designs garages, and at the last pitch meeting of the movie, as she is talking about making a garage that is light and airy, she correlates them to herself:

> Natalie: And then, suddenly…something that was invisible, something nobody ever cared about or looked twice at…suddenly, they're not invisible anymore. People actually look at them and…see beauty. They see something…at least.

With her realization of self-love, she refuses to be invisible to others and is no longer confused about Josh being interested in her. She and Josh kiss, and agree on a date, but she has realized how "Josh does not complete me. I complete myself."

These findings will be further critically and comparatively discussed in Chapter 5, but I will briefly sum up the findings here. Natalie has stereotypical fat character traits, and the movie includes classic slapstick comedy and bodily humor at her expense. She is funny and smart, but she allows others to treat her poorly. She does not understand why men would be attracted to her, and she is insecure in that regard. Her size is not explicitly referenced in the movie by others than the street vendor, referring to her as a cement truck. Other instances I interpret having to do with her looks and size are the few discussions analyzed, the first one being her mother in the first scene talking about her sad future and the second the notion of "a girl like me" Natalie herself talks about. The film carries a self-love message.

4.2   Sierra Burgess is a Loser

Sierra Burgess is the main character of *Sierra Burgess is a Loser* (2018). She is played by Shannon Purser, a white American actress. Sierra is a teenager, going to high school. This movie has two fat characters: Sierra and Veronica's mother, Trish, who will be

briefly mentioned in the analysis since her part was very minor. She is played by Chrissy Metz, a white American actress.

4.2.1 Sierra

As the opening credits roll, Sierra is coming out of the shower. She walks to the mirror and is turning around, looking at herself in the mirror. Sierra looks herself in the eye through the mirror and says: "You are a magnificent beast." Before smiling at herself (image 4).
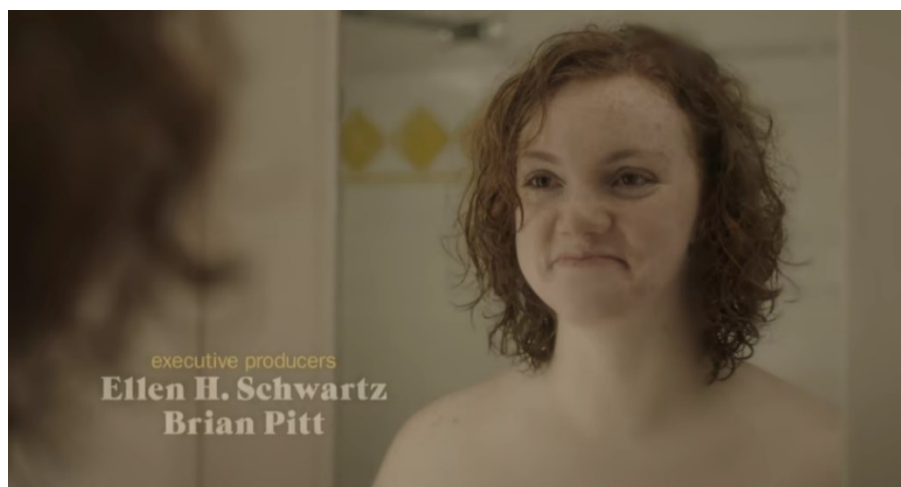

Image 4. Sierra smiling at herself.

Talking to yourself through a mirror is a popular self-help trick where one is encouraged to say affirming messages to oneself in front of a mirror. This is something Sierra has been taught by her mother since her mother works in the self-help world. Whilst describing herself as magnificent indicates positive feelings about herself, pairing it up with the word 'beast' shows that she sees herself as a beast. Beast can have different meanings, often relating to an animal or a monster. According to *Collins Dictionary* (n.d.b) 'beast' refers to either an animal or a person associated with negative attributes, such as being uncivilized, brutal, or filthy. However, her smile and look of contentment indicate that this is how she sees herself, and she is happy about it.

Further, regarding her *visual appearance*, Sierra wears quite shabby, homely clothing throughout the movie. She wears a dress to prom, but otherwise, she is dressed in full-length pants and t-shirts, long sleeve shirts, or cardigans. Her hair is ginger and curly, and she wears little makeup. And as she sees herself as a beast, so do the bullies in school. Her main bully Veronica, tells her to move away from the mirror in the bathroom before she breaks it, meaning to call Sierra Quasimodo from *Hunchback of Notre Dame* but accidentally calls her Frodo instead. Sierra corrects this mistake, and Veronica continues: "I meant looking at you makes me want to gouge my eyes out." Another student refers to Sierra's trans journey though Sierra is not

trans, apparently indicating that they see Sierra as more manly. Veronica also refers to this when Sierra suggests they help each other, saying: "you've added crazy pills to your hormone pills" as hormone pills are something needed in the transitioning process. Veronica continues this by telling Sierra that she needs diet pills, making a direct comment about her size. Sierra is bullied in school for her appearance, and after Sierra and Veronica form an unlikely friendship, Veronica's friends call hanging out with Sierra "a social suicide". Even Sierra's best friend Dan (RJ Cyler) jokingly makes a comment about Sierra's looks when she puts up a flyer offering tutoring to the school's message board, saying: "What's up with America's Most Unwanted?" referencing America's Most Wanted list of criminals. However, adding the un-prefix in front of wanted makes it negative, giving the idea that Sierra is the least wanted person. Dan also asks why the flyer is so unsexy. The two are joking about it, and Sierra does not seem to mind Dan's comments.

