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‘Thick girls get low’

Representations of gender, fatness, blackness and sexuality in music videos by Lizzo

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation considers how gender, fatness, blackness and sexuality are represented and constructed in music videos by the plus-sized African-American recording artist Lizzo. Drawing on fat studies, feminist studies, black studies and music video studies, this paper employs the concepts of intersectionality and representation to explore how self-portrayals by fat women can serve to resist normative discourses around the fat female body. Audio-visual analysis and social semiotics are used to examine a total of eight music videos by Lizzo: *Scuse Me*, *Truth Hurts*, *Fitness*, *Boys*, *Juice*, *Cuz I Love You*, *Tempo* and *Good As Hell*. From the sampled music videos, three main themes are identified for interpretation: sexuality and desirability; food and eating; and fitness and exercise. This study finds that in using audio-visual signs that code her body as sexually desirable, Lizzo attempts to inscribe new discursive meanings on the fat black female body.

INTRODUCTION

In a 2019 video interview with The New York Times, the plus-sized African- American recording artist Lizzo references a song she released in 2015, titled *My Skin*: 'I wrote a song called *My Skin*', she says, 'and people were just so shocked that in 2014 [sic] this big black girl was saying "I'm in love with myself, I love my skin". I was like: why is this such a shocker to y'all? I'm about to just talk about this shit all the time until you get used to it'.

Such has been Lizzo's modus operandi since she began her recording career as a rapper, singer, and songwriter. Her songs, music videos, and social media accounts are full of empowering messages of self-love that celebrate her fatness, blackness and femininity. This is no small feat in a culture that has long maligned fat people as immoral, undisciplined and unattractive (Gurrieri, 2013). As fat studies scholars Jana Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco note, in contemporary Western society fatness has effectively 'become vilified in ways ideologically yet cleverly intertwined with concepts of nature, health, and beauty' (2001: 2).

For corpulent black women, oppression based on gender and race is further compounded by fatphobia. As April Michelle Herndon writes, 'black women are concerned about weight precisely because they understand that being heavy removes them even further from the ideal of Western beauty' (2005: 134). Furthermore, frequent stereotypical representations in news, film and television serve as an additional source of stigmatisation for corpulent black women.

This dissertation uses audio-visual analysis and social semiotics to examine how Lizzo constructs new narratives around fatness, blackness and sexuality in her music videos. The paper begins with a section on context that provides a brief description of Lizzo's career and public persona. This is followed by a theoretical chapter that contains a literature review, an elaboration of the concepts of intersectionality and representation, and a statement of the research aims and research question. The chapter on research design and methodology explains the choice to focus on music video, describes the rationale behind the selection of samples, justifies the chosen methodologies, and finally considers issues of ethics and

reflexivity. The chapter on results and interpretation examines the themes identified for analysis, namely sexuality and desirability; food and eating; and fitness and exercise. In the conclusion implications of the research and future avenues for investigation are discussed.

Through close analysis of the concepts of fatness, blackness and sexuality in music video, this dissertation aims to address an existing gap in the literature on the representation of fat black female bodies in music video, and to explore how the semiotic can be used to rewrite cultural scripts around fat black femalehood.

CONTEXT

Melissa Viviane Jefferson, popularly known as 'Lizzo', is a three-time Grammy award-winning songwriter, singer, rapper and flautist from Detroit, Michigan. In 2013 Lizzo released her debut album, *Lizzobangers,* which was followed by a second studio album *Big Grrrl Small World.* In 2016 Lizzo was signed to Atlantic Records, and released her first major-label EP, titled *Coconut Oil.* However it wasn't until 2019 when her song *Truth Hurts* reached number one on the American Billboard charts that Lizzo achieved major mainstream success. A plus-sized black woman, Lizzo has also become popularly known as a prominent voice on body positivity, racial justice and female empowerment. In 2019, Time Magazine named Lizzo its 'Entertainer of the Year', calling her the 'defining star of 2019 – not just for the music she makes, but for what she represents' (Irby, 2019).

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the theory and concepts that will form the basis of this dissertation. The chapter begins with a Literature Review which is divided into three parts. The first part serves as an introduction to fat studies. The second part deals with fatness

and femalehood, and contains a section on fat female sexuality. The third part provides a review of the literature on music video and includes a section on the representation of women in music video. Following the literature review, the second part of this chapter discusses two of the concepts central to this dissertation, namely intersectionality and representation. Finally, the last part of the chapter contains a description of the research aims and identifies the research question to be answered.

Literature Review

Fat studies

In contemporary American society, fatphobia is one of the few remaining socially acceptable forms of prejudice. Whereas recent decades have seen an emerging consensus that discrimination based on gender, ethnicity and sexuality is unjust, discrimination against fat people remains not only common but largely unquestioned. Perhaps this is because unlike gender or ethnicity, weight is viewed as something which can be controlled. Therefore fat bodies, in the words of gender studies scholar Lauren Gurrieri, 'have become publicly understood as failed projects that are unsuccessful, immoral, undisciplined, undesirable, and defiant' (Gurrieri, 2013: 199). This image of fat bodies has been consolidated by the medical establishment, which admonishes fat Americans for contributing to a national health crisis, and by popular culture, which represents fatness as unattractive to the point of abhorrence.

Fat studies, which is a relatively new but fast-developing interdisciplinary field of scholarship, aims to challenge the relationship between fatness and moral weakness, as well as to document the discrimination against fat people in contemporary Western society. Fat studies has its origins in the 1970s, when radical fat activists began arguing that negative Western perceptions of fatness are not natural or inherent, but rather socially constructed. Drawing on disciplines such as history, sociology, philosophy, gender studies and physiology, fat studies scholars aim to demonstrate that 'what counts as fat and how it is valued is far from universal; indeed these judgements are saturated with cultural, historical, political, and economic influences' (Braziel & LeBesco, 2001: 2). Furthermore, they interrogate how hegemonic discourses, including medical, scientific, and capitalistic, are used to marginalize and oppress fat people. In doing

so, as fat studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco argues, the field aims to 'alter the discourses of fat subjectivity by moving inquiries from medical and scientific discourses to social and cultural ones' (Lebesco, 2001: 75), and in doing so endeavour to 'reposition fat in the cultural imaginary' (ibid: 83).

Fatness and disciplinary power

A number of fat studies scholars have identified a link between fat oppression and disciplinary power. In her essay *A "Horror of Corpulence"* (2001) Joyce Huff references the work of Michel Foucault to explain this link:

> As Michel Foucault has argued, the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of the idea of the norm and, with it, a new type of coercive power – disciplinary power. Foucault notes that beginning in this period, the body became subjected to a normalizing judgement that both homogenizes individuals, by proclaiming a universally applicable standard, and differentiates them, by ranking them according to their difference from an unattainable ideal (Huff, 2001: 45).

According to Foucault, where one differs from this ideal body they are perceived as having failed, and their physical difference is thus 'transformed into aberration' (ibid: 45). Huff relates this notion to fat bodies, arguing that in Western society fat people are expected to feel a sense of shame or dissatisfaction because of their physical difference, and to willingly undertake a dietary or exercise regimen 'as a means of subduing the erring body and rendering it docile' (ibid: 53). For Huff, this represents a process of self-monitoring and self-regulation where the individual 'assum[es] responsibility for the power relationships in which he or she is caught up' (ibid: 53); thus, in the words of Foucault, the individual becomes 'the principle of his own subjection' (Foucault, 1977: 203).

In *Body Panic: Gender, Health, and the Selling of Fitness* (2009), health studies scholar Shari Dworkin and sociologist Faye Linda Wachs also draw on the concept of disciplinary power in their analysis of late 20th and early 21st century American fitness and lifestyle magazines. Dworkin and Wachs convincingly show how these media texts promote the stigmatization of bodily difference by presenting 'a highly rigid, exclusive body ideal masquerading as

"health"' (Duncan, 2011: 245). They use the term 'healthism' to describe the increasing emphasis on bodily surveillance, which serves both to create docile citizens and to meet the 'ever-increasing demands of consumer capitalism' (Andsersen, 2009: 717). They also tie the notion of healthism to the ideology of neoliberalism, arguing that neoliberalism places the responsibility of obtaining an "ideal physique" onto the individual, as 'structural inequalities vis-à-vis gender, race, social class, and sexuality become ignored' (Young, 2011: 1693). In this way, the discourse of healthism encourages the 'personal pursuit of fitness, rather than broader solutions that produce a wider range of health and fitness options for all' (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009: 13).

