

“They are fat and want special treatment for being fat”: Backlash to and lay theories of fat activism

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Abstract

Fat activism is a movement that seeks to acknowledge and eliminate the oppression of fat people. The movement and those who participate face significant backlash, yet fat activism is understudied. We sought to understand lay theories about fat activism; that is, how everyday people think about the goals and motivations of fat activism, and people who engage in fat activism, to understand how these perceptions shape support for and backlash toward fat activism. In Study 1 ($N = 294$), we qualitatively elucidated lay theories of fat activism in a US nationally representative sample. We identified lay theories that both represented neutral or positive perceptions of fat activism (e.g., oriented around increasing rights for fat people) and lay theories that captured more hostile perceptions of and backlash toward fat activism (e.g., enabling unhealthiness). Building on Study 1 findings indicating fat women are characterized as most likely to engage in fat activism, Study 2 ($N = 349$) manipulated gender (woman, man) and body size (fat, thin) of hypothetical fat activists. Relative to thin people, fat people engaging in fat activism were perceived to have more hostile goals and more experiential and neg-

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ative motives, and their fat activism was perceived more negatively overall.

KEYWORDS

anti-fat attitudes, body size, consensual qualitative research, weight bias

Public Significance Statement

The fat activist movement faces significant backlash for labelling and challenging the oppression of fat people. Our research examined public perceptions of fat activism, revealing both supportive and hostile perceptions. Activist body size also impacted perceptions, which were more negative when activists were fat (vs. thin). Our findings provide insight into backlash against fat activism and suggest intervening on lay beliefs as a mechanism to increase support for fat activism.

“Weight loss isn’t genocide: Fat Activism Risks Lives”-The Critic Magazine

“It’s not fine to be fat. Celebrating obesity is irresponsible”-The Guardian

INTRODUCTION

Fat people experience pervasive and severe oppression (e.g., Rubino et al., 2020), and, while other forms of prejudice have decreased over time, bias against fat people is increasing (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019, 2021). As with other forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism), activists have enacted social justice efforts to challenge the oppression of fat people. Fat activists fight against anti-fat bias, also called sizeism, with the intent of challenging social attitudes and structures which oppress fat bodies (e.g., Cooper, 2016; Davidson & Gruver, 2022; LeBesco, 2004; Striley & Hutchens, 2020); broadly, fat activism refers to a loose collaborative of efforts to acknowledge the role of fatness as a signifying identity and axis of marginalization with the goal of eliminating the oppression of fat people (see Acar & Ulug, 2022; Cooper, 2016; Edison & Notkin, 2023; Simic, 2015; Striley & Hutchens, 2020). Relative to other social movements that coalesce to create social change around social-identity-based inequities (e.g., anti-racist activism, feminist activism; see Park et al., 2022), fat activism is understudied (see Acar & Ulug, 2022; Simic, 2015; Striley & Hutchens, 2020). This lack of attention is often understood as one symptom of the ongoing marginalization of fat identities in social justice research and praxis (e.g., Dufur & Fox Okeke, 2024; Nash & Warin, 2017; Oswald et al., 2022).

Fat activism is a site of severe backlash (Bograd et al., 2022; Davidson & Gruver, 2022; Nimmo, 2023). The opening quotations of this manuscript—headlines of articles discussing fat activism—

highlight this pervasive backlash, which is similarly salient on social media (Bograd et al., 2022; Nimmo, 2023). Though this backlash is a significant barrier to fat activism's goals of reducing fat oppression (and a symptom itself of this oppression), little work examines the specific mechanisms of this backlash. Integrating the lay theories framework, the current work aims to understand the context of this backlash by examining lay theories about fat activism—that is, how everyday people think about the goals and motivations of fat activism, as well as who participates in this form of activism—as an inroads to promoting the liberation of fat people. Using mixed methods, the present two studies investigate lay theories about fat activism, both qualitatively using a US nationally representative sample and quantitatively as a function of the identity of the activist engaging in fat activism.

Lay theories of activism

Everyday people construct cognitive explanations to account for a wide range of social phenomena; these explanations are sometimes referred to as lay theories (see Anderson & Lindsay, 1998; Heider, 1958). In social psychology, lay theories are understood as being distinct from formal scientific explanations for a phenomenon, with significant differences between the two often noted (Anderson & Lindsey, 1998; Furnham 1988). The lay theories framework has examined how everyday people think about a wide range of social issues, such as prejudice (e.g., Chaney & Forbes, 2023; Pham, Chaney, Lin, 2024; Pham, Chaney, Ramírez-Esparza, 2024), collective power (e.g., Twali et al., 2023) and intergroup relations (e.g., Ulug & Cohrs, 2019). This framework responds to a need to integrate the experiential knowledge of community members into psychological theories in order to initiate social change (e.g., Cornish et al., 2023; Ulug et al., 2024).

Empirically, this literature unveils the psychological underpinnings of certain aspects of social, affective, and health experiences among both privileged and marginalized people (e.g., Chaney et al., 2024; Pham, Chaney, Lin, 2024; Pham, Chaney, Ramírez-Esparza, 2024). For instance, people who endorse a lay theory of generalized prejudice (i.e., belief that those who are prejudiced to one marginalized groups are also prejudiced to others) recognize more similar discrimination between marginalized groups and personally engage in greater solidarity with other marginalized groups (e.g., Chaney & Forbes, 2023; Pham, Chaney, Lin, 2024; Pham, Chaney, Ramírez-Esparza, 2024). As such, the lay theories framework helps to not only shed light on, but potentially to shift, people's cognition and behaviors to promote social equity.

Research has begun to examine other forms of activism, such as anti-racism activism, using lay theories as a key framework for predicting behavior (Pham, Chaney, Lin, 2024; Pham, Chaney, Ramírez-Esparza, 2024). In a qualitative paradigm, Pham and colleagues identified novel lay theories about the goals of (e.g., tackling systemic racism, raising awareness of racism) and motivations for anti-racism activism (e.g., understanding racial disparities, caring for close others), which they argue can be harnessed to boost engagement. While there was some overlap between goals and motivations in lay theories, the goal-motivation distinction was made to capture potential differences, as the psychology of goal pursuits has conceptualized goals and motivations distinctly (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Specifically, while goals refer to the “what,” or the target outcomes of activism actions, motivations refer to the “why,” or the motives or reasons of engaging in such actions (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2012; see Pham, Chaney, Lin, 2024; Pham, Chaney, Ramírez-Esparza, 2024).

Indeed, understanding how everyday people conceptualize activist movements and social justice efforts is a key step toward understanding and prompting engagement in those movements (Pham, Chaney, Lin, 2024; Pham, Chaney, Ramírez-Esparza, 2024). We argue that this lay

theory framework may also be useful for understanding backlash toward activist movements, including fat activism. As such, building on Pham, Chaney and Ramírez-Esparza (2024)'s initial work on anti-racism activism, we examine lay theories about the goals (the “what”) and motivations (the “why”) of fat activism, as well as lay theories about who participates in fat activism, to better understand both support for and backlash against fat activism. Critically, we contend that centering a lay theory perspective in our understanding of activism is necessary, as activism is generated by and for everyday people. Notably, Pham, Chaney, and Ramírez-Esparza (2024) framed lay theories of anti-racism activism as distinct from scientific explanations about anti-racism activism (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2008) and indeed found differences between lay and scientific theories; these lay theories were investigated among a sample of participants who ranged in their personal participation in that type of activism in question (Pham, Chaney, Lin, 2024; Pham, Chaney, Ramírez-Esparza, 2024). As such, we conceptualize lay theories of fat activism in this research as explanations held by everyday people (as opposed to those derived primarily from scientific evidence) about fat activism.

