Have you noticed? Discussing the embodied experiences of fat queer individuals in Greece

Evdokia Papagianni

Edyta Just
Alma Persson
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the intricate interplay of fatness and queerness, as navigated by Greek individuals. Employing a qualitative approach and thematic analysis, the study aims to unfold the experiences, challenges, and resilience. To do so it is informed by queer theory, as well as Michel Foucault’s concept of the Panopticon and Judith Butler’s concept of performativity. Ethical considerations, the application of queer phenomenology, and an awareness of positionality guide the study to ensure a compassionate and empathetic examination of these experiences. The findings reveal the pervasive societal narratives on fatness and queerness and the significant role of self-identification, aiming to contribute to the broader discourse on body image, self-identity, and societal expectations.

KEYWORDS

Fat Studies, queer theory, fat queer embodiment, the Panopticon, performativity, focus group, thematic analysis
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My brother. My mom. You have the most beautiful souls.
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PART I

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. PERSONAL AND SOCIETAL BACKGROUND

I can clearly remember the day I first started brainstorming on my second-year thesis: it was February 28th, 2023. The same night, reportedly 57 people, mainly students, would lose their lives in an unprecedented railway accident in central Greece. On the news, one could still hear about the devastating Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as the thousand deaths by the 7.8 Richter earthquake in the Turkish-Syrian borders.

The 2023 national elections, having taken place in May, led to the formation of the most conservative parliament in recent decades, since the downfall of the dictatorial regime in Greece in 1974, leading to a sequence of legislative initiatives designed to facilitate the extensive privatization of services typically considered integral to a state's "social" functions. On July 10th, trans refugee Ana was brutally murdered in her apartment in central Athens. Midsummer brought catastrophic wildfires in Rhodes island as well as Evros region, irreparably burning to ashes a vast part of the National Park of Dadia, only to be followed by storm “Daniel”, that, given the unpreparedness of the Greek authorities, resulted in the flood of Thessaly area (i.e. the backbone of Greece’s agricultural production). Meanwhile, 29-year-old Michalis Katsouris was murdered in a cruiser-style attack by Croatian hooligans (according to journalist claims, most probably neo-Nazis), who, ahead of a football match, crossed the country north to south without being checked by the authorities, despite international warnings. Early September marked the homicide of Antonis Kariotis, a person with a mental disability who looked “too dark”, according to the ship’s personnel who pushed him to the sea while he was trying to board, as well as 58-year-old Kostas Manioudakis’ murder by police officers. Although femicides and domestic
abuse cases do not make it to the top headlines of the news bulletins and the mainstream press, they are sadly frequent, just like divisive discourse that fosters sexism, racism, and various forms of discrimination.

It is evident that there's no need to debate about the prevailing sense of insecurity among people who live in Greece. The extended economic crisis has deeply impacted the implementation of state policies, as well as the broader political landscape. Social polarization has, in turn, exacerbated, leading to social tension. From my daily experience, conflicts and acts of violence have become commonplace, especially affecting social groups and persons at high risk of marginalization. For instance, there has been a notable rise in incidents of verbal harassment having sexist, racist, transphobic, or homophobic motives, as individuals report through viral videos on popular social media platforms.

Studying gender and intersectionality, and having an increased interest in an intersectional understanding of embodied experiences and fat bodies in particular, I could not help but wonder. In an era overshadowed by prevailing despair, how can academic research be relevant?

In the aforementioned context, emphasizing the challenges faced by individuals outside the heteronormative social and political status quo feels like an urgent necessity. Greek academia has been increasingly focused on addressing gender issues, mainly from a feminist perspective, with a particularly intensified focus on gender-based violence and gender equality. Regardless, research focusing on the experiences of persons who self-identify as LGBT remains limited, and even scarcer are studies about those identifying as queer. In contrast, when browsing through Greece's official doctoral thesis databases, fatness is primarily approached within a medical framework.

One of my core beliefs is that knowledge is always situated. Thus, the academic gap on fatness and gender diversity felt very personal. Starting from my identification as a fat person who does not ideologically agree with the
female-male binary, and following my first-year thesis “Your weight in gold: How mainstream media affect the way fat women experience sexual pleasure”, I began to ask myself how the discussion around fatness could extend to include those who do not align with the conventional gender binary.

In initiating this effort, I aim to bring to light the intricate and multifaceted mechanisms through which self-identification operates within specific contexts. In the subsequent chapters of this thesis, I will conduct a more thorough examination of these contexts, drawing upon the insights and personal experiences of individuals to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of how persons who self-identify as fat and queer navigate this contemporary society.

1.2 RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTIONS

The research problem arises when the experiences of individuals in Greece who self-identify as both fat and queer are overlooked at. Recognizing the critical academic gap concerning the intertwined topics of fatness and gender diversity, this thesis aims to understand how these intersecting self-identifications are embodied and negotiated in a society that often marginalizes non-normative bodies - but also to create a space for personal narratives and dialogue among these individuals, hoping to challenge prevailing societal norms. Through this exploration, the research intends to contribute to the broader field of gender studies in Greece while challenging prevailing narratives about the body.

Starting from the guiding research question of this thesis, that is how do individuals in Greece, who identify as both fat and queer navigate their lived experiences, I aspire to engage readers, particularly those in Greece, in meaningful reflection on the core principles of Fat Studies and queer theory. I will focus on the nuanced intersection of fatness and queerness, while also emphasizing the agency and control individuals exercise over their bodies.
Moreover, I will try to bring to light the experiences of those who self-identify as both fat and queer, by conducting a study. Most importantly, through this research, I hope to initiate dialogue between persons who are experiencing fat queer embodiment, while creating a space where personal events can be shared in a safe environment.

In order to answer this question, as well as be competent with the aims of this thesis, research data will be collected through focus groups, which will then be analyzed through thematic analysis. The final conclusions will be drawn based on what is considered to be appropriate literature on the subject, as follows.

1.3 THESIS LAYOUT AND CONTENT

Following the introductory first section of this thesis, I will go through the foundations of Fat Studies discussing their emergence as a scholarly field, as well as reflecting on their relationship to gender studies and activist movements. Then, I will proceed to talk about queer theory, which will form the basis of my analysis. I will present Michell Foucault's (1995) idea of the Panopticon, as well as discuss Judith Butler's work, focusing on the concept of performativity (Butler, 1990). Despite the lack of research in Greek academia, I will then be referring to international previous research that touches on the issues of this thesis to justify my theoretical background. Finally, to defend my rationale behind my interest in examining fatness and queerness as intertwined, I will discuss the need for applying an intersectional lens when talking about these two self-identifications.

In the second part, I will describe and explain the methodology, namely the use of queer phenomenology as a methodological tool, as well as refer to positionality as fundamental part of the research. I will expand on my ethical considerations and then proceed to thoroughly describe the research design and implementation details.
In the last part, I will present the data that have been collected and proceed to their analysis. Moreover, I will share some further thoughts in the “Discussion” section, as well as limitations I pinpointed while conducting the study. Before concluding, I will reflect on queer phenomenology as a methodological tool. Apart from the bibliographical references, in the appendices section, the reader can find some useful tools used during the focus groups.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 FAT STUDIES AND QUEER THEORY: EXPLORING RADICAL PERSPECTIVES

According to Wann (2009), ‘Fat Studies is a radical field, in the sense that it goes to the root of weight-related belief systems’ (p. 9). As many other academic fields throughout history, fatness was theoritized after relevant radical movements gained momentum. Fat activism is typically perceived as a societal initiative aimed at challenging prejudicial narratives both in social and medical contexts, directed toward individuals based on their body size (Chalklin, 2016). The emergence of the fat pride community, also known as the size acceptance movement, can be traced back to the late 1960s in the United States. This movement found its roots in the establishment of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance in 1969 and was significantly fueled by the influential efforts of the Fat Underground during the 1970s. However, it was not until the new millennium that Fat Studies began to acquire a significant place within academia – not to overlook, of course, previous substantial yet individual academic publications, such as LeBesco’s works (Wann, 2009). Landmark conferences took place in the USA during the first half of the 2010s, paving the way to a more coherent study of fatness and its connection to social reality (or, more accurately, various social realities). The field of fat studies strives to challenge well-entrenched beliefs regarding the body. It delves into the historical,
social, and political factors that have contributed to the characterization of the ideal body as one that is slender (often linked to concepts of whiteness, ability, and similar attributes) (Otis, 2020).

Like Fat Studies, queer studies have its origins in activist movements, although in this case things are somewhat more multilayered. Queer thought emerged out of the gay and lesbian movements, such as the prominent during the 1960s Gay Liberation Front, which was influenced by the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the anti-war movement, the Black Power Movement, etc. Its intersectional viewpoint included a critique of the socially constructed and imposed nature of gender, leading to the position that sexual expression can take various forms. (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022). Gay liberation called for a profound shift in societal values, asserting that true liberation for the LGBTQ+ community could only be achieved once traditional notions of sex and gender had been completely abolished (Jagose, 1996). "Queer politics" took shape as a response to mounting frustration with perceived scientific attempts to erase queer identities and the assimilationist tendencies within AIDS activism. Activists, who felt marginalized within traditional civil rights movements led by lesbian and gay organizations and witnessed a surge in legal and physical attacks against the LGBTQ+ community, launched a more assertive and confrontational political movement (Johnson & Henderson, 2005).

LGBT academic and writer Annamarie Jagose (1996) mentions Queer Studies’ pioneer Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s argument that “calling yourself queer ‘dramatizes the difference between what you call yourself and what other people call you.’” (p. 97). In discussions within lesbian and gay studies during the 1990s, uncertainty about which terms to use in different contexts was noticeable. The word *queer* emerged as a versatile -as well as empowering- solution to linguistic challenges. This linguistic choice was shaped by various cultural and theoretical influences, both within and outside academic circles, and it has been informed
by the shifting perspectives on identity and power (Jagose, 1996). *Queer* as opposed to the term *gay* which emerged as a political response to the rigid sexual categorization that privileges heterosexuality as the norm and treats homosexuality as a deviation, is not just another word in the historical vocabulary of same-sex attraction (Long, 2020). It's a result of a critical examination of universal terms. It encapsulates the fusion of defiant, anti-oppressive actions aimed at challenging normative structures, alongside the exploration of gender identity and sexual orientation. It emerged as a political and intellectual endeavor focused on challenging and examining heteronormativity - which operates under the assumption that individuals are heterosexual by default, reinforcing a rigid gender binary and categorizing those who do not conform to it as deviations from the norm - across societal contexts, everyday conversations, and academic environments (Long, 2020). *Queer* frequently functions as a comprehensive and inclusive term that encompasses a variety of sexual orientations and gender identities, which may include but are not restricted to, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (Sephard, 2016). Essentially, *queer* strategically adopts denaturalization as its central approach, outlining a realm closely associated with homosexuality but also remarkably suggestive of a broad spectrum of sexual possibilities. This confronts the traditional distinctions between normal and pathological, heterosexual and homosexual, and masculine/men and feminine/women (Jagose, 1996). This interpretation aligns with my understanding of queerness, hence any original (meaning, not directly referring to an acclaimed scholar's work) use of the term *queer* within my discourse will entail this particular connotation.