Fatness and femalehood

If in Western society the corpulent body has come to represent undesirability or a lack of discipline, it is women's bodies that have tended to bear a disproportional amount of this judgement. In *Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship* (2001), Cecilia Hartley points out how 'women learn early, increasingly as early as five or six years old, that their bodies are fundamentally flawed' (Hartley, 2001: 60), and that this recognition begins 'often as soon as a child is able to understand that there is a difference between the sexes' (ibid: 60). Hartley argues that young girls realise early on that their bodies must be 'changed, moulded, reconfigured into an ideal' (ibid: 60), and that this leads to a sense of deficiency or even self-hatred among girls by the time puberty begins. The prevalence of negative body image among women beginning during childhood has created a culture where 75% of women between the ages of 25 and 45 report disordered eating behaviours, 53% of women who are neither overweight nor obese are actively attempting to lose weight, and 27% percent agree that they would be 'extremely upset' if they were to gain five pounds (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2008).

A number of feminist scholars, including Naomi Wolf, Sandra Bartky and Laura Brown, have argued that the epidemic of body dissatisfaction among women ought to be considered a feminist issue. In *The Beauty Myth* (1992) Wolf ties the issue to a notion of patriarchal disciplinary power, arguing that 'a cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession

about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience' (Wolf, 1992: 83). For Bartky, female obedience has had to be renegotiated in the West as women have gained social and economic power: she argues that 'cultural expectations have progressively shifted away from what a woman is allowed to *do* onto what a woman is allowed to *look like*' (Hartley, 2001: 62). As a result, Bartky suggests, 'normative femininity is coming more and more to be centred on a woman's body - not its duties and obligations or even its capacity to bear children, but its sexuality…and appearance' (Bartky, 1990: 80). This obedience, however, is not merely imposed from the outside; women have taken it upon themselves to discipline their own bodies in order to conform to the norm of thinness and thus meet cultural expectations. 'Above all', Hartley writes, 'women must control themselves, must be careful, for to relax their vigilance might lead to the worst possible consequence: being fat' (2001: 64).

For Brown, the pressure that Western women feel to remain thin has become internalised in the form of 'fat oppressive notions' (1985: 68) that construct the fat woman as being in violation of the social norms set out for her. She writes:

> Fat women are ugly, bad, and not valuable because they are in violation of so many of the rules. A fat woman is visible, and takes up space. A fat woman stands out. She occupies personal territory in ways that violate the rules for the sexual politics of body movement...Thus, for women to not break the rules, and for women to not be ugly, bad, and invaluable, women must fear fat, and hate it in themselves (Brown, 1985: 65).

In not capitulating to social norms, or in trying and failing, the fat woman cannot hide the fact that she 'has not submitted to the rules that society has established for feminine behaviour' (Hartley, 2001:6). The fat woman must therefore punish herself for her aberration, through diets, strenuous exercise, or weight-loss surgery. For as long as she does not succeed, she will be punished for her failure through hostility and degradation.

Fat female sexuality

Another important avenue for study at the intersection of fat studies and feminist studies is the topic of fat female sexuality. Maya Maor identifies the treatment of fat sexuality as a prominent part of fat activism, addressing the fact that the 'stigmatization of fat individuals

tends to focus a great deal around the area of sexuality' (2013: 12). Nevertheless, a limited amount of academic work has been done to theorise fat female sexuality in either feminist studies or fat studies. The little work that has been done tends to focus on the perceived asexuality of fat women. As sociologist Marcia Millman argues in *Such a Pretty Face: Being Fat in America* (1980), 'in our society, fat women are viewed as unfeminine, unattractive, masculine, out of the running…in a word, they are desexualised' (1980: 98). This notion is corroborated in popular media, which rarely portrays fat women as either sexually attractive or as exhibiting sexual desire (Puhl et al, 2013). According to one study published in the American Journal of Public Health, fat female characters on American television are less sexualised than their thin or average-sized counterparts (Greenberg et al, 2003). The authors employ content analysis in order to quantify the prevalence of overweight and obese characters on ten top-rated American prime-time television programs across six major networks. They find that not only are overweight and obese women significantly underrepresented (only 14% of female characters were overweight or obese, compared with 67% of the general population), but overweight and obese female characters were less likely to be considered attractive, less likely to date or interact with romantic partners, and less likely to have sex.

When considered with blackness, fat female asexuality takes on additional layers of meaning. Courtney Patterson-Faye (2016) and Senyonga and Luna (2021) argue that when sexuality shares a theoretical space with blackness and fatness, it is often manifested in the corpulent "Mammy" figure, i.e. 'the smiling, docile, asexual figure designed to care for white children and their families' (Patterson-Faye, 2016: 1). Both Patterson-Faye and Senyonga and Luna draw on Patricia Hill Collins, who argues that the Mammy figure represents 'one of the first controlling images of Black women in the United States' (Senyonga and Luna, 2021: 10). With her 'large fat body, covered hair and dark skin' (ibid: 11), Patterson-Faye argues that Mammy embodies the opposite of Westernised beauty ideals, and is therefore seen as 'the impossible partner of white men' (Patterson-Faye, 2016: 1). The added layers of signification inscribed on the fat black female body thus demonstrate a necessity for studies of fatness, femalehood and sexuality to make room for the way these concepts interact specifically with blackness.

The study of music video

In comparison with forms of moving media such as film or television, academic work on music video is relatively uncommon. The limited work that has been done was mainly undertaken in the 1980s and early 1990s. According to Carol Vernallis, perhaps the most prolific scholar writing on music video today, in the 1980s 'music video seemed the thing to study…because it resembled a laboratory where relations around music, image, and text could be tested' (2004: ix). This interest in music video came about as a response to the launch of MTV in 1981, and led to the publication of many articles in journals on media studies, cultural studies, film studies and television studies, which discussed 'both the new phenomenon of music television and the videos that constituted its content' (Railton and Watson, 2011: 3).

The scope of these texts was broad and discussed a number of issues pertaining to music video. They dealt with, for example, representations of gender in music video, and the usage of music video as 'part of the music industry's star machinery' (Railton and Watson, 2011: 3). As Railton and Watson argue in their book 'Music Video and the Politics of Representation' (2011), early studies of music video contained two key strands: 'those which seek to warn against the negative aspects of music video' (e.g. its stereotypical representations, especially of black women) and 'those which ferret out positive aspects to celebrate' (e.g. its transgressive nature, and potential for progressive representations) (Railton and Watson, 2011: 4). Regardless of the authors' positioning, these texts were based on an underlying notion that music video represented a new and significant genre that was distinct from previous mediums and worthy of study in its own right.

In the early 1990s, two books were published that have come to be regarded as seminal texts within music video studies: Goodwin's *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture* (1992) and Frith, Goodwin & Grossberg's *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader* (1993). These books used a mixture of textual and socio-cultural analysis to examine issues of gender, culture, and commercialisation in music video. In paying close scholarly attention to music videos as media texts, Railton and Watson argue that the authors of these works provided a 'potential blueprint for further inquiry…[that] could have marked the beginning of an institutionalisation of music video studies' (2011: 5). As it happens however,

the scholarly interest in music video that accompanied the launch of MTV mainly petered out around the mid-1990s.

The lack of sustained academic interest in music video is surprising given the current centrality of music video to popular culture. MTV may not be as culturally relevant as it once was, but as Vernallis (2017) argues, music video is one of the most popular forms of audio-visual media today. Music videos represent the most viewed content on YouTube, with views on the most popular music videos numbering in the billions. Furthermore, studies show that the most common way that audiences currently consume popular music is via music videos (Vernallis, 2017). Given the clear relevance of music videos today, contemporary writers on music video have accurately emphasised the 'need to scrutinise music video in this cultural moment [and] to subject it to the same kinds of rigorous analysis which have proved so illuminating in the study of other forms of audio-visual popular culture' (Railton and Watson, 2011: 7). Certainly there is a gap in media studies for in-depth textual evaluations of music video within what could be deemed the "YouTube era", drawing on the research produced during the MTV era of the 1980s and 1990s, but with an additional recognition of how the move from television to internet has affected the medium and how it treats issues related to race, gender and sexuality.