Characteristics of fat activism and fat activists

Fat activism in the United States and Europe generally emerged in tandem with feminist body politic advocacy in the late 1960s (Cooper, 2016; Simic, 2015). Diverse components of fat activism included social activities for fat people as well as more radical liberation fronts, such as the Fat Underground (Edison & Notkin, 2023; Simic, 2015). Contemporary fat activism remains multifaceted, with different corners of the online fat acceptance movement serving differing purposes (see Striley & Hutchens, 2020). Nonetheless, Davidson & Gruver (2022) articulate five shared philosophical goals of fat activist movements: (1) critiquing sociomedical claims about fatness and its relationship to health; (2) challenging the sociopolitical and material conditions of fat people; (3) refuting claims that link fatness to immorality; (4) critiquing epistemic practices which erase or obscure fat knowledges; and (5) countering thinness culture and rejecting appearance/aesthetics as a basis for the value of human lives.

Within the fat activist community, motivations and goals for engaging in the movement vary. For example, Striley & Hutchens (2020) found that, among a sample of (mostly North American and European White women) fat activists, participants reported joining fat activist communities for both personal and systemic reasons. Personal reasons included finding community support, growing self-love, and self-empowerment, while systemic reasons included fighting for social justice and equal rights for fat people. Narratives of fat activism histories in Europe, North America, and New Zealand similarly highlight both personal and systemic motivations for engaging with these movements, and delineating movement goals at both the personal (e.g., encouraging body acceptance) and systemic level (e.g., gaining rights for fat people; see Acar & Ulug, 2022; Edison & Notkin, 2023).

Despite varying motivations, there are consistent identities associated with engagement in fat activism. Fat activists tend to be women and particularly feminist women who identify as fat (Lupton, 2013; Simic, 2015). Identifying with fatness is a fraught process (e.g., Pausé, 2012), and many people who have larger bodies may not identify with fatness as a social identity per se (e.g., Oswald et al., 2022). Thus, people who engage with fat activism represent a faction of fat people who hold relatively politicized identities. Yet, it is unknown whether one's politicized identity drives engagement with activist movements or emerges from engagement with activist movements (see Acar & Ulug, 2022). Systems of privilege are also saliently at play in fat activist movements. Vocal thin

allies to fat activism appear rare (see Przybylo & Fahs, 2021), and tensions surrounding thin people's role in fat activism are salient (Nash & Warin, 2017). Further, despite that fat oppression is particularly virulent for people who exist at multiple margins (e.g., Black, Indigenous, and people of color who are fat; see Harrison, 2021; Strings, 2019), prominent voices in fat activist movements often highlight North American and European White, middle-class experiences (see Simic, 2015).

Contemporary fat activism is largely rooted in online spaces, where fat people can bring attention to and connect over shared experiences of discrimination (see Acar & Ulug, 2022; Davidson & Gruver, 2022). This online context is at times protective, allowing fat activists to shield their identity and avoid backlash—something felt necessary by many prominent members of the community (see Davidson & Gruver, 2022; Gordon, 2020). Indeed, social movements—regardless of their varying radical nature and marginalized groups of focus (e.g., women, Black people, and queer people) they serve—have faced significant backlash both historically and contemporarily (e.g., Briscoe, 2020; Warner, 2002). As counternarratives to existing structures of power, activist movements are often challenged by those who hold power and are thus motivated to defend existing power-granting structures (Jost et al., 2017). As a result, it is not surprising that fat activism is often met with backlash.

Fat activism and backlash

Prejudice toward fat people is embedded in numerous social structures, and particularly salient in aesthetic, sociomedical, and moral discourses (e.g., Davidson & Gruver, 2022; Oswald, 2024; Oswald et al., 2024; Pham, Chaney, Ramírez-Esparza, 2024). Anti-fatness is so salient and pervasive that even many fat people internalize and uphold the notion that there should be power differentials between thin and fat people, with fat people being less deserving of power ([redacted for review]). As a result, fat activism faces substantial backlash not only from those who explicitly support or engage with systems of power that oppress fatness (e.g., the medical industry) but also from everyday people who passively or actively endorse messaging that derides fatness (e.g., Bograd et al., 2022).

Though this backlash is salient in online articles attacking fat activism (such as those whose titles comprise the opening quote of this paper; Cernick, 2018; Pluckrose, 2019) and on social media, little work explicitly highlights or examines this backlash. In one study of social media sentiment, Bograd et al. (2022) found that public sentiment on Twitter toward fat acceptance was overall saliently negative. The authors suggest that this backlash likely limits engagement with fat activism even among those who would be likely to benefit from the movement. Despite this initial evidence of backlash toward fat activism, understandings of backlash toward fat activism are limited without greater contextual knowledge. Specifically, we posit that lay theories about activist movements can help us understand responses to them in both directions—people may be more likely to engage in a movement when they align with certain characteristics they perceive that movement as embodying, and more likely to respond negatively to—or enact backlash toward—a movement when they disagree with certain (perceived) characteristics.

Integrating lay theories, fat activism, and backlash

Though prior research provides insight into the characteristics of fat activism and fat activists, less is known about how everyday people perceive fat activism. That is, it is not clear whether lay theo-

ries about fat activism reflect the actual goals and motivations of those who engage in fat activism, and whether mismatches in the reality of and perceptions of fat activism might contribute to backlash against fat activism. For example, while the goals of fat activism include striving toward body acceptance and equal rights for fat people (e.g., Acar & Ulug, 2022; Edison & Notkin, 2023), we also anticipated that lay theories of fat activism would include perceived goals that are not embodied in fat activism and that mischaracterize the movement in negative ways. For example, a prominent online claim about fat activism is that fat people engage in fat activism in an effort to “glorify obesity” (see Rose Spratt, 2023); we anticipated that lay theories would capture backlash toward fat activism in this vein.

We also anticipated that lay theories of fat activism might differ depending on who engages in fat activism. Existing work reveals varying perceptions of activists holding different identities. Particularly, activists or advocates with advantaged identities (e.g., White racial justice advocates) are generally perceived positively (e.g., as altruistic; Alt et al., 2019; Burrows et al., 2023), albeit often with skepticism from marginalized group members (e.g., Burrows et al., 2023; Iyer & Achia, 2021; Park et al., 2022). Conversely, there are many negative stereotypes of activists with marginalized identities, including pejorative labels of “social justice warriors,” and assumptions of aggressive emotionality, performativity, and liberal extremism (e.g., Bashir et al., 2013; Burrows et al., 2023; Phelan, 2019). Given the lack of literature on fat activism and novel to the literature on lay theories about activism, we thus also sought to understand lay theories about who engages in fat activism and perceptions of activists who do or do not meet such expectations.

THE CURRENT STUDIES

While prior research has illustrated the prevalence of fatphobia and backlash to fat activism (e.g., Bograd et al., 2022), less is known about how such backlash may manifest. Integrating a lay theories framework (e.g., Chaney et al., 2021; Heider, 1958), the current studies examine lay theories about fat activism. Specifically, drawing upon research on lay theories of anti-racism activism (Pham, Chaney, Lin, 2024; Pham, Chaney, Ramírez-Esparza, 2024), we collected qualitative data from a US nationally representative sample to elucidate lay theories about the goals of fat activism, the motivations of fat activists, and the characteristics of fat activists (i.e., who is perceived as likely to engage in fat activism). In Study 2, based on reported characteristics in Study 1, we experimentally manipulated identity characteristics (gender, body size) of fat activists to examine how these characteristics influence perceived motives and goals of fat activism. In doing so, we begin to elucidate how lay theories of fat activism shape backlash toward this social justice movement. Both studies were IRB-approved. Data are openly available¹: https://osf.io/6vfdm/?view_only=20305d5b32384b8c95c4d12d15dcad9b

STUDY 1

In Study 1, we collected qualitative data to elucidate lay theories of fat activism in a US nationally representative sample. Following previous work on lay theories (e.g., Furnham, 1988; Pham, Chaney, Lin, 2024; Pham, Chaney, Ramírez-Esparza, 2024), we conceptualize lay theories of fat

¹ Qualitative data are fully anonymized and presented apart from any demographic or quantitative information to protect participant confidentiality.

activism as different from scientific explanations about fat activism; accordingly, we sought to recruit everyday people in a nationally representative sample who may engage in fat activism to varying degrees.