Sierra's *behavior* shows that she is very smart; she can speak multiple languages, she knows literary quotes and who wrote them, and she tutors other students in her school. She also plays in the school's orchestra and is a gifted singer. Her behavior also indicates that she is insecure when it comes to her looks. She catfishes Jamey for the length of the film, and although she acknowledges to her friend that what she is doing is wrong, she will not tell him the truth. When they accidentally meet, she pretends to be deaf rather than have him recognize her voice. After Jamey finds out the truth about Sierra catfishing him, Sierra cries to her mother:

> Sierra: You know, it's…it's easy for you to spout your self-esteem BS, but look at me. Do you have any idea what it's like to be a teenage girl and to look like this? Of course not, because you're tiny, you're tiny and you're beautiful and you've always been beautiful.

Sierra puts emphasis on the fact that her mother is tiny, saying it twice. Said like this, it suggests that life is easier if you are tiny, and even more easy if you are tiny and beautiful. This showcases Sierra's own self-esteem problems even further. She sees herself as a beast with more 'mannish' characteristics, and she finds it hard to look the way she does.

Catfishing shows Sierra's character in a negative light. A catfish in this case refers to someone hiding behind "a false identity on social media in order to lure someone into establishing a relationship" (Collins Dictionary n.d.c), and catfishing another person is wrong. This is further amplified when Sierra would rather pretend to be deaf than tell the truth, showing a lack of morality. Lack of morality is again present when Veronica goes on a date with Jamey, and after the date, Sierra hides under Jamey's car to hear what they are talking about. They are about to kiss, and Veronica tells Jamey to close his eyes so Sierra can secretly get out from under the car, cover his eyes with her hand and kiss him instead. Since Jamey believes he is talking to Veronica, he ends

up kissing her later whilst Sierra is watching. Sierra is jealous, and despite being friends with Veronica, she hacks into Veronica's Instagram account, calling Veronica stupid as she guesses her password, to share a picture of Veronica getting dumped by her ex-boyfriend. Veronica confronts Sierra saying: "You think I'm mean? You should check the mirror, because your looks are the least ugly thing about you." Sierra's behavior is morally questionable for any character, but a fat character doing it sends a message that this was the only way Sierra could get a love interest.

Romantically Sierra has not dated anyone, nor is there any indication that she has ever been interested in anyone before Jamey and her started texting. This becomes clearer when she and Dan are cutting images out of magazines, and she picks up a picture of a model, asking Daniel "Is this really what guys want?" Dan confirms that most guys do. Sierra's next comment further proves that she has not been interested in others by commenting that she has not needed to think about what guys want before. At this point, Sierra does not yet know whom Jamey thinks she is. After realizing that Jayme thinks Sierra is Veronica, Sierra has already started liking Jamey and refuses to tell him she is catfishing him, saying in one scene that even though Jamey imagines Veronica when he talks to Sierra, they are Sierra's words, and he is falling for her. The movie enforces the idea that had it not been for the catfishing, Jamey would not have been interested in Sierra: "honestly, had we not met the way that we had, maybe I wouldn't have noticed you. I mean, you're not exactly everybody's type", but he does end up saying that she is his type. This enforces the message that catfishing is the only way 'a guy like Jamey' would be interested in our fat main character Sierra.

When Sierra and Jamey are texting, Jamey sends Sierra a shirtless photo of himself. After struggling with her answer, Sierra eventually sends a photo of an elephant as her response (image 5).
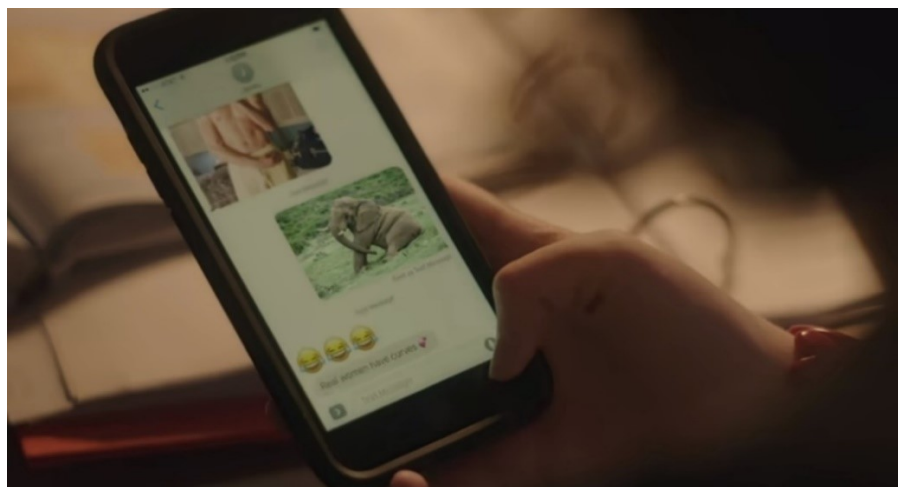

Image 5. Sierra's text.