Representations of female sexuality in music video

Many scholars have identified the music industry as a significant site for analysing how women's sexuality is portrayed in popular culture. In particular there exists a great deal of scholarship on the hip-hop genre and its portrayal of women (see for example Shelton, 1997; Lewis, 1995; White, 2013; Hunter and Cuenca, 2017; Perry, 2003). Cultural studies scholar Theresa Renee White points out that although hip-hop has traditionally been dominated by men, African-American women played a significant role in the genre's development. However, White notes that as hip-hop became more mainstream 'the image of women seemed to take on a more gender inferior, sexually demeaning, and provocative role' (2013: 613). Beginning in the early 2000s, Imani Perry identifies the increasing prevalence of a new role for women in hip-hop, the pejoratively named 'video ho' (2003: 137). Building on Perry, Hunter

and Cuenca argue that these so-called 'video hoes' are cast in rap videos as objects of the male gaze, and 'usually serve as props to enhance the performance of masculinity by the male rapper in the video' (2017: 29).

Recently however, feminist scholars Laura Harvey and Rosalind Gill have identified the rise of a 'new and contradictory subject position: the sexual entrepreneur' (2011: 52), which they argue is a product of 'the modernization of femininity…in the wake of the "sexual revolution"' (ibid). The female sexual entrepreneur has become notable in the hip-hop genre, as demonstrated by artists such as Nicki Minaj and Cardi B, who employ their sexuality as a key element of their artistic personas. The music video is a particularly important site for these artists, who market themselves through ever-more provocative representations of female sexuality.[1] In the words of Harvey and Gill,

> recent representations of women may constitute a clear break with representations from the past in which women were passive and objectified, now showing them as active, desiring and taking charge sexually in a way that clearly reflects feminism's aspiration for female sexual self-determination (2014: 54)

Whether this represents a positive direction remains a subject of debate among feminist and black studies scholars. Patricia Hill Collins for example argues that in a post-industrial economy that provides few opportunities for working-class African-Americans, black bodies have become transformed into a commodity for sale through 'hip-hop capitalism' (2006: 35) and that black female artists are merely participating in the commodification of black female sexuality. bell hooks roundly dismisses the notion that these commodifications of black sexuality are empowering, arguing that recording artists 'can exercise control and make lots of money, but that doesn't equate with liberation' (Stoeffel, 2014). White is slightly more ambivalent, arguing that 'Black women have demonstrated a shrewd, complex understanding about how they wish to use their bodies [and] too often Black women rappers are not credited with having a conscious understanding of their oppression' (White, 2013: 620).

[1] See for example Minaj's 2014 video *Anaconda*, or Cardi B's 2020 video *WAP*

Theoretical frameworks

This dissertation relies heavily on feminist theory, as well as theories of blackness and fatness drawn from black studies and fat studies, respectively. In particular, this dissertation makes use of the theoretical framework of intersectionality, as well as the concept of representation.

Intersectionality

The theory of intersectionality was first introduced in 1989 by American lawyer and critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in order to illuminate how race- and gender-based discrimination intersect in a way that creates unique challenges for black women in the United States. In the words of Patterson-Faye, intersectionality ‘proclaims that black women live at the intersection of oppressive identities that work together to create injustice and inequality’ and these identities ‘are not additive, but are interconnected/interrelated and need to be considered simultaneously’ (2016: 16). Intersectionality has since been applied to understand how oppression is experienced by other groups with overlapping identities, including but not limited to class, disability, gender presentation and sexual orientation. This paper will employ intersectionality as a theoretical framework to understand how discrimination based on fatness, blackness and gender combine to create unique modes of oppression for fat black women.

Representation

The role of representation has been discussed at length in media studies. In *The Rediscovery of ‘Ideology’: Return of the Repressed in Media Studies*, Stuart Hall describes how in early mass media studies representations of “deviance” were considered natural; it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that media scholars began to observe that ‘the media defined, not merely reproduced reality’ (1982: 60). This is significant because as film studies scholar Richard Dyer notes, ‘how social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in real life’ and ‘harassment, self-hate and discrimination…are shored up and instituted by representation’ (Dyer, 2002: 1).

Given the significant role that the media plays in targeting “deviant” groups for discrimination, it is difficult to underestimate the importance of fat representation in the

media. Not only are fat individuals underrepresented in the media (Greenberg et al, 2003), but where they are represented it is often in a negative or stigmatising way (Puhl et al, 2013). Heuer, McClure and Puhl (2011) identify a number of representational conventions of fatness, including 'the close cropping of body parts, bodies not fully clothed or wearing ill-fitting clothing, portrayals from side or rear angles, or images of fat people eating, drinking, or engaged in sedentary behaviour' (Gurrieri, 2013: 199). Gurrieri notes that such representations 'are used to intentionally evoke a sense of disgust, in turn degrading and dehumanizing fat subjects' (2013: 199). On the other hand, studies have also shown that viewing positive, non-stereotypical images of obese persons can produce positive reactions and therefore potentially help reduce weight-related stigma (Pearl et al, 2012; Puhl et al, 2013).

Research Aims and Research Question

While a significant amount of work has been done to theorise representations of black women in music video, extremely little has been written on how these representations intersect with fatness and sexuality. This is largely due to the fact that prior to Lizzo achieving mainstream success, sexualised representations of corpulent black women in music video were few and far between.

Since Lizzo has gained widespread popularity, two studies have been done on her self-representations: Senyonga and Luna's *If I'm shinin' everybody gonna shine": centering Black fat women and femmes within body and fat positivity* (2021), and Miller and Platenburg's *Lizzo's Black, Female, and Fat Resistance* (2021). Senyonga and Luna focus on Lizzo's performances, while Miller and Platenburg use Lizzo's social media as their site of analysis.

This study is therefore unique in its focus on how Lizzo presents her fatness, blackness and sexuality specifically through the medium of music video. To this end, the research question that this dissertation will address is:

> In what ways are the concepts of fatness, blackness and sexuality represented and constructed through Lizzo's music videos?

In answering this question, this dissertation aims not only to fill an existing gap in the research on representations of fat, black, female sexuality in music video, but to address wider questions about how positive and sexualised representations of fat individuals in the media can serve to disrupt dominant narratives around fatness.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGIES

The purpose of this chapter is to clarify the research strategy and methodologies employed to answer the research question set out in the previous section. The first part of this chapter contains a justification of the choice to focus on music video, as well as an explanation of which music videos were sampled and why. The second part of this chapter contains an elaboration of the chosen research methodologies, namely audio-visual analysis and semiotics. Finally, the third part addresses the issues of ethics and reflexivity.

Research Design

Analysing music video

Lizzo's official YouTube channel, like the channels of other commercial recording artists, features a number of different videos, including not just "official" music videos, but official lyric videos, official audio videos, official remixes, tour diaries, interviews, and live performances from awards shows and talk shows. While these videos could all prove fruitful for analysing how Lizzo presents herself as a fat black woman, only "official" music videos were selected as the focus for this dissertation.

The choice to focus on music video is based on the notion that popular culture is an important site for the production of representational norms, and that music video in particular is a significant form of popular media with its own set of conventions and structures that are worthy of scholarly analysis. As Railton and Watson point out, music video is often dismissed as 'a worthless by-product of capitalist business practice' (2011: 1), and this has resulted in the diversion of scholarly attention towards other mediums that are commonly accepted to have

greater cultural value. However, as Railton and Watson argue, 'notwithstanding their undoubted commercial agenda, indeed to some extent because of it, music videos are an important part of the contemporary cultural terrain' (ibid: 12). Residing somewhere between art and advertising, music video has become all the more significant since the advent of YouTube, which streams over a billion videos a day and is now viewed more than television (Vernallis, 2013).

Sample selection

When selecting music videos for analysis, two main criteria were considered: publication date and relevance to themes of fatness and sexuality. Lizzo has released eighteen music videos on YouTube to date; the earliest was uploaded in September 2013, and the most recent in December 2019. The music videos released prior to 2017 were discounted mainly because they were released before Lizzo was signed to a major record label and therefore are markedly different from her later videos in terms of style and production scale. A total of eight music videos were ultimately chosen for analysis, which was deemed an amount of footage that was both manageable and sufficient for gaining a thorough understanding of how the concepts of fatness, blackness and sexuality are negotiated in Lizzo's music videos. A table identifying the music videos sampled can be found in the chapter on results and interpretation, and the video URLs can be found in Appendix A.

Methodologies

Audio-visual analysis

Music video provides fertile ground for audio-visual analysis. As with mediums such as film or television, the audio-visual analysis of music video may focus on elements such as mise-en-scène, editing, types of shot and shot distance, camera angle and movement, mood, clothing or costuming, framing, props, and sound/audio. However, music video also differs from more established forms of moving images like film or television for a number of different reasons.