According to Jagose (1996), identity is deeply integrated into culture. During the latter part of the 20th century, this seemingly straightforward notion of identity was heavily questioned by various thinkers like Louis Althusser, Sigmund Freud, Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault, who
collectively played a role in driving significant progress in social theory and the human sciences (Jagose, 1996). As a result, identity has been redefined as a long-lasting cultural construct, almost like a timeless myth (Jagose, 1996). Michel Foucault (in Jagose, 1996) in particular, noted that the concept of sexuality is a construct arising from discourse rather than a pre-existing, natural condition, proposing that the formation of modern subjectivity is intricately tied to notions of power. Foucault's analysis pinpoints that marginalized sexual identities aren't victims of power's mechanisms but are rather shaped by these very mechanisms. Foucault's reevaluation of power dynamics has left a profound impact on lesbian and gay analysis (Jagose, 1996).

Along with Queer Studies as an academic field, contemporary queer theory emerged in the 1990s, building upon feminist theories from the civil rights era (Long, 2020). Initially, it aimed to disrupt normative gender and sexuality binaries (e.g., gay-straight, man-woman). Queer theory is deeply rooted in the disruption or dissolution of the boundaries and rigid categories that typically define and restrict the human body. It involves envisioning novel possibilities for bodies to exist or express themselves within society (Otis, 2020). Judith's widely referenced book "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" (1990) explored how language, discourse, philosophy, and identity shape the understanding and performance of gender. It questioned the impact of normativity and psychoanalytic models on gender and, consequently, heteronormativity and sexuality (Butler, 1990). According to Butler (1990), heteronormativity stems from this binary view of gender as clear gender distinctions are necessary to determine suitable partners. This perspective forms the core of a specific strand of queer theory, emphasizing fluid identity and resistance to established norms. However, defining "queer" and "queer theory" remains a subject of debate. Some argue that boundaries should exist to determine what qualifies as queer / queer theory and who should be part of these conversations. According to Long
(2020), scholars of color (e.g., Calafell, Chavez, Eguchi, Hill Collins, Johnson, Muñoz) stress the importance of considering factors like race, class, gender identity, and ability alongside sexual orientation (Long, 2020). The concept of compulsory heterosexuality, popularized by Adrienne Rich (1980), argues that heterosexuality is a political institution, not just an orientation. This default pairing of men and women enforces patriarchy and maintains male dominance. Queerness encourages worldmaking within heteronormative systems, offering moments of agency (Long, 2020).

2.2. FOUCAULT, BUTLER, AND THE POWER DYNAMICS OF SOCIETAL NORMS

American activist Riki Wilchins, in their book “Queer theory, gender theory” (2004) claims that according to Foucault, Western societies have possessed extensive knowledge about sexuality for centuries. However, before the Enlightenment, this knowledge primarily revolved around sexual techniques and pleasure, lacking deeper significance. By the 18th century, the emergence of scientific approaches to human behavior prompted nation-states to recognize population dynamics as a national concern. This led to state officials monitoring various aspects of sexuality, including contraception, birthgiving, adultery, marriage, and family size, representing a change in how sexuality was perceived, shifting from a matter of individual morality to something to be controlled for the benefit of society. Desires were no longer seen solely as threats to decency or moral transgressions but as potential dangers to the entire community and a waste of a valuable national resource. This shift gave rise to a new scientific understanding of normalcy and deviance. Doctors like Richard Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis (in Wilchins, 2004) documented various sexual variations during this period. Sexuality transformed from a closely guarded secret into something of great significance that Science and Reason aimed to decode. Wilchins (2004) notes that Foucault held a deep skepticism toward the application of science to
pleasure and desire, criticizing the construction of sexuality as a means of self-knowledge that imposed self-awareness regarding inner drives. According to Foucault (in Wichins, 2004), the institutionalization of sexuality led individuals to willingly manage their private behavior in ways they wouldn't have considered otherwise.

The new scientific approach was not just about understanding sex but also about exerting control over it. It introduced a comprehensive taxonomy of latent desires, perversions, deviance, and disorders, all aimed at imposing a universal rationality on human bodies and their pleasures, fundamentally altering our relationship with our desires. From the 19th century onwards, sexuality shifted from being regulated by law, morality, and religion to becoming a subject of medical examination, normality assessment, and the identification of disorders. This transformation in societal attitudes toward sex was exemplified by the focus on homosexuality (Wilchins, 2004).

Wilchins (2004) further explains how, during this new means of regulation, Foucault suggested discourse as an alternative exercise of power. In his work “The History of Sexuality: An Introduction” (1976), Foucault argues that discourse, the set of principles and practices that determine what types of statements and knowledge are considered comprehensible within a specific society or culture, is not a neutral or objective system for transmitting knowledge, but rather a form of power. It doesn't simply reflect a society's prevailing norms and values; it actively constructs and reinforces them. In the case of gender, discourse dictates which types of bodies, identities, and behaviors are considered legitimate, while stigmatizing or pathologizing those that deviate from established norms (Wilchins, 2004). Such insights challenge traditional notions of objectivity and offer a framework for understanding how societal norms and values are shaped and upheld, underlining the necessity for new forms of political and social
activism to challenge and transform the power dynamics inherent in discursive systems, particularly in the context of gender and sexuality.

This examination of the power dynamics within discourse sets the stage for understanding how individuals are deeply affected by prevailing social standards. Much like the way discourse operates, the Panopticon, first presented by Jeremy Bentham yet thoroughly studied by Foucault, embodies these principles in a physical structure. The Panopticon, as a metaphor for societal control and surveillance, enforces constant observation and internalized self-regulation, compelling individuals to conform to normative standards (Foucault, 1995).

Foucault's (1995) ideas on the Panopticon can be related to the way society views and controls fatness and queerness. Just as the Panopticon involves constant surveillance and self-regulation (Foucault, 1995), the pressure to conform to societal norms around body size and appearance can create a similar effect. In the context of fatness, individuals might feel like they are being constantly watched and judged by others, which can lead to self-monitoring and attempts to fit into accepted body standards. The Panopticon's idea of internalizing control mechanisms (Foucault, 1995) also applies to how people may internalize societal expectations regarding body weight. The fear of being perceived as "different" due to body size can lead to self-discipline and self-policing behaviors, like dieting or excessive exercise, even when no one is directly watching. In the context of fatness and queerness intersecting, the Panopticon's concept can highlight the additional layers of surveillance and control that fat queer individuals might experience. This dual surveillance can lead to experiences of self-regulation and adaptation to navigate societal expectations. Overall, the Panopticon concept helps us understand how societal norms and expectations can shape individual behavior and self-perception, particularly in relation to body size and appearance.
Judith Butler’s initial ideas extend Michel Foucault’s concepts to demonstrate how identities on the edges of societal norms can paradoxically support the very identity structures they seek to counter. Their work has had a profound impact on queer theory, illustrating the transformative influence of their dense and imposing scholarship on the field. Butler’s perspective is framed through the lens of feminism, but it reaches even beyond to reveal how gender operates as a regulatory construct that privileges heterosexuality. Butler’s work aims to deconstruct normative narratives of gender, offering insights into how this deconstruction legitimizes diverse sexual subject positions, including those of lesbians and gays.

Butler’s (1990) central concept discusses gender not as a fixed, unchanging attribute but as a repetitive, performative act. Gender, they argue, is a stylization of the body that takes place within strict regulatory confines over time, giving the illusion of being inherent, challenging the notion of a stable, unchanging gender identity, proposing that identity itself is shaped through these very repetitions (Jagose, 1996). This perspective dismantles the assumed authenticity of gender, asserting that gender identity if taken seriously, undermines the legitimacy of homosexual identities. This does not mean all gender is mere performance, which is a common misinterpretation. Instead, gender is created and maintained through actions and speech. When someone dresses and acts in a gendered way, they are not merely referencing a role; they are constituting themselves as that gender (Wilchins, 2004).

Butler’s notion of performativity, while widely influential, has also faced criticism for its oversimplification and misunderstanding (Jagose, 1996). Critics often take performativity to mean a willful theatrical act, failing to grasp its nuanced implications. Butler (1990) themselves clarify that performativity is not about individual choices but about a process that shapes the subject over time, constrained by cultural norms, including the threat of marginalization or worse.
Moreover, there have been debates about whether performativity should also extend its focus to sex, not just gender. According to Jagose (1996), some argue that challenging the fixed nature of sex, as Butler does, is essential for fully understanding the instability of gender. Butler also questions the immutable character of sex and suggests that the distinction between sex and gender might not hold, further denaturalizing these categories (Jagose, 1996).

Despite its complexities, the concept of performativity continues to challenge entrenched ideas about identity, sexuality, and social norms, encouraging a critical reevaluation of the authenticity of identity categories and their political efficacy. Contemporary discussions in lesbian and gay studies have shifted towards a more nuanced understanding of identity politics, with a growing awareness of the complex interactions between identity, power, and societal norms. Persons who do not conform to the normative societal narrative often struggle with being recognized as subjects within a framework that predominantly values thinness and adheres to heteronormative ideals (Butler, 1990). For fat queer individuals, the performative aspect of navigating societal expectations around body size can be particularly challenging. They may engage in self-monitoring, self-discipline, and behavioral moderation to fit into accepted norms, even when not under direct observation, mirroring the internalized control mechanisms described by Foucault's (1995) Panopticon.

2.3 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

By adopting *queer* as an umbrella term that encompasses a broad spectrum of self-identifications extending beyond the LGBTQ+ sphere, I aspired to discover scholarly publications and research inquiries that explore the lives of fat individuals who identify as queer. My primary objective, as previously outlined in the thesis introduction, was to underline the relative scarcity of research conducted on this subject within the Greek context. On the contrary, on an
international level, previous research has delved into the intricacies of self-identification with regard to gender, sexual orientation, and body size, employing diverse analytical frameworks.

Below, I aimed to compile some previous studies that I believe offer valuable insights into the experiences of those who identify as both fat and queer.

Within Fat Studies, a significant discourse revolves around the impact of fatness on the gendering of bodies, emphasizing that the perception of fatness as either masculinizing or feminizing is context-dependent (Mulder, 2021). It hinges on its location on the body, the observer's interpretation of one's gender presentation, and societal norms influenced by variables like race, class, age, and gender. The influence of fatness on gender can evoke feelings of gender euphoria or distress, while simultaneously serving as a means to challenge or disrupt the traditional gender binary. According to Mulder (2021), for example, for certain fat queer femme individuals, their fatness is experienced as a source of femininity. In contrast, others might perceive it as contributing to a more masculine. The way fatness shapes the body, accentuating features like breasts or accentuating hips, can result in a gendered connotation. (Mulder, 2021).

Samantha Murray's 2005 essay “(Un/Be)Coming Out? Rethinking Fat Politics” critically explores the intricate intersection of fatness and queerness, unearthing the societal constructs that both fat and queer bodies encounter. Murray (2005) discusses how fat bodies are discursively constructed as 'failed bodies,' emphasizing society's relentless pressure on individuals to conform to normative beauty standards. Deriving from Murray's (2005) personal experiences, it highlights the discomfort and impermanence associated with living in a fat body, along with the imposed societal expectations that necessitate concealing one's true self. This narrative then draws connections between the societal constructs of fatness and queerness, without explicitly labeling them as such, engaging with the notions put forth by Eve Sedgwick, particularly regarding "coming out" as an
act of defiance that renegotiates the representational contract between one's body and society. Murray (2005) also emphasizes the transformative potential of rethinking one's attitude towards their body, being empowered by the size acceptance and fat pride movements. However, Murray's (2005) essay also highlights the complexities inherent in fat politics, especially in how certain practices intended to challenge normative aesthetics may inadvertently reinforce the very ideals they aim to subvert, raising questions about the effectiveness of practices that simply reverse dominant aesthetic norms without critically engaging with them.