As the image is sent as a response to a shirtless picture of Jamey, this indicates that not only does Sierra think of herself as a beast, but she also thinks she looks like an elephant. And since elephants are big animals, and the image is sent in this context, I interpret this to be about how Sierra sees her size. To this, Jamey answers with three laughing emojis and says "Real women have curves" adding a heart emoji, making Sierra smile.

During the film, Sierra also tries out for the boys' track team. Her lack of experience in exercise is indicated by her copying a boy's stretches before the run (image 6).

Image 6. Sierra copies stretches.

Image 7. Sierra moments after the run.

When the running starts, she and her best friend Dan are behind the other students, showing how much slower they are. There are a few jumping fences on the track, and Sierra stops and steps over one, rounds another, and pushes one to the ground. During the run, she acknowledges to Dan that tying out was a mistake. Her lack of exercise is also apparent after the run, as her face contorts and she appears to feel unwell, holding

her stomach (image 7). She ends up puking on the ground, indicating that she is not used to exercising and the short run she did was more than she is used to, again showcasing the stereotype of fat people being lazy and physically unfit. Further, as Bartky (1990, p. 73) and Hartley (2001, p. 62) have both noted, women are supposed to take up less space than men, and when they start taking up more space, their stature closes in on or exceeds that of a man, they are seen as freakish and unfeminine. Having Sierra try out for the boys' team enforces the idea of her being more masculine and less feminine. Sierra also thinks her voice sounds 'mannish', telling Jamey that she has a cold, and that is why her voice is "kinda mannish" when they speak on the phone for the first time. Jamey flirts with her, saying she should get sick more often because he likes her voice, and Sierra laughs with "Oh, okay, because you're what, super into dudes?" This comment further reinforces that Sierra thinks she sounds like a man. Her being more masculine is also emphasized by the trans comments Sierra got earlier, and Veronica's comment: "…don't put your man hands on the railings." when Sierra goes to Veronica's house for the first time.

After Jamey finds out about the catfishing and she fights with her friends, Sierra writes a song that she sings in the film. The song starts with these few lines: "rose girls in glass vases / perfect bodies, perfect faces / they all belong in magazines / those girls the boys are chasin'/… and then the chorus:

> but I'm a sunflower, / a little funny / if I were a rose /maybe you'd want me / if I could I'd change overnight / I'd turn into something you'd like / but I'm a sunflower…

The song is about how Sierra sees herself. During her first phone call with Jamey, when he believes he is talking to Veronica, he says that if Veronica was a flower, she would be a rose, describing roses as "the queen flower all the other flowers are jealous of." Adapting Jamey's comment, Sierra sees girls like Veronica, who have perfect bodies and faces, as roses, and herself as a sunflower, which is still a beautiful flower but bigger than others. Singing that she would change overnight for Jamey to be something he would like sends a message about Sierra's relationship with herself; she does not love herself for her, and this can be seen in various parts of the film previously mentioned.

In sum, Sierra is associated with more masculine traits, by others and by herself. After she starts talking to Jamey, she appears insecure about her looks and struggles with that during the film. Otherwise, she does not seem to care what others say, and she does not let bullying comments bother her. Her morality is questionable as she catfishes Jamey the entire film. She is portrayed as physically unfit, but very smart and talented. Her representation did not include her relationship with food.

4.2.2 Trish

Veronica's mother's name is not mentioned in the film but on IMDb (n.d.b) her name is listed as Trish so that is the name used here. Trish is the other fat character in the movie. She only appears in three scenes, and she is portrayed in a negative light.

Image 8. Veronica's mother, Trish.

When it comes to Trish's *visual appearance*, she wears covering clothes in the films. She is seen wearing a tracksuit, with full-length pants and a jacket, and later, she wears full-length pants and a hoodie with a zipper. Her hair is brown, curled, and tied up with a few strands of curled hair framing her face. She wears more makeup than the other fat characters, also wearing eyeshadow and lipstick in her scenes (image 8). She also wears hanging earrings, which are associated with femininity.

Trish's *behavior* emphasizes traditional beauty ideals and expectations for women in that she sets such standards for her children. She emphasizes exercise and boys to Veronica; when Veronica cut cheer practice to study, her mother was worried she got cut from the squad. As Veronica explains the situation, her mother says: "That's gonna get you far with the boys." Trish is emphasizing the idea that girls should be focused on how to look good and get a boyfriend instead of school, lining with the traditional ideas of adolescent femininity and the need to have a boyfriend and look good (McRobbie, 2000, p. 69) as well as the idea of romantic relationships being integral for femininity (Milestone & Meyer, 2012, p. 92). She also tells Veronica not to skip practices anymore: "because you know what happens when gymnasts stop practicing, right? One day they're these cute little firecrackers and the next day they've exploded out of their Lycra." Trish is also a pageant mom, which is indicated by her commenting to her two young girls that they will not go to a pageant if they do not calm down. She clearly emphasizes traditional ideas of beauty and size and holds her children to that standard. This can also be seen later when Sierra is eating a rice cake

at their house and asks whether they have any real food in the house. Veronica's mother answers: "No. You don't eat junk at your age. You'll make lifelong fat cells that'll ride your hips like a cowboy rides a buckin' bronco." These types of comments and Trish's behavior show that even when being a fat person herself, she has strong feelings about fat. She enforces the idea that fat is the most terrible thing that could happen to a girl, which is apparent by her comments and her regulation of her children's eating, since monitoring food intake is a discipline imposed especially on the female body (Bartky, 1990, p. 66).