As a secondary goal, building on prior research on activism, and fat activism specifically, which suggests that factors such as political conservatism and activist orientation may influence engagement in or perceptions of activism (e.g., Oswald et al., 2024; Park et al., 2022), we also sought to understand how these factors are quantitatively associated with variability in lay theories of fat activism. Specifically, Oswald et al. (2024) and Park et al. (2022) alike found that samples of self-identified activists tend to endorse less conservative political ideology, suggesting that political conservatism might be associated with more negative perceptions of fat activism. We anticipated that political conservatism and greater assumptions of fat people's responsibility for their weight would be associated with less positive perceptions of fat activism and fat activists. Conversely, we anticipated that support for size acceptance, activist orientation, personal engagement in fat activism, fat identity, and body mass index (BMI) would be associated with more positive perceptions of fat activism and fat activists.

Method

Participants

We recruited a nationally representative sample (based on age, sex, and ethnicity) of 300 US-based participants, the minimum sample size required for a representative sample via Prolific. This is a significantly larger sample size than recent work using the same qualitative methodology (e.g., Oswald et al., 2023). We removed two participants whom we suspected of using generative AI in their responses, and four participants who provided nonsensical height and weight data.

The final sample consisted of 294 participants ($M_{age} = 46.16$, $SD = 15.94$). Participants were on average politically moderate ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.86$) on a scale ranging from 1 (*very liberal*) to 7 (*very conservative*). Participants identified as women (50.7%), men (46.9%), and non-binary or genderqueer (2.4%). The majority of participants identified as heterosexual (79.3%) followed by bisexual (11.2%), gay (3.7%), lesbian (1.7%), asexual (1.4%), queer (1.4%), and another identity (1.4%). Most participants were White (75.5%), followed by African American or Black (11.6%), Asian American or Asian (6.5%), Latinx or Hispanic (3.7%), Native American or Indigenous (0.7%), and multiethnic (1.4%).

We assessed participant BMI as one method for gaining insight into the body size of participants. The average BMI of participants was 27.83 ($SD = 7.48$), a BMI associated with the arbitrary category of "overweight" as defined by the World Health Organization. Additionally, just over half (56.8%) of participants identified with at least one fat identity label in a "check all that apply" multiple choice question, which asked participants to indicate whether they identified as: overweight, obese, fat, thick, curvy, big, small fat, mid fat, large fat, superfat, plus size, and/or a "specify" option in which participants could input their own label (see also Oswald et al., 2022). From these responses, we calculated a binary identifier scored as 1 (for participants who endorsed any of the above labels) or 0 (for participants who endorsed none of these labels).

Procedure

Upon consenting to participate, participants were instructed as follows: “In the following sections, we are going to ask your opinions about **fat activism**. Please keep that in mind as you progress through the survey.” Participants then responded to the three critical open-ended questions for the present investigation in the order presented here: (1) “In your opinion, what is the goal of fat activism?” (2) “In your opinion, what motivates people to participate in fat activism?” and (3) “In your opinion, what kind of people are most likely to participate in fat activism?” Questions 1 and 2 were drawn from Pham, Chaney, and Ramírez-Esparza (2024). Participants typed their responses into essay-style text boxes and had unlimited time to respond to each prompt.

After participants completed a battery of measures in randomized order (see Measures). Participants then provided demographic information (e.g., race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, height, and weight), were carefully debriefed, and received monetary compensation for their time.

Measures

Participants responded to each measure on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) unless otherwise specified.

Attitudes toward fat activists. We included a measure of attitudes toward fat activists as a face-valid, quantitative assessment of these attitudes; because our primary outcome in this study was qualitative, we also sought to have an easily quantifiable indicator of the valence of attitudes toward fat activists. Participants responded to 13 PI-developed items indicating the extent to which they believed a number of statements about fat activists (see Online [Supplemental Materials](#)). The statements were developed by the research team based on our expertise in the topic area and on exposure to public opinions about fat activism. Participants were asked to indicate “the extent to which you think that people who engage in fat activism. . .” followed by a number of items, including “Are downplaying the negative health effects of fatness” and “Are doing important work.” An exploratory factor analysis indicated that a single factor best fit the data. We reverse-scored negative items and created an average perceptions score, with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes toward fat activists ($\alpha = .957$, $w = .962$).

Activism orientation. Participants responded to the seven-item Activism Orientation of the Fat Attitudes Assessment Toolkit (FAAT; Cain et al., 2022). The measure includes items such as “Activism is necessary because of the discrimination fat people experience.” Item scores were averaged to create a subscale score, with higher scores indicating greater activism orientation ($\alpha = .972$, $w = .972$).

Size acceptance. Participants responded to the six-item Size Acceptance FAAT subscale (Cain et al., 2022). The measure includes items such as “Size acceptance is an important social movement.” Item scores were averaged to create a subscale score, with higher scores indicating greater support for size acceptance ($\alpha = .964$, $w = .964$).

Responsibility. Participants responded to the six-item Responsibility FAAT subscale (Cain et al., 2022). The measure includes items such as “Fat people lack willpower.” Item scores were averaged to create a subscale score, with higher scores indicating greater beliefs that fat people are responsible for their size ($\alpha = .922$, $w = .923$).

Engagement in fat activism. Participants responded to the single item, “To what extent have you personally engaged in fat activism?” Response options ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

Analytic approach

We used a consensual qualitative research—modified approach (CQR-M; Spangler et al., 2012) to analyze our qualitative data. CQR-M is the data-driven approach used to analyze large samples of relatively brief, simple qualitative data (Spangler et al., 2012). We coded responses to each of the open-ended items separately, developing unique sets of codes to characterize each set of responses.

Two trained authors coded the data. The coders first read papers on best practices for CQR-M (Spangler et al., 2012), then separately read through the qualitative dataset as many times as it took to become familiar with responses before developing initial domains. Once coders had an initial scheme, they met to discuss codes and develop a collated set of coding categories for each of the three questions.

We then developed a spreadsheet to track the responses of each participant and identify the presence and absence of each code in each response. This allowed us to calculate response frequency for each code (i.e., how many times each code was represented in the data). Coders independently indicated the presence or absence of each theme in a response (1 = *theme was present*, 0 = *theme was absent*). Initial coding reliability across the coders was 96.18% (95.85% for goals, 94.92% for motivations, and 97.79% for activist identities); Discrepancies were resolved through conversation between the coders. A given response could be coded for more than one theme.

Results

Qualitative analyses

Goals of fat activism. We identified 20 themes that captured the perceived goals of fat activism. Table 1 depicts these themes alongside descriptions, examples, and frequencies of reporting. About 10% of participants indicated that they were *unsure* of the goals of fat activism.