Firstly, as Carol Vernallis has pointed out in her work on music video aesthetics, when it comes to the production of music video, 'the music comes first - the song is produced before the video

is conceived - and the director normally designs images with the song as a guide' (2004: x). Secondly, as Vernallis also points out, the music video is a product designed to accompany the release of a single; therefore 'the video must sell the song; it is…responsible to the song in the eyes of the artist and record company' (ibid: x). For these reasons, Vernallis proposes treating music video as its own genre, distinct from mediums like film, television or even photography, distinguished by its 'own ways of organising materials, exploring themes, and dealing with time, all of which can be studied through close analysis' (ibid: x).

For example, one convention of music video is that it tends not to follow a clear narrative; indeed some have argued that as a genre, music video is 'fundamentally anti-narrative' (ibid: xi). Unlike in classic Hollywood cinema, where 'shots are edited in order to allow the clear development of the story' (Rose, 2016: 77) and 'the principle behind montage is the maintenance of both narrative flow and spatial coherence' (ibid: 77), music video defies these narrative conventions through the frequent use of jump cuts. One reason for this is that the music video is edited in response to the song; thus the editing 'can elucidate aspects of the song, such as rhythmic and timbral features, particular phrases in the lyrics', etcetera (Vernallis, 2004: xi).

Another convention of music video which audio-visual analysis can help to unpack is the significance of a song's lyrics to the music video as a whole. It is important to note that the importance of the lyrics varies greatly from video to video. Whereas some videos closely reference the lyrics of the accompanying track through elements such as setting, clothing or props, other videos may have very little if anything to do with the song's lyrics. Therefore as Vernallis argues, 'the lyrics constitute no more and no less than one of many strands a video must weave together' (2004: xiii).

Finally, audio-visual analysis is useful for analysing music video through "compositional interpretation". According to Gillian Rose, compositional interpretation refers to a method for 'expressing the appearance of an image' (2016: 56). As Rose notes, it is 'an approach long established in art history' and is most often used in analysing paintings (2016: 57). Nevertheless, compositional interpretation can be a productive method for the analysis of

music video, as it encourages the viewer to look closely at the site of the image itself, which in music video is often highly stylised. Compositional interpretation takes into account visual elements such as content, colour, lighting, distance and angle, all of which can lend meaning to the image and allow for a variety of interpretations.

While audio-visual analysis is useful for considering the aesthetics of music video as well as the role played by the song and lyrics, as a methodology it does not necessarily give the researcher a deep level of insight into the social or cultural meanings of the text.

Semiotics

Semiotics is a methodology that aims to uncover how meaning is created and communicated through signs. For Roland Barthes, one of the theorists most prominently associated with semiotics, a semiotic analysis involves identifying the layers of meaning contained in an image. According to Barthesian visual semiotics, this requires first identifying what is being depicted by an image (i.e. the "sign", or what is being denoted) and second, suggesting what ideas or values are being expressed via the image (i.e. the "signified", or what is being connoted) (van Leeuwen, 2001). This process, in the words of Margaret Iversen, allows the semiotician to 'lay bare the prejudices beneath the smooth surface of the beautiful' (1986: 84), and in doing so better understand how images represent meanings which are socially constructed or culturally specific.

According to Gillian Rose, 'since all forms of semiology are concerned with the making of meaning, semiology is an approach that can be applied to all kinds of visual materials' (2016: 108). Social semiotics is a useful methodology for the analysis of music video as it gives the researcher the tools to interrogate how the elements represented in a music video relate to wider systems of social and cultural meaning. For example, hip-hop music videos often contain visual depictions and lyrical references to expensive pieces of jewellery like "chains" or "grills"; here the sign being denoted is the piece of jewellery itself, whereas the signified being connoted is wealth, which as a concept is culturally relevant to the hip-hop lifestyle, which is further tied to ideologies around race and social status in the United States.

In addition, semiotics is a useful methodology for analysing music video because music videos often contain advertising, and semiotics has proven to be particularly apt for understanding how ideologies are recreated in advertisements. As Robert Goldman has pointed out, 'because ads are so pervasive and our reading of them so routine, we tend to take for granted the deep social assumptions embedded in advertisements; we do not ordinarily recognise them as a sphere of ideology' (1992: 1). This is especially true for music videos which contain product placement, since the product is often integrated into the video in such a subtle manner that the viewer does not necessarily realise that they are being advertised a product, let alone what meanings are being connoted by the product in the context of the video. In the case of Lizzo's music videos, some of the products being advertised include Beats headphones, the social media application TikTok, and Cheetos snacks, all of which have culturally specific connotations.

A couple of semiotic tools in particular are worth mentioning: the tools that Barthes (1977) refers to as "anchorage" and "relay-function". Anchorage occurs when the producer of an image directs the viewer towards a preferred meaning through the use of accompanying text (Rose, 2016). In a news story for example, the caption on a photograph provides a ready-made interpretation of the image for the viewer. In other forms of media like music video, the accompanying text (in this case the lyrics) may be 'more important in relation to the image; they are complementary' (Rose, 2016: 121). In music videos where the audio relates closely to the visual, as is generally the case with Lizzo's videos, the song lyrics have a relay-function that guide the viewer towards the artist's preferred meaning.

While semiotics can be very useful for uncovering the layers of meaning in an image, or in this case in music video, it has its limitations. The use of semiotics as a methodology requires a certain level of analytical self-awareness, given that images can have any number of meanings, and that the viewer's interpretation of an image's meaning will always depend on their own cultural background and experiences of ideology. However, as Rose points out, while semiotics 'permits reflexivity', it does not 'demand reflexivity' (2016: 145). These concerns will be addressed in the following part of this chapter, in section 3.2.

Note on additional methodologies

Audio-visual analysis and semiotics are not the only methodologies that could have been employed to answer the research question; psychoanalysis in particular is useful for understanding representations of sexuality, and discourse analysis for interrogating how representations can disrupt dominant ideologies around fatness, blackness and sexuality. However two methodologies were deemed a manageable amount for this dissertation, and it was decided that unlike mainstream semiology, social semiotics provides sufficient tools for understanding how ideological social difference can not only be constructed but contested through music video.

Ethical considerations and reflexivity

Ethical considerations

Given that each of the videos that were selected for analysis are commercial materials and part of the public domain, the researcher identified no serious ethical issues. The research objectives and methodological framework were further approved by a supervisor, who found that they met the ethical guidelines set out by the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Reflexivity

According to Gillian Rose, one of the essential criteria of any critical visual methodology is an approach which considers the author's 'own way of looking at images' (2016: 22). Rose argues that the purpose of this kind of self-reflexivity is two-fold. Firstly, reflexivity serves to 'resist the universalising claims of academic knowledge and to insist that academic knowledge, like all other knowledges, is situated and partial' (2016: 180). Secondly, reflexivity helps to clarify how the researcher's own social positioning may have influenced not just the interpretation of the data collected, but also the construction of the research question, the selection of samples, and the design of the research strategy.

To this end, it is important to note that the researcher's interest in the topic of fatness stems from their own experiences as a plus-sized woman, and that this undoubtedly informed the construction of the research question and the interpretations of the music videos provided in

the discussion section. In order to avoid bias in sample selection the researcher followed the criteria set out in section 1.2 of this chapter. Furthermore, in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the chosen samples, the researcher relied on two methodologies as outlined in sections 2.1 and 2.2.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

This chapter provides a detailed analysis of the eight sampled music videos (Table 1), and a discussion of the themes identified. The first section considers the theme of sexuality and desirability, and discusses how Lizzo connotes these qualities through symbols such as dress, gesture, and the use of conventionally attractive men as props. The second section, which looks at the theme of food and eating, examines how Lizzo combines references to food with lyrics that contain African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in a way that both plays into and subverts normative representations of fatness and blackness. The third and final section considers the theme of fitness and exercise, and analyses how the complex relationship between health, fitness and sexuality is constructed through Lizzo's music videos.

