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Unveiling Fatness in Lisa Fipps's *Starfish* through the Lens of Fat Studies

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Abstract

This research article delves into the portrayal of fatness in Lisa Fipps' novel *Starfish* through the lens of fat studies, intertwined with the theoretical framework of the Cultural Capital Theory. *Starfish* offers a poignant narrative of Ellie, a fat protagonist navigating the complexities of body image, self-acceptance and societal expectations. By employing fat studies, this analysis scrutinises how fatness is constructed and deconstructed within the narrative, revealing the multifaceted dimensions of a fat identity. Furthermore, Cultural Capital Theory has been used as a critical tool to examine how societal norms and cultural ideologies shape perceptions of body weight and influence individual agency. Through a close examination of characters, plot development and societal interactions in *Starfish*, this article illuminates the intricate interplay between cultural capital and the live experiences of fat individuals. By synthesising fat studies and Cultural Capital Theory, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the representation of fatness in literature and the socio-cultural forces that underpin it. This article underscores the importance of diverse narratives in challenging hegemonic discourses surrounding body image and fostering inclusivity and acceptance in society.

Keywords: Body Acceptance, Body Positivity, Community Support, Trauma-informed Care

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of studying fatness among children within the realm of academia and societal discourse. The field of fat studies, which originated as a critical interdisciplinary inquiry into the social, cultural and political dimensions of fatness, has increasingly turned its focus towards understanding the experiences of children living in larger bodies. This shift reflects a broader acknowledgement of the unique challenges and complexities faced by children navigating societal attitudes, norms and policies surrounding body weight and size. The intersection of fat studies and literature offers a rich and complex terrain for exploration, providing insight into how societal attitudes, norms and stereotypes surrounding body weight and size are reflected, challenged and perpetuated through literary works. Fat studies, as an interdisciplinary field, interrogates the cultural, social and political dimensions of fatness, seeking to dismantle hegemonic discourses and promote inclusivity, equity and social justice. When applied to literature, fat studies offer a critical lens through which to analyse representations of fatness, examining how authors depict and negotiate the experiences of fat characters within fictional narratives.

Literature has long served as a mirror to society, reflecting its values, beliefs and prejudices. Depictions of fatness in literature are often fraught with stereotypes, stigma and oversimplified narratives, perpetuating harmful tropes and marginalising fat individuals. However, literature also has the power to subvert dominant paradigms, challenge societal norms and offer nuanced portrayals of fatness that defy simplistic categorisations. The exploration of fatness among children is particularly crucial due to the profound impact it can have on their physical and mental well-being, as well as their social and emotional development. Children living in larger bodies often encounter stigma, discrimination, and bullying, which can adversely affect their self-esteem, body image and overall quality of life. Moreover, societal perceptions

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of childhood obesity as a personal failure or moral issue can further exacerbate these challenges, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and barriers to access to healthcare and support services. Against this backdrop, fat studies offer a valuable framework for examining the multifaceted dimensions of fatness among children, encompassing not only biological factors but also sociocultural, economic and environmental influences. By interrogating dominant discourses surrounding childhood obesity and challenging prevailing norms of body size and shape, fat studies seek to amplify the voices and experiences of children living in larger bodies, fostering inclusivity, equity and social justice. Through an analysis of *Starfish* by Lisa Fipps's fat characters, narratives and themes, this article will discuss the myriad ways in which literature engages with issues of fatness, including body image, self-acceptance, identity and belonging. By focusing on the voices and experiences of fat individuals in literature, it hopes to challenge prevailing stereotypes, foster empathy and understanding and promote greater visibility and representation of fat identities.

2. Aim of the Study

This study aims to illuminate the transformative potential of *Starfish* by Lisa Fipps, offering children a beacon of hope and empowerment in navigating the complexities of bullying, body image and self-acceptance through the protagonist Ellie's journey.