In the study "Bodies at the Intersections: Refiguring Intersectionality through Queer Women's Complex Embodiments" by Rice et al (2020) the authors employ a critical intersectional and decolonial lens to examine how the fields of "obesity" and "eating disorders" contribute to the reinforcement of cissexist, heteronormative, white, colonial, and other normative body standards that either erase or misrepresent LGBTQ+ communities. They point out that mainstream literature typically treats obesity and eating disorders as medical issues requiring intervention and behavior modification (Rice et al, 2020). Additionally, their work emphasizes that "obesity" is a category constructed to uphold norms related to gender, race, class, ability, and sexuality, which perpetuates unequal power dynamics (Rice et al, 2020). They also argue that obesity is not a disease but rather a cultural construct with adverse effects on those labeled as "fat" (Rice et al, 2020). In a similar vein, feminist scholarship redefines problematic eating as a response to the objectification of female-coded bodies and the use of body control and fitness as measures of success and respectability. On the other hand, mainstream obesity literature characterizes fatness as an "epidemic" that disproportionately affects specific populations, particularly in the global North. The intersection of body size and queer sexuality
is explored, with queer women often being associated with larger body ideals, especially within the lesbian culture (Rice et al, 2020).

Katarina Kyrölä, a distinguished scholar in media and cultural studies, has significantly contributed to the academic discussion around fatness and queerness through her extensive exploration of fat bodies from a feminist and queer-informed perspective. Her research, deeply rooted in the realm of Fat Studies, represents a departure from the predominantly medical orientation of obesity. Instead, it draws inspiration from the rich legacies of feminist and queer studies and activism, as well as critical investigations into body norms and the beauty ideals. More specifically, Kyrölä (2014), in her book “Weight of Images: Affect, Body Image and Fat in the Media”, states that within the sphere of fat activism, the unapologetic embrace of the term fat seeks to reclaim and positively redefine its meaning, similar to how queer activists have reclaimed and empowered the term queer. Both fat and queer draw their political significance from their connection to experiences of shame and derogation.

Similarly, Kathleen Le Besco (2001) noted the importance of redefining or "resignifying" fatness within a cultural and social context. She emphasized that the act of resignification aims to challenge conventional norms and values associated with body size (Le Besco, 2001). This process involves reworking the signs and symbols linked to fatness to make it more socially and culturally intelligible. Le Besco (2001) draws inspiration from the work of Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz, highlighting the need to understand the body through diverse discourses beyond scientific and naturalistic explanations. Le Besco (2001) also acknowledged that this process of resignification may give rise to its own set of challenging and abject bodies, as subjects are often constituted by processes of exclusion and abjection. Despite these challenges, she asserts that the reworking of abjection into political agency is a critical resource in the effort to redefine the terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility (Le Besco, 2001).
Robyn Longhurst (2014), in their chapter “Queering body size and shape: Performativity, the closet, shame and orientation” of the collective work “Queering fat embodiment” (Pause & Wykes, 2014), reflects on years of research from a feminist poststructuralist geographical perspective, which explored the interplay of gender, sex, sexuality, and body size and shape. Longhurst (2014) acknowledges that, just as they perform their sex and gender, they also perform their body size and shape, influenced by societal expectations and culturally imposed values. Their text references various stereotypes related to different body types and how societal expectations can prompt subjects to reinforce or contest these stereotypes. Longhurst's (2014) own experiences with varying body sizes and shapes throughout their life highlight that changes are not solely the result of dieting but are influenced by different life phases, circumstances, and environments, emphasizing the performative nature of body size and shape, rather than considering it as something natural, fixed, or stable.

Otis (2020) underlined the intricate connections between fat bodies and queerness, revealing the inherent queerness within corpulence. Through an examination of core principles in queer theory, their analysis underscores how fat bodies disrupt established norms and categorizations (Otis, 2020). The intersection of fatness and queerness reveals a complex interplay that goes beyond conventional societal constructs. Fat bodies or bodies that do not conform to societal ideals of thinness, according to Otis (2020) challenge established norms in various ways. Firstly, fat bodies disrupt traditional categorizations and societal expectations related to body size and shape, challenging the binary view of gender. The physical presence of a fat body challenges both spatial and societal norms, blurring the boundaries between individuals and society, and disrupting the normative concept of self and Other (Otis, 2020). Fatness challenges the notion that the male and female bodies are fundamentally distinct, opposing, and designed to harmonize with each other.
Kyrölä (2014) gives the example of how overweight men may develop breasts, whereas similarly gender-specific bodily features, such as breasts in overweight women, can merge with the crevices of their bodies. This inherent disruption, stemming from the mere existence of fat bodies, is considered *queer* in nature. Secondly, fat bodies face regulation through compulsory heterosexuality, demonstrating the connection between societal expectations around body size and heterosexual desire (Rich, 1980). People who do not conform to prescribed gender roles due to their weight might be deemed less desirable within the context of heterosexual relationships. Compulsory heterosexuality attempts to exclude sexual experiences involving fat individuals, despite the existence of such relationships. Lastly, the medicalization and pathologization of both non-normative sexualities and fatness share similarities, indicating the queerness of fat bodies. In response to medicalization, pathologization, and social stigmatization, both queer and fat individuals engage in the process of "coming out" (Otis, 2020). This process involves openly acknowledging their identities, representing a form of resistance against societal norms and expectations. Fat individuals, despite being highly visible in their non-conforming image, engage in a unique version of coming out, affirming their fatness as an inherent and non-negotiable aspect of their identity. This act of resistance challenges normative beliefs, resembling the actions of queer individuals in their fight against heteronormativity (Otis, 2020).

Fat bodies are not considered “deviant” only within a heteronormative context, but also within the queer community. Conte (2017) describes, for example, that the femme queer body is paradoxically both fetishized and sexualized for its perceived submissiveness. Discussing their own experience on the popular dating app Grindr, Conte (2017) underlines how femme queer men are often portrayed as sexual objects rather than individuals, attributing their hypersexualization to their embrace of femininity. Additionally, fatness is often a
source of sexual attraction, particularly in queer male bodies. Nathaniel C. Pyle and Michael I. Loewy (in Conte, 2017) point out that fat queer individuals are often pursued by "fat admirers" or "chubby chasers" in the gay culture. These individuals are exclusively attracted to fatness and view fat queer men as objects of desire. The intersection of fatness and femininity in the queer male body presents a complex dynamic. Fatness is historically associated with effeminacy in queer males, creating gendered and stereotypical features that challenge traditional notions of masculinity (Conte, 2017). This often leads to the establishment of rigid boundaries between hegemonic masculinity and the so-called "fats" and "femmes" within the queer community. Conte's (2017) personal narrative aims to shift the focus from the oppression imposed by heteronormative society to the discrimination and oppression occurring within queer communities.

Similarly, Francis Ray White's (2020) chapter “Fleshing Out Non-Binary” in the book “Non-Binary Lives: An Anthology of Intersecting Identities” explores their experience as a non-binary person with a focus on their fatness. They assert that their fatness is an integral part of their non-binary self-identification, and they discuss how it challenges traditional gender norms. The author's journey includes struggling with societal pressures related to body size, discovering empowerment in the fat activism and queer communities, and embracing their fatness as a tool for defying conventional gender expectations while expressing a desire to expand and challenge traditional notions of womanhood and gender norms. (White, 2020).

In general, fat studies, queer theory, and the upcoming exploration of fatness and queerness through an intersectional lens delve into a nuanced understanding of identity. In exploring fat studies and queer theory, particularly through an intersectional lens, the dynamic interplay of body size, queerness, and societal norms is unraveled, emphasizing the transformative potential of
intersectionality and contributing to a more inclusive understanding of diverse identities, building upon earlier research.

2.4 FATNESS & QUEERNESS THROUGH AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS

Sheena Ann Lawrence, a self-identifying fat lesbian, in her essay “From a Fat Dyke…”, which was included in the sixth Common Lives/Lesbian Lives quarterly, published in the winter of 1986, bravely states “[…] I was constantly struggling against a society that was not only homophobic, but also fatophobic.” (Lawrence, 1986, p.71). From my personal experiences, I could not agree more - thus, this thesis deliberately addresses fatness and queerness as a concurrent self-identification.

As I mentioned before, queer theory offers a valuable framework for critiquing heteronormativity and challenging societal norms related to body size and shape, having sought to disrupt established sex, sexual, and gender narratives. Queer theory also aims to question unquestioned practices, such as the idealization of being tall and slim in Western societies. This means that, like sex, sexuality, and gender, body size and shape are not fixed but are influenced by socially constructed narratives that promote one specific body type as normal (Longhurst, 2014). Intersectionality explores how various social categories like race, gender, disability, sexuality, class, age, and others are intertwined and influence each other (Crenshaw, 1989). This interconnectedness is affected by factors such as colonialism, neoliberalism, geopolitics, and cultural settings, resulting in fluid power dynamics and systems of oppression (Rice et al, 2019).

The term was coined by scholar and civil rights advocate Kimberle Crenshaw, in her 1989 essay titled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," where she argued that feminist theories rooted in the perspectives of white, Western feminism often overlook the intricate dimensions
of Black women's lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). In a 2016 Ted Talk (see reference section) Crenshaw further argued that intersectionality serves as a perspective that allows to examine the points at which power dynamics converge, intertwine, and overlap. Instead of addressing isolated issues of race, gender, class, or LGBTQ+ matters, intersectionality acknowledges the complexities that arise when individuals experience multiple forms of discrimination or privilege (Crenshaw, 2016).

Crenshaw's work, although it has been used extensively by academia and has significantly influenced academic thinking, has sometimes been translated in ways that perceive it as rigid and "strictly socially constructed" (Friedman, et al, 2019). From 1990 onwards, poststructuralist viewpoints began infiltrating the field of intersectional thinking. According to Brah & Phoenix, (2004), poststructuralism was used to conceptualize how various aspects of identity, power dynamics, the formation of categories in complex and often conflicting relationships, and individuals' efforts to both comply with and contest categorization are interconnected. This allowed for a more nuanced understanding of these intricate issues (Brah & Phoenix, 2004).

Within academic discussions, opinions diverge on the matter of intersectionality. Referencing thinkers such as Naomi Zack, Rice et al (2019) highlight advocacy for the complete abandonment of this concept. The assertion is that emphasizing differences, a characteristic of intersectionality, carries the risk of fostering divisions and inhibiting solidarity among those with similar identities. From this standpoint, intersectionality is often associated with the term "identity politics," seen as a potential obstacle to the establishment of alliances. On the other hand, there exists a perspective that welcomes intersectionality as an analytical framework, considering it a tool to aid individuals in identifying shared interests and fostering solidarity, even amid differences, particularly as a means of addressing oppression (Rice et al, 2019).
Further arguments suggest that intersectionality, rooted in structuralism, may portray identities and subjectivities as inflexible constructs, falling short of comprehending the complexities of multiple identities. It is contended that this perspective may neglect to envision subjectivities as dynamic and interconnected. Conversely, there are proponents of the view that see intersectionality as a versatile and evolving theory, especially in the understanding and mapping of identity and subjectivity. From this standpoint, the process of self-identification may be perceived as dynamic, emerging when differences intersect with prevailing forces (Rice et al, 2019).