Her *romantic situation* is not much talked about. The father of her three children has left her for a younger woman, and she resents him for it. During the movie, she mentions different things that supposedly happened to him, such as that he died in a plane crash or that he had a heart attack. At the end of the film, Veronica tells her that their dad is not dead, and she replies: "I know. But he should be." Besides being a stereotypical bitter woman about her situation with him, there is no mention of her being otherwise romantically involved with other people.

Overall, Trish is portrayed as more feminine through her makeup and jewelry. However, she is portrayed in a negative light, bitter about her previous romantic life, restricting her children's diets, and emphasizing traditional ideas of femininity to her children.

4.3   Dumplin'

Willowdean Dickson is the main character of *Dumplin'* (2018). She is portrayed by Danielle Macdonald, a white Australian actress. Willowdean is a teenager in the movie, and one of the two fat characters in the film. The other fat character, Millie, portrayed by Maddie Bailio, a white American actress, will also be briefly analyzed here to see how both of these fat female characters are represented in the movie. Willowdean will be shortened to Will from time to time since that is the way her name is also shortened in the movie. Willowdean's best friend Ellen's name is also often shortened to Elle by Will, so I will use both here when mentioning her.

4.3.1   Willowdean

The movie starts with a sequence of flashback scenes of young Willowdean, establishing her relationship with her aunt Lucy and her love for Dolly Parton with the help of narration. In one of these scenes where Willowdean is a child, she is leaving a donut shop with Lucy. Before Lucy comes out of the shop, three boys come up to Willowdean, who is standing in front of the shop, and call her a pig, saying that she is huge. After short glimpses of Will's childhood, the movie cuts to the current time,

where Will and her best friend Ellen are in the pool, floating on donuts. A boy jumps into the pool, splashing the two whilst yelling "Whale watch!" These situations indicate that Willowdean gets and has gotten comments about her weight from other people for a long time.

With respect to Willowdean's *visual appearance,* she wears homely clothes. Her clothes are moderate. Unlike the previous characters analyzed, some of Will's clothes are clearly above the knee with her wearing dresses or a pair of shorts at the beginning of the film, and two different swimsuits. However, she only wears dresses when it comes to pageant situations. When she joins the pageant she wears high heels, but it is apparent she does not know how to walk in heels, almost twisting her ankle and calling the shoes "torture devices". Otherwise, she wears full-length pants, either jeans or trousers and t-shirts. Outside of these situations, she wears a uniform at work, which is a purple knee-length dress with t-shirt sleeves (seen partly in image 10). Her hair is curly, and she wears minimal makeup. During the film, two different characters are shocked that Rosie is Will's mother, as Will looks quite different than her pageant-winning mother. One of Rosie's beauty pageant friends thought Ellen was Rosie's daughter, and when Rosie corrected her and introduced her to Will, she replied with a flabbergasted "Wow" when she saw Will.

Will's *behavior* shows that she is confident; she does not let other people's comments get to her, and she joins the pageant to prove a point. She stands up for herself and knees a boy at school after he calls her "Dumplin'" and makes a comment about Millie. Joining the pageant when it is not normally a place for fat women also indicates confidence. The only instances where her confidence wavers are when she is on stage before the actual pageant and in romantic situations. She is not used to being in front of an audience with everyone watching her, but this is normal. She gains confidence for her performance with the help of drag queens her aunt Lucy used to go see. She is portrayed as funny. Her comments in the film show that she is not impressed by pageants, and in fact, she detests them: rolling her eyes when telling Ellen that her mother already started her diet for the pageant since she will be hosting it, imitating her mother saying that she needs to fit her dress since it is tradition. She also mentions to another girl that her mother works at the nursing home "wiping old people's butts" smiling that that is something that happens to many ex-beauty queens. Will, Ellen, and Rosie go see a pageant, and as Rosie comments on how hard the girls have worked, Will sarcastically comments to Ellen: "Yes, walking is so, so hard", smiling whilst making fun of them. Her hate for the pageants is also apparent with her trying to start the 'revolution' and even trying to get her best friend Elle to drop out of the competition, because she is mad at Ellen for practicing a pageant dance, seeing it as a betrayal since they are trying to make a point. Willowdean comments on how Elle would not understand, because she is "not built for the revolution" because

she is thin, which is indicated by Will looking down Elle's body as she says this, further commenting that Elle has to quit the pageant and that she is "the kind of girl who could win this thing without even trying." Willowdean's behavior shows her as judgmental and stubborn, but in the end, she comes around.