The most commonly reported themes included *reducing fat stigma*, *increasing acceptance*, and *normalizing body diversity*. For example, one participant, exemplifying the themes of both *reducing fat stigma* and *increasing acceptance*, described the goals of fat activism as, “To eliminate bullying and promote inclusion of overweight people” (55-year-old extremely conservative heterosexual White woman who described her body as average). Others highlighted the notion of *normalizing body diversity*; for example, one 39-year-old extremely liberal heterosexual White woman participant who described herself as slim outlined the goals of fat activism as “To normalize fatness and have a size-inclusive society,” while a 24-year-old centrist bisexual Black man who described himself as slender stated, “The goal on the surface level is to advocate for the destigmatization of obesity and the normalization of body types that may fall out of the realms of what is socially acceptable or coveted as the best.”

A smaller portion of participants reported goals of fat activism that reflected more hostile perceptions of the movement. Though only reported by around five percent of our sample or less (see Table 1), these themes mirrored ideas highlighted in prominent online backlash to fat activism. For example, some participants described the goals of fat activism as *excuse unhealthy lifestyles*, *promote fatness as healthy*, *force others to accommodate fat people*, or *glorify fatness*. For example, embodying several of these themes, one 23-year-old extremely conservative heterosexual White man who described himself as overweight described the goals of fat activism as, “To try to push the burden off of people who are overweight by choice and have the ability to change it; they instead

TABLE 1 Coding domains and frequency for goals of fat activism.

Code	Description	Example	Frequency
Reduce fat stigma	Includes responses that target the reduction of systemic biases toward fat people.	“The goal of fat activism is to eradicate prejudice toward obese people.”	35.03%
Increase fat acceptance	Includes responses that target increasing acceptance or inclusion of fat people.	“Encourage others to accept obese people as equal in our society.”	25.17%
Normalize body diversity	Includes responses that highlight representation, body diversity, body positivity, or body inclusivity.	“To get society to accept there is no one ideal body size for everyone. Literally, one size does NOT fit all.”	18.03%
Unsure	Includes responses that indicate a lack of awareness of the goals of fat activism.	“I’m not quite sure what fat activism is?”	9.52%
Combat fat stereotypes	Includes responses that specifically mention stereotypes about fatness and challenge these stereotypes.	“A lot of people have preconceived opinions about fat people. Such as being unhealthy, lazy, ugly, etc. These people try to change that.”	8.16%
Empower fat people	Includes responses that promote positive affective and embodied experiences for fat people.	“To empower fat people that their current body state is “OK” and “acceptable.”	7.48%
Excuse unhealthy lifestyles	Includes responses that suggest that fat activism is an “easy out” to avoid responsibility for or normalize what are perceived as unhealthy lifestyles.	“It is to normalize unhealth lifestyles.”	6.12%
Increase awareness/education	Includes responses that highlight spreading information about the discrimination that fat people experience.	“Maybe to make known the problems overweight people face through the media and images in the public through perception.”	5.10%
Reduce fatness	Includes responses that describe fat activism as reducing rates of fatness.	“Make people aware of foods/activities that make you fat, so that people are more aware and make better choices.”	5.10%
Promote fatness as healthy	Includes responses that highlight fat activism as challenging institutionalized knowledge claims (i.e., challenging the idea that fatness is unhealthy/thinness is healthy).	“To claim that being fat is healthy.”	4.42%
Make fat people feel better about themselves (negative valence)	Includes responses that suggest that fat activism promotes positive affective and embodied experiences for fat people, but suggests that these positive experiences are undeserved.	“To make fat people feel better about being lazy.”	4.08%
Challenge the thin culture	Includes responses that highlight challenging the cultural context surrounding anti-fatness (thinness culture, diet culture, exercise culture, etc.)	“The goal of fat activism is to limit the stigma of being overweight, and the toxic culture of dieting that results in eating disorders.”	3.74%

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Code	Description	Example	Frequency
Increase accessibility	Includes responses that target spatial accessibility for fat people.	“To reduce stigma of fat people and make places more fat accessible.”	3.40%
Promote equal rights	Includes responses that invoke the language of fat rights.	“A movement that fights for the right of overweight people”	3.40%
Force others to accommodate	Includes responses that highlight fat accessibility as a special and undeserved privilege.	“To get special privileges like two seats for the price of one on an airplane.”	2.38%
Encourage compassion	Includes responses that target increasing sympathy, empathy, or compassion for fat people.	“To be more sympathetic to fat people.”	1.70%
Performative activism	Includes responses suggesting that fat activism is a performative or attention-seeking activity.	“Getting likes/upvotes on social media.”	1.02%
Glorify fatness	Includes responses that specifically invoke the language of glorifying fatness.	“To glorify fatness. To encourage the acceptance of unhealthy ‘fat lifestyles.’”	1.02%
Shaming thinness	Includes responses that suggest fat activism shames those who are not fat.	“Supposedly it’s to stop bullying, but in reality it seems to be shaming people for not being fat themselves or for not having enough sex with fat people.”	0.68%
Explicit prejudice	Includes responses that deploy stereotypes of fat people or otherwise indicate prejudice against fatness and fat people.	“Fat is the most undesirable of all the body agendas twirling around. Fat is an early death sentence, limits life and a huge debt to the tax paying individuals. It will and should always be stigmatized.”	2.72%

Note: Percentages rounded.

try to blame the world for not accommodating them.” Reflecting similar sentiment, another participant described their perception that “Fat activism has a goal of making sure no one feels bad about themselves, their choices, or their appearance. It is removing consequences from actions” (26-year-old liberal-leaning heterosexual White man who described himself as lean).

This distinction between positive or neutral responses and negative responses reflecting backlash to fat activism also emerged in our analysis of perceived motivations for fat activism. Indeed, many themes for the goals of fat activism were mirrored in responses to the motivations question.

Motivations for fat activism. We identified 19 themes that captured perceived motivations for engaging in fat activism. Table 2 depicts these themes alongside descriptions, examples, and frequencies of reporting. About 6% of participants indicated that they were *unsure* of the motivations for fat activism.

The most commonly reported themes of what motivates people to participate in fat activism include *because they are fat*, *experiences of discrimination*, *reducing fat stigma*, *creating positive change*, and *a desire for inclusion*. Many of these themes either explicitly or implicitly held the assumption that fat people are the ones who engage in fat activism, with some themes building upon this notion to suggest that not only being fat, but also experiencing discrimination or

TABLE 2 Coding domains and frequency for motivations for fat activism.

Code	Description	Example	Frequency
Because they are fat	Includes responses that indicate people engage in fat activism simply because of their own body size or weight.	“Maybe being overweight themselves”	26.50%
Experiences of discrimination	Includes responses that suggest experiences of discrimination on the basis of body size motivate activism.	“I think a lot of people involved in it are overweight . . . They simply want to be treated like everyday people and don’t want to deal with the stereotypes that people have about them.”	19.73%
To reduce fat stigma	Includes responses that suggest people are motivated to engage in fat activism in order to reduce stigma or discrimination.	“To end the stigma against fatness and fat bodies”	18.71%
To create positive change	Includes responses that indicate a motivation to increase positive perceptions of fatness.	“To be accepted and represented as people.”	17.69%
Desire for inclusion	Includes responses that suggest fat people themselves want to feel accepted or included.	“I think people want to feel more accepted. Instead of working to make themselves more healthy, they would rather the people around them just accept them.”	17.69%
To enable unhealthiness	Includes responses that suggest fat people engage in fat activism to avoid the consequences of what are perceived as unhealthy lifestyles.	“To enable their unhealthy lifestyle, their inability to lose weight, and avoid responsibility for their obesity.”	8.50%
To feel better about themselves (negative valence)	Includes responses that suggest that fat people engage in fat activism for the affective experience of coping with inner insecurities.	“Trying to cope with inner insecurities that want to make society be more fat friendly”	8.16%
Compassion	Includes responses that highlight motivations relating to compassion or caring for others.	“Caring about others feelings”	6.46%
Because a loved one is fat	Includes responses that highlight support for close others.	“Maybe to support over weight family and friends”	6.12%
Unsure	Includes responses that highlight a lack of knowledge about the motivations for fat activism.	“I have no idea.”	5.78%
Challenge societal standards	Includes responses that highlight attempts to challenge the cultural context surrounding anti-fatness (thinness culture, diet culture, exercise culture, etc.)	“Discontent with the society around them; unrealistic beauty standards being tied to self-worth”	5.10%

