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Plus size people can and will travel too: body positivity in travel and leisure

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ABSTRACT

The tourism sector is increasingly moving towards equality, diversity, and inclusion, yet a systematic issue within the sector that largely hinders and excludes non-conforming, alternative bodies. Using a netnographic research approach framed by a poststructuralist perspective, this paper explores the body positive travel and leisure experiences of TikTok content creators, critically engaging with the narratives and discourses in circulation. The analysis of 200 TikTok videos and 977 comments reveals a multifaceted landscape of structural challenges, community support, and societal perceptions surrounding plus-size travel. The digital sharing of plus-size travel and leisure experiences is crucial in challenging traditional and homogeneous structures of what it means to be “a tourist”, disrupting scripted tourism and leisure narratives, and deconstructing normative embodiments of travel experiences. This paper provides a deeper understanding of how inequalities hinder the inclusion of alternative, non-conforming groups in travel, as represented in online discourses. It also offers empirical insights on advancing inclusivity in tourism and establishes a foundation for implementing changes that foster more equitable tourism experiences.

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Introduction

Tourism discourses continue to play a role in constructing the “tourist body”, often depicting tourists based on dominant ideologies in which they represent “slim” and conventionally attractive bodies (Benjamin & Dillette, 2021). Portrayed in sexualised and overtly visible positions, the “tourist body” is a crucial element in promoting the desirability of a place or destination. Habitual showcasing and marketing of the “slim” homogenised conventionally attractive body promotes an individualised tourism physicality that problematises transgressive bodies, recreating and reinforcing inequalities that prevent the full inclusion of alternative or non-conforming groups (Jordan, 2007).

While the figures on plus-size travel and leisure trends are limited, in 2016, 39% (+1.9 billion) of adults aged 18 years and over were overweight, and 13% (650 million) were obese

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(WHO, 2021). Specifically, the most recent 2016–2017 report on the UK plus-size market suggests that an estimated 63% of people were “overweight” (PwC, 2017), while more than 73% of the US adult population was considered overweight including obesity during this same period (CDC, n.d.), representing a significant market segment. This growing market segment should greatly interest tourism and leisure providers as it may offer significant economic and commercial opportunities. However, the travel experience and potential economic value of plus-size people have not been sufficiently investigated.

To theorise the interplay between structure and agency, conformity and resistance, we utilise a poststructuralist perspective to help problematise what is taken as “stable” and “unquestionable truth[s]” (Davies & Gannon, 2005), by exploring the relationship between representations of “bodies” and the pressure to conform or resist bodily expectations (Ingram, 2022). Previous research has considered a variety of tourist bodies, including gendered females (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008) and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) and Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Youth (TGNC) bodies (Reddy-Best & Olson, 2020), demonstrating the extent to which tourism provides a space within which to explore expressive, sensual, and individual body faculties (Everingham et al., 2021). While tourism has progressed our understanding of inclusion and diversity, the experiences of plus-size tourists remain largely absent. A holistic approach that incorporates body diversity is needed to understand the social inequities that prevent the inclusion of all people. This study focuses on the constructed content of the travel and leisure experiences of plus-size travellers, an important but hitherto neglected area of research. Travel and leisure for plus-size individuals as a research subject are rarely discussed beyond the context of health risks and challenges (Mozo et al., 2017). Importantly, as attitudes towards inclusivity continue to evolve and body confidence among plus-size consumers increases, there is a growing need for more research focusing on the experiences, influence and representation of transgressive bodies (Richardson, 2010). The representation and discourse surrounding these bodies challenge, resist, and disrupt societal norms, expectations related to body size, appearance, and mobility. Consideration of plus-size experiences in travel contributes to advancing the development of a more inclusive, accessible, and equitable tourism industry.

Travel and leisure spaces are not merely physical locations, but socially constructed environments actively shaped and reinforced by power dynamics, social identities and cultural meaning (Aitchison & Reeves, 1998). This research is essential for examining how “power, identity, meaning, and behaviour are constructed and negotiated” in travel and leisure spaces (Aitchison & Reeves, 1998, p. 51) through social media. As agents of socialisation, social media platforms play an instrumental role in constructing, maintaining, and disrupting homogenous identities (Hunter & Cuenca, 2017). The expression of lived experiences of marginalised groups and communities, suggests that social media is an important tool for social activism. Within the context of tourism, tourists are nowadays more actively engaged in digital information sharing or storytelling within online communities, leading to increased feelings of empowerment (Seeler et al., 2019) and self-identity (trans)formation (Pera et al., 2020). The aim of this study is, therefore, to explore body positive travel and leisure experiences of TikTok content creators and examine interactions with constructed body positive content to advance understanding of inclusion within the tourism sector.

The paper first contextualises the (re)presentation of tourism as a form of embodied social practice, before providing an understanding of social media posts as a form of social resistance. The focus on social media content provides opportunities to disrupt the scripted tourism and leisure narrative and deconstruct the embodiment of travel experiences. This visibility challenges societal norms and promotes body acceptance. Our findings underscore the role of social media, particularly TikTok, in reshaping perceptions of plus-size travel and participation in leisure experiences.

Literature review

Tourism and leisure as an embodied social practice

The study of tourism (i.e. travel and leisure) is typically defined through Western hierarchical dualism, the “us” and the “them”, the “self” and the “other” (Johnston, 2001). “Other” or “otherness” refers to the perception of difference (Staszak, 2009). The binary division is defined through hierarchical oppositions between the valued dominant and devalued subservient subject (Johnston, 2001). In tourism, the dominant subject or body (i.e. “White”, “heterosexual” and “thin”) is valued over other alternatives (Small, 2022). Individuals that fail to reflect an idealisation of this body highlight their “otherness” (Andrews, 2011). Importantly, those with superior and highly valued attributes possess “dominant group status”, exercising power to exert ideological and sociocultural norms concerning body size, shape, and appearance. Drawing further attention to this issue, feminist scholars, such as Bordo (1993), view the material body as a site of constant political struggle within which significance and meaning are attached to the thin/fat, healthy/unhealthy dichotomy. Colls and Evans (2014) argue that the medical framing, particularly through the use of measurements (i.e. Body Mass Index), views obesity/fatness as inherently problematic. The medicalisation of bodies ignores the complexities of physical diversity, perpetuating the stigmatisation of “fat” individuals. Importantly, this framing works to legitimise societal practices and spaces (Colls & Evans, 2014). The essentialist binary construction of the body mandates what is acceptable and desirable, a social pressure and scrutiny female bodies are particularly vulnerable to Bordo (1993). Orbach’s (1987) feminist review of diet culture provides an early, critical criticism of how societal norms surrounding “fatness” serve as mechanisms of power and control, particularly over women’s bodies. It is argued that diet cultures enforce a narrow standard of beauty, which pressures women to conform to unrealistic body ideals. For Orbach (1987), the societal idealisation of thinness places disproportionately harmful expectations surrounding the female body. As a form of political control and social construction by which individuals are categorised, Orbach (1987) posits that the pressure to be thin limits autonomy, reinforcing conformity and uniformity.