Romantically, whilst there is no mention of Willowdean being in a relationship before, she has a crush on Bo, her co-worker, and has had that crush for a while. However, when Ellen tells Will that Bo likes her because Bo gave her a magic 8-ball as a gift at work, Will insists that he does not, saying that Bo is nice to everybody, continuing: "And guys like Bo don't like girls like me. That's a fact. He just wants to be friends so he can ask me questions about girls he actually likes." Later, Bo asks her to come and watch meteors with him and he kisses her. All is well until Bo's hand touches her lower back. Bo's touch on her lower back makes Willowdean uncomfortable, causing her to open her eyes immediately, break off the kiss, and leave the parking lot where they were about to watch the meteors. When she gets home, she goes to her room and looks at herself in the mirror, confused about what just happened. She studies herself in the mirror. She lifts her hands to touch her abdomen, looking down at that area in the mirror (image 9).

Image 9. Willowdean looks at herself.

Her expression is unhappy, and she turns sideways to touch the same area on her back Bo touched. This is the first time Willowdean's character is shown as self-conscious of her size and looks, and here it is directly related to a romantic interest. The next day, she tells Elle about the kiss, mentioning how she freaked out when Bo touched her back, and it made her think: "Why does this hot guy wanna kiss me?" Then hating herself for being "that girl". Elle points out to Will that she has insecurities too when it comes to her boyfriend, bringing up the fact that anyone can have insecurities about their body parts.

Despite this, Will's insecurity continues later, when the next time Will and Bo are at work together, Bo tells her he likes her. Will asks him "Why?", not

understanding why someone like Bo would be interested in someone like her. The following conversation ensues:

> Willowdean: … 'cause you and I, we don't work together in the real world, Bo. You're supposed to be with someone like Bekah.
> Bo: What are you talking about?
> WD: Oh my god. I'm talking about this! How are you missing this? Do you not know what it would be like to with me?

Image 10. Willowdean and Bo arguing.

During this conversation, Will indicates that Bo should be with someone like Bekah (Dove Cameron), who is one of the contestants in the pageant and has indicated her interest in Bo. She is blond, thin, and beautiful. Bekah had asked Bo to a dance earlier, but Bo had turned her down. Bo mentions how he does not "like Bekah like that". Bo does not understand Will's comment about Bekah, so Willowdean yells: "I'm talking about this!" She gestures to her body with both of her hands angrily (image 10). Her facial expression also reflects a level of disbelief and frustration at the conversation they are having. It becomes clear that Will struggles with her size when it comes to romantic relationships. Earlier, Will said that Bo would not be interested in her, and now that he is saying he is, Will does not believe they should be together, saying that she cannot. She is worried about what other people would say about them as a couple. Bo calls her a coward for this since Will is not one to care what other people think about her. Will appears to tear up, but she does not stop Bo from going inside and ending the conversation. At the end of the movie, after the pageant, Willowdean stops caring what other people think, and she ends up together with Bo, with Bo's hands on her back, showing that she is no longer insecure about the area or Bo's interest in her.

Rosie, Will's mother, is the person who gave Will the nickname "Dumplin'". She has been calling Willowdean "Dumplin'" for Will's entire life. On multiple occasions Will expresses her annoyance with the nickname:

> Willowdean: … that hideous nickname you've been calling me my whole life.
> Rosie: Why you getting all sensitive about a silly little nickname
> WD: We know it's about so much more than just a nickname. You'll never come out and say it, but I know you can't stand that your daughter looks like this.
> R: What?
> WD: Like a round little dumplin'.

Will has been fat since she was a child, and that entire time her mother has been calling her "Dumplin'" despite Will's dislike for the name, but Rosie does not seem to understand why calling her fat daughter by that name is wrong. According to *Collins dictionary* (n.d.d), outside of food, dumpling is used to refer to a short, plump, or fat person or animal. Instead of it being a nice nickname, it is a pejorative word for fat people. Rosie makes it seem like Will is being sensitive and overreacting to that 'silly' nickname. When Rosie uses the nickname in front of Will's school, the other teens start snickering, laughing, and calling her "Dumplin'" too. At the end of the movie, Rosie finally acknowledges that Will hates the nickname and promises to try to stop using the word.

Rosie's character brings forth the health policy view that often surrounds discussions on weight and fat, acknowledging that it is harder for big girls to have opportunities in various aspects of life because she was fat but lost her weight before high school, unlike her sister Lucy. Will tells her mother that Lucy never made her feel bad about herself, and Rosie replies: "I really wish you didn't idolize her so much. If she took better care of herself, she'd probably still be here." This shows that Rosie focuses on weight and alleges that Lucy's death might have been connected to her weight, which is often an argument that arises when talking about fatness (Solovay & Rothblum 2009).

At the beginning of the film, Willowdean comments to Ellen about how their "fridge has been reduced to bunny food" because of Rosie's diet, and later on, there are two scenes where she opens the fridge and there are only salad and condiments in it, she sighs and makes an "ugh" sound, indicating that she is not a fan of salad, which is healthy food. During the film, Rosie notices that Will has a breakout on her forehead and asks her: "You're not eating that greasy stuff over at Harpy's right?" Whilst fattening foods are associated with fatness (Plotz, 2020, p. 200), Willowdean's character goes against this, answering her mother: "Mom, you know I don't even like burgers and hotdogs."