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Code	Description	Example	Frequency
Improve health	Includes responses that highlight motivation linked to health outcomes such as weight loss, healthcare experiences, and embracing a “healthier” lifestyle.	“A health goal”	4.76%
Performative activism	Includes responses suggesting that fat activism is a performative or attention-seeking activity.	“To be honest, it’s so ridiculous. They are bored and seek attention.”	3.74%
Social support	Includes responses suggesting that fat people engage in fat activism to find community or social support.	“The togetherness in being looked down upon because of their size.”	3.06%
Forcing others to change	Includes responses that suggest that fat activism is an “easy out” to avoid responsibility for fatness and place responsibility on others.	“An inability to face the consequences of their poor health decisions and force society to medicalize and subsidize their activities.”	3.06%
Normalizing fatness (negative valence)	Includes responses that suggest that fat activism is intended to normalize fatness, but suggest that this should not be normalized.	“Wanting to believe being overweight is normal”	2.72%
Pathology	Includes responses that assign pathology to people who engage in fat activism.	“Lack of honesty with self and general delusion.”	2.38%
Externalizing blame	Includes responses that suggest that fat activists are motivated to find external sources to blame for their fatness.	“Self hatred mixed with a weak ego that causes people to look for external factors to blame”	1.02%
Explicit prejudice	Includes responses that deploy stereotypes of fat people or otherwise indicate prejudice against fatness and fat people.	“They probably believe that they are moving mountains by trying to make society accept obesity rather than work on the harder health issue.”	6.80%

Note: Percentages rounded.

desiring greater inclusion as a result of one’s fatness were significant motivators for engaging in fat activism. For example, a 36-year-old liberal-leaning heterosexual Black woman who described herself as large captured the notions of *being fat* and *experiencing discrimination* as motivators, stating, “Usually bullying or personally being overweight and shamed for it.” Similarly, but also capturing the notions of *creating positive change* and *desiring inclusion*, a 59-year-old liberal heterosexual Asian American man who described himself as average indicated, “In my opinion, people are motivated to participate in fat activism because they want to challenge stereotypes and discrimination based on body size, promote body positivity and acceptance, and advocate for social change. They may also be motivated by personal experiences of discrimination or marginalization

due to their body size, and a desire to create a more inclusive and equitable society for people of all sizes.”

A smaller portion of participants reported perceived motivations for engaging in fat activism that reflected more hostile perceptions of the movement. Though only reported by around two to eight percent of our sample (see Table 2), these themes mirrored ideas highlighted in prominent online backlash to fat activism and our analysis of lay perceptions of the goals of fat activism. These included perceived motivations such as *to enable unhealthiness*, *to feel better about themselves*, *forcing others to change*, *pathology*, and *externalizing blame*. Capturing the notions of *enabling unhealthiness* and *forcing others to change*, one participant described perceived motivations of fat activism as, “It is to change society into thinking that unhealthy lifestyles are okay and that fat women are attractive.” (34-year-old extremely conservative heterosexual White man who described himself as average). Capturing the notions of *pathology* and *externalizing blame*, a 23-year-old extremely conservative heterosexual White man who described himself as overweight, described perceived motivations as “Self hatred mixed with a weak ego that causes people to look for external factors to blame.”

Activist identities. We identified 17 themes that characterized perceptions of who engages in fat activism. Table 3 depicts these themes alongside descriptions, examples, and frequencies of reporting. Only about two percent of the sample indicated that they were *unsure* of who was likely to participate in fat activism.

Broadly, there was the most agreement among participants on perceptions of who engaged in fat activism (relative to motivations and goals), with almost three-quarters of the sample endorsing that those who engage in fat activism are *fat people*. Other prominently endorsed categories included *people with fat loved ones*, *social justice advocates*, *people who have experienced fat stigma*, *compassionate people*, and *liberal/progressives*. For example, one participant described likely activists as, “People who are overweight, or is close to someone who is overweight, and affected by it in some way” (37-year-old liberal heterosexual White man who described himself as average), and another described likely fat activists as, “Those that are overweight or have struggled with weight issues and body acceptance” (34-year-old liberal bisexual Latina woman who described herself as big).

The themes of *social justice advocates* and *liberal/progressives* were often accompanied by expressions of distaste. For example, one participant described likely fat activists as, “Left leaning progressives so have never been held accountable for anything” (59-year-old conservative bisexual White man who described himself as normal), while another stated, “Liberals, social media addicts, and democrats. People who uses pronouns and hold and project discriminatory views against conservatives” (36-year-old centrist heterosexual Asian man who described himself as slim). Similarly, a 68-year-old conservative, heterosexual White man who described himself as lean described likely fat activists as “People that are attracted to the idea of playing out their “social justice warrior” fantasies.”

Backlash was also reflected in additional response themes, including labelling of likely fat activists as *lazy people/people who don't want to lose weight*, *attention seekers*, and *people with pathology*. Capturing multiple of these notions, one 24-year-old centrist bisexual Black man who described himself as slender stated, “people who are conflict avoidant who seek habitual comfort through food, People who eat for the sake of having something to taste regardless of hunger, People with poor impulse control, Poor people, the list goes on tbh.” Similarly, one participant described how people who might engage in fat activism are “Misguided or deluded people, people seeking a cause to pour themselves into so they don't have to deal with their own issues, people seeking to be politically correct... not that there is not some form of activism that may be healthy, but gener-

TABLE 3 Coding domains and frequency for activist identities.

Code	Description	Example	Frequency
Fat people	Includes responses that indicate fat people engage in fat activism.	“Fat people”	74.15%
People with fat loved ones	Includes responses that indicate people who love or are close to fat people engage in fat activism.	“People who love someone who categorizes themselves as fat”	15.31%
Social justice advocates	Includes responses that suggest people who engage in social justice activism are generally likely to participate in fat activism.	“People who are already committed to other kinds of activism (equality for People of color, queer people, etc) and see there being intersections with these other marginalized identities and fatness”	10.20%
People who have experienced fat stigma	Includes responses that suggest that fat people who have specifically experienced discrimination on the basis of their body size are likely to participate in fat activism.	“People who have been body shamed by their peers”	9.18%
Compassionate people	Includes responses that suggest people who are caring, empathetic, or compassionate engage in fat activism.	“I think empathetic people are most likely.”	9.18%
Liberals/progressives	Includes responses that suggest people on the political left engage in fat activism.	“People who are generally progressive would likely participate in activism.”	8.50%
Women	Includes responses that suggest gendered dynamics in fat activism, such that women are likely to engage.	“The plus sized variety, mostly women.”	5.78%
Anyone	Includes responses that suggest that anyone and everyone might participate in fat activism regardless of demographics or identities.	“As with any cause, you will get a diverse group of people for different groups.”	5.44%
People who were previously fat	Includes responses that suggest that people who were once fat but have since lost weight would engage in fat activism.	“People who were previously fat”	4.76%
Lazy people/people who don't want to lose weight	Includes responses that suggest fat activism is for people who are unwilling to lose weight or are generally lazy.	“The people most likely to participate in fat activism are fat, lazy, liberal people.”	3.74%
Unsure	Includes responses that suggest a lack of awareness of who participates in fat activism.	“I have no idea.”	2.38%