In response to queer critique, the concept of intersectionality has evolved, to review and potentially adjust to better address the complexities and nuances of how various forms of oppression intersect and impact individuals' lives, particularly in the context of sexuality and gender self-identification. The term *queer*, as mentioned before, often serves as a broad umbrella term encompassing a range of sexual orientations and gender identities, including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Within this context, the process of queering intersectionality has primarily questioned the conventional focus on gender, race, and class, highlighting the importance of including sexualities in intersectional examinations (Shephard, 2016).

Leslie Hahner's (2012) notion of "constitutive intersectionality" shifts the focus from fixed identities to the dynamic interplay between discourse and subjectivity, allowing identifications to adapt to diverse contexts. Aristeia Fotopoulou (2012) introduces a distinction in intersectional research: the deconstruction of categories versus their strategic use. Anna Carastathis (2016) emphasizes the necessity of a decolonial perspective, going beyond mere identity categories to transform ideology and institutions. Scholars like Evelien Geerts and Iris van der Tuin (2013) explore the productive side of power, conceptualizing social forces and subjectivities as ever-shifting "material-discursive phenomena". Jasbir Puar
(2012) reframes intersectionality through the concept of "assemblage," illustrating the dynamic interchange between self and society. These theoretical perspectives shed light on the multifaceted nature of power and the unpredictability inherent in structures and categories (Rice et al, 2012).

Furthermore, Carastathis (2016) argues that intersectionality should be employed as a temporary and transformative idea, aimed at reshaping our perspectives. In my research, I strive to use the intersection of fatness and queerness not in a cumulative way, but as a complex self-identification that does not ignore the oppressive social structures that affect fat people, queer people, and people who simultaneously perceive themselves as such, but also take into account that people may identify themselves in various other positions such as class, able-bodiedness, race, etc. I believe that this, especially in the context of sharing experiences with others, can promote visibility and enhance a better understanding of the elaborate life and emotional events of individuals.
PART II

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 QUEER PHENOMENOLOGY AS A METHODOLOGICAL TOOL

Queer phenomenology, as developed by scholars like Sara Ahmed (2006) and Judith Butler (1990), emphasizes subjectivity and the ways individuals perceive and interact with the world around them, particularly in the context of non-normative gender expression. For that reason, I find it crucial to include queer phenomenology in the study, as a methodological tool that is embedded in the entirety of the thesis.

Sarah Ahmed (2006), in her fundamental work "Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others" claims that phenomenology is, by definition, queer. Ahmed (2006) explains how bodies are not neutral entities but instead are oriented in specific ways within the context of the world around us. These orientations extend to social and cultural aspects, particularly influenced by normative ideas of gender and sexuality. Ahmed's (2006) notion of queerness goes beyond sexual identity; it signifies change, challenging established norms. Within the framework of queer phenomenology, she examines how these changes occur and what they unveil about the prevailing social norms. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of performativity, Ahmed (2006) emphasizes that bodily orientations are performative acts that can either reinforce or contest societal norms, while paying attention to how we move through space, our choices in physical contact, and our comfort or discomfort in various environments, all of which can serve as performative acts challenging normative narratives. Ahmed (2006) also critiques heteronormativity, highlighting how it extends beyond sexual orientation to dictate how bodies are oriented in space, imposing the idea that heterosexuality is the norm.
Furthermore, Ahmed (2006) explores the intricate relationship between emotions, objects, and bodily orientations, revealing how certain objects and spaces can evoke specific emotions based on our social orientations. In essence, Sarah Ahmed's work on queer phenomenology offers a profound insight into the complex web of interactions between bodies, orientations, and social norms, elucidating how our lived experiences are profoundly influenced by these factors.

In that sense, queer phenomenology helps in uncovering the complexities of how individuals navigate a society that often marginalizes and stigmatizes them based on their queerness and body size. Alongside queer theory, I believe it can be of significant assistance when aiming to shed light on the unique challenges and resilience of fat queer individuals, but also contribute to more inclusive and empathetic research outcomes that respect their diverse experiences. By acknowledging the impact of societal norms and discrimination on individuals, researchers can approach their work with greater sensitivity and ethical awareness. Queerness, much like having a body that does not conform to what is considered conventional size and shape standards, reconfigures the dynamics of proximity and connection (Longhurst, 2014). It is essential to highlight this aspect, as our physical bodies play an integral role in shaping our perception and interaction with the world. Consequently, the space occupied by our bodies serves as a significant locus for generating knowledge and fostering comprehension (Long, 2020).

3.2 POSITIONALITY

Apart from applying queer phenomenology as a methodological tool, in the sense of allowing it to become the backbone of the thesis, I strive to identify my own positioning as a researcher and writer. I believe that positionality is
important to comprehending my choice of a broader connection between society and research.

In her profound 1988 essay, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,' Donna Haraway (1988) extensively challenges research objectivity, introducing the notion of 'situated knowledges,' a kind of feminist objectivity. This perspective bridges the gap between those who view science as a rhetoric and those who uphold 'feminist empiricism,' suggesting that feminist theories can be rooted in evidence. Haraway (1988) propounds that when scientists acknowledge their positions, they can craft more objective knowledge. Haraway (1988) argues against a universal interpretation of matters, which she labels as 'reductionism.' To her, positioning signifies the responsibility for our enabling practices (Haraway, 1988).

As a fat person who self-identifies as fat and questions the gender binary, I am well aware I am bringing my own beliefs and preoccupations to the study, as well as my understanding of my embodiment as often non-normative. However, I yet feel a great responsibility towards the participants – a responsibility to treat their words with kindness and empathy.

4. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although I am to approach fatness and queerness as intertwined self-identifications, I recognize that fatness per se, as well as queerness, bare specific societal narratives. According to Wann (2009), when one academically studies fatness, they already are an inseparable part of their research. Mainstream culture in the global North often fosters anti-fat beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes. For example, as Bruce Blaine (2007) notes in his discussion of weightism, a multitude of stereotypes can be faced by overweight individuals, such as being lethargic, socially awkward, intellectually sluggish, undesirable, unattractive, and, overall unhappy (Blaine, 2007). I believe that it is crucial to
acknowledge that none of us can ever escape this societal conditioning, nor can we entirely free ourselves from power relations – especially me, as a fat person, who has dealt with fatphobia, internalized fatphobia, internalized ethical stereotypes, and black-and-white thinking, narratives of appropriation and weight-based self-worth, and more – you name it. Thus, engaging in Fat Studies needs an examination of one's position concerning the privileges and biases associated with body weight and body image. This involves acknowledging both the internalized beliefs, those that are adopted and projected onto the self and others, and the external interactions with individuals, institutions, and the broader societal and material circumstances influenced by body weight (Wann, 2009).

Furthermore, Erel et al. (2008) propose addressing intersectional method limitations by considering one's position within a specific academic field. Regardless of possible shared characteristics, recognizing power dynamics during fieldwork is vital. Ignoring academic privilege may lead to observing research from an elevated perspective rather than the subject's viewpoint. Positionality and transparency seem crucial. Reflecting on academic placement in research settings helps prevent oversimplifying differences into similarities. Committing to 'situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1988) is essential for accountable feminist theory (Fotopoulou, 2012).

Marilyn Wann (2009), in the same foreword of the Fat Studies Reader that is cited before, raises some important ethical questions that I think are important to reflect on when conducting a study on fatness. Initially, she highlights the very use of words describing people who have bodies that are considered non-normative. Nowadays, the term fat is used as a political act, aiming for its neutralization (the same way that queer movements redefined the meaning it was given to the word queer, focusing on achieving a shift from negative to
neutral, but also a political signifier that challenged the dominant heteronormative narratives (Lykke, 2010).

Moreover, the discussion on fatness intertwines with broader societal issues, including the exaggeration of fat-related death statistics. Claims of hundreds of thousands of fat deaths annually have been debunked, and accurate studies suggest significantly lower figures (Wann, 2009). Sensationalized fat-related death threats and prejudices persist, contributing to the challenges faced by fat individuals. Then, Fat Studies, according to Wann (2009) can act as an intellectual and political field, criticizing organizations for promoting fat hatred and highlighting weight-based discrimination across various sectors. The ethical considerations raised by Wann (2009) encourage reflection on language use and the political nature of the term fat. To me, the call for accountability and understanding when studying fatness extends to challenging prevailing stereotypes, and biases, and promoting a more inclusive and nuanced perspective on body weight and image – but queerness as well.

5. RESEARCH DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

5.1 FOCUS GROUP

Clough & Nutbrown (2012) underline that (feminist) research is persuasive, purposive, positional, and political. To my understanding, this highlights its multidimensional aspects, pushing towards an aware engagement in the experiences of individuals. Thus, to answer my research question, that being how do individuals in Greece, who identify as both fat and queer navigate their lived experiences, I decided to conduct qualitative research, in the form of a small focus group. As can be seen from the description of the method itself, focus groups are a research method in which data is gathered through group discussions focused on a topic selected by the researcher (Morgan, 1996). The researcher is also mentioned as a mediator (Clarke & Braun, 2013).
According to Morgan (1996), focus groups can be very useful to unveil the intricate layers of human stories. These group settings create a dynamic space where individuals can articulate their perspectives and even challenge each other's ideas. They serve not only as a window into the surface of both personal narratives and conversations but also as a textured lens through which to perceive underlying beliefs and opinions (Wilkinson, 1998). But, like all methods, they also have disadvantages. The influence of the mediator, for instance, can cast varying shades on the interviews. It is a bit like the different directors of a play, each shaping the performance in their own way. There is also what Morgan (1996) describes as the "polarization" effect, where group discussions can sometimes intensify individual beliefs. Moreover, the boundaries of discussion topics can be rather flexible, as they depend on what participants feel comfortable to discuss about. This flexibility offers potential, but it also poses questions about the scope of research that's suitable for these group settings. In essence, focus groups are exceptional at unraveling the complexities of human behavior, thanks to their vibrant interactions.

Taking into consideration both its advantages and disadvantages, I believe that this method is well suited to answering the research question since it accomplishes, as Morgan (1996) states in his presentation of a successful focus group, to get participants to engage in conversation actively and easily.

Essentially, focus groups provide a direct perspective into the personal experiences of individuals, while tapping into the potential of group dynamics, varied viewpoints, and sharing. In that sense, this method perfectly serves one of my main purposes – to create a space for personal narratives and dialogue among these individuals to challenge prevailing societal norms. By putting myself in the position of a researcher, yet having an academic background in social work, I am deeply concerned with creating a community. I am deeply concerned with bringing people together, sharing, and participatory knowledge production.
5.2 PARTICIPANTS

To approach potential participants, I used my personal social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram) to make my research topic and intention to facilitate a focus group known. An invitation, in the form of a colorful image and a text, was posted online. After I published the image and accompanying text (which can be found translated in Appendix II), I received numerous messages from people who self-identify as fat, or queer, and a smaller yet significant number of persons who self-identify as fat and queer. However, I also received many positive comments from people who found the topic of my project important and relevant, so they reposted this image.