The body is a principal tourism component, central to tourist experiences and leisure activities (Johnston, 2001). In the field of tourism, the concept of *embodiment*, is used to identify the way in which bodies become in a social space (Turner, 1996). Embodiment in tourism contributes to the discourse within which individuals manage and locate their bodies (Pritchard & Morgan, 2011), reinforce and construct their identities (Andrews, 2011), interact with their environment, engage with tourism space, and communicate with others. The feminist poststructuralist perspective, a unique framework for challenging what is taken as stable and unquestionable truth (Davies & Gannon, 2005), adds to the discussion on embodiment, highlighting the relationship between bodies and the pressure to conform or resist bodily expectations (Ingram, 2022). Previous research has considered a variety of tourist bodies, including gendered females (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008) and LGBTQIA+ and TGNC bodies (Reddy-Best & Olson, 2020), demonstrating the extent to which tourism provides a space within which to explore expressive, sensual, and individual body faculties (Everingham et al., 2021).

The embodied practice of travel and leisure is further examined in various structural and procedural elements, such as the design of tourist attractions and the activities offered (Williams et al., 2023). Embodied tourism research provides a deeper understanding of experiences, cognitive and sensory diversity and highlights ongoing inequities in tourism and leisure practices (Palmer & Andrew, 2019). The attention towards the representation of tourist bodies, particularly the embodiment of female bodies has been extensively explored in the tourism literature, providing unique insights into norms and predominant practices (O’Regan, 2016). Tourism studies on the representation of the tourist body highlight that Western-centric tourism marketing and media (i.e. brochures, postcards, magazines and industry websites) are predominately based on normative ideas of gender and sexuality (Jordan, 2007). Coleman (2009) emphasised that bodies

and images continuously interact and influence one another, crucial in establishing and promoting societal body ideals. Most Western-centric tourism media images and promotional material convey representations of dominant ideologies and identities of “conventionally attractive”, “White”, “able-bodied”, “young” and “slim” or “acceptably-sized” tourists (Benjamin & Dillette, 2021; Small et al., 2008). The pressure of narrowly defined physical ideals is most notably featured in the representation of women in Western-centric tourism media. The images of female tourists fail to represent the actual bodies of women travelling (Hemmati, 1999). Pritchard (2001) discussed the wider socio-cultural implications of stereotypical tourism imagery, arguing that representations of narrow ideals of Western beauty standards reinforce narrow representations of desirable and valuable bodies. Travel and leisure spaces create an environment where body appearance and lifestyle forms are cultural signifiers of norms (Black, 2001). These norms become embodied and internalised, further maintaining the thin/fat dichotomy as fixed and constructing what it means to be a tourist (Williams et al., 2023). Importantly, the lack of diverse tourist bodies further entrenches the invisibility and devaluation of non-conforming body types and sizes (Small & Harris, 2012).

In the broader market, inclusive marketing strategies are essential to improve consumer well-being and body image (Zhang et al., 2024). Therefore, change is needed not only in advertising and branding but also in marketing products and services (Branca et al., 2024). The narrowly defined slim tourist body is valued while the alternative non-conforming body (i.e. plus-size) is marked as the devalued “Other”. The absence of the Other in mainstream tourism media further upholds the idealised body as a benchmark for the embodied tourist (Jordan, 2007). Poria et al. (2021) discuss the difficulties of obese guests in hotels, identifying physical (i.e. servicescape) and human (i.e. presence of guests) environmental factors that often lead to feelings of embarrassment, shame, humiliation, and ultimately exclusion. In an attempt to avoid the gaze, obese guests adopted behaviours that minimised the exposure of their body (i.e. covering up). Size inclusivity within the travel and leisure sector has been rarely discussed, with limited attention given to plus-size travellers lived experience of “fat” embodiment. Previous research has primarily focused on the inaccessibility of tourist destinations, leading to increased consideration of social and structural barriers and enabling greater mobility in travel in recent years (McCabe, 2020). Accessibility concerns in travel and leisure raise wider issues concerning minority and marginalised groups, including plus-size travellers.

Online plus-size travel movement

Understanding counter-narratives and resistance to dominant ideologies and identities, especially as represented on social media platforms, provides valuable opportunities. This insight can support Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) efforts and help transform the tourism and leisure sector in sustainable ways. Previous research on EDI in the online space is mostly noted in the increased use of internet technologies for social and political activism or resistance to dominant societal norms (Retallack et al., 2016; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Active participation in the online sphere disrupts postfeminist dominant forms of beauty and embodiment and enables individuals to construct identities and negotiate their appearance, leading to greater inclusion and empowerment.

Content created and distributed *via* social networking sites (SNSs) is crucial in influencing and promoting social movements and societal politics (Papacharissi, 2014). SNSs such as Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter) and TikTok are distinct from traditional media outlets as they shift the power balance, that is, redistribute power in terms of representation and influence. This in return allows users to create and distribute their self-representation and individualised narratives, becoming cultural producers rather than mere consumers (Van Zoonen, 1994). Unlike “influencers” (i.e. micro-celebrities) who often produce sponsored posts, engage in paid partnerships, and share endorsed opinions, everyday content creators develop and

distribute participatory storytelling, offering humanised (positive and negative) narratives of lived experiences (i.e. user-generated content) (Hou, 2023).

Body positivity largely promoted through social media platforms, challenges the prevailing homogenous societal norms that traditionally uphold narrow beauty standards and dictate what is considered “ideal” or “acceptable” (Morris, 2019). Content creators are increasingly turning to social media as a space within which alternative bodies are made visible, thereby shaping the way in which societies are (re)organised and (re)constructed. Despite the growing use of SNSs as a tool for resisting narrow body ideals and promoting body diversity, there remains a significant gap in understanding how plus-size travellers use these platforms to engage with and influence the discourse surrounding EDI in tourism. A pivotal study by Yang (2023) on how websites advocate for plus-size travel movement was the first to introduce the phenomenon to the domain of tourism studies. Their findings suggest that plus-size travel, as an online discourse, has evolved into a social movement in which content creators utilise the online sphere to increase visibility and advocate for greater inclusion and empowerment, to change the discourse around the idealised tourist body. Showcasing alternative bodies in tourism spaces and engaging in tourist practices legitimises these environments and highlights the right of plus-size individuals to travel (Yang, 2023).