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Code	Description	Example	Frequency
Attention seekers	Includes responses that suggest fat activism is an attention-seeking or virtue-signaling behavior.	“People who want to be noticed.”	2.04%
People with pathology	Includes responses that label people who engage in fat activism as pathological.	“Narcissists, or more simply put, mentally disordered individuals.”	1.70%
Younger people/students	Includes responses that suggest young adults and students are likely to engage in fat activism.	“Mostly females, young adults.”	1.36%
People with other marginalized identities	Includes responses suggesting that people who experience other forms of discrimination are likely to participate in fat activism.	“They could also be so one who has experienced unfair practices against them, possibly because of racial, gender, etc. They understand how people who are going through this feel.”	1.36%
Celebrities	Includes responses that celebrities engage in fat activism.	“I believe many people participate, however, I believe the forward faces are celebrities or models.”	0.68%
Entitled people	Includes responses that suggest that people who engage in fat activism are entitled.	“Fat people who are entitled to think the world needs to bend around their selfish, bad choices.”	0.68%

Note: Percentages rounded.

ally what I’ve seen is extreme and foolish” (62-year-old conservative-leaning heterosexual White man who described himself as average).

Quantitative analyses

Correlations between all themes are presented in supplementary materials (see Table S1).

Demographic differences. We conducted additional quantitative analyses on the qualitative data to establish trends. We examined whether endorsement of each theme varied by participant gender identity, racial/ethnic identity, and body size (fat or nonfat). All analyses are presented in Table 4. Overall, there were few significant demographic differences in reporting of themes, though women, White people, and fat participants were more likely to report “because they are fat” as a motivation for people’s engagement in fat activism.

Support for fat activism. Additionally, we used quantitative analyses to test our hypotheses about the associations between support for fat activism and a number of additional variables. Our hypotheses overall were supported; Political conservatism and assumptions of fat people’s responsibility for their weight were associated with less positive attitudes toward fat activism and fat activists. Conversely, support for size acceptance, activist orientation, personal engagement in

TABLE 4 Coding domains and frequency by demographics.

Coding Domain	Frequency								
	White (n = 222)	POC (n = 72)	Sig	Man (n = 138)	Woman (n = 149)	Sig	Fat (n = 167)	Nonfat (n = 127)	Sig
Goals									
Reduce fat stigma	33.3	40.3	.320	31.9	38.9	.220	38.3	30.7	.217
Increase fat acceptance	24.8	26.4	.758	21.0	28.2	.173	26.9	22.8	.498
Normalize body diversity	17.6	19.4	.726	13.8	20.8	.123	18.0	18.1	1.000
Unsure	10.8	5.6	.249	9.4	9.4	1.000	7.2	12.6	.160
Combat fat stereotypes	8.6	6.9	.807	8.0	8.7	.835	9.6	6.3	.391
Empower fat people	7.7	6.9	1.000	8.0	7.4	1.000	5.4	10.2	.124
Excuse unhealthy lifestyles	6.8	4.2	.576	8.0	4.7	.331	5.4	7.1	.626
Increase awareness/education	4.1	8.3	.213	3.6	6.7	.294	4.2	6.3	.435
Reduce fatness	5.0	5.6	.766	6.5	3.4	.276	4.2	6.3	.435
Promote fatness as healthy	5.0	2.8	.741	4.3	4.7	1.000	3.6	5.5	.569
Make fat people feel better about themselves (negative valence)	5.0	1.4	.305	6.5	2.0	.076	3.0	5.5	.374
Challenge the thin culture	3.6	4.2	.734	3.6	4.0	1.000	5.4	1.6	.122
Increase accessibility	4.1	1.4	.460	2.2	4.7	.339	3.0	3.9	.750
Promote equal rights	1.8	8.3	.016*	4.3	2.7	.529	3.6	3.1	1.000
Force others to accommodate	2.7	1.4	1.000	4.3	0.7	.058	1.8	3.1	.470
Encourage compassion	1.4	2.8	.599	1.4	2.0	1.000	1.2	2.4	.655
Performative activism	0.9	1.4	.571	1.4	0.7	.610	0.0	2.4	.080
Glorify fatness	1.4	0.0	1.000	1.4	0.7	.610	0.6	1.6	.580
Shaming thinness	0.9	0.0	1.000	0.7	0.7	1.000	0.6	0.8	1.000
Explicit prejudice	3.6	0.0	.206	3.6	2.0	.487	2.4	3.1	.730
Motivations									
Because they are fat	30.6	13.9	.005**	19.6	34.2	.005**	31.1	20.5	.046*
Experiences of discrimination	20.3	18.1	.736	11.6	27.5	<.001***	24.0	14.2	.039*
To reduce fat stigma	17.1	23.6	.227	18.8	18.8	1.000	20.4	16.5	.452
To create positive change	14.4	27.8	.013*	13.0	21.5	.064	15.6	20.5	.284

(Continues)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Motivations	White	POC	Sig	Man	Woman	Sig	Fat	Nonfat	Sig
	(n = 222)	(n = 72)		(n = 138)	(n = 149)		(n = 167)	(n = 127)	
Desire for inclusion	18.0	16.7	.861	14.5	21.5	.129	20.4	14.2	.217
To enable unhealthiness	9.5	5.6	.465	12.3	5.4	.058	6.6	11.0	.208
To feel better about themselves (negative valence)	10.4	1.4	.012*	8.7	8.1	1.000	6.0	11.0	.135
Compassion	6.3	6.9	.788	4.3	7.4	.324	6.6	6.3	1.000
Because a loved one is fat	7.2	2.8	.258	3.6	8.7	.090	6.0	6.3	1.000
Unsure	5.9	5.6	1.000	5.8	6.0	1.000	6.6	4.7	.617
Challenge societal standards	4.5	6.9	.375	3.6	5.4	.576	6.6	3.1	.284
Improve health	4.1	6.9	.342	5.8	3.4	.399	2.4	7.9	.049*
Performative activism	4.5	1.4	.305	4.3	3.4	.763	3.0	4.7	.540
Social support	2.7	4.2	.461	4.3	2.0	.320	4.2	1.6	.308
Forcing others to change	3.2	2.8	1.000	4.3	2.0	.320	2.4	3.9	.507
Normalizing fatness (negative valence)	2.3	4.2	.410	2.9	2.7	1.000	0.6	5.5	.023*
Pathology	2.7	1.4	1.000	4.3	0.7	.058	2.4	2.4	1.000
Externalizing blame	1.4	0.0	1.000	2.2	0.0	.110	0.6	1.6	.580
Explicit prejudice	6.8	6.9	1.000	9.4	4.7	.163	5.4	8.7	.350
Activist identities	White	POC	Sig	Man	Woman	Sig	Fat	Nonfat	Sig
	(n = 222)	(n = 72)		(n = 138)	(n = 149)		(n = 167)	(n = 127)	
Fat people	73.9	75.0	1.000	72.5	76.5	.498	76.0	71.7	.421
People with fat loved ones	14.9	16.7	.709	15.2	15.4	1.000	16.8	13.4	.514
Social justice advocates	7.7	18.1	.023*	13.8	7.4	.085	10.2	10.2	1.000
People who have experienced fat stigma	7.7	13.9	.156	5.8	12.8	.067	10.8	7.1	.314
Compassionate people	7.7	13.9	.156	4.3	14.1	.005*	12.0	5.5	.067
Liberals/progressives	5.9	6.9	.778	8.0	4.7	.331	3.6	9.4	.049*
Women	6.3	4.2	.771	5.1	6.7	.623	7.8	3.1	.129
Anyone	6.3	2.8	.373	3.6	6.7	.294	5.4	5.5	1.000
People who were previously fat	4.5	5.6	.752	2.9	6.7	.173	5.4	3.9	.783
Lazy people/people who don't want to lose weight	3.6	4.2	.734	6.5	1.3	.030*	1.8	6.3	.061