TITLE	**PUBLICATION DATE**	**VIEWS** (as of 28/08/ 2021)
'Scuse Me	January 25, 2017	12.9 million
Truth Hurts	September 25, 2017	268.1 million
Fitness	March 30, 2018	9.2 million
Boys	June 22, 2018	60.3 million
Juice	January 4, 2019	99.6 million
Cuz I Love You	February 14, 2019	16.2 million
Tempo feat. Missy Elliott	July 26, 2019	37.6 million
Good as Hell	December 9, 2019	34.6 million

Table 1: Sampled music videos

Sexuality and desirability

In a cultural context that views fat women as asexual, self-portrayals of sexuality by fat women can serve to resist normative discourses around the fat female body. Building on Judith Butler's theory of the queer body as a discursive production, fat studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco argues that 'the semiotic can be used as a source of subversion' (2001: 80) when it comes to the fat body. She references feminist scholar Elizabeth Grosz, who posits that 'bodies speak, without necessarily talking because they become coded with and as signs…they become intextuated [and] narrativized' (ibid: 79). In much the same way as queer theorists have contended that the 'public performance of "perversion" enables sexual subjects to play a role in how they are inscribed with meaning – to enter themselves into discourse' (ibid: 81), theorists of fatness have argued that there is a need for representations which demonstrate that 'pleasure can be taken by and in fat bodies' (ibid: 79). For Patterson-Faye, this type of self-representation is 'especially important for fat black women as they engage in interpersonal scripts' (2016: 3). She argues that the bodies of fat black women in particular tend to be 'masculinized and made deviant when juxtaposed to white femaleness and or/thinness' (ibid: 3) and that their sexuality continues to be 'flattened under mammy's existence' (ibid: 3). By constructing their own narratives and coding their bodies as sexual, fat black women may therefore be able to inscribe their bodies with new meanings, which present their sexuality not as perverse or deviant, but as empowered and "normal".

In the sampled music videos, Lizzo forcefully resists the "mammy" trope by employing clear symbols of sexuality. One of the ways she accomplishes this is through forms of dress that signify sexuality. In all of the sampled music videos Lizzo wears outfits that variously reveal her large breasts, buttocks, and thighs. In many videos she can also be seen in outfits, including lingerie, that highlight body parts that fat women are often expected to hide: her protruding stomach, her fleshy arms, and her cellulite. Patterson-Faye offers the concept of "sartor-sexuality" to argue that how fat women define and execute their sexuality is 'directly correlated to the relationship between their clothing and their bodies' (2016: 3). By wearing clothing in her videos that both reveal and accentuate her fatness, Lizzo challenges the notion that fatness is something to be hidden or tucked away, and instead constructs fatness as

something to be shown off. Lizzo's use of revealing outfits in her videos is certainly novel; of the few black and corpulent mainstream female musicians, Lizzo is perhaps the only one that wears the same kinds of revealing outfits often seen in the videos of thinner female stars. Even Missy Elliott, who presents herself as a sexual being through her explicit lyrics, typically dresses in loose streetwear in her videos.[2] The contrast between how Lizzo and Missy Elliott represent their sexuality is especially clear in the video for *Tempo* (2019), which has Elliott as a featured artist. Where Elliott is dressed in one of her trademark track suits, Lizzo wears a sequined bikini and silver high-heeled boots, with a fur cape slung over her shoulders.

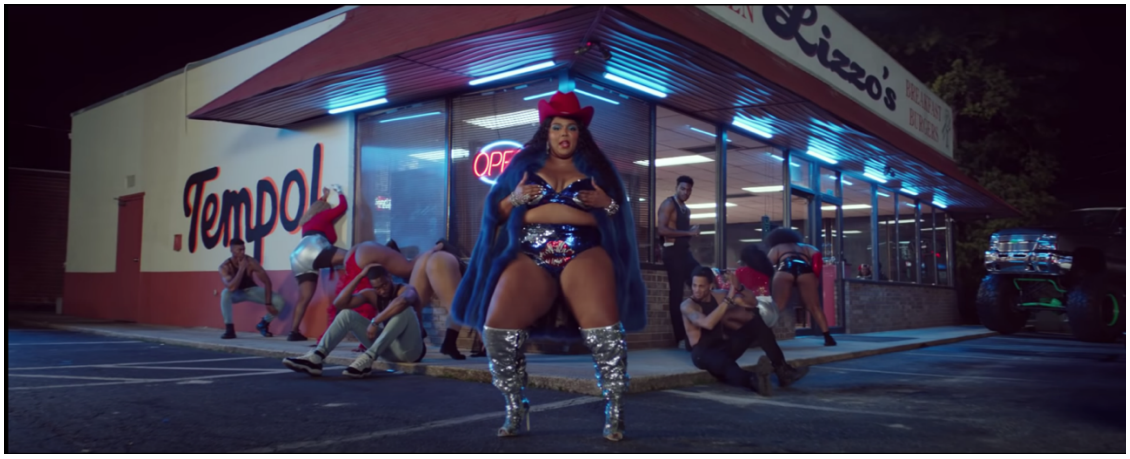

Image 1: Revealing clothing in *Tempo* (2019)

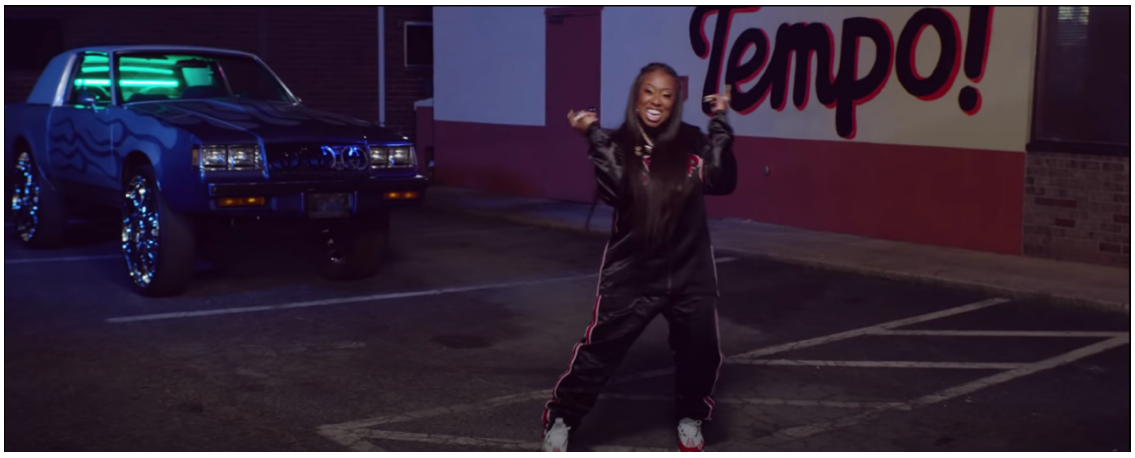

Image 2: Elliott in one of her trademark track suits

[2] As demonstrated in Elliott's 2009 videos *The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)* and *Get Ur Freak On*, e.g.

Another way that Lizzo emphasizes her sexuality and desirability as a corpulent black woman in her music videos is through sexually charged lyrics, combined with suggestive dancing and gestures. In the video for *Scuse Me* (2017), Lizzo sings while looking directly into the camera: 'Feeling like a stripper, when I'm looking in the mirror/I be slapping on that ass [smiles] getting thicker and thicker'. Not only does Lizzo explicitly sexualize herself here by comparing herself to a stripper, which can connote attractiveness to the male gaze or even sexual empowerment, but the reference to getting 'thicker', a term in AAVE that refers to a person's corpulence, is a clear nod to both her size and her blackness. Moreover, by smiling at the camera while she sings this line Lizzo shows that she is unabashed and even proud of her "thickness". In the video for *Boys* (2018), Lizzo raps directly into the camera, while gesturing confidently: 'Hit my phone boy, is you home boy?/Are you alone boy? Come give me dome, boy'. The lyrics show Lizzo being proactive in looking for sexual attention, and after rapping 'Come give me dome, boy' Lizzo makes a suggestive gesture with her tongue between her two fingers, connoting cunnilingus. She makes the same gesture in the video for *Tempo*, as she sings 'Baby, baby/Come eat some of this cake…Lick the icing off, put the rest in your face'. By using a combination of lyrics and gesture to implicate herself in sexual acts, Lizzo can clearly be seen to subvert the norm that views fat women as asexual, and instead suggests a script that codes her body as sexually desirable, and herself as sexually desiring.