There are important messages about body size and shape in the film. When Willowdean joins the pageant, she needs her mother to sign the form. She says that to her, "…a swimsuit body is a body with a swimsuit on it." Also loudly exclaiming how by not signing, her mother would send the message that "…every girl in this room is more deserving than me because I'm not built like them. That I don't belong here."

Having not one, but two fat characters joining a pageant brings fatness into a space it has not had room in before. During the health- and fitness -section of the pageant competition, the message is further cemented by the main character and her best friend (images 11 & 12):

Image 11. Swimsuit message front.

Image 12. Swimsuit message from behind.

"Every body is a swimsuit body" is an important message of the movie. Historically, pageants have shown, and continue to show, much about the attitudes toward what is expected of women and their physical appearance (Banner, 1983, p. 249) since pageants are a place for thin, young, and beautiful girls. The film contests this idea. The audience responds to this message with a standing ovation, showing that they agree with the sentiment. This is then further emphasized when Millie wins second place in the competition. This message has been introduced since the beginning of the film when Willowdean gets bullied by the little boys outside the donut shop. Her aunt Lucy tells her: "Pay them no mind Willowdean. The world is filled with people that are gonna try to tell you who you are, but that's for you to decide." The message of size acceptance carries through the film.

Overall, Willowdean is represented in a positive light. She stands up for herself and does not let comments get to her. However, in romantic situations, she is insecure about her weight, but she gets past it, ending the movie on a positive note. Through both Will's and Millie's characters, the film carries a message of size acceptance.

4.3.2 Millie

Millicent Michalchuk, Millie, is the other fat character in *Dumplin'*. She does not have as prominent a role as Willowdean as she is a supporting character. Millie is one of the characters who join Will's 'revolution' and sign up for the pageant.

Millie is portrayed as classically more feminine through her *visual appearance*. Millie wears more feminine clothing, dressing in skirts and dresses in mostly light colors. Her hair is long and black. Her feminine aspects are emphasized by her desire to compete in the pageant since pageants are traditionally centered on beauty and looks. In fact, she has wanted to join the pageant since she was eight years old.

Millie is portrayed as more feminine also through her being a 'good girl'. Millie's 'good girl' characteristics can be seen in her *behavior*. She is kind to everyone and seems to be happy all the time. When she gets bullied, she pays them no mind. She is shown to be talented; she sings beautifully, she can tap dance, and hula hoop. She is genuinely excited to compete in the pageant. Her 'good girl' behavior is only broken when she mentions that she lied to her mother to join the pageant. During the competition, Millie clearly loves being on stage in front of people, and she comes in as the first runner-up. Millie is also religious. She makes mentions of going to church and when mean boys yell at her from the car, she yells back that she will pray for them. During her talent section in the pageant, she sings Dolly Parton's "High and Mighty" which is a song about God.

She has no *romantic interest* in the movie, and there is no mention of her ever being in a relationship or interested in anyone. She also appears to not have had any friends before her friendship with the group of girls protesting the pageant.

Millie joins the pageant boot camp, but she mentions how she did this to get to know the other girls, indicating that this was not done for exercise purposes. The boot camp happens every year around the pageant, where the girls taking a part in the pageant dress in pink clothing and run around the town to stay in shape. In one scene, Millie is shown running with the other girls. However, she runs behind them, suggesting that exercise-wise, she is not on par with the other pageant girls.

She is shown to be clueless and a little dumb. At the beginning of the movie, Millie is sitting by the pool when Willowdean and Ellen are in the pool. They are not yet friends, but the same boy who yelled "Whale watch!" at Willowdean, yells "Whale!" again, this time targeted towards Millie because the camera pans to her.

Millie's reaction is just to laugh when the water hits her (image 13). Next to Millie, two other boys are sitting on a lounge chair, and it appears that the boys might be making

Image 13. Millie on a lounge chair.

fun of her. Will looks at the situation and comments to Ellen that "I'm fat but at least I'm not clueless." This suggests that Millie thinks she is in on the joke when she, in fact, is the joke and lacks the understanding that she is being bullied. She is also verbally bullied when she is talking to Willowdean through a car window, and a car with boys drives by. The boys yell: "Get off the road fatty!" and "Fat! Fat!" from the car as they pass by. In the school hallway, a boy walks in front of her and moves when she moves, stopping her from passing him. He makes a comment about her size: "Guess we need to widen the hallways" and Millie rounds him just as he moves away. Millie does not say anything about the bullying she faces, and the only time she does is to yell she will pray for the boys yelling from the car.

In sum, Millie is portrayed as a more feminine "good girl" even when she lies to her mother about joining the pageant. She is always nice, and excited to compete in the pageant. She is bullied during the movie but does not let bullying get to her. However, she is also portrayed as clueless in that regard. As a side character, she has no romantic interest in the film.