Perceived as more trustworthy and authentic, social media content significantly influences consumer travel decisions, shaping travel-related purchases and destination choices (Fotis et al., 2012; Pop et al., 2022). Alongside social media content, online travel communities play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging, facilitating shared experiences, and offering valuable recommendations (Lee & Hyun, 2015). Within the context of the plus-size travel movement, digital communities provide support, advocate for greater inclusivity, and share practical advice to minimise physical and emotional challenges in travel (Yang, 2023). Social media platforms are, ergo, increasingly becoming a space to present and display alternative, diverse representations of the body. Alternative representations and displays contribute to contesting and modifying normative discourses and challenging well-established conceptions. Though Yang’s (2023) work has formed the basis for understanding plus-size travel communities as promoting social movements and societal politics, to further advance the body positive movement, more insight into engagement and interaction with constructed content is required. Before we can examine the ways in which tourists’ representations of the body reinforce and/or resist “body types” on social media, attention now turns to the methodology we adopted to undertake our investigation.

Methodology

The use of visual imagery or content in tourism and leisure research is well established, providing an in-depth understanding of the symbolic aspect of imagery in film and television (Beeton, 2011) and more recently social media imagery (Smith et al., 2021). In tourism, representative destination images of tourist attractions provide powerful branding and marketing information (Arefieva et al., 2021). Using imagery in tourism and leisure marketing is underpinned by Foucault’s (1977) concept that the power and disciplinary regimes support particular tourism dialogues. Imagery including still images or screenshots of short-form videos offer fragmented yet insightful glimpses about social phenomena and lived experiences (Pink, 2007). Masset et al. (2024) note that videography (i.e. film and moving images) are effective in exploring marginalised or stigmatised populations capturing intricacies of their experiences.

Social media is increasingly becoming a primary source of valuable and rich data for social research, particularly pertinent to travel and leisure performance (Oliveira et al., 2020). Video-sharing SNSs have become an integral part of modern society, contributing significantly to societies increasing dependence on visual stimuli (Du et al., 2020). TikTok is the most popular mobile video and social network application created in China as “Douyin” in 2016 and released globally as “TikTok” in 2018. During the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), TikTok saw an increase

in user and cultural visibility (Kennedy, 2020), with the app reaching the highest number of downloads among all SNSs in both Google Play Store and Apple Appstore in 2020. In fact, TikTok's dominance among all short video platforms (Feldkamp, 2021) is supported by the rapid growth in the number of active users (excluding Douyin users in China) tripling from 381 million in 2019 to 1.58 billion in 2023 (Business of Apps, 2023).

TikTok is primarily a commercial platform that serves to attract and retain users' attention. Interactive and engaging components of the platform include repeated viewings, liking, commenting, favouriting, sharing, downloading, and stitching serve a commercial interest enhancing user participation and generating profit (Peng, 2023). The platform's main feature is its *For You Page (FYP)*, provided by TikTok's unique algorithm (Kanthawala et al., 2022). The algorithm feeds into TikTok's subcultures, groups of like-minded people that differ from the mainstream culture and community. TikTok communities are understood as networks of users with shared interests, values, or characteristics, often united by subcultures or identities. Interactions such as commenting, sharing, stitching, and liking content contribute to online "trends" and social movements. The platform's data-driven algorithm tailors content based on user engagement patterns and behaviours, while its flexible design allows individuals to explore and engage with diverse communities beyond those they follow. Unlike TikTok "trends" such as dance and lip-synching video content, subcultures establish niche communities (e.g. *#FitTok*) that draw attention to and promote discourses, such as unfiltered body positivity discussions. As an emerging platform, TikTok is still in its infancy of scholarly inquiry. Nevertheless, existing research surrounding body image indicates that TikTok significantly influences behaviour and creates a critical space in which identities and cultures are shaped (Seekis & Kennedy, 2023). Given its global popularity, TikTok, as a site for research, has significant potential to provide access to a wide range of niche communities and social interactions.

Data collection & analysis

The study employed a qualitative research method using netnography to understand complex and naturally occurring discussions (Kozinets, 2015). As a method, netnography involves observing online communities, offering opportunities to explore unique social phenomena, and taking advantage of accessing and archiving data (Kozinets, 2015; Smith et al., 2021). The focus on visual data surfaces sensitive, emotionally powerful but otherwise silent narratives that may not be obtained through traditional methods, thereby creating a deeper understanding of the way social realities are perceived and understood (Scarles, 2014).

The study used purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) to select information-rich video content shared by individual content creators on TikTok. An archival, non-participatory observational or lurking approach was adopted allowing the researchers to exist within the natural context of the plus-size travel community (Giles, 2017). This research exclusively focuses on body diversity in travel and leisure. The research team searched for data using the keyword search term "*#plussizetravel*" as it reflected the highest number of views at the time of data collection in July 2023 (See Table 1). *#plussizetravel* was effective in producing a diverse sample of users engaged in a reflexive process to present themselves and disseminate their travel and leisure experience as body positive advocates (Rauschnabel et al., 2019). The hashtags "*#fattravel*" and "*#travelingwhilefat*" were considered as potential search terms as the term "fat" gained popularity within the body positivity movement. However, as search terms they yielded limited data and were therefore excluded as viable hashtags for identifying and collecting the travel and leisure experiences of content creators.

The first 200 videos tagged *#plussizetravel* were selected and downloaded manually. The number of videos used in this research yielded a focused sample and was therefore deemed sufficient to capture primary themes and allow a detailed thematic exploration. Promotion-sponsored or incentivised content was excluded from analysis as the research sought to explore authentic,

Table 1. Plus-size travel keywords.

Hashtag	Number of views
#plussizetravel	299m*
#plussizetraveltoo	62m
#plussizetraveltips	24.9m
#plussizetraveller	12.7 m

*million.

lived travel and leisure experiences. Descriptive statistics (i.e. metadata) of each post were recorded, including upload date, video length and the number of likes, comments, saves and shares (Table 2). The selected videos which were made by 61 content creators and posted on TikTok between July 2020 to July 2023 cumulatively amounted to approximately 145.6 min with the average length of 43.7 s per video. Table 3 details the top five content creators and an overview of their engagement features which demonstrate their significant influence and contribution to the body positive movement on social media. To build on Yang's (2023) work and deepen our understanding of the plus-size community, this study engaged with the narratives and discourses surrounding the constructed content. The top five comments from each video, representing the highest levels of engagement, were selected for analysis. In total, 977 comments were chosen, with both text and emoticons included in the selection.

Social media research is unique due to its "unsteady forms of publicness" and attempts to exist within the public and private sphere, raising new challenges regarding ethics and privacy concerns (Moreno et al., 2013). To maintain anonymity, no identifying information (i.e. name, username, and location) was included. This study also captured still images of constructed short form content to gain a more nuanced understanding of how plus-size tourist bodies construct individualised travel and leisure identities. The still (i.e. static and non-moving) images represent short-form content snapshots. The images are illustrative representations of the content designed to capture the essence of the social phenomena and lived experiences. Adopting Pearce and Wang (2019) and Smith et al. (2021) approach, this research includes bespoke illustrations of constructed content excluding facial features, focusing primarily on the performative and expressive body (i.e. shape, physical dimensions, weight). The development of custom illustrations provided another layer of immersive depth and prolonged engagement with the constructed content (Kozinets, 2019).