3. Objective of the Study

- Critically examine the portrayal of fatness in *Starfish* by Lisa Fipps.
- Explore the intersection of fat studies and cultural capital theory.
- Analyse themes of body image, self-acceptance and social dynamics in the novel.
- Illuminate how cultural attitudes towards fatness shape individual experiences.
- Contribute to understanding fatness representation in literature and advocate for inclusivity and social justice.

4. Literature Review

Fatness representation in literature has garnered increasing scholarly attention, with researchers exploring how fictional narratives both reflect and shape societal attitudes towards body weight and size. Within this context, Lisa Fipps' novel *Starfish* has emerged as a significant text for examining the portrayal of fatness and its intersection with broader cultural discourses. A review of existing literature reveals several key themes and theoretical frameworks that contribute to the analysis of fatness in *Starfish*. One prominent theme in literature is the depiction of fat characters and their experiences of body image and self-acceptance. Scholars such as Amy Farrell[1], *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* have examined how fictional representations of fatness can challenge dominant narratives of thinness as the ideal and highlight the importance of body positivity and acceptance. Through analysing characters like Ellie in *Starfish*, these scholars emphasise the significance of diverse and nuanced portrayals of fat individuals in literature. Furthermore, researchers have explored the intersectionality of fatness with other social identities, such as gender, race and class. For example, author Sabrina Strings[2], *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* discusses how historical constructions of fatness have been intertwined with colonialism and racialisation, illuminating how systems of power and oppression intersect with body size. Theoretical frameworks such as fat studies and cultural capital theory have also been instrumental in analysing the representation of fatness in literature. Fat study works, including Kathleen LeBesco's *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*[3] and Esther Rothblumand Sondra Solovay's *The Fat Studies Reader*[4] have advocated a critical examination of fatness as a social and cultural phenomenon, challenging dominant discourses that pathologise fat bodies. As articulated by Pierre Bourdieu[5], cultural capital theory offers insights into how cultural values and beliefs surrounding body image are constructed and maintained within society, shedding light on the power dynamics at play in representations of fatness in literature. While existing literature provides valuable insights into the representation of fatness in literature, gaps remain in

our understanding of how these representations impact readers and contribute to broader social attitudes towards body size and shape. Future research could further explore the reception of fat characters and narratives and the efficacy of literature in promoting fat acceptance and challenging stigma. By building upon existing literature on this subject, researchers can continue to advance their understanding of the representation of fatness in literature and its implications for social change.

In the realm of sociological theory, few concepts have garnered as much attention and scholarly debate as cultural capital. Coined by the influential French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital serves as a cornerstone in understanding the dynamics of social stratification, cultural reproduction and symbolic power. At its core, cultural capital encapsulates the repertoire of knowledge, skills, habits and cultural resources that individuals inherit or acquire through socialisation processes within their respective cultural contexts.

Bourdieu delineates cultural capital into three distinct forms, embodied, objectified and institutionalised. Embodied cultural capital pertains to the internalised dispositions, mannerisms and tastes that individuals acquire through upbringing and socialisation. Objectified cultural capital comprises material artefacts such as books, artworks and other cultural commodities that confer symbolic value and status. Lastly, institutionalised cultural capital refers to the recognition and validation bestowed upon individuals based on their cultural credentials, such as educational qualifications, institutional affiliations and cultural pedigree. Central to Bourdieu's conceptualisation is the notion of habitus, which denotes the internalised set of dispositions, preferences and worldviews shaped by an individual's cultural milieu. Habitus mediates the relationship between cultural capital and social stratification, influencing individuals' aspirations, choices and life trajectories. Moreover, Bourdieu contends that cultural capital operates as a form of symbolic power, enabling dominant social groups to legitimise their cultural norms and perpetuate social hierarchies. As the transition to exploring the major themes connecting cultural capital theory with the oppression of children based on body shape, it is crucial to delve into the intersectionality of these concepts.