5   DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the findings of the analysis will be discussed, and the characters will be compared to get a comprehensive view of the representation of fat female characters and fatness in the movies *Isn't It Romantic* (2019), *Sierra Burgess is a Loser* (2018), and *Dumplin'* (2018). The aim of this study was to examine the representation of fat female characters through three research questions: How are fat female characters represented? Does the character's weight play a role in the film? How and what kind? and how is fatness portrayed in the films? These were answered through by examining the visual appearance, behavior, romantic situation, and stereotypical traits associated with fat characters as well as the messages of the films. These were inspired by previous research introduced in Chapter 2.5. I will now discuss the findings.

There were five fat female characters in the films, and their representations had similarities. The characters wore mostly covering, homely, and less feminine clothing, usually wearing full-length pants and covering tops. The findings here are quite compatible with findings made by White et al. (1999) and Giovanelli and Ostertag (2009), in that the fat characters studied by them also wore covering and moderate clothing. However, in this regard, the representation has also bettered, because in both *Isn't It Romantic* and *Dumplin'*, the characters also wore more feminine clothing featuring dresses that were about knee-length, and Millie's character only wore dresses or skirts. Especially Natalie's clothes in the romantic comedy universe were colorful, more form-fitting, and showed more cleavage. The characters wore a minimal or normal amount of makeup except for Trish, whose look was more feminine as she also wore lipstick and eyeshadow.

The main characters were portrayed as desirable. Where previous research (e.g., Greenberg et al., 2003; White et al., 1999) has found that fat characters are often not shown in romantic interactions with romantic interests or as being attractive, the main characters in these movies had romantic interests and situations, with each of them

ending up in a relationship by the end of the film. However, as they are the main character, it is common for them to have a romantic plotline. The fat side characters did not have romantic interests in the films. Because of this, conclusions about the representation of fat female characters and their romantic situations are impossible to make. Still, the characters were not romantically humiliated, and as fat bodies are seen as something outside the 'acceptable' norm we have for bodies (Harjunen, 2004, p. 243), portraying fat characters in a desirable way with romantic interests is positive representation.

The three main characters were also portrayed in stereotypical ways; they were portrayed as funny and smart, showing insecurities when it came to romantic situations. However, only Sierra and Will indicated their insecurities to be about looks and weight specifically. Natalie's behavior indicated that she was insecure in other aspects of her life also, but in that regard, her insecurity was not explicitly size-related. Sierra's behavior showed her as morally questionable and jealous, and Will was also depicted as judgmental. Trish was portrayed as bitter and controlling. Thus, these three characters were portrayed in a more negative light behavior-wise. Through comments by others as well as her actions, Sierra was also associated with masculine traits, which can be connected to her size. Female fatness has been associated with masculine traits because the fat body takes up more space than the 'normal' ideal female body should (Bartky, 1990; Hartley, 2001). The multiple denotations and connotations of Sierra being 'manlier' made Sierra's representation as a fat female character more negative.

The laziness associated with fatness (Bordo, 2003, p. 195) and the unfit fat body mentioned by Plotz (2020) were present in the films. However, Natalie's representation regarding exercise was more ambiguous than the others. The characters were not presented as overeaters, which is often the case with fat characters (Plotz, 2020, p. 189), and only Natalie's story featured sweet foods that are associated with fatness. Whilst Greenberg et al. (2003) found that in their study, fat characters were more likely to be shown eating, here such situations were not present, offering a more positive representation of fat characters in that regard. The characters were also active, and they had agency. Whilst they had stereotypical fat character traits, they were not entirely stereotypical fat characters. Trish's character was portrayed as a stereotypical bitter woman at the fact that her children's father has left her for a younger woman. Whether it be because of their size, the intended audience, or changing times, the representation of fat women did not reinforce sexism, and the characters were not sexualized or depicted as something to be 'looked at'.

The main characters' weight played a role in the films. Their behavior and romantic situations were shown to be affected by their size since each of them mentioned some notion of "he would not be interested in someone like me", and

although the idea of what exactly "someone like me" meant was never explicitly said, one can draw the conclusion that it had to do with their looks and thus also weight. The main characters all though that they belong with a certain kind of person who is unlike the men they themselves were interested in. Blake, Jamey, and Bo, whom each of the characters made this sort of comment about, are all tall, lean, and attractive male characters. Natalie also made this type of comment about her friend Josh, who is more unconventionally attractive than the others. In *Isn't It Romantic*, Natalie's size and body are used for physical humor on multiple occasions, and thus her weight plays a role in the film as part of the physical, bodily humor.