The data was analysed through interpretive thematic analysis to identify patterns across the dataset. Thematic analysis is a flexible and iterative method to explore rich and complex insights (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Prior to collecting and analysing data, the research team extensively engaged with the literature to help inform Braun and Clarke (2021) thematic technique. Data analysis involved (1) familiarisation by repeatedly viewing TikTok videos (verbal and textual material and visual elements) and interactions with constructed content (i.e. comments, likes, saves and shares). At this stage of the analysis, the researchers engaged in reflective practices (i.e. peer debriefing and maintaining a reflexivity record) to note initial concepts investigating the production of cultural and social body positive norms and practices. Building on these initial reflections, the following process, (2) producing and categorising initial codes, involved coding the data set that presents the dominant discourse. Once the initial codes were developed, the analysis progressed by (3) searching for preliminary themes of complex social and visual practices shared on the platform. The analysis then moved to (4) reviewing preliminary themes by modifying each theme based on the reflective narratives and (5) defining specific themes. The final stage (6) involved writing up, reflecting, and refining the themes. All the data have been collated and cross-checked by the research team to ensure a less biased coding process. This study identified two major themes – structural challenges and barriers for plus-size travel and empowerment *via* normalising plus-size travel, leisure, and people – and five sub-themes that are elaborated upon hereafter in the findings and discussion section.

The final element of the analysis process is reflexivity, particularly recognising the role of positionality (i.e. identity and social position). Acknowledging these aspects is essential, as it

Table 2. Average of engagement features.

	Likes	Comments	Saves	Shares	Video length*
Average	38974	801	1630	667	43.7

*Length in seconds.

Table 3. Top five content creators & total TikTok engagement features.

Body positive content creator (BoPo.CC.)	Number of videos	Videos (V)**	Gender	Likes	Comments	Saves	Shares
BoPo.CC.1	82	V1, V7, V9, V11, V13, V16, V27, V31, V35, V39, V40, V42, V43, V45, V46, V48, V49, V50, V53, V54, V55, V56, V58, V64, V66, V71, V74, V81, V87, V90, V93, V97, V103, V105, V109, V112, V113, V114, V117, V122, V123, V127, V128, V130, V132, V133, V134, V137, V139, V140, V141, V144, V145, V150, V152, V153, V154, V155, V157, V158, V159, V162, V164, V165, V166, V168, V173, V174, V175, V176, V177, V178, V180, V181, V183, V186, V191, V192, V195, V196, V198, V199	Female	1,953,940	62,607	55,978	33,599
BoPo.CC.2	35	V2, V3, V4, V5, V6, V14, V15, V23, V30, V33, V44, V59, V68, V80, V83, V84, V86, V91, V99, V102, V104, V108, V111, V116, V121, V125, V138, V143, V151, V156, V169, V184, V188, V189, V193	Female	1,735,286	77,217	57,685	57,539
BoPo.CC.3	6	V18, V24, V28, V69, V94, V160	Female	237,967	1,019	7,321	399
BoPo.CC.4	4	V19, V41, V171, V179	Female	555,553	5,349	12,975	3,429
BoPo.CC.5	4	V22, V37, V57, V88	Female	248,601	14,859	7,143	3,867

**Video number.

allows us to reflect on how our biases and privileges influence the research process (England, 1994). As such, we aim to provide a sense of how our identities shaped the research and influenced our perspectives. The authors of this study reflect diverse social identities and backgrounds. As researchers examining plus-size travel and body positivity, we acknowledge our relationship with body image and representation. Collectively, we have varying experiences exploring marginalised areas of social inequities, particularly navigating intersections of gender, race, and other systems of oppression. The lead author of this research is a mixed-race woman with complex experiences of diet culture, exercise and body image. Personal experiences in parallel with the ongoing and complex relationship with body image informed the research team's approach, particularly in analysing the plus-size community's online representation and digital voices. Throughout the research process, we prioritised the digital narratives of plus-size individuals, ensuring that their lived experiences remained central to the analysis. Our extensive background in EDI informs our critical engagement and understanding of systemic inequities and their impact on lived experiences. Through this lens, we identify and acknowledge plus-size travellers' resistance, empowerment, and community-building.

Findings and discussion

Structural challenges and barriers for plus-size travel

Content creators routinely use short-form TikTok videos to share and distribute their plus-size travel and leisure experiences by not only highlighting barriers and challenges, but importantly

often providing travel suggestions and recommendations for plus-size travellers and tourism sector actors especially service providers.

Air travel challenges and constraints

Air transport facilitates the movement of people and contributes to the development of the tourism sector (Papatheodorou, 2021). As a core component of travel and leisure, the TikTok content generated by plus-size travellers places significant emphasis on the complexities and limitations of air travel as flying presents numerous travel constraints for plus-size travellers, including issues with seat sizes, seatbelts, legroom, tray tables, aircraft lavatories, priority boarding and customer of size policies. Whilst theme park and restaurant seat/table constraints and challenges are occasionally discussed, approximately 44% of TikTok's shared experiences detailed by creators consisted of flight-related encounters, particularly low-cost carriers' small economy seats. Speaking directly to the audience, V52 reflects on their experience flying as a plus-size woman with Alaska Airlines and their challenge with the seat's armrests, sharing (Figure 1):

"We were the first row behind first class. I didn't realise because there was no indication when we were booking that the seats, we were sitting in didn't have adjustable armrests. When we sat down in these seats, I was overwhelmingly surprised that I barely fit in the seats...I honestly felt like I couldn't breathe. My whole body was like [as] tense and I was making myself as small as I could, and it was really really physically uncomfortable...Out of disbelief and anger and frustration and sadness and discomfort and pain I just started crying..."



Figure 1. Flying in a plus-size body (V52).

Responses of acknowledgement and understanding are shared by two comments:

"...I also have been bruised by airplane seats": V52-C4

"Girl, I've been in that exact same seat, same airline, same flight...I have INTENSE anxiety on that flight": V52-C5

The discomfort experienced by reduced mobility in air travel are common occurrences and have been widely discussed in relation to disabled travellers especially those with visible disabilities (see Darcy, 2016). Evans et al. (2024) research on "fat" travellers offers further insights concerning mobilities in air travel. In their work, the concept of "misfitting" is used to describe the experiences of "fat" travellers as they navigate narrow aisles, get in and out of seats, and access aircraft facilities. The larger bodies' inability to comfortably occupy an airplane seat often causes physical and emotional discomfort (e.g. embarrassment), warranting body surveillance as a result of complaints or harassment from fellow passengers (Flaherty et al., 2019; Mozo et al., 2017). As such, concerns in navigating travel spaces that fail to accommodate larger bodies go beyond physical discomforts and pain, including social stigmatisation and exclusion (Evans et al., 2024).