From this first stage, 4 people who self-identify as fat and queer showed a keen interest in participating and were available to participate during my time framework. After a few days since I had stopped receiving messages, I reached out to the online activist group 'Fat Unicorns', through whose intermediation a few more people showed interest. I also contacted the voluntary group of the Association of people living with HIV in Greece (Positive Voice-Θετική Φωνή) with which I am involved as a volunteer. To facilitate communication among volunteers, we are members of a Facebook group chat, which also functions as an emotional support community sometimes. There, I had previously discussed homophobic incidents that were shared among the group, so I thought that possibly some people would like to join the study. In addition, I asked an affiliate of mine, who is involved in drag and is a body-positive advocate to share my post, through which I also listed some potential participants.

Finally, an online friend suggested I join the Facebook group with the Greek title Χοντρόσφαιρα (Chontrosphera, which loosely translates as "Fatosphere". Through this group, I was approached by 4 more people.

My primary and exclusive criteria were to collaborate with individuals who self-identify as both fat and queer and feel eager to actively participate in the
research process, openly discussing their experiences. Throughout the study, there was no request for individuals to talk about their precise weight or BMI. A favorable yet non-compulsory standard was their nativeness. This reflected the study's aim to truly encapsulate the Greek context. Hence, participants were encouraged to have spent a significant portion of their formative years in Greece, including childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, while also demonstrating proficiency in the Greek language.

5.3 IMPLEMENTATION

The focus group occurred online, and the date was determined collectively by the participants. I had opted for an online format for two reasons: practicality and the belief that it would enable both participants and me, as a researcher, to shift the focus away from the physical body and the stereotypes associated with images. This allowed us to concentrate on the words, emotions, and stories that were to be shared. My original plan was to conduct one focus group maximum of 7 people. The final number of participants was 6, but due to their schedules, two groups consisting of 3 persons each took place.

Implementing the focus groups online offered practical advantages. It allowed engagement despite potential distances or relocations. For example, one of the participants had recently moved to another city, and thus, an in-person meeting would have made their participation impossible. Another consideration was that an online meeting could also make it easier for individuals with mobility limitations to participate. It is essential to acknowledge that while securing an accommodating venue for individuals with physical disabilities was plausible, it demanded financial resources, such as renting an accessible space, that was not available.

Prior to the focus group, I contacted the persons who initiatively had expressed interest. In these communications, I shared my academic and
professional background while also disclosing my self-identification as a fat individual who ideologically opposes the gender binary. I provided a comprehensive overview of the research’s context, its underpinning theoretical framework, and the practical details of its implementation. I informed them about the confidentiality of personal data and tried to elaborate on my commitment to creating a secure and inclusive space for all participants. Finally, I encouraged them to reach out to me in case before, during, or after the completion of the study they needed further information regarding either the content of the research itself, but also about support services for queer and/or fat people.

When the participations were explicitly fixed, I provided the participants with an informed consent form (found in Appendix I) and asked them to have it signed and sent back at least a day before the predetermined date. The focus groups took place through the Microsoft Teams software application, which I had access to through my university ID. It was recorded and transcribed. I believe it is crucial to mention that the focus groups were conducted in Greek (I will elaborate on this in the section on research limitations as well). The reason I made this choice is that, while I was well aware that this thesis would be written and defended in English, I believe that using any language other than the language the participants use in their daily lives would undermine part of the validity of my choice to facilitate focus groups - meaning, the spontaneous and uninhibited expression of the participants since it was crucial for me and the purposes of the research the participants recount their embodied experiences without the barrier of vocabulary or grammar. However, at the beginning of each meeting, participants were asked to agree on terminology. Thus, we all agreed that, when referring to the word χοντρό (chondro (in neutral form)) we meant the corresponding English word fat, but I will elaborate on that in the analysis

3 Greek is a gendered language, classifying nouns, pronouns, and adjectives into male, female, and neuter categories. This linguistic feature influences grammar and word agreements in communication.
section. Furthermore, at the beginning of the sessions, essential information about recording and ensuring data privacy was conveyed to all participants. After the meetings, I collected brief individual feedback, and participants were reminded of the availability of counseling and support services, as previously informed.

5.4 ANALYTICAL APPROACH

My analytical approach is that both fatness and queerness as intertwined embodied experiences. The rationale behind examining the intersection of body size and queerness lies in the recognition that both form an integral aspect of a person's daily interactions.

To analyze the collected data I chose to implement a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is suitable for exploring diverse themes, aligning with the variety of backgrounds and viewpoints found in focus group participants (Clark & Braun, 2013). Its approach allows themes to emerge naturally from the data, making it well-suited for focus groups where unexpected issues or perspectives might arise, but also helps to explore shared themes, as well as understand group dynamics. According to Clark & Braun (2013), the primary aim of conducting a thematic analysis is to uncover meaningful patterns and themes within the data, and then employ these patterns to make a statement about the research topic. This goes beyond mere data summarization since effective thematic analysis involves interpretation and the search for meaning within the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Thus, I utilized the transcribed sessions in the following manner. Initially, I meticulously read through the transcribed discussions multiple times, discerning the topics that were discussed in both the focus groups and searching for repeating keywords. Then, I identified themes that seemed to emerge and drawing from queer theory, Michel Foucault's (1995) concept of the Panopticon,
and Judith Butler’s (1990) performativity, I attempted to proceed to a meaningful analysis.

In my analysis, I made a deliberate decision to refer to the participants as A., B., C., D., E., and F, rather than as "participant 1, 2, etc.,” in alignment with my belief that each individual story holds significance, and people should not be reduced to mere numerical labels. In that way, one can imagine that behind every participant is a real person. Simultaneously, this approach ensures the anonymity of the individuals. However it is important to note that Participant A. uses a gender-neutral name that they have chosen from themselves and bares a specific spiritual meaning for them, and B. uses a neutralized version of their given name. All other participants use their birth names in the Greek language, which are gendered.

As Longhurst (2014) underscores, as people exchange, and contemplate their experiences of body size and shape, it becomes increasingly evident that these experiences encompass a broad spectrum, exhibit complexity, and frequently manifest contradictions. Thus, recognizing the limited academic discourse on the subject of fat queerness, I made the deliberate choice to offer a brief summary of the topics that were discussed before embarking on the process of the thematic analysis, also aiming to comply with one of the goals of this thesis, that being to bring to light the experiences of fat queer individuals – and to do so not as a mere summary, but treat their words as insightful testimony of their everyday lives. In essence, given the choices I made toward this analytical approach, this study aims to provide a concise and insightful exploration of diverse themes, capturing the complexities of embodied experiences at the intersection of body size and queerness.
PART III

6. RESEARCH RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In this section of the thesis, I will present the data collected from the focus groups that took place as part of the qualitative research.

Although, as I have previously mentioned, I intentionally did not employ any structured questionnaires, the same topics of discussion emerged in both sessions. Utilizing my background as a licensed social worker, who has facilitated numerous support groups, I let the conversation flow and made sure that all participants commented on the topics that arose. For example, when a participant mentioned the use of dating apps and their interaction with other individuals within this context, I encouraged the others to share their own stories, given that they had similar encounters.

The topics that were discussed were: self-identification and the discourse surrounding it; interpersonal and intimate relationships; self-presentation and attire; professional relationships; interpersonal and intimate relationships; weight loss as a personal goal and as an external imperative from others; fetishization of the fat body; discrimination within the queer community; empathy and understanding as a means of creating a counter-narrative around fatness and queerness.

The background of the participants unfolds as such: A. (they/them) is a non-binary 26-year-old AMAB\(^2\) person with an academic background in graphic design and audio technology, currently working in the field. B.

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\(^2\) Assigned male at birth (noun) – Refers to the sex that is assigned to an infant, most often based on the infant’s anatomical and other biological characteristics (LGBTQ+ Inclusion: Glossary, UW Medicine)
(they/them) is a non-binary 26-year-old AFAB\(^3\) master’s student, with bachelor studies in translation and interpretation. C. (he/him) is a 34-year-old queer AMAB person who engages in homosexual relationships. He is a social worker and fat activist. D. (he/him) is a queer 41-year-old AMAB person who as well prefers to mainly engage in homosexual relationships. He has a background in mathematics and is currently working in digital marketing. E. (he/him) is a 28-year-old queer AMAB person who engages in homosexual relationships. He has a background in biology but is currently working as an actor. F. (he/him) is a 37-year-old old queer AMAB person who engages in homosexual relationships. He has studied law and is currently working as a journalist.

Both the first and second group discussions, given the fact that they were conducted in Greek, started with the necessary clarification of the terms \textit{fat} and \textit{queer}, prompting participants to share their personal interpretations of these concepts in the context of their self-identification. The reason I did this was twofold. Firstly, to ensure that I could provide an accurate translation of the specific terminology without making assumptions about the contents of the participants’ narrative. Secondly, I aspired that such an approach could lead to a meaningful conversation without me strictly guiding it with predetermined questions. The answers varied. Concerning the term \textit{fat} the responses appeared to be primarily influenced by the perception that individuals did not consider their bodies to be "thin", even though a few participants mentioned ongoing weight loss efforts and not being at their heaviest. E. hesitantly said that others describe him as “stocky”, a term that within the gay community refers to a solidly built person. B. mentioned that in their childhood and adolescence,

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\(^3\) Assigned female at birth (noun) – Refers to the sex that is assigned to an infant, most often based on the infant’s anatomical and other biological characteristics \(\text{LGBTQ+ Inclusion: Glossary, UW Medicine}\)
they avoided using the word fat but gradually became less concerned about it. A. admitted that they find the term fat intriguing in both positive ways, although they felt uncomfortable when someone else uses it in a belittling way. They explained that they had heard people comment on others' weight without any apparent reason, which had bothered them.

Likewise, responses referring to sexual self-identification were predominantly centered around a counter-narrative rather than the utilization of the term queer as a descriptive label. All six participants agreed that they broadly use the self-identification queer as an umbrella term, but also aim to make a political, anti-binary statement, and for that reason, they were interested in talking about their embodied experiences.

Through the topics that were discussed in both focus groups, the following themes emerged:

**Theme 1: Body Image Issues and Early Experiences**

**Subtheme 1: Panopticon of Body Surveillance**

In a world where constant societal scrutiny and regulation of larger body types are prevalent, reminiscent of Michel Foucault's (1995) Panopticon concept, the experiences of individuals who identify as both fat and queer shed light on the intricate interplay between these two forces.

For instance, B. reflected on their struggles with body image and the shame they felt due to societal beauty standards and norms. B. shared their childhood struggle with societal beauty standards, impacted by early medical interventions for weight control, due to hormonal issues. Despite significant weight loss for health reasons that they recently had, societal acceptance remains elusive. B. candidly admitted grappling with a
fetishized self-image, a source of deep shame. This ongoing internal struggle persists, underscoring the complex challenges beyond B.'s control, even as they approach broader social acceptance while losing weight. This external monitoring of their body reflects a society where larger bodies are stigmatized, reinforcing the idea of a Panopticon-like watchfulness. The pressure to conform was evident, leaving individuals like B. under constant self-scrutiny explored the intricate interplay between his sexual expression, self-esteem, and physical self-image.