Image 3: Lizzo in *Boys* (2018) – 'Come give me dome, boy'

A third way that Lizzo connotes her desirability in her music videos and thus disrupts cultural norms around fat female sexuality is through the use of conventionally attractive black men, essentially as props. In four of the sampled videos Lizzo is either pictured with one or several muscular men, who are either shirtless or wearing clothes that reveal their broad shoulders and muscled arms. For example, *Truth Hurts* (2017) contains a scene where a shirtless man with chiseled abs is posing with a thin girl – Lizzo pushes her away and out of shot so that she can pose with the man instead, and they smile flirtatiously at each other. In

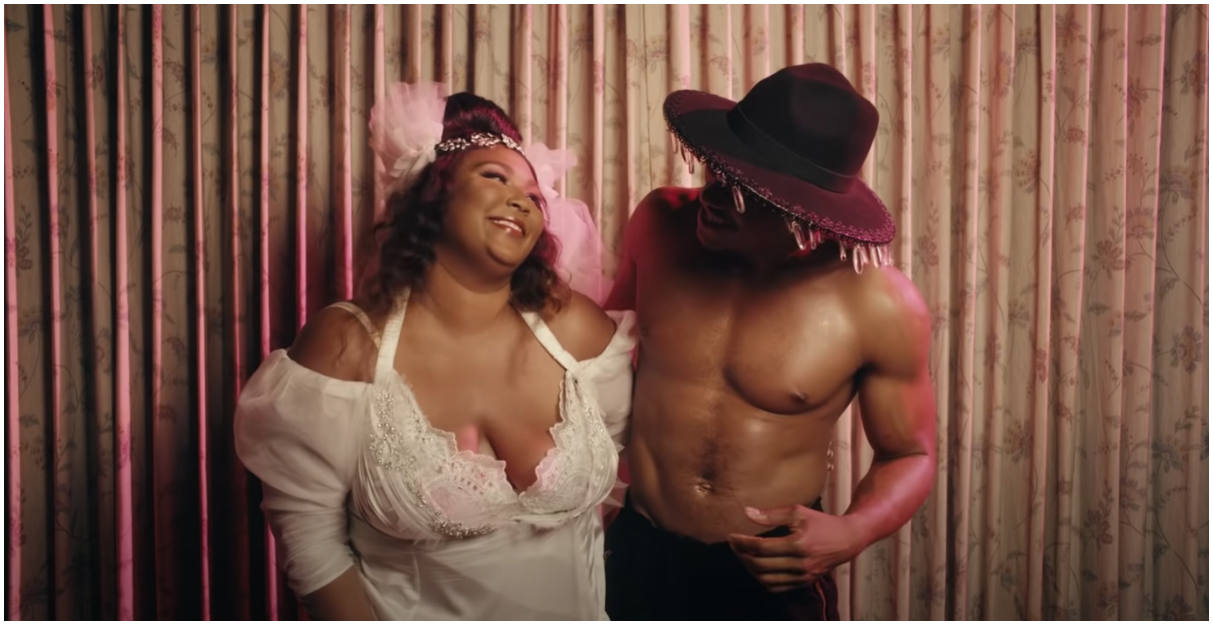

Image 4: Lizzo poses with a man in *Truth Hurts* (2017)

Juice (2019), Lizzo is pictured next to another muscular black man who is wearing nothing but a pair of briefs. He moves to caress her, and Lizzo looks at him in an unimpressed manner, while singing the lyrics 'Don't dare try to cop a feel'. By rejecting the man's advances, Lizzo is effectively making a statement about her own appeal and worth, that she is able and willing to reject someone who is more attractive than her in a culture that values toned bodies over corpulent ones. In the video for *Cuz I Love You* (2019) Lizzo is accompanied by a group of eight or so athletic black men. Here the men essentially serve the same purpose as "video hos" do in rap videos, in this case to demonstrate the femininity and desirability of the artist. As the

video takes place in a church with the men sitting in pews, there is no reason why men and women of all body types couldn't have been cast, but here Lizzo trades on conventional notions of male attractiveness in order to signify her own desirability (Bordo, 1993). The objectification of men in music video, while perhaps more novel than the objectification of women, is still problematic especially given what Dworkin and Wachs find on the increasing pressures for men to conform to the ideal male body type represented in these videos. It is therefore important to note that in using toned, athletic men as symbols of sexuality, Lizzo may be rewriting the scripts for fat female bodies, but she does so by very much reinforcing the narratives around the idealized male body.

Food and eating

In *Unbearable Weight*, feminist cultural studies scholar Susan Bordo suggests that an individual's body size has become a 'symbol for [their] emotional, moral, or spiritual state' (1993: 193); whereas toned bodies signify discipline and willpower, corpulent bodies signify the lack of ability to control 'infantile impulse', here the impulse to eat. The attribution of meaning to others' bodies is what Huff refers to as the 'narrativizing gaze' (2001: 51). Huff suggests that in a fatphobic culture the 'narrativizing gaze' singles out the corpulent body, and especially the corpulent female body, and identifies it as deviant. She argues that 'the spectator ascribes to the fat woman a history that is both etiological, in that she "must" eat too much, and pathological, in that she "must" have an underlying psychological reason for that overeating' (ibid). For fat black women, as sociologist Sabrina Strings has argued, the deviance of fatness intersects with the deviance of blackness to construct a perception of obese black women as 'social dead weight' (2015: 108). Strings cites multiple studies that 'corroborat[e] the finding that "black women are more likely to be obese because they eat more high-calorie foods"' (2015: 120), and that 'this black female overindulgence', rather than being caused by structural inequalities, 'is apparently buttressed by deviant black cultural ideals, which "inhibit motivation for weight control"' (ibid). For Strings, these medical tropes are merely the latest iteration of racist discourses that pathologize black people as particularly prone to sensual (i.e. sexual and oral) indulgences, evinced here via the site of the fat black female body.

Lizzo makes references to food and eating in six of the sampled music videos, and in doing so she shows not only an awareness of the narrativizing gaze that casts her corpulence as deviant, but she demonstrates a defiant resistance to ideological norms that dissuade her from engaging in behaviour that contributes to her "deviance". In *Good As Hell* (2019), Lizzo is pictured on a school bus eating from a large bag of Cheetos. This scene is shown at two different points in the video; once at 1:54, and again at 2:32. In the second scene Lizzo puts a Cheeto in her mouth and closes her eyes and smiles, as if savouring it. While the lyrics make no reference to food (according to an article published in Rolling Stone magazine, the Cheetos were added to the video as product placement, following the production of the track [Wang, 2020]), the visual symbolism is significant. If the Cheetos are the sign, then the signified could be gluttony or unhealthiness, since Cheetos are widely considered junk food. As an obese person unabashedly savouring Cheetos, Lizzo is effectively pushing back against the narrative that she should restrict such foods in an attempt to slim down and thus conform to a more "acceptable" body type. This is also the case in the video for *Truth Hurts*. The video has a wedding theme, and contains a shot of Lizzo in a wedding dress and veil, standing next to a thin black girl; the girl lifts a piece of wedding cake to Lizzo's face, Lizzo takes a bite and then looks directly into the camera, with icing all over her mouth. Not only is cake another food that is considered unhealthy, but Lizzo is eating it in a playful way, exhibiting none of the shame that might be expected of an obese person "indulging" in sugary food. Moreover, with her mouth covered in icing, Lizzo directly plays into notions about fat people being sloppy (Hartley, 2001), especially when eating. Lizzo's deviance is effectively written all over her face, and by smiling she shows that she makes no apologies for it. Finally, in the video for *Juice*, there is a scene where Lizzo both poses with and drinks from a soda can labelled 'Juice! Soda'. The use of the soda can as a prop is significant given that sugary drinks are often linked with obesity in popular medical discourse. If the soda drink is the sign, then drinking it could signify a disregard for health, or a lack of willpower in choosing soda over a lower-calorie beverage. By using a soda can as a prop, Lizzo is therefore both playing into and pushing back against popular medical discourse.