Plus-size travellers generally require an additional seat. Yet, purchasing a second seat further excludes many potential plus-size travellers due to financial constraints as noted by V72-C1:

"This is awesome – but financially not feasible for everyone to cover the cost upfront. Wish airlines were just more inclusive & didn't cram people in".

However, some airlines have realised the implicit disadvantages faced by plus-size travellers and are starting to implement measures to assuage these. Showcasing structural constraints and limitations of standardised airline seats, V72 recalls an experience of flying with Southwest Airways highlighting the airline's plus-size friendly policy, which offers reimbursement for a second seat when the flight has not reached full capacity (See Figure 2). The positive and favourable emotions conveyed in the video resonated with the audience, evident by the top five comments expressing encouragement and the perception of viable solutions for plus-size travel, including the second seat refund policy. Engaging with the content and confirming the policy, V72-C2 shared:

"If the flight isn't full you can ask at check-in for that & they'll give you the extra seat free-really helpful".

These observations align with the findings of Du et al. (2020), which emphasise that social media engagements are influenced by the storytelling in short videos like TikTok, with content creators conveying positive effects to their review audiences. This captures customer interest and may prompt stakeholders (i.e. tourism companies and destination marketing organisations) to consider corporate social responsibility, better comprehend traveller needs, and make necessary adjustments. The transgressive body, due to industry services, facilities, structural inadequacies as well as standardisation of the idealised homogeneous norms of physicality, can be excluded from fully participating in travel and leisure activities, contributing to their marginalisation in society (Zavattaro, 2021). Airline "Customer of Size" policies address seat size issues and requirements for plus-size passengers, highlighting the structural inadequacies, inconsistencies, and sectors' lack of accessibility. The purchase of extra seats to accommodate physically larger bodies may be viewed as a discriminatory practice, one which adds additional financial strain and further excludes plus-size travellers from participating fully in the holiday experience (Andrews, 2011). More concrete, sustainable changes by travel intermediaries are required to increase the inclusivity for plus-size travellers (Yang, 2023).

Collectively, the air travel narratives of these plus-size travellers capture transportation related discomforts as well as emotional and physical well-being challenges while travelling (Mozo et al., 2017). Structural constraints such as the physical dimensions of the aisle, aircraft seat and limited legroom, according to Huff (2009) are not a reflection of space as a limited resource



Figure 2. Airline seat constraints (V72).

but rather a purchasable commodity. Beyond its commoditisation, air travel is deeply rooted in narrow ideas surrounding the body. Whilst aircraft design and structural amendments have been made since the early years of commercial travel, aesthetically, the slim and thin body in aviation organisations remains valued (Smith et al., 2021). Thus, the placement of value on weight and size fundamentally excludes non-conforming, transgressive bodies. Failure to adapt to societal changes and attitudes contributes to the continued lack of size inclusivity in travel and the general population's needs, more than 40% of which is considered as overweight and/or obese (WHO, 2021).

Plus-size travel hacks, reviews, and suggestions

Tourists proactively utilise review platforms (e.g. TripAdvisor) and SNSs (e.g. TikTok, YouTube and Instagram) to share and distribute their travel and leisure experiences. Constructed content routinely offered informative and personable travel hacks that could improve the plus-size travel experience. Content produced by the plus-size travel TikTok content creators included reviews and suggestions such as "outfit of the day" (OOTD) and "try on" videos, a cultural phenomenon in the context of fashion blogging and vlogging. Approximately 18 out of 200 TikTok videos deliberately offered a "plus-size fit check", focusing on travel apparel and confidently sharing fit support and suggestions. Small's (2022) work on women's physical appearance on holiday

found that clothing significantly influences the identity of the traveller, particularly for women who are routinely confronted with societal perceptions on how they should look on holiday (i.e. toned, slim, tanned and wearing the “right” clothes). Content creators routinely provided “big girl friendly” advice on outfits that are suitable for travel and leisure activities (e.g. air travel and beach visits), generally with a positive and confident tone. This is reflected in the playful and engaging showcasing of OOTD and “try on” content in which the plus-size body is displayed in various open poses and positions (Figures 3 and 4).

Importantly, OOTD and “try on” content that serves to enhance interactivity and trustworthiness often received encouraging and complementary responses from TikTok audience members as the following excerpts indicate:

“Finally someone with the same body type as me doing a try on! I LOVE them on you girly. So gorgeous 🤍” (V17-C4)

“You look so good mama... I appreciate these outfits”. (V62-C1)

“thank you for this video! im [sic] a size 22/24 & this inspired a couple cruise outfits for me that i [sic] normally wouldn't have even tried 🤍🤍” (V110-C2)

However, the content generally lacked depth, rarely identifying brands or product information due to the format of the platform which utilises “bite-size”, short-form content. As a result,



Figure 3. Mirror selfie (V62).

audiences engaged further with the constructed content, requesting content creators to share more comprehensive information, and provide practical advice:

"Over half of what I'm packing I think is cycling shorts to avoid chafing! Is the stick you use good?" (V70-C2)

"Did the package include the food? I'm now dying to get out there!" (V95-C4)

This phenomenon reflects the empowering impact of plus-size individuals showcasing fashionable and comfortable clothing options in online spaces, boosting confidence among plus-size consumers (Andrew & Fairclough, 2015). The digital sharing of plus-size travel hacks, reviews and suggestions emphasises the crucial role of authentic, personalised user-generated content in shaping consumer perceptions. Finally, the interactions between content creators and audience members reflect a symbiotic relationship, where influencers provide insights and audiences routinely engage with constructed content by requesting more personalised information to enhance or improve their travel and leisure experiences. Overall, significant systemic constraints rooted in facilities, equipment, and tourism and travel organisations' policies hinder the mobility of plus-size travellers. Tourism and its related industries (i.e. hospitality, leisure, and transport) play a crucial role in the embodiment of plus-size travel experience (Small, 2022). Sharing personal encounters and experiences increases the visibility of the plus-size body in tourism,



Figure 4. Plus-size cruise apparel (V110).

thereby challenging narrow body ideals surrounding the tourist body and the structural norms that inhibit the inclusion of alternative, non-conforming groups in travel.

Empowerment via normalising plus-size travel, leisure, and people

Social media has become a powerful force in marketing, particularly in the realm of tourism. Content creators play a fundamental role in shaping public opinion of the “fat” body and maintain some degree of power over its representation and potential liberation (Morris, 2019). Our analysis finds moments of resistance through empowerment, activism, body liberation and support by normalising the plus-size travel and leisure experience.