5. Critical Study on Fat Studies in *Starfish*

5.1 Body Image and Self-acceptance

Children's experiences with body image are profoundly influenced by cultural norms, societal expectations and the distribution of cultural capital within their communities. Cultural capital not only shapes children's perceptions of their bodies but also dictates the resources and opportunities available to them based on their conformity to dominant standards of beauty and bodily norms. In Lisa Fipps's *Starfish*[6], the protagonist Ellie confronts pervasive societal norms regarding body image and weight. Ellie's journey towards self-acceptance mirrors the struggles of many individuals living in larger bodies, as she grapples with internalised shame and external pressures to conform to unrealistic beauty standards. Through the lens of fat studies, it examines how Ellie's experiences are shaped by cultural attitudes towards fatness and how these attitudes intersect with Cultural Capital Theory. Cultural Capital Theory states that individuals possess certain cultural competencies and resources that confer social status and privilege. In the context of body image, Cultural Capital Theory suggests that societal ideals of thinness and physical fitness are privileged forms of cultural capital, while fatness is devalued and stigmatised. Ellie's journey to reclaim her sense of self-worth and reject harmful stereotypes about fatness illustrates how individuals negotiate their cultural capital within a society that values thinness.

5.2 Social Interactions and Peer Dynamics

The themes of social interactions and peer dynamics are central to protagonist Ellie's journey of self-acceptance and resilience. Ellie, a 12-year-old girl facing relentless bullying due to her weight, grapples with societal expectations and internalised shame leading her to adhere to self-imposed "Fat Girl Rules" to avoid drawing attention. The novel vividly depicts Ellie's experiences of ostracising both at school and at home, where her mother's relentless criticism exacerbates her struggles. However, through newfound friendships and therapy, Ellie learns to stand up for herself without perpetuating

the cycle of bullying. Throughout the novel, Ellie grapples with bullying and social ostracisation due to her weight. Fat studies allow us to analyse how these experiences are shaped by cultural attitudes towards fatness and how they intersect with Cultural Capital Theory. In many societies, fatness is associated with laziness, lack of self-control and moral inferiority, leading to discrimination and marginalisation of fat individuals. Ellie's experiences with bullying highlight how cultural capital is wielded as a tool of social exclusion, reinforcing hierarchies of power and privilege based on body size.

5.3 Family Dynamics and Support Systems

Another central aspect of *Starfish* is Ellie's relationship with her mother, who perpetuates harmful diet culture ideologies and reinforces negative stereotypes about fatness. Fat studies allow us to examine how familial dynamics contribute to the construction of body image and self-esteem, while Cultural Capital Theory sheds light on how cultural values and beliefs are transmitted within families. Ellie's mother's emphasis on appearance and dieting reflects a cultural capital that prioritises thinness and physical appearance as markers of success and social acceptance[7].

Ellie's mother, driven by societal ideals of thinness and physical appearance as markers of success, subscribes to a cultural capital system that prioritizes conformity to narrow beauty standards. Her relentless criticism of Ellie's weight reflects a broader cultural narrative that equates thinness with value and moral superiority, perpetuating harmful stereotypes about fatness and reinforcing hierarchies of power and privilege based on body size. As a result, Ellie internalises these messages and struggles to assert her worth in the face of her mother's relentless scrutiny. Moreover, Ellie's lack of familial support exacerbates her feelings of isolation and inadequacy, highlighting the profound impact of family dynamics on children's self-esteem and well-being. In the absence of nurturing and affirming relationships within her family, Ellie is forced to seek support and validation elsewhere, ultimately finding solace in her friendship with Catalina and her therapy sessions with Dr. Wood. This underscores the importance of alternative support systems in mitigating the negative effects of familial discord and fostering resilience in children facing adversity.