Reflection on his experiences C. explained that this journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance began to unfold since adolescence, and continued until he reached the age of 22, a period during which he abstained from sexual encounters. His previous hesitation to have sex was rooted in a deeply ingrained belief that he was undesirable and that no one would be interested in getting to know him, let alone forging a romantic connection. As he approached the age of 22, which marked his first significant sexual experience, he revisited past encounters, which had been characterized by hesitancy and a lack of self-confidence. These earlier interactions had been navigated with caution and a certain degree of timidity. In a pivotal moment, C. recalled the first time he unveiled his body, not at 22 years of age, but as a child, when he exposed himself to his parents. This memory underscored the depth of his insecurities and the reluctance he had felt about being seen. Gradually, he began to cultivate self-assurance by engaging in sexual exploration, leading to a proliferation of brief, non-committal sexual interactions. This surge in his romantic activity was particularly notable in 2015 when he was at his heaviest. C. noted that during this period, he possessed a significant amount of self-confidence, manifesting in his ability to engage in flirtatious interactions and leverage his physical appearance. However, the
trajectory of his life took a transformative turn in 2020, when he endured a severe leg injury. In the aftermath of this incident, he found himself attributing blame to his own body for the fall and the ensuing injury, intensifying the self-loathing he had once experienced. Subsequently, despite three years having passed and being involved in a relationship for an equivalent period, C. acknowledged that his self-perception had fundamentally shifted. He articulated an ongoing process of self-improvement, which, notably, did not include weight loss. C.'s narrative reflects a Foucauldian Panopticon, with his early self-exposure and evolving self-esteem embodying the internalized gaze of societal expectations. The transformative impact of a leg injury in 2020 underscores the enduring influence of societal norms and self-scrutiny on his evolving self-perception.

D. and E. shared their experiences on gay dating apps, particularly Grindr. They encountered negative comments and rejections based on their appearances, creating a virtual Panopticon where users were perpetually under critique. More specifically, D. observed a paradox in advocating equality within dating apps, where individuals claim to champion equality but then engage in selective communication based on appearance. The frustration with superficial judgments was highlighted, questioning the expectations placed on individuals regarding their height, weight, and grooming choices. D. shared personal coping mechanisms developed since childhood, including a self-deprecating sense of humor and a preemptive disclosure of their own body image. Despite this, D. expressed continued disappointment in the pervasive negative comments and communication styles surrounding body image, particularly within the so-called progressive circles.
In general, D. navigated a complex journey. From childhood to university, he battled for weight loss, adopting an exhaustive self-imposed diet. Despite the visible success, weight fluctuations persisted. About 4-5 years ago, D. chose a balanced approach, only to face post-diet health problems. D. mentioned that societal expectations, especially on dating apps, create a perplexing dichotomy for him, caught between mixed comments on his appearance, sometimes implying that he should lose weight to look better, and other times to gain weight to look more desirable. In this realm, societal norms become a puzzle, and D. grapples with ambiguous standards.

For individuals who are both overweight and queer like D. and E., these digital spaces foster an environment where their bodies are consistently judged, aligning with societal beauty standards and imposing self-observation practices. He shared his expectations concerning intimate relationships, especially when seeking for them through dating apps such as Grindr. He admitted with disappointment that his expectations regarding how he would be perceived on the app did not align with reality. Despite his efforts to present himself in a positive light with photos, he received unsolicited rude comments and blocks from users who commented on his appearance. This led to feelings of rejection and a negative self-image, which sometimes translated to him gaining body weight. E. also shared an experience with someone on Grindr who seemed overly concerned about E.’s weight and even suggested weight loss pills. The two persons engaged in a conversation about health and biology, which, given E.’s background in biology, E. answered appropriately. Then the other individual suggested that taking weight loss pills would be acceptable, and when meeting with E. brought him such pills, without E. agreeing to that. According to E., his experience
highlighted the importance of self-acceptance and the potential influence of societal standards on one's self-perception.

An experience shared by F., in which an online acquaintance felt compelled to comment on his weight, suggesting the need to lose weight, echoes the broader concept of the Panopticon. Here, F. reflected on his experience with were continually under surveillance, enduring unsolicited opinions about his bodies, even in casual interactions. D. also shed light on his professional life, where judgments based on their appearance and social media presence sometimes overshadowed their professional qualifications (for example, he was once told that, to gain professional recognition and success, he had to “look the part”). Moreover, within these work settings, the criticizing and regulation of larger bodies limited opportunities for fat queer individuals, subjecting them to criticism that extended beyond competence, highlighting the pervasive impact of societal monitoring on career progression.

E. argued that, beyond models and dancers, actors faced scrutiny regarding their physical appearance. He pointed out a double standard, noting that while society was accepting of the LGBTQ+ community, discrimination persisted concerning body image, especially regarding weight. He shared personal experiences of being labeled as fat and discussed how this judgment extended even to the theater industry. E. suggested that the theater, despite being a space for artistic expression, was not immune to societal biases and expectations related to body image. He mentioned instances where he had been directly confronted about his weight, highlighting the lack of tact in such situations. E. reflected on the constant pressure actors faced regarding their bodies, emphasizing the prevalence of body image discussions even during casting processes. He recalled instances where he had been questioned
about his weight and had to provide specific measurements, feeling objectified in the process. Despite being a newcomer to the profession, E. acknowledged the challenges of navigating these expectations in the acting industry. He admitted to not reacting as he would have liked in certain situations, recognizing the power dynamics at play in the professional environment. E. also mentioned the impact such judgments had not only on his career but also on personal relationships, as even friends contributed to the scrutiny based on societal standards. This experience illustrated how external perceptions could significantly influence the performance of self-identification within their chosen professions, further emphasizing the pivotal role of societal expectations.

**Subtheme 2: Queer Performativity of Gender and Sexuality**

In this sharing of the experiences of fat queer individuals arises the complex interplay of queer performativity, embodiment, and societal expectations, shaping the multifaceted landscape of self-identification within queer communities. A. discussed the importance of authenticity in relationships. Although they have faced negative intimate encounters in the past, they mentioned that they are now in a relationship where they feel happy and safe. "*I am fully myself and happy. I have no issue with that. I am currently in a relationship and want to remain in this relationship.*" They embodied their true self as a fat queer individual, actively resisting societal pressures to conform to conventional body standards. A.'s resistance seems to align with Butler's performativity theory, representing a non-normative performance of self-identification.

B. shared their introspection regarding body image and relationships. They recounted their evolving emotional landscape, which included feelings of shame and guilt, on their path to self-acceptance. B.'s self-
acceptance emerged as a profound embodiment of their authentic fat queer identity. They underwent a period of introspection characterized by a perceived lack of visibility, particularly during a two-year residence in a locale with minimal representation of queer identities. Despite the presence of a supportive companion, a persistent sense of non-belonging transgressing conventional gender norms prevailed. The term *nonbinary* presented itself as a conceivable identification, albeit not fully encapsulating the intricacies of their gender experience. The lack of clear involvement in activism in everyday life and the mismatch with societal gender norms made B. feel discomfort. The aspiration for a nonconforming body image (for example, wearing a fake beard), challenging societal norms, engendered a nuanced relationship with their physical self. The desire for gender fluidity highlighted a complex balancing act between personal authenticity and societal expectations. Navigating the inherent challenges of finding peace in this context revealed a continuous path toward self-acceptance. Struggles in both personal and professional aspects, mainly arising from a resistance to adhere to traditional gender norms, generated a yearning for a social environment where appearance choices wouldn’t demand excessive effort. This aspiration subtly conveyed an inherent resistance to societal norms, illustrating the intricate dynamics of navigating identity in a socio-cultural context. Their journey closely followed Butler’s (1990) performativity theory, as they actively performed their self-identification beyond traditional norms, unapologetically aiming to navigate the realm of societal expectations.

The discussion brought to the fore how societal pressures influenced the embodiment and performativity of fat queer individuals, especially in the context of relationships, engaging in a dialogue that underlined the
profound impact of societal norms on body image and self-confidence. It laid bare the intricate connection between societal expectations and the performance of self-identification. Within intimate encounters and their intricate relationship with self-identification, fetishization rose as an important aspect. F. clarified the transient nature of fetish experiences, emphasizing that they do not serve as the defining element of a relationship. This nuanced conversation unraveled the complex interplay between self-identification, embodiment, and performativity, offering insight into how fat queer individuals navigate their identity in intricate relationships.

D., on the other hand, expressed the difficulties he faces in finding clothing that makes him feel comfortable due to his larger size. He mentioned challenges in both physical stores and online shopping, where even the so-called "extra-large" sizes felt small for him. D. shared personal experiences of relatives expressing concern about the fit of clothes on his legs and abdomen, making it hard to find comfortable attire. He explained that the limited availability of larger sizes in regular stores pushed him to shop online. D. discussed the varying attitudes of store employees, noting some were helpful while others seemed judgmental. He emphasized the need for more inclusivity in the fashion industry, criticizing the lack of options for those who do not fit the "extra-small" mold. D. also touched on the importance of feeling comfortable in one's clothes, especially in professional settings, and how working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic, when he did not need to wear clothes to be perceived in a specific way by his colleagues, provided a sense of freedom in choosing attire. D. also stressed the importance of selecting clothing for personal comfort rather than conforming to societal expectations. D. delved into familial influences on their fashion choices, highlighting past comments.
from family members about clothing styles. Additionally, he reflected on societal biases, suggesting that individuals not meeting certain appearance criteria might face challenges in professional advancement. Drawing a connection to Oscar Wilde’s notion that beauty is often prioritized over intelligence, D. addressed societal perceptions of body weight and the expectation of self-discipline. He shared a past encounter with a colleague who associated weight with a lack of self-control, prompting D. to question the reliability of individuals who cannot manage their own lives when making decisions for others. The discussion expanded to societal norms and expectations, particularly regarding appearances and their impact on professional life. D.’s experience involved a sense of liberation in expressing personal style for comfort. The absence of criticism regarding clothing choices was a source of relief, fostering an environment where personal comfort prevailed over societal norms. D. navigated familial influences, with past comments shaping their perspective on fashion. The encounter with a colleague who linked weight to self-discipline had left a lasting impression, prompting D. to critically assess societal expectations and biases. In association with gender self-identification, D.’s narrative reflects Judith Butler’s theory that gender is not an inherent trait but a socially constructed performance. The societal expectations around clothing sizes and styles contribute to the performance of gender norms. D.’s experience illustrates how these norms can impact individuals who do not conform to the stereotypical body sizes often associated with their gender. The struggle to find suitable clothing not only addresses issues of body image but also underscores the performative aspect of gender in everyday life.
Theme 2: Relationships and Body Image

Subtheme 1: Navigating Intimate Relationships

In the context of intimate relationships, self-identification emerges as a central point, providing a nuanced perspective through which we can examine the complexities of connections among overweight queer individuals.

Reflecting, A. realized the harmful impact of staying with someone who constantly criticized and pressured them to change their body. A sense of obligation and fear of disappointing others fueled an intense self-policing mindset. The pressure to conform to societal beauty standards, particularly comments about needing to lose weight, was acknowledged. Despite acknowledging the need to address weight concerns, A. expressed discomfort with anyone misinterpreting their statement. They worked diligently on self-improvement, incorporating suggestions, but still grappled with the fear of disappointing others. The intensity of these experiences, coupled with the struggle to communicate openly in past relationships, led to a profound impact on A.'s emotional well-being. The second instance of such intensity occurred in another relationship, albeit indirectly, with communication breakdown due to unspoken weight-related expectations. This reticence stemmed from the fear of disappointing others and negatively impacting the relationship.