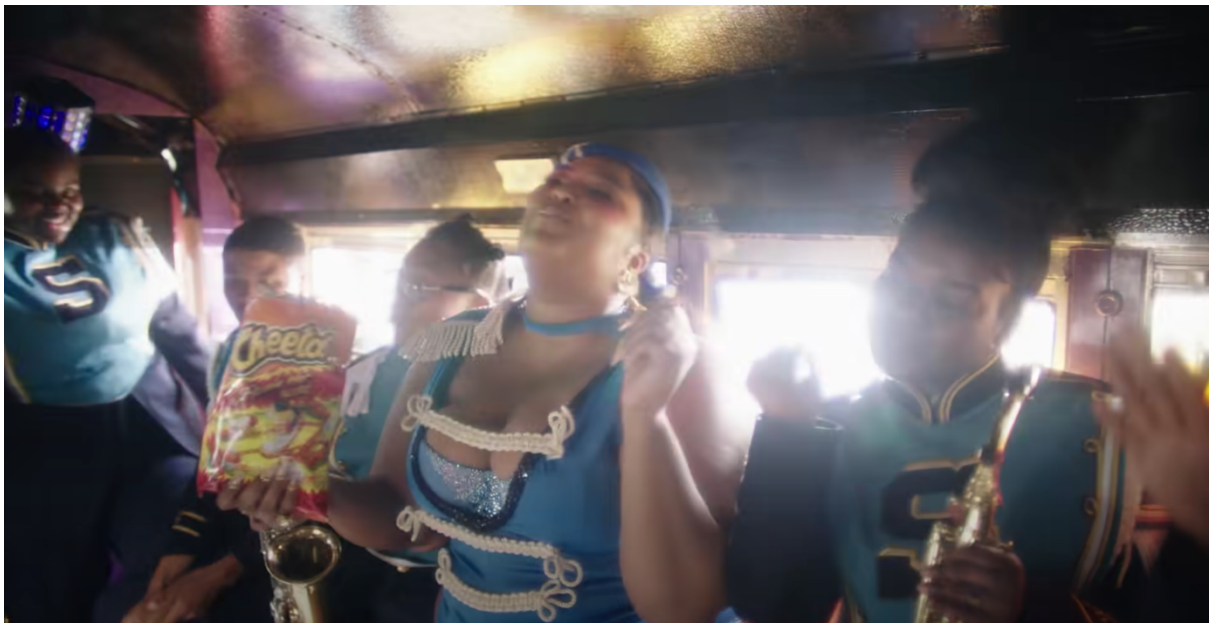

Image 5: Lizzo pictured eating Cheetos in *Good As Hell* (2019)

Lyrical references to food can be found in the videos for *Scuse Me* and *Juic*e. In *Scuse Me*, Lizzo sings: "I be slappin' on that ass/Getting thicker and thicker/Now spoon the yams/Now stir the soup". Yams and soup are not considered unhealthy foods, like Cheetos or cake, but yams in particular are a typical African-American dish. Here Lizzo is therefore making a cultural reference, while ostensibly taking pride in the way this dish figures in her corpulence. Moreover, by using the AAVE term 'thick' Lizzo refers specifically to her corpulence as a black woman. As she sings these lyrics, Lizzo is seen twerking while looking directly into the camera. By dancing suggestively while singing about food and getting 'thicker' Lizzo takes ownership of both of her body size and her desire to eat, and as she stares defiantly into the camera she directly resists the narrativizing gaze that figures her blackness and fatness as both deviant and sexually undesirable.

If in *Scuse Me* Lizzo is somewhat defiant in her references to food, in *Juice* she is playful. At 0:25 Lizzo sings: 'I be drippin' so much sauce/Got a bih lookin' like ragù'. The reference to 'sauce', which in AAVE refers to confidence or swagger, is accompanied by a playful reference to pasta sauce. In another humorous lyrical reference to food, Lizzo sings 'No, I'm not a snack at all/Look, baby, I'm the whole damn meal'. Again Lizzo is using AAVE; 'snack' as used here

is slang for an attractive person, and 'whole damn meal'can be seen as a reference to Lizzo's size and attractiveness – as a big woman she is not merely a snack, but a whole meal. Furthermore, in the video this lyric is accompanied by a scene where Lizzo wears lingerie while sitting next to a shirtless muscular black man. The shot shows the man looking appreciatively at Lizzo and placing his hand on her knee. Through the use of dress that connotes Lizzo's sexuality, and through the gaze of the conventionally attractive man next to her, Lizzo not only represents herself as sexually attractive, but by simultaneously making AAVE-laden lyrical references to food and eating she constructs herself as attractive not in spite of her fatness and blackness, but because of it.

Fitness and exercise

While Lizzo's references to food and eating in her music videos seem to rebuke dominant ideologies around fat people and food, the representations of fitness and exercise in her videos are more ambivalent. Indeed, the relationship in capitalist Western culture between health and fitness is very complex. The work of Dworkin and Wachs is particularly helpful in explaining the nuances of this relationship. Dworkin and Wachs argue that American consumers are sold a narrow definition of fitness that has less to do with health, and more to do with 'individual anxieties related to the body's appearance' (Duncan, 2011: 245). Dworkin and Wachs suggest that this has much to do with neoliberalism in the US, as 'capitalist markets advocate individual responsibility for health, displacing criticism of social structure onto individual bodies and on the failure of individual people to stay fit' (Andersen, 2009: 716). Moreover, they argue that the discourse of what they call 'healthism' constructs 'moral hierarchies through which particular bodies [i.e. fit or thin bodies] and body-practices are imbued with social status and privilege' (Duncan, 2011: 245). Yet, as they also note, some bodies are more naturally able to achieve these privileged positions. Therefore, for Dworkin and Wachs, 'the obligatory nature of fitness, when presented as a highly rigid, exclusive body ideal masquerading as 'health' and as the responsibility of each individual to achieve despite the fact the game might be weighted against them, constitutes a site where inequality may be "literally embedded in the flesh" [Dworkin and Wachs, 2009: 69]' (Duncan, 2011: 245).

Lizzo makes references to fitness in two of the sampled music videos, the video for *Juice* and the video for *Fitness* (2018), and both of these texts feed into gendered discourses that construct exercise as a means to transform the fat female body into a shape that renders it more sexually attractive and therefore more culturally acceptable. In the video for *Juice* the references are visual, since the track itself does not contain references to fitness or exercise. The video, which has an eighties theme, contains scenes where Lizzo, and later Lizzo accompanied by a pair of backup dancers, are seen working out in eighties-style aerobics outfits. Interestingly, the scenes in *Juice* that feature fitness are heavily encoded with symbols of femininity. Firstly, the scenes are awash with the colour pink: Lizzo is pictured wearing a pink leotard, her hair is smoothly tied back with a pink scrunchie, and she is seen lifting up a small pink hand weight with a pink sweatband around her wrist. Furthermore, the fitness studio in which these scenes take place is lit with a soft magenta hue. Finally, Lizzo's "look" emphasizes her femininity: her leotard is low-cut and reveals her cleavage, she is wearing a pair of traditionally feminine pearl earrings, and her makeup is perfectly done, with pink eyeshadow, pink blush, and pink lipstick.

These scenes can be interpreted as both pushing back against and feeding into racialized and gendered discourses of 'healthism'. As Dworkin and Wachs found in their study of fitness magazines, 'in the mediated health industry, white [and] thin equate to "healthy" in ways that nonwhite [and] nonthin do not' (Young, 2011: 1695); therefore the representation of fat women of colour (for the back-up dancers, like Lizzo, are both plus-sized and nonwhite), certainly push back against stereotypes of fat people and particularly fat black and brown people as sedentary or lazy. Nevertheless, the heavy use of feminine symbolism demonstrates the narrow confines within which women, and especially fat black women, must operate when it comes to fitness. For if women's bodies must abide by Western beauty standards of petiteness and whiteness to be considered desirable, then fat black women, who cannot meet either of these standards, must overcompensate by appearing hyper-feminine, even (or especially) while working out.