Visibility through mundane travel and leisure content

Social media is inundated with carefully curated and digitally manipulated content of aesthetically pleasing and “attractive” bodies, contributing to body-related concerns and shaping self-perceived attractiveness (Ozimek et al., 2023). Readily available curated content distributed online may alter the travel and leisure experience by dictating idealised norms of physicality that typically exclude the plus-size body. The majority of TikTok videos in this research routinely showcased various body sizes engaging in mundane, everyday travel and leisure, including physical activities (e.g. at the beach, swimming), shopping, sightseeing, eating out, utilising accommodation amenities, and TikTok “trends” such as POV (point of view) videos, dance challenges and sound bites. Rather than hiding the plus-size body, content creators routinely showcase their alternative bodies in tourism spaces and engage in tourist practices, further legitimising their right to embody diverse forms of travel and leisure. In doing so, plus-size individuals challenge dominant norms. For instance, reflecting on an international trip to Bali, V48 detailed:

“...went to a cooking class to help break the stigma around fat people enjoying food”.

Alongside the voiceover, V48’s visual content displays the mundane engagement, actively participating in the tourism and leisure experience (Figure 5).

V48’s use of the term “fat” to describe their tourist body type and size is significant, as this discourse historically carries negative, demeaning social connotations intended to shame and stigmatise non-conforming bodies (Limatius, 2018). These associations are deeply rooted in Western societal norms and cultural narratives, where “fat” bodies are marginalised. By showcasing non-conforming bodies, the content creator asserts visibility in tourism and leisure spaces, drawing attention to what the body can do. Further evidence of this can be found in V54’s display of the plus-size body, its shape and size accessing a hammock while on vacation (Figure 6):

“Finally realised that my fear was all in my head and that the hammocks were there for me to enjoy too 🍷❤️”

Zhang et al. (2014) explored the significance of documenting and sharing ordinary, routine life, emphasising the prolonged value and pleasure of mundanities. Mundane travel participation supports the view of the body as a functional and capable instrument (Orbach, 1987; Small, 2022). Visually documenting and distributing mundane travel and leisure experiences can be empowering as it normalises the places and spaces plus-size tourists occupy.

Mundane travel and leisure content of the plus-size body is a reinterpretation of normative travel and leisure activities that disrupt the dominant social discourse which typically features idealised homogenous norms of physicality, reinforcing beliefs concerning the “attractive” and “fit” tourist body. Notably, the mundanity of content and ubiquity of social media now allows plus-size travellers to confidently expose and display themselves in the same way as the “slim”



Figure 5. Cooking activity whilst travelling (V48).

homogenised, conventionally attractive tourist body (McAllister, 2009). Exposure through the mundane, as an act of personal resistance, offers visibility and helps reduce the stigmatisation and normalisation of underrepresented plus-sized bodies in travel and leisure (Johansson, 2021). Thus, instead of concealing the body, it is active and engaged in the experience. Alongside video footage of exploring various tourism destinations and engaging in leisure activities, V109 shares (Figure 7):

"I'm not staying home just because you're not comfortable seeing a fat person happy in their body. Maybe you should stay inside until you've realised why you put so much emphasis on the way someone looks. Plus size people CAN and WILL travel too".

Engaging in mundane travel and leisure as a plus-size traveller thus becomes an important space of display and site for appearance visibility (Small, 2022) and empowerment. Plus-size friendly content not only makes transgressive bodies visible in spaces where they have historically been excluded but also questions the very reasons for such exclusion (McCracken et al., 2024). In conjunction with the *#plussizetravel* hashtag, mundanity has become a vehicle for increasing visibility in which the exposed plus-size body becomes liberated further contributing to the positive conceptualisation of body image in travel and leisure (Cohen et al., 2019).



Figure 6. Engaging in mundane travel activities (V54).

Building supportive community networks

Plus-size travellers often avoid travel and leisure activities due to physical constraints and feelings of shame, embarrassment, and humiliation (Flaherty et al., 2019). Huff (2009) notes that stigmatising larger bodies is exploited to shame minorities to adapt and comply with dominant ideologies and sociocultural norms concerning body size, shape, and appearance. However, the instant communication of social media creates avenues by which messages surrounding body inclusivity and diversity are distributed to wider audiences, allowing the social movement to become more powerful and obtain further meaning (Dillette et al., 2019). The shift to body positive messaging is significant as mainstream media and travel advertisements rarely feature plus-size individuals. Additionally, previous social media research has primarily focused on the impact of “fitspiration” and “thinspiration” amongst young women’s bodies (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). The above-mentioned mundane yet motivational and transgressive content actively promoting self-confidence and well-being were positively consumed by the TikTok community, often showing gratitude and appreciation, further contributing to its supportive community network (i.e. followers). TikTok audiences often reacted positively by using empowering language (i.e. “queen” or “Goddess”) and emoticons (i.e. ❤️, 🤩 and 🙌).

As body inclusivity and diversity increase, the representation of alternative bodies on social media offers a sense of community and mutual understanding, promoting self-confidence and well-being. For Yang (2023), social media platforms create collective emotional attachment to

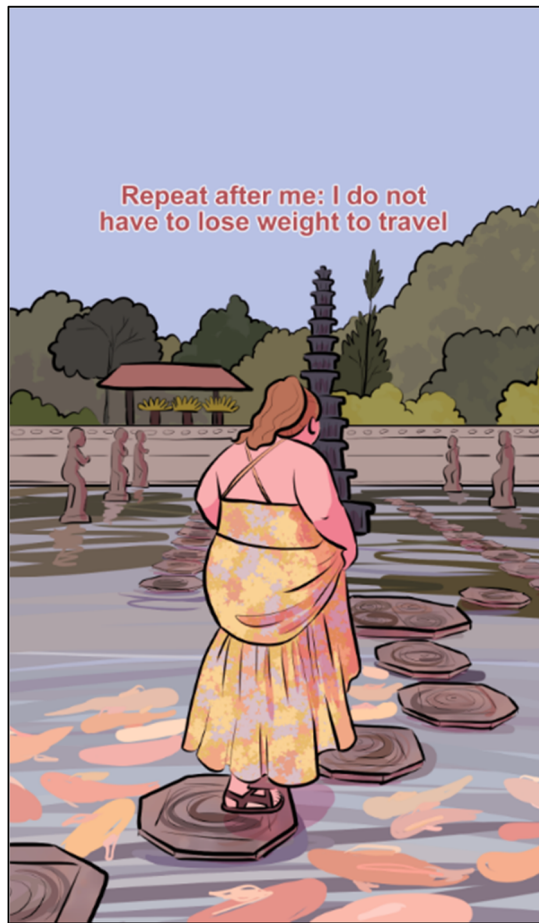


Figure 7. Plus-size travel body in mundane tourism settings (V109).

the community that empower plus-size travellers to develop confidence. Evidence of motivation, inspiration, and affirmation were featured in approximately 28 out of 200 TikTok videos.