Fatness was portrayed as a part of these characters, and not as something they were actively trying to change. Only Rosie's character brings up the health perspective which is the dominant perspective and discourse when it comes to fatness (Harjunen & Kyrölä, 2007, p. 9). Trish's character viewed fatness in a negative light, and through her behavior, it became clear that she saw fatness itself as the worst thing that could happen to a girl. Natalie's mother also portrays fatness and Natalie's size as undesirable. Therefore, three adult characters, one in each film, expressed concern or negative thoughts regarding fatness, but otherwise, fatness was not shown in a negative light in the films. Though, as these narratives feature stereotypical portrayals of the lack of exercise by the fat characters, they can be seen as relying on the assumption that fat people do not move and that is one of the reasons for their size. As the fat body and fatness are always denigrated (Tischner & Malson, 2012, p. 312), these films do not set out to do that in their portrayal of fat female characters. However, fatness was portrayed as a reason for bullying, as the fat characters who were teenagers faced bullying and negative comments from others. This is in line with findings by Himes and Thompson (2007), although Sierra's bullies were girls. Fatness was also featured in the messages and morals of the film narratives. However, these differed. Where Natalie's and Will's stories featured a message of self-love and size acceptance, which, as was mentioned earlier, is common for narratives about fat characters (Frater, 2009), with *Dumplin'* carrying that message throughout the movie, Sierra's did not. Instead, Sierra disliked her looks, sending the message that if she could change herself, she would, making her representation, once again, negative. Natalie's realization of self-love is also shadowed by the fact that she needed to experience life in 'an alternative universe' where people paid attention to her in order for her to come to the realization.

Finally, Plotz (2020, pp. 101, 128, 166) mentions how since 2011, there has been a wave of films that position the fat female character as sexually desirable and breaks the gross-out structure previous comedy films have had regarding fat women. In some way, these films feature Rebel Wilson and/or Melissa McCarthy, who are well-known fat actors. The space for fat actors has opened, since Rebel Wilson is acting in only one

of the movies chosen for the data of this study, and McCarthy appears in none of them. Instead, we have two fat main female characters, and their actors who have been featured in more works (Shannon Purser in TV show *Riverdale* and Danielle Macdonald in *Falling for Figaro* and TV show *The Tourist*). It is also apparent that as losing weight has been considered the natural goal for a fat person (Harjunen, 2007, p. 207), fatness has been something that needs to be 'fixed' (Bordo, 2003; Mills, 2010, pp. 34–35), and many popular culture products featuring fat characters have often been about changing appearances and losing weight with the help of fat suits (for example *Insatiable*, *Friends*), none of these three movies analyzed here featured such notions. Although the findings of the study show that the representation of fat female characters is still at parts negative, they also feature positive aspects, with the representations in *Dumplin'* being mostly positive. Although the representation is still very lacking, popular culture is slowly opening its doors for more diverse body representation with more positive representations of fatness.

6 CONCLUSION

This thesis explored the representation of fat female characters and fatness in three comedy movies: *Isn't It Romantic* (2019), *Sierra Burgess is a Loser* (2018), and *Dumplin'* (2018) with the help of critical discourse analysis. Gender studies, feminist film theory, and fat studies were utilized as the framework for this study. Building on top of each other, the framework provides the background for the study to understand the fat female in her unconventional role. Each character and movie were scrutinized in relation to their weight to answer the three research questions of the study: 1) How are fat female characters represented? 2) Does the character's weight play a role in the film? How and what kind? and 3) How is fatness portrayed in the films?

The study found that the representation of these fat female characters was similar in some regards. All of the films included size and fatness in some way. The characters were smart and funny, and all of the main characters mostly dressed in covering, homely clothing with minimal makeup. They were portrayed as insecure when it came to romantic interests, bringing forth the idea of "a girl like me" and how the opposite sex would not be interested in them based on their looks, which weight is a part of. The characters were portrayed as more physically unfit or there was no indication of them exercising at all. Natalie was the only character whose love for some type of food associated with fatness was apparent. Natalie was also the only character doing classic slapstick comedy. Two of the movies had messages of self-love/acceptance whereas *Sierra Burgess is a Loser* did not.

Regarding the previous research on fat characters mentioned in Chapter 2.5, it is possible to see that the representation of fat female characters in comedy films is at parts better than before, although it is still lacking. Bodily humor in the films studied was quite minimal and fat characters were not shown to be overeaters. The three main characters were portrayed as insecure about their size when it came to romantic interests, but they were still portrayed as desirable and each of them ended up in a relationship. The two side characters did not have romantic interests. Three of the five

fat characters analyzed here still received comments about their size, but they paid them no mind.

All of the characters analyzed were heteronormative, fat white characters who seemed to be middle-class. Thus, these were the only intersectional elements in the films. However, class was left out of the scope of this study, only taking into consideration gender and size since both can be a source of oppression. Race and sexuality were also not relevant to the study.

The data mining and selection procedures chosen were systematic and justified for the current study, but it must be noted that a Master's thesis is limited in its length and depth. Three recent movies with altogether five fat female characters is limited, and one cannot make many conclusions about the overall representation of fat people based on such a little amount of data, since there are other potential characters and films that could have been studied, and the results of that analysis might have led to different findings. This study examined these films from the perspective of representation of fatness, and this focus guided the interpretation.

Looking ahead, more studies need to be done about the representation of fat people in different popular culture products. Representation in other genres could be a topic of future research, especially in genres and films that are meant for other audiences. With the body positivity movement and fat-shaming gradually falling out of favor, media will hopefully accommodate more diverse body types and take steps to cast actual fat actors to play the roles of fat characters instead of casting a 'thin' or a 'normal' weight actor who needs to wear a fat suit to play the part.

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