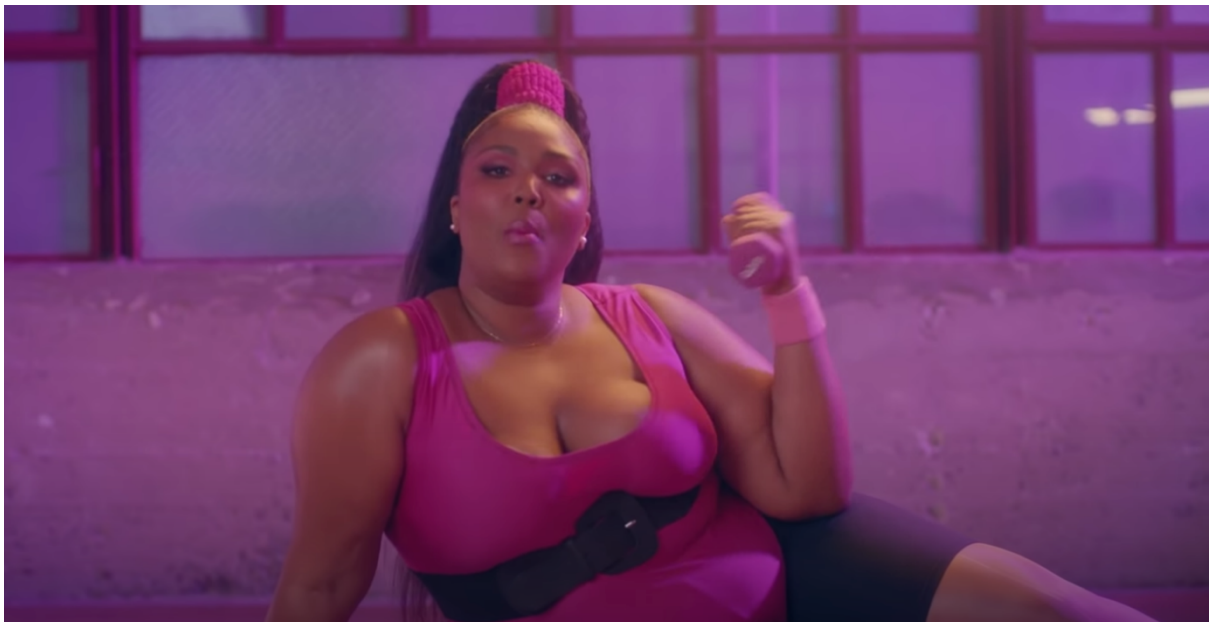

Image 6: Lizzo in *Juice* (2019)

Further references to fitness in Lizzo's music videos construct exercise as way to achieve a sexually desirable body. The findings of Dworkin and Wachs' content analysis of American fitness magazines uphold the notion that in American media the goal of fitness is more often framed as a means of obtaining an ideal body type than as a means of becoming healthier; in short 'the object of fitness is looking good, not feeling good' (Andersen, 2009: 717). Moreover, their findings 'highlight the propensity for women to find empowering forms of subjectivity within the context of objectification' (Duncan, 2011: 245).

The nuanced relationship between empowerment and objectification is very evident in the music video *Fitness*, which features a number of contradictory messages. In the opening lyrics, Lizzo sings: 'Independent/Athletic/I been sweating/Doing calisthenics'. The use of the word independent here is interesting as it mirrors the neoliberal healthist discourse identified by Dworkin and Wachs; Lizzo is very much individualizing her pursuit of fitness. Later in the video Lizzo sings 'Woo, tryna get it/Working on my fitness'. Here she is expressing an empowered desire for sex; however the lyric also suggests that for Lizzo, working out is a requisite means to that end. In effect Lizzo is implying that the body, here the fat female body, must be altered via exercise in order to become sexually desirable. This notion is also present

in the lyric 'Think about how I'm gonna feel/When I got that ass that don't stop/That ass that don't stop/That ass that don't stop/And think about how I'm gonna feel/When I take it all off'. With this lyric Lizzo suggests that by working out she will achieve an 'ass' that is supposedly more sexually attractive, and that this will make her feel differently about her naked body. Whether Lizzo is 'taking it all off' for herself or someone else is not entirely clear; however the subsequent lyric 'Think about how I'm going to feel/When I step up on the catwalk' certainly implies an audience. This reaffirms the message in the lyrics that Lizzo's pursuit of fitness is conditional on an assumption of bodily surveillance.

The visuals in *Fitness* contain a number of interesting and contradictory symbols. The video itself has a BDSM theme, with Lizzo and her backup dancers outfitted in latex, leather harnesses, collars and fishnet stockings. These BDSM symbols can variously connote notions of discipline and subjugation, or power and domination. The notions of subjugation and discipline certainly feed into the Foucauldian power relationships inherent in the self-regulation of the body as a means of abiding by cultural norms. However, Lizzo is ostensibly attempting to subvert these power relationships: in one shot the image of Lizzo and her dancers is overlaid with the text 'I DON'T DO THIS FOR YOU' in large red letters, supposedly referring to the practice of fitness. Nevertheless, this message is largely contradicted by the song lyrics, which implicate that the pursuit of fitness is undertaken in order to cater to the gaze of others.

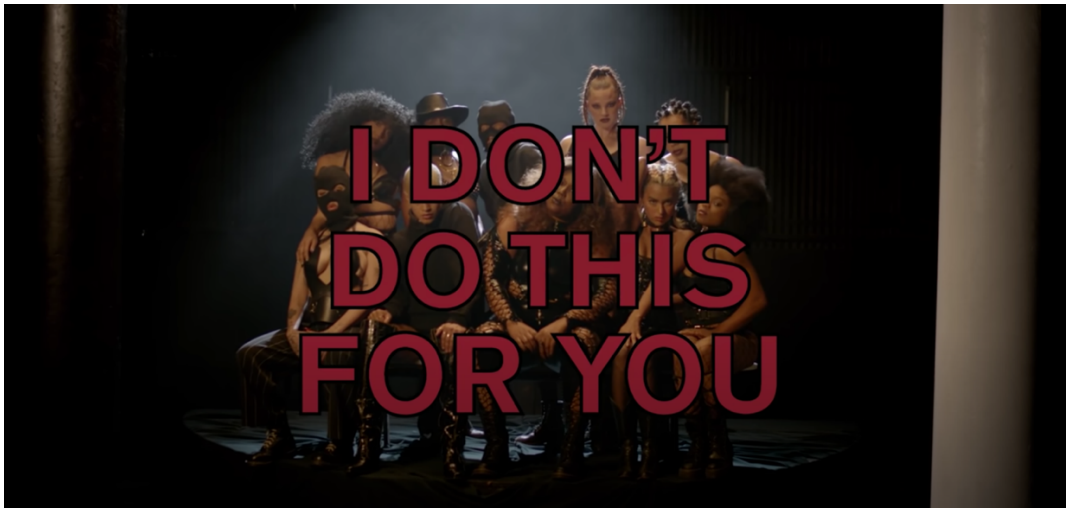

Image 7: Text imposed over Lizzo and back-up dancers in *Fitness* (2018)

These contradictions show that even in her attempts to find empowerment in fitness and exercise, Lizzo ends up constructing a somewhat confused narrative that at once suggests that she is not pursuing fitness for others, while at the same time expressing a desire to transform her body so that it is more visually pleasing or sexually attractive. If anything, this ambivalence merely serves to demonstrate the complexity of the relationship between health, fitness and sexuality, and the power of bodily surveillance in a fatphobic society.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In presenting positive representations of herself as a fat black woman, Lizzo attempts to rewrite a cultural script that inscribes deviance, undesirability and asexuality on the site of the fat black female body. Through the use of various symbols such as dress, suggestive gestures and conventionally attractive men, Lizzo codes herself as a sexual being who is simultaneously desiring and desired. By both playfully and defiantly referencing food and eating, she demonstrates an unwillingness to capitulate to societal norms that suggest that fat women should be ashamed of their supposed gluttony. Lizzo's audio-visual references to fitness and exercise construct a somewhat ambivalent narrative that both pushes back against and feeds into discourses around gender, race and health, and finds fitness as a site of both empowerment and subjugation.

While this dissertation relies on the combined use of audio-visual analysis and semiotics to analyse Lizzo's music videos, a number of other methodologies such as content analysis, discourse analysis and psychoanalysis could prove helpful in future research. The effects of Lizzo's positive self-representations, which are outside of the scope of this particular study, could be measured through audience studies, which may prove helpful for understanding how Lizzo's music videos impact viewers' perceptions of fat black female bodies. Moreover, the question of whether Lizzo's use of sexually charged lyrics and imagery represent a progressive change or merely another iteration of the commodification of black female sexuality within the context of consumer capitalism ought to be further explored. Finally,

whereas this study explored the themes of sexuality and desirability, food and eating, and fitness and exercise, Lizzo's videos contain a number of other themes that are worthy of analysis, including but not limited to representations of self-love and empowerment, African-American culture, and religion.

Whether Lizzo's positive constructions of fat black femalehood will become part of a broader shift in popular culture towards humanising and destigmatising fat women remains to be seen. There are already signs that popular media is moving towards including more ubiquitous and progressive representations of fat bodies, as evidenced through the increasing presence of plus-size models in fashion and fitness publications. Other forms of media however, such as film, television and even music video, continue to lag behind in this regard. The importance of representation in popular media cannot and should not be underestimated: in the words of film and cultural studies scholar Jane Feuer, 'for those of us subject to what might be called "visual oppression", representation is the necessary first step toward liberation' (1999: 198).

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