In a compilation of visual content displaying the plus-size body engaged in a variety of tourism activities, V177 shares (Figure 8):

"...I spent too long telling myself I was too fat to travel and I don't want anyone else to feel how I did. Sure it may be hard at times but honestly, travelling has completely changed my life..."

The visibility of the plus-size body engaged in travel evoked positive responses and interactions:

"...We're going to Mexico this summer and you've inspired me to take lots of videos of myself on the beach 🤳" (V177-C3)

"I feel safe here 🤳🤳" (V177-C5)

Rather than concealing the plus-size body in an effort to avoid the gaze or feelings of shame behaviours noted in Poria et al. (2021) work, V177 routinely exposes the plus-size body. Yang (2023) argues that the visibility of the plus-size body in tourism offer an alternative narrative that empowers consumers advocating change and promoting social movements.



Figure 8. Exposing the plus-size body at the beach (V177).

In another example, reflecting on a recent theme park visit, V170, through a voiceover and alongside visual content, shared that (See Figure 9):

"We have spent most of our lives trying to make ourselves smaller, trying to take up less space and contort ourselves to fit the mould of someone that society deems acceptable. But we are not doing that anymore. We deserve to live our lives loudly. Our followers deserve to see plus-size people living happy, joyous, and full lives".

In response to V170, V170-C2 commented: "SAY IT LOUDER FOR THE PEOPLE IN THE BACK!!!! 🙌🙌🙌". Motivational and affirming content creates opportunities in which audience members engage in social exchange, often exposing intimate details and personal body-related travel and leisure experiences:

"I was handed a seatbelt extender (without asking for one) in front of my mother who likes to belittle plus size beauties and I still cry about it 😭". (V36-C5)

"I am travelling because you told me I deserve to travel too even tho [sic] I am fat. THANK YOU". (V90-C4)

Comments expressing gratitude, appreciation and intimate details are significant, and stand in contrast to Simon and Hurst (2021) work on the representation of size in holiday destination Instagram posts, which identified that women who viewed body positive content featuring larger women resulted in a restricted positive mood compared to neutral travel imagery. The findings of this research suggest that motivational language and the representation of



Figure 9. Content creators at a theme park (V170).

alternative, transgressive bodies in tourism spaces and leisure activities play a crucial role in reconstructing the tourist body. Community engagement with constructed content displaying powerful imagery of the plus-size body demonstrates an interconnectedness that is unique to the online plus-size community. Importantly, the content created and distributed as part of the plus-size movement resists heteronormative discourses, promotes body acceptance while empowering plus-size persons. These efforts advocate broader social and industry change, including stigma reduction, increased recognition, diverse digital representations of bodies in tourism discourses and inclusive practices. This social and personalised exchange between the content creator and the audience is mutually reinforcing as the comments associated with motivational body positive TikTok video content support activist communication.

Community criticism and detracting remarks

Notwithstanding the positive feedback and impacts as elucidated above, digital spaces continue to marginalise these communities. Drawing on Aitchison and Reeve's (1998) argument that spaces are not neutral but are monitored and regulated to reinforce social norms. This is evident in the analysed TikTok videos, which also engendered negative feedback discussed hereafter. TikTok comments are essential features of engagement that influence sharing behaviour and self-esteem (Cheng & Li, 2023). The study's findings show that body positive content and

creators are vulnerable to criticism and detracting remarks. Body positive travel and leisure content, particularly advice on air travel (e.g. seating, seat belt extender, customer of size policy, and petition), routinely received forms of criticism with approximately 26% out of 977 comments depicting prejudicial statements and confrontational observations towards the challenges of travelling whilst plus-size. For instance, in response to a comment made by an audience member concerning the customer of size policy, V125, addressing the audience directly shares (See Figure 10):

"I have people make assumptions all the time that I don't use two seats or that I don't purchase two seats, but the answer is 'yes', I do book two seats when I am flying for comfort. As a woman who wears a size 6X I feel that I need two seats to fit comfortably, and I do take up more than one seat".

Navigating assumptions and stereotypes related to the plus-size body is intertwined in V125's suggestions for travelling plus-size. Visually, V125 depicts the use of a nasal cannula oxygen tube. 4 out of 5 comments related to the content react negatively:

"Oxygen tank is crazy" (V125-C1)

"I think I know a solution" (V125-C2)



Figure 10. Experiences travelling plus-size (V125).

"this isn't flex 🏴‍☠️🏴‍☠️" (V125-C3)

"And I paid 60€because my baggage was 1kg more" (V125-C5)

Assumptions and prejudice towards plus-size travellers are often based on medical discourse that reinforces the distinction between thin/fat, healthy/unhealthy dichotomy (Colls & Evans, 2014). Consequently, the medical framing perpetuates weight bias and stigma, placing the blame on the individual and their inability to conform to physical social norms and expectations (Mozo et al., 2017; Poria et al., 2021). Van Amsterdam (2013, p. 10) points out that the stigmatisation of "fat bodies" seems warranted as "fatness" is viewed as a direct consequence of lifestyle choices. As such, non-conforming bodies are to blame. Despite TikTok content creators' efforts to reclaim the term "fat" through visibility and positive discourse, criticisms and detracting remarks undermine these efforts by shaming and stigmatising plus-size tourist bodies. Social barriers (e.g. negative comments) and inaccessible infrastructures further maintain homogenous norms of physicality, excluding individuals and groups from participating in and enjoying tourism and leisure experiences (Evans et al., 2024).

In another example, responding to plus-size air travel advice, V7-C1 comments: *"If you sit in the emergency exit, we're all dead"*. Criticism and detracting remarks often referenced "death" through emoticons (e.g. 🏴‍☠️) and employed sarcastic and abusive language (e.g. "wake up call", or "FedEx" and "UPS"). Yang (2023) argues that the experiences of plus-size travellers are often negative evoking feeling of shame and embarrassment. Consequently, references to "FedEx" and "UPS", delivery service providers (i.e. cargo), draw attention to physically larger bodies, weight, and size, further stigmatising and excluding plus-size travellers who do not reflect societal body ideals. Transgressive bodies are viewed as representation of failure and self-control offering limited social value (Orbach, 1987).

Alongside references to death and unhealthy lifestyle, confrontational and aggressive comments were also identified:

"Free 'two even three seats'?! K [sic] so they just raise the price of all seats?? Calling it discriminatory if they don't do this is INSANE" (V15-C1)

*"f*ck do you mean I'm plus size? not everyone is obese so stop normalising it" (V196-C4)*

Remarks towards content creators' physical appearance are forms of body surveillance, the preoccupation of observer-perceived attractiveness and social acceptance. The negative online abuse aimed at plus-size travel content and TikTok creators reflects the stigmatisation and exclusion discussed by Colls et al. (2021) and Evans et al. (2024). Importantly, it suggests that anyone who does not control their body size is entitled to less figurative and literal space (Farrell, 2011). Rather than acknowledge the structural constraints and corporate responsibility, criticism and detracting remarks by the community place the onus on the individual and their responsibility to meet societal norms and expectations, further contributing to the continued exclusion of alternative, transgressive bodies in travel and tourism.