Moreover, B. reflected on the impact of body weight on relationships, noting a pattern of entering abusive relationships. There seemed to be a perceived notion that the heavier one is, the more one tends to avoid certain individuals or situations. B. expressed uncertainty about the idea that people who prefer larger bodies are more accepting. This notion,
although not personally validated, raised the question of self-worth, sex appeal, and desirability. The experience of transitioning from being thin to gaining weight while in a relationship led to fears about potential negative reactions from partners. The subsequent relationship, thankfully, ended, but it left a lasting impact. In the next relationship, the opposite occurred, with B.’s partner embracing the weight gain without issue. The internalized fear of not being worthy or sexy was challenged, and humor became a coping mechanism. B. acknowledged the support of their current partner, who, having experienced weight fluctuations themselves, understood the internal struggles. Despite the challenges, B. expressed a lingering sense of insecurity and the absence of a relationship where they felt entirely secure, attributing it partly to unresolved trauma related to sex and relationships. The journey towards self-discovery and acceptance was recognized as an ongoing process that required personal growth before feeling completely at ease in intimate connections. This reflection underscores the profound impact of their partners' responses to their body size on their self-esteem. Their self-identification as a fat individual plays a significant role in their quest for acceptance and their desire to find partners who genuinely value them.

Similarly, C. candidly shared their experiences within an abusive relationship and their personal struggles with self-acceptance. C. shares a distressing account of enduring verbal abuse in a past relationship, where psychological manipulation led to severe emotional distress and depression. The partner's derogatory comments, coupled with coercive behaviors, specifically targeted C.'s self-image, amplifying his insecurities. Despite the detrimental impact, C. struggled to leave, influenced by fear and uncertainty. The turning point came when the partner's negative remarks extended to C.'s physique. This prompted C. to break free,
vowing to never tolerate such mistreatment again. The experience underscores the importance of mutual respect in relationships, as C. now prioritizes self-worth and emotional well-being. Despite the emotional abuse they endured, they chose to remain in the relationship for various reasons, with their choices and decisions notably influenced by their self-identification, including concerns about loneliness and diminished self-esteem.

Navigating relationships within the LGBTQ+ community appears to be even more challenging. Participants engaged in discussions about how their self-identification, including labels like queer, informs their experiences within intimate relationships. F. provided a unique perspective on relationships within communities of people who do not conform to society’s normative narrative and expectations, emphasizing the significant role of self-identification in shaping their encounters with acceptance and discrimination. He said “I’ve faced ample fear, criticism, disdain, rejection, mostly due to my weight in recent years. Initially, using dating apps was tough, really tough. Expecting respect, I met rejection in the dating realm. It stung because the same queer individuals, victims of disrespect, rejection, and disdain, didn’t reciprocate the respect I sought. This constant cycle left me shattered. I questioned how someone from a minority could speak so negatively about weight while experiencing the same struggles”. These compelling examples underscore the profound influence of self-identification on the navigation of intimate relationships. Furthermore, the way individuals perceive themselves, their body image, and their unique identities serves as a pivotal force that shapes their choices and expectations within the realm of relationships. Self-identification emerges as the essential lens through which they engage with and negotiate the intricate fabric of intimate connections.
**Subtheme 2: Queer Resistance to Fetishization**

It is evident that power dynamics surround intimate relationships, and self-identification can act as an instrument of queer resistance against the fetishization of fat bodies.

F.’s insights shed light on the exclusionary experiences individuals face, particularly within the LGBTQ+ community, emphasizing the need for resistance against societal biases. F. shared a personal journey of self-discovery regarding his perception of body image and the concept of fetishization within the LGBTQ+ community. Until about two years ago, F. had not fully grasped the concept "fetishization of fatness" within the community. The realization dawned during a conversation with a person they were dating, marking a turning point in F.’s understanding. F. revealed that, for a significant period, he had unknowingly used body size as a refuge. F. recounted asking the individual early in their relationship whether they liked their partners to be fat, to which the response was initially met with surprise. This interaction triggered a moment of self-awareness for F. regarding the distinction between fetishization and appreciation of the body, highlighting the challenges faced by those perceived as outside societal norms. The conversation with the dating partner served as a catalyst for F.’s realization that his previous relationships had also involved a positive view of body size but lacked a profound understanding. F. acknowledged the internalization of societal norms and accepted body positivity without fully comprehending the nuances. Despite having embraced body positivity on a surface level, F. came to the realization that he had not delved into the deeper aspects of this acceptance.
Furthermore, F. touched upon the emotional impact of societal expectations and the “statistical exclusion”, to his words, experienced in daily life, particularly in gay bars, coming to the conclusion that fat queer individuals due to their self-identification struggle more with intimate relationships than persons who comply with normative ideas of “gayness” (for example, thinness, whiteness, etc). F. conveyed the vulnerability and weakness associated with being subjected to statistical exclusion based on body size in environments where individuals expect acceptance. This discussion led to the exploration of personal experiences, highlighting the challenges faced in forming connections and relationships due to societal biases within LGBTQ+ spaces. F. delved into one significant to him relationship, describing it as a realization of the fetishization of a larger body. The relationship unfolded through video calls, and F.’s partner displayed a fascination with the physical aspects of his body, emphasizing certain features. Despite the initial excitement, F. expressed concern about the potential shallowness of the connection if the partner's interests were solely based on physical attributes. The narrative extended to F.’s evolving understanding of fetishization, emphasizing the importance of genuine connections beyond physical appearances. F. acknowledged the complexity of the topic, recognizing that the discussion, while uncomfortable, could provide valuable insights for research or personal growth.

The conversation touched on societal pressures, body acceptance, and the impact of body fetishization on interpersonal relationships. F. concluded with a reflection on the uniqueness and exoticism associated with being part of the LGBTQ+ community, highlighting the potential for exploration and discovery. The sentiment conveyed was one of acceptance, acknowledging that individuals may come and go, but the
curiosity that drives exploration will persist. Also, F. expressed criticism regarding the existence of gay bars exclusively meant for individuals who self-identify as "bears" (meaning, men who self-identify as gay and are commonly recognized for their larger, more robust physique and excess body hair) – the one in Athens in particular is called “Big”. F. conveyed a negative experience where he highlighted the discriminatory behavior within these bars. During an specific incident he felt marginalized and subjected to scrutiny by others in the gay bar who were seemingly enforcing a particular body standard.

His critique implies that these bars, instead of fostering inclusivity within the LGBTQ+ community, contribute to further division and judgment based on body types. F. expressed discomfort with the idea that such spaces may perpetuate a narrow and exclusionary view of attractiveness within the community. F.'s active engagement in challenging the fetishization of fatness in relationships exemplifies an act of resistance, providing another perspective on the complexities within the LGBTQ+ community. Furthermore, here, self-identification emerges as a formidable tool to assert control over their own identity, effectively resisting objectification based solely on their body size. In a third testimony, participants shared their experiences of initial expectations regarding the understanding and acceptance they anticipated within the LGBTQ+ community, only to find that reality did not always align with their hopes. Furthermore, the identification with terms like queer and other specific identities represents a potent assertion of self-identification. This serves as a mechanism to navigate and resist societal expectations and fetishized preconceptions in intimate relationships, as highlighted by the participants' narratives.
In Greece, individuals identifying as both fat and queer encounter a nuanced interplay of societal expectations, self-perception, and relationships. They described a Panopticon-like scrutiny of larger bodies in Greek society. This external monitoring echoes Foucault's (1995) Panopticon concept, revealing the pervasive societal pressure to conform to narrow beauty standards. The use of Grindr, as discussed by Rice et al. (2020), becomes a virtual Panopticon, where fat queer individuals, like D. and E., face constant critique, reflecting the intersectionality of their identities.

Aligned with Butler's (1990) performativity theory, fat queer Greeks engage in acts of resistance against societal pressures. A. exemplifies non-normative performance, embodying authenticity in relationships, and challenging conventional norms. Participants articulate the complex interplay of societal expectations, embodiment, and performativity, particularly in intimate relationships, that reflects Fotopoulou’s (2012) deconstruction of societal categories. This resistance extends to fetishization, as discussed by Puar (2012), highlighting the importance of self-identification in reclaiming agency over one's identity. In intimate relationships, self-identification emerges as a critical lens, shaping the complexities of connections among overweight queer individuals in Greece. B.'s reflections can be read through Mulder (2021) and Murray (2005) to underscore the profound impact of partners' responses to their body size on self-esteem. The LGBTQ+ community, as presented in the text but also explored by Jagose (1996) and Wilchins (2004), presents unique challenges, with self-identification informing experiences of acceptance and discrimination within persons who self-identify as fat and queer.
In the realm of intimate relationships, Butler's performativity theory (1990) becomes evident as participants like B. and C. reflect on the profound impact of self-identification on their choices and expectations. Their narratives align with Butler's emphasis on resistance to conforming to traditional norms, emphasizing the performative acts of navigating queerness in Greece. Furthermore, F.'s active challenge against fetishization resonates with Jagose's insights (1996) into the performative aspects of self-identification as a tool for asserting control over identity. In navigating their lived experiences in Greece, individuals identifying as both fat and queer face multifaceted challenges and opportunities.

The pervasive societal scrutiny, akin to a Panopticon, manifests in diverse spheres, from dating apps to professional settings, where body judgments intersect with queer identity. Authenticity emerges as a form of resistance as these individuals embrace their non-normative body images. Intimate relationships become arenas where self-identification plays a pivotal role, influencing partner acceptance and negotiating the intricacies of the LGBTQ+ community. Resistance against fetishization becomes a tool for asserting agency over their bodies and challenging societal expectations. Despite societal pressures, fat queer individuals carve spaces for self-acceptance within the Greek context, challenging normative ideals and shaping their narratives authentically at the intersection of fatness and queerness.

Overall, if queer perspectives encourage the creation of diverse worlds, as highlighted by Long (2020), and considering the outcomes from thematic analysis, it appears that the study participants are courageously aiming to craft alternative, tailored to their needs and desires realities. In doing so, they challenge not only themselves and others but also societal norms in a broader sense.
7. DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

7.1 DISCUSSION

One of the fundamental themes that emerged from the thematic analysis is the intricate intersection of fatness and queerness. Participants widely recognized the concept of self-identification and embraced the term queer as an umbrella term, as suggested by Shephard, (2016) that allows them to make a political and anti-binary statement about their identity. It is essential to acknowledge that self-identification is a dynamic and individual process, one that reflects the multifaceted nature of human experiences. While the Greek context may use *queer* as an inclusive umbrella term, it is significant to consider that terminology varies across cultural settings. This diversity underscores the importance of contextual understanding when discussing self-identification.

The concept of the Panopticon and body surveillance, inspired by Michel Foucault (1995), was prevalent in the narratives of participants. The societal scrutiny and regulation of fat bodies bear striking similarities to the Panopticon, where individuals are under constant surveillance, leading to self-scrutiny and compulsory conformity with prevailing beauty standards. Participants shared experiences of being judged and rejected on dating apps, thereby highlighting the digital Panopticon within queer communities. The intersection of fatness and queerness also reveals the influence of queer performativity, as framed by Judith Butler's theory. Participants shared stories of navigating relationships, emphasizing the importance of authenticity in self-identification. This active resistance to
societal pressures aligns with the idea of non-normative self-performance. In this context, self-identification is more than a label; it is an ongoing and dynamic process of embracing and embodying authenticity. The interplay between societal norms, body image, and self-confidence serves as a significant theme in this research.