(Continues)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Activist identities	White (n = 222)	POC (n = 72)	Sig	Man (n = 138)	Woman (n = 149)	Sig	Fat (n = 167)	Nonfat (n = 127)	Sig
Unsure	2.7	1.4	1.000	2.2	2.0	1.000	2.4	2.4	1.000
Attention seekers	2.3	1.4	1.000	3.6	0.7	.109	1.2	3.1	.408
People with pathology	1.8	1.4	1.000	3.6	0.0	.025*	1.2	2.4	.655
Younger people/students	1.8	0.0	.575	1.4	1.3	1.000	1.2	1.6	1.000
People with other marginalized identities	1.4	1.4	1.000	0.0	2.7	.123	2.4	0.0	.136
Celebrities	0.9	0.0	1.000	0.7	0.7	1.000	0.6	0.8	1.000
Entitled people	0.9	0.0	1.000	0.7	0.7	1.000	0.6	0.8	1.000

Note: All tests of significance use Fisher's exact test (two-sided). Demographic variables of racial/ethnic identity and gender identity were recoded to meet statistical assumptions; genderqueer and nonbinary participants were excluded from comparisons due to small sample size. * = <.05, ** = <.01, *** = <.001.

TABLE 5 Descriptive statistics and correlations among measures.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Perceptions of fat activists	4.10	1.41	–						
2. Political conservatism	3.39	1.86	–.591*	–					
3. Responsibility	4.69	1.38	–.763*	.504*	–				
4. Size acceptance	4.44	1.79	.904*	–.577*	–.683*	–			
5. Activism orientation	4.31	1.85	.901*	–.551*	–.669*	.906*	–		
6. Engagement in fat activism	1.26	0.64	.378*	–.265*	–.382*	.367*	.329*	–	
7. Fat identity (binary)	–	–	.317*	–.086	–.238*	.334*	.299*	.219*	–
8. BMI	27.83	7.48	.206*	–.017	–.205*	.217*	.201*	.055	.560*

Note: Measures 1–5 are scored on a scale ranging from 1 to 7, Engagement in Fat Activism on a scale ranging from 1 to 5. For fat identity, 1 = fat and 0 = nonfat.

Abbreviations: BMI, body mass index; M, mean; SD, standard deviation.

* $p < .001$.

fat activism, fat identity, and BMI were associated with more positive attitudes toward fat activism and fat activists (see Table 5).

Table 6 displays correlations between each code and these additional measures. Generally, more positive attitudes toward fat activists, activist orientation, and size acceptance were positively correlated with positive lay theories of fat activism, and negatively correlated with more hostile or negative lay theories about fat activism. Political conservatism and assumptions of fat people's responsibility for their fatness were generally positively correlated with more hostile or negative lay theories about fat activism. Engagement in fat activism appeared to be positively associated with some systemic perceived goals and motivations, but BMI generally was not significantly correlated with lay theories.

TABLE 6 Coding domain correlations with measures.

Goals	Attitudes toward fat activists	Activism orientation	Size acceptance	Responsibility	Engagement in fat activism	BMI	Political orientation
Reduce fat stigma	.264**	.267**	.219**	-.111	.157**	-.098	-.182**
Increase fat acceptance	.030	.039	.069	-.082	.045	.032	-.076
Normalize body diversity	.017	.026	.059	-.050	.002	-.051	-.080
Unsure	-.050	-.023	-.055	-.011	-.097	-.019	-.031
Combat fat stereotypes	.206**	.192**	.191**	-.186**	.112	.074	-.090
Empower fat people	-.048	-.044	-.047	.045	.086	-.006	.058
Excuse unhealthy lifestyles	-.342**	-.305**	-.331**	.269**	-.105	-.010	.229**
Increase awareness/education	.150*	.152**	.153**	-.108	.026	-.035	-.115*
Reduce fatness	.037	.006	.014	-.054	.002	.008	-.016
Promote fatness as healthy	-.287**	-.284**	-.288**	.249**	-.089	-.062	.177**
Make fat people feel better about themselves (negative valence)	-.272**	-.275**	-.244**	.195**	-.085	-.005	.142*
Challenge the thin culture	.168**	.160**	.162**	-.176**	.173**	.079	-.099
Increase accessibility	.020	.005	.020	-.037	.011	-.006	-.080
Promote equal rights	.031	.044	.066	.000	-.018	.103	.031
Force others to accommodate	-.218**	-.231**	-.219**	.200*	-.064	-.035	.159**
Encourage compassion	.041	.053	.061	-.088	.070	-.006	-.084
Performative activism	-.062	-.083	-.078	-.014	-.042	-.033	.033
Glorify fatness	-.108	-.141*	-.132*	.056	-.042	-.018	.070
Shaming thinness	-.076	-.043	-.013	.064	.031	-.026	.027
Explicit prejudice	-.181**	-.190**	-.185**	.167**	-.069	.019	.100

(Continues)

TABLE 6 (Continued)

Motivations	Attitudes toward fat activists	Activism orientation	Size acceptance	Responsibility	Engagement in fat activism	BMI	Political orientation
Because they are fat	.000	-.050	.006	.028	.007	.098	-.056
Experiences of discrimination	.282**	.256**	.273**	-.273**	.132*	.149*	-.210**
To reduce fat stigma	.192**	.216**	.201**	-.160**	.132*	-.031	-.106
To create positive change	.175**	.170**	.158**	-.133*	.033	-.114	-.050
Desire for inclusion	-.009	.043	.065	.058	-.065	-.012	-.026
To enable unhealthiness	-.414**	-.414**	-.400**	.317**	-.126*	-.075	.284**
To feel better about themselves (negative valence)	-.272**	-.229**	-.232**	.218**	-.045	-.065	.245**
Compassion	.221**	.209**	.182**	-.162**	.066	-.061	-.160**
Because a loved one is fat	.134*	.104	.110	-.053	.096	-.003	-.107
Unsure	-.017	.007	-.027	-.053	-.102	.039	-.076
Challenge societal standards	.251**	.212**	.224**	-.293**	.245**	.075	-.199**
Improve health	-.004	-.018	-.021	.028	-.067	-.019	.005
Performative activism	-.181**	-.213**	-.174**	.106	-.053	-.010	.084
Social support	-.026	-.004	-.020	-.033	.051	.027	.005
Forcing others to change	-.252**	-.235**	-.220**	.177**	-.073	.002	.218**
Normalizing fatness (negative valence)	-.231**	-.218**	-.257**	.170**	-.069	-.113	.190**
Pathology	-.171**	-.177**	-.198**	.127*	-.064	-.004	.159**
Externalizing blame	-.134*	-.114	-.123*	.080	-.042	.003	.124*
Explicit Prejudice	-.385**	-.365**	-.376**	.282**	-.048	-.057	.300**

(Continues)

TABLE 6 (Continued)