In reality, the dynamics depicted in *Starfish* resonate with the experiences of many children grappling with familial expectations and societal pressures. Cultural capital systems shape family dynamics by influencing attitudes towards body image and self-worth, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and contributing to the marginalisation of fat individuals. However, the novel also offers hope by illustrating the transformative power of alternative support systems, such as friendships and therapy, in helping children navigate the complexities of familial discord and cultivate a sense of self-acceptance and resilience. Through Ellie's journey, readers are reminded of the importance of challenging societal norms and fostering environments of empathy, acceptance and unconditional love within families, ultimately promoting the well-being and dignity of all children, regardless of their body size or shape.

In the final critical study of the novel, Ellie's acceptance of life resonates powerfully with the cultural capital theory, particularly in inspiring real fat children. Ever since Ellie donned a whale swimsuit and made a bold statement at her fifth birthday party, she had been subjected to relentless bullying about her weight. Yet, rather than succumbing to societal pressures, Ellie navigates her world by adhering to what she terms the "Fat Girl Rules", guidelines aimed at minimising attention and avoiding criticism. However, her safe haven lies within her swimming pool, where she transcends the constraints of her weight and feels liberated. Here, she can stretch out like a starfish, unencumbered by societal judgment. Moreover, Ellie finds solace and support in her father, therapist and her new neighbour, Catalina, who embraces and celebrates her for who she truly is. With this network of allies bolstering her, Ellie embarks on a journey towards self-acceptance, poised to defy the Fat Girl Rules and embrace her uniqueness unabashedly. Through Ellie's narrative, the novel champions the notion that cultural capital extends beyond societal norms advocating the empowerment and celebration of diverse identities thus serving as a beacon of inspiration for real-life individuals grappling with similar challenges.

5.4 The Scope of this Study Encompasses the below

- Examination of the portrayal of mental health themes such as anxiety and depression and its relevance to psychology and counselling.

- Analysis of the treatment of friendship dynamics and its implications for social development and peer relationships.
- Examination of the representation of fatness concerning health, well-being and body positivity movements, contributing to discussions in Fat Studies.
- Within the realm of public health and wellness.
- Consideration of the novel's portrayal of fatness within the context of family dynamics and societal attitudes, offering insights into fat studies in sociology and family studies.

The study utilises textual analysis and theoretical frameworks to achieve its objectives, focusing on a close reading of *Starfish* and drawing connections to broader concepts within fat studies and Cultural Capital Theory. While the primary focus is on the novel itself, the study also incorporates relevant secondary sources and critical literature to provide context and support for its arguments.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of Lisa Fipps's novel *Starfish* through the perspectives of fat studies and Cultural Capital Theory offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of real children navigating societal attitudes towards body weight and size. By examining the protagonist Ellie's journey towards self-acceptance and the challenges she faces within her social environment, she gains a deeper understanding of the complexities of growing up in a culture that often stigmatises fatness. The framework of Cultural Capital Theory shows how societal norms and cultural ideologies shape perceptions of body image and influence individual agency.

Ellie's experiences with bullying and social ostracisation reflect how cultural capital is wielded as a tool of social exclusion, reinforcing hierarchies of power and privilege based on body size. Moreover, her interactions with family members and peers underscore how familial dynamics and peer relationships contribute to the construction of body image and self-esteem. fat studies provides a critical lens through which to examine Ellie's experiences and challenges dominant narratives surrounding fatness. Interrogating societal ideals of thinness and physical fitness can disrupt harmful stereotypes and promote body positivity and acceptance. Ellie's journey serves as a reminder of the importance of fostering inclusivity, equity, and social justice for children of all body sizes and underscores the need for greater representation and visibility of fat individuals in literature and media. Applying the insights gained from this analysis to real children recognises the profound impact that societal attitudes towards body weight and size can have on their physical and mental well-being. It is essential to create environments that promote body positivity, acceptance and inclusivity, both within educational settings and broader societal contexts. By challenging stigma, advocating for diverse representation and fostering empathy and understanding, this article can create a more compassionate and supportive world for all children, regardless of their body size or shape. Through continued research, advocacy and education, society can work towards dismantling harmful stereotypes and promoting a culture of acceptance and celebration of bodily diversity.

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