Conclusion

This paper explored body positive travel and leisure experiences of TikTok content creators and examined interactions with constructed body positive content. Tourism plays a crucial role in establishing and maintaining a specific relationship with the idealised tourist body. In doing so, it contributes to transgressive bodies' continued marginalisation and invisibility. This study has evidenced how *#plussizetravel* provides opportunities to discuss online discourses surrounding bodies in tourism and the embodied experience. The findings of this research contribute to promoting a fairer environment for plus-size travellers, bringing a deeper understanding of

socially constructed inequalities that prevent the full inclusion of alternative or non-conforming groups. Our analysis of 200 TikTok videos and 977 comments highlighted the role that social media communities (i.e. content creators and audiences) play in (re)constructing and deconstructing conventional binary oppositions, such as the thin/fat dichotomy. Through social media activism, these communities negotiate and distribute their self-representation and individualised narratives. This process contributes to advancing the body positive movement and supports broader social inclusion and equality agendas.

The academic contribution of this paper is twofold. First, the current study extends previous research on body image in tourism and Yang's (2023) recent work. It does so by exploring how socially constructed inequalities continue to be perpetuated within the tourism sector. Additionally, this study identifies the related social justice issues that diminish the confidence of marginalised groups (i.e. plus-size people), thereby impacting their participation in tourism experiences. The findings of this research have identified the plus-size body as a prominent marker of social difference and a site of political struggle and differentiation in which its appearance plays a significant role (Bordo, 1993; Van Amsterdam, 2013). However, forms of activism and social movement on social media, as those identified across the constructed content, challenge perceived norms of physicality (i.e. thinness). Our findings reveal the difficulties that plus-size travellers routinely encounter in navigating socially constructed tourism and leisure spaces and societal attitudes. As a result, our research exposes how online discourse within the plus-size travel movement both challenge and create inequalities, suggesting the need for further research in this, and other, areas.

Furthermore, by utilising a feminist poststructuralist lens to critically analyse and unpack the construction of the individual "self" in relation to how the tourism sector constructs, positions and portrays these "selves" (i.e. plus-size travellers), this study contributes to the literature on the use of social media as a tool for social activism through an in-depth analysis of the situation of plus-size travellers that other traditional research does not. We ergo advance understanding of how "power, identity, meaning, and behaviour are constructed and negotiated" in travel and leisure spaces (Aitchison & Reeves, 1998, p. 51) by plus-size travellers who utilise social media (TikTok) to create their own narratives, disrupt existing norms and perceptions about them, thereby transforming and empowering themselves and boosting the confidence of their community to actively engage in tourism and leisure activities.

TikTok, as one of the multiple social media platforms, has provided a platform for establishing new and alternative norms in displaying and representing transgressive bodies that counter the traditional tourist ideal. By utilising various forms of visual and textual TikTok formats and trends (i.e. POV), content creators actively resisted dominant imagery of the "tanned" and "slim" homogenised conventionally attractive tourist body. Participating and routinely showcasing plus-size bodies in tourism and leisure challenges the benchmark for the embodied tourist experience (Jordan, 2007). Equally, attempts to normalise and help reduce the stigmatisation of plus-size bodies in travel and leisure may have a prolonged impact, enabling individuals to confidently resist oppression in all aspects of everyday life lives that typically exclude transgressive, non-conforming bodies.

Nevertheless, while the content shared on TikTok conveys messages of empowerment and self-acceptance, body positive content was subject to body surveillance through forms of criticism, confrontation, and harassment. The plus-size tourist body is identified as a societal threat that challenges the essentialist binary thinking and the hierarchical opposition between the valued dominant and devalued subservient subject (Johnston, 2001). As such, negative criticism and remarks demand a sense of conformity and compliance (Huff, 2009).

The paper's findings offer valuable practical implications for tourism marketers and policy-makers, particularly in developing socially responsible and inclusive products and services that cater to all, especially taking cognisance of the economic value of this segment. This also includes developing or adjusting size-inclusive regulations and policies to create a more inclusive

environment for plus-size travellers. Whilst societal attitudes towards inclusivity are constantly evolving, changes in the tourism sector remain gradual and considerably inconsistent, particularly concerning corporate social responsibility and structural procedures (e.g. customer of size policies). The findings indicate significant challenges concerning structural constraints that exclude plus-size travellers from participating fully in travel and leisure activities. Stakeholders (e.g. transport, accommodation, and leisure attractions) should consider accessibility standards (e.g. physical infrastructure) and service gaps to address the inclusive requirements of marginalised groups by developing inclusive design initiatives.

The omnipresence of social media content as a sharing space creates opportunities to learn collaboratively, share and document evidence, and spread activist messages (Dillette et al., 2019). Actively responding or engaging (i.e. sharing, commenting, and liking) with body positive content on TikTok sustains collaboration and community support. Importantly, content creators become cultural producers and online activists that shape the way in which societies are constructed. Thus, fostering collaborative efforts and partnerships with representative tourism stakeholders and social activist groups is essential for effective policy development and sustainable progress. This, in turn, builds a network of inclusivity and inherently enriches tourism stakeholders' understanding of how to meet the diverse needs of a broad consumer base and further disrupts societal norms concerning body size, shape, and appearance. Actionable industry changes to promote inclusivity in tourism should include developing inclusive media representations of diverse body types to move away from traditional and homogeneous structures of what it means to be "a tourist". Media content such as advertisements, webpages, and social media platforms should incorporate plus-size individuals engaged in diverse travel experiences. Offering broader representations of tourists allows stakeholders to shift narrow perceptions of desirable and valuable bodies.

The present study has some limitations. First, the sample selection of this study consisted predominantly of the experiences of women. This is unsurprising as women predominantly occupy social media spaces and are disproportionately pressured to maintain the homogenous norms of physicality concerning body size and weight. Though these narratives contribute to deconstructing the embodiment of travel and leisure experiences, achieving meaningful, sustainable change requires the inclusion of all subjectivities. As such, future research may consider adopting an intersectional approach by exploring the complex system of overlapping intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1991). Secondly, while the netnographic method through content aggregation via the *#plussizetravel* was effective, discovering relevant TikTok content is heavily influenced by its algorithmic curation. The inherently personalised nature of the platform posed some challenges regarding the visibility of certain content. Nonetheless, the content persists and disrupts heteronormative discourses surrounding the plus-size body, challenging traditional representations. Future research should extend the plus-size travel movement by exploring the lived body and how it is conceptualised and embodied in the tourism and leisure experience.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Whitney Estanita Vernes**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Weizheng Zhang**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Albert Nsom Kimbu**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Paul Hanna**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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