Activist identities	Attitudes toward fat activists	Activism orientation	Size acceptance	Responsibility	Engagement in fat activism	BMI	Political orientation
Fat people	-.173**	-.141*	-.119*	.193**	-.136*	.074	.074
People with fat loved ones	.229**	.249**	.190**	-.161**	.107	.019	-.115*
Social justice advocates	.108	.114*	.086	-.015	.038	-.104	-.010
People who have experienced fat stigma	.229**	.224**	.236**	-.178**	.221**	.026	-.200**
Compassionate people	.255**	.253**	.206**	-.170**	.128*	.035	-.099
Liberals/progressives	-.167**	-.204**	-.159**	.158**	-.038	-.082	.168**
Women	-.163**	-.098	-.110	.078	-.010	.015	.144*
Anyone	.171**	.160**	.164**	-.186**	-.052	.016	-.010
People who were previously fat	.174**	.175**	.182**	-.044	.159**	-.024	-.150**
Lazy people/people who don't want to lose weight	-.253**	-.239**	-.260**	.214***	-.081	-.098	.132*
Unsure	.076	.107	.057	-.002	-.029	-.025	-.141*
Attention seekers	-.148*	-.131*	-.143*	.082	-.059	-.033	.086
People with pathology	-.156**	-.157**	-.201**	.110	-.054	-.007	.128*
Younger people/students	-.137*	-.154**	-.116*	.126	-.048	.070	.102
People with other marginalized identities	.067	.108	.026	-.051	-.048	.088	.023
Celebrities	.044	.012	.022	-.146*	-.034	-.035	-.084
Entitled people	-.135*	-.104	-.090	.109	-.034	-.038	.049

Note: For political orientation, higher = more conservative.

* = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$

Abbreviation: BMI, body mass index.

Study 1 discussion

In a nationally representative sample, we identified lay theories about the goals and motivations of fat activism, and who is likely to participate in fat activism. We examined these lay theories to better understand both support for and backlash against this form of activism. We avoided imposing a researcher-generated organizational structure in our reporting of these data, and instead allow the categories to coexist in the free manner in which participants reported them, in line with best practices for CQR-M (Spangler et al., 2012). We identified lay theories that both represented neutral or positive perceptions of fat activism, and lay theories that captured more hostile perceptions of and backlash toward fat activism. Such hostility toward activist efforts, while resonating with past work on backlash against activism (e.g., Bograd et al., 2022), has not emerged in the literature on lay theories of activism in other contexts, such as anti-racism activism (see Pham, Chaney, Ramírez-Esparza, 2024).

Broadly, most demographic comparisons rendered no significant difference. People of color endorsed slightly more positive motivations for fat activism, and women and fat participants were more likely to endorse experiential motivations (*because they are fat, experiences of discrimination*) than men and thin participants, respectively. Participant BMI was also positively associated with the *experiences of discrimination* motivation, but interestingly demonstrated no other significant associations with lay theories. This may reflect the diversity of ways in which people with larger bodies identify with their fatness, which vary from highly negative to highly positive (e.g., Pausé, 2012). Engagement in fat activism appeared to be positively associated with some systemic perceived goals and motivations (e.g., *challenge thin culture, challenge societal standards*), suggesting that participants who engage with fat activism may be more aware of (and thus perhaps more likely to rally against) these systems that oppress fat people.

Though this backlash tended to represent a relatively small (<10%) proportion of our sample, we also identified broader trends and characteristics associated with more negative perceptions of fat activism. For example, quantitative analyses suggest that political conservatism and assumptions of fat people's responsibility for their weight were associated with less positive perceptions of and lay theories about fat activism and fat activists. Such notions of personal responsibility for fatness are often tied to political conservatism, with both supported by an underlying ideology of individualism or "the Protestant work ethic," including the belief that hard work leads to success and a lack of success reflects moral failings on the part of the individual (e.g., Quinn & Crocker, 1999). The assumption that fat people are responsible for their weight—and that fat activism is a way of externalizing or escaping this responsibility—was apparent in responses that captured backlash to fat activism across domains, suggesting that the idea of evading personal responsibility for one's fatness may be a particularly nefarious perception of fat activism that leads to or underlies backlash.

Predominant in both hostile and neutral/positive responses to our qualitative prompts was the notion that fat people are the ones engaging in fat activism, though some attention was paid to characteristics that may prompt nonfat people to engage (e.g., *having fat loved ones, being compassionate*). A number of participants also suggested gendered dynamics in fat activism, with women—and those with additional marginalized identities—perceived as more likely to participate in fat activism than those with advantaged identities. Notably, endorsing the notion that women were most likely to engage in fat activism was positively associated with endorsement of hostile perceived goals (e.g., *glorifying fatness, excusing unhealthiness, forcing others to accommodate*) and motives (e.g., *enabling unhealthiness, pathology*) for fat activism (see Table S1).

To better understand hostility toward fat activism, and with the goal of developing knowledge to reduce this hostility, we conducted a second, experimental study to better understand how activist identities are implicated in lay theories about fat activism. Given the saliency of the assumption that only fat people engage in fat activism, as well as initial evidence that gendered dynamics shape backlash to fat activism, we experimentally manipulated the identity of fat activists in Study 2. We examined whether perceived goals and motivations—and broadly, backlash to fat activism—differed depending on whether fat activists held more stereotypical, assumed identities (i.e., fat, women; based on Study 1 findings) relative to advantaged identities that are less stereotypical of fat activists (i.e., thin, men). Prior research has indeed shown that marginalized people who engage in social justice efforts—including fat researchers studying body size (Thai et al., 2021)—are perceived as more biased/less objective and having a more vested interest (i.e., driven by motives to help themselves and their ingroups; Thai et al., 2021; Torrez et al., 2024). This work, however, has mainly investigated activist identities that match the type of activism under investigation (e.g., Black vs. White advocates for anti-racism activism), leaving the impact of activist identity unclear when it does not match the activism (e.g., women engaging in fat activism). That said, prior work on the co-occurring nature of prejudices (e.g., Duckitt & Sibley, 2007) found that those who are prejudiced against one marginalized group are also prejudiced against others, suggesting that the negative perceptions associated with marginalized activists may generalize and thus emerge even when the activist identity does not match the activism type. Integrating this literature with our initial findings suggesting that hostile lay theories of fat activism are associated with assumptions that fat activists are women, we hypothesized that fat (vs. thin) and women (vs. men) activists for fat activism would be perceived more negatively and particularly met with more backlash.

STUDY 2

Building upon the findings of Study 1, Study 2 used a 2×2 experimental paradigm to examine whether perceived goals and motivations of fat activism differed depending on the identity of fat activists. Specifically, based upon Study 1 findings about the stereotypical identities of fat activists, we manipulated the body size (thin, fat) and gender (man, woman) of a fat activist, and developed scales to assess perceived goals and motivations of the activist based on Study 1 themes. We included additional outcomes from prior work on activism (e.g., perceptions of activist qualities). Broadly, we expected that activists described as fat would be evaluated more negatively than activists described as thin, and that activists described as women would be evaluated more negatively than activists described as men. We also expected to see an interaction whereby fat women activists (the group most likely to participate in fat activism; see Lupton, 2013; Simic, 2015) would be evaluated more negatively than activists with any other combination of identities.

Method

Participants

An a priori power analysis indicated 351 participants for a 2×2 between-subjects design with 80% power to detect a small effect size ($f = 0.15$). We oversampled 384 US-based participants in a gender-balanced sample from Prolific to account for exclusions. We removed six participants

who failed more than one attention check, 21 participants who provided nonsensical height and weight data, and eight participants who did not complete the full survey.

The final sample consisted of 349 participants ($M_{age} = 34.68$, $SD = 11.59$). Participants were on average