Navigating intimate relationships emerged as a central aspect of this study, revealing how self-identification plays a vital role in shaping individuals' choices and expectations. Participants' experiences reflected the profound impact of their fatness on self-esteem and acceptance within relationships, demonstrating the strong connection between self-identification, body image, and the dynamics of intimacy. Additionally, participants discussed the complex issue of fetishization within relationships, as well as the discrimination within the LGBTQ+ community, highlighting the role of self-identification as a tool for resistance against the fetishization of fat bodies and the importance of using labels like *queer* to redefine narratives about the body within marginalized communities.

Finally, I find it crucial to address a recurring topic that emerged throughout the entirety of the focus group sessions. Although it does not directly respond to the question of how fat queer individuals navigate their embodied experiences in the Greek reality, it surfaces as a compelling need, consistently voiced by the participants in the study. In particular, at the end of the session, when I asked the participants for short feedback on the process and contents of our discussion, F. shared his feelings about exchanging experiences and thoughts with other fat queer individuals. He said, "I feel liberated; I feel incredibly positive about participating in this". D. also claimed “It was a very positive experience; I have absolutely no complaints. Everything went beautifully, and
discussing what we discussed felt comfortable and liberating. It is so nice to express your feelings to people who share common experiences. At least, if nothing else, it feels absolving and liberating to know that it happens to others as well. Now you are not a person that should sit in the corner in the dark”.

Not only that, but participants expressed a yearning for acceptance and seem to invest considerable effort in attaining it. Their narratives reveal a longing to foster positive relationships, a contemplative stance on personal journeys, and an acceptance of others. This highlights the necessity for open discussions on matters affecting fat queer individuals, offering potential relief from the associated challenges. Observing their empathetic and understanding interactions during the group discussions suggests a potential therapeutic effect, indicating a possible catalyst for redefining the narratives around fatness and queerness.

7.2 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

As I mentioned before, in terms of the research limitations in my study, it is crucial to mention the language barrier.

The focus groups were conducted in Greek, but my thesis is exclusively composed in English. Although I consider myself rather accustomed to using English as a working and studying language, I must note a substantial challenge concerning translation and interpretation. The intricacies and cultural nuances inherent to the Greek language might not have been fully captured in the English rendition. Consequently, the depth of data analysis could potentially lead to a restricted comprehension of participants' perspectives. Furthermore, I acknowledge that the language barrier’s implications extend to the generalizability of findings. The experiences and viewpoints expressed in Greek may not seamlessly
translate to English-speaking contexts or other cultural settings, thus requiring cautious interpretation and application.

Moreover, throughout both the study's design phase and the actual research implementation, it became quite evident to me that not all individuals with bodies that are not considered “normal” within the prevailing societal narratives opt to identify themselves as fat, a choice rooted in specific linguistic and theoretical preferences. Similarly, not every individual within the LGBTQ+ spectrum chooses to embrace the queer label for self-identification. This phenomenon can potentially introduce limitations to the research outcomes by failing to capture the full spectrum of perspectives and identities within these respective groups. Some individuals may not identify with the terminology used, which can potentially lead to limited findings. Furthermore, the fact that in Greece the term queer is more widely used as an umbrella term may complicate the interpretation of research results in contexts where the usage of this concept carries a more specific interpretation. This is compounded by the fact that discussions about queer individuals in Greece are still relatively limited. Additionally, there is no direct translation of the word in Greek, leaving it open to interpretation and adoption by individuals who feel it resonates with their own identity.

Indeed, it is important to recognize the significance of conducting in-depth research on the experiences of queer –and fat queer- individuals within the Greek societal framework. Such academic research is crucial, not only for the purpose of exploring the nuances of queer self-identification but also for promoting inclusivity and fostering intersectional understanding. Greece's cultural landscape is characterized by a relative scarcity of discussions and comprehensive exploration of queer identities, particularly within the realm of body size and
appearance. The necessity arises from the need to shed light on the experiences, challenges, and unique narratives of fat queer individuals within this complex Greek context.

Moreover, such research can help challenge prevailing stereotypes and social norms, offering a counter-narrative to the prevailing notions of desirability and beauty. It can also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the intersection of gender, sexuality, and body image, thereby enabling more informed and effective advocacy for marginalized communities. In essence, the study of the experiences of fat queer individuals in Greece is indispensable not only for its potential to redefine the contours of identity and self-identification but also for its role in advancing social awareness, acceptance, and equity. It holds the promise of fostering a more inclusive and empathetic society that embraces the multiplicity of human experiences and identities.

To overcome this thesis' language limitations, future research could explore experiences within different linguistic and cultural contexts, thereby broadening the scope of understanding. Furthermore, future research within the intersection of fatness and queerness can explore various dimensions to deepen our understanding. Investigating the intersectionality of fatness, queerness, and other self-identifications like race, ethnicity, disability, or age is essential to uncover the nuanced experiences of those navigating multiple identities that are often overlooked at. Cross-cultural analyses could be conducted to consider linguistic and cultural factors that influence self-identification and body image experiences. Further research could expand on understanding community building and support networks are essential for empowering these individuals. Mental and emotional well-being could be explored, focusing on psychological impacts, coping strategies, and support
systems. Evaluating the effectiveness of educational initiatives challenging stereotypes and promoting understanding is critical. Additionally, exploring the experiences of gender-nonconforming and non-binary individuals in the context of body size and queerness can enhance inclusivity.

7.3 A REFLECTION ON QUEER PHENOMENOLOGY

This theoretical framework played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of the study and provided a nuanced lens through which to analyze the gathered data. The importance of queer phenomenology in this context lies in its profound ability to capture the intricate interplay between subjectivity, bodily orientation, and societal norms. Ahmed’s (2006) assertion that phenomenology is inherently queer resonated profoundly with the study's focus on non-normative gender expressions and the navigation of societal scrutiny by those living at the intersection of being both fat and queer. The emphasis on bodily orientations as performative acts, influenced by normative narratives, provided a robust theoretical foundation to dissect the participants' experiences with a keen focus on the performative nature of their identities. Reflecting on queer phenomenology as a methodological tool, its significance becomes apparent in guiding the study through the complexities of how bodies, identities, and emotions intertwine within a societal context. This methodological approach facilitated a nuanced analysis of the data, unveiling the performative nature of how fat queer individuals negotiate their identities in response to societal norms. Ahmed's (2006) insights into the emotional landscapes shaped by social orientations proved instrumental in deciphering the multifaceted dimensions of the participants' experiences. Queer phenomenology's contribution extends
beyond the theoretical realm to ethical considerations in research. By acknowledging the performative nature of identities and bodily orientations, I aimed to approach the data with heightened sensitivity, recognizing the impact of societal norms and discrimination on the lived experiences of fat queer individuals. This methodological tool, therefore, played a pivotal role in ensuring that the research outcomes are not only academically robust but also empathetic and inclusive. In essence, queer phenomenology served as more than just a theoretical framework; it became a methodological companion, guiding the study through the diverse, lived realities of fat queer individuals in Greece. It enriched the research process with depth, empathy, and a commitment to ethical inquiry, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the intersectional challenges faced by fat queer individuals.

8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study aimed to contribute meaningfully to the discourse on body image, self-identification, and societal expectations. Utilizing thematic analysis with the foundations of queer theory, the Panopticon, and performativity, the research aimed to shed light on the challenges, resilience, and nuanced narratives of fat queer individuals. Guided by ethics, queer phenomenology, and an awareness of positionality, I aimed to maintain a compassionate and empathetic exploration of diverse experiences. With queer methodology and theory as the conceptual framework, the goal was to establish a platform for participants to share their stories, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support systems. The research highlights the importance of addressing the emotional well-being of those navigating self-identity and body image complexities.
However, the participants’ narratives go beyond academia, serving as compelling examples that call for a more inclusive and empathetic society. These stories urge a paradigm shift in understanding and embracing the diverse experiences of those at the intersection of queerness and fatness. In the academic tapestry, this thesis is a thread, weaving together stories of resilience and resistance. It emphasizes the power of narratives to encourage society to listen, understand, and extend empathy. As I conclude, let it resonate not only as a culmination of research but as a call to action—a reminder to foster a world where every individual's narrative is heard, acknowledged, and celebrated.
REFERENCES


Long, H. R. (2020). "'Fat is a Queer Issue, Too': Complicating Queerness and Body Size in Women's Sexual Orientation and Identity.", https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cj_etds/131


APPENDIX

Consent to data processing

CONSENT TO DATA PROCESSING

I hereby consent that Linköping University processes my personal data in the form of audio recording for the purposes of a research study carried out by postgraduate student Evdoxia Papagianni, within the framework of the MA programme "Gender, Intersectionality and Change", as provided by the University of Linköping.

Information about the study:

The topic of the study is centered around people who self-identify as fat and queer, and aims to explore how they navigate their identity, through personal experiences. To do so, a focus group will take place online, on a pre-arranged day and time, via an online platform.

The objective of this group will be to reflect on the experiences of the participants. Part of the discussion will be the meaning that the individuals themselves give to fatness and queerness, as well as sharing personal experiences through examples and stories.

Throughout the study, the participants will not be directly asked questions concerning their weight number, nor be expected to talk about specific sexual practices, unless they themselves feel like sharing with the group. Moreover, participants are encouraged to use either their given name, name of preference or nickname during the focus group. Personal information, such as name, surname and social media account names will be only in the possession of the facilitator (Evdoxia Papagianni).

The focus group will be recorded (audio / video) with the aim to be transcribed. The transcription will then be used to extract data, that will be analyzed to identify how persons who self-identify as fat and queer navigate their identity and be included in a master thesis. The data will be used anonymously. Through the research process the data will be stored, in digital form, on Linköping University’s internal servers.

Personal data controller is Linköping University,581 83 Linköping, corporate identification number 202190-3096.

Contact:
Evdoxia Papagianni

evdpc420@student.liu.se

Legal basis for the data processing: Consent.

Withdrawal of consent/questions/complaints: If you want to withdraw your consent, please contact Evdoxia Papagianni (evdpc420@student.liu.se).

Your consent will be valid without limitation in time. You may withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. We will in that case stop using your personal data that we have collected based on your consent. You may request to have your personal
data erased, and if you do so, we will erase information about you wherever possible. You have the right to obtain information about your personal data that are processed by Linköping University. You may request this in writing by contacting the registrar’s office at Linköping University, either by email or letter. You also have the right to request that the use of certain of your personal data be limited.

If you want to know how your personal data are used, or you believe that we have used your personal data in a way that violates the agreement or current legislation, please contact Linköping University’s data protection officer at dataskydd@liu.se.

If you have complaints regarding the way in which Linköping University processes your personal data, you are always entitled to contact the relevant inspection authority, which in this case is the Swedish Data Protection Authority.

By signing this Form, I

1. consent to participate in this research.
2. confirm that I am at least 18 years old\footnote{GDPR permits 16 years old in the EEA to consent. From an ethics perspective, holding on to the age people become an adult may be preferable. Different countries may handle a different age for becoming an adult.}
3. understand that participating in this research is completely voluntary; and
4. understand that my data will be anonymized for publication, educational purposes and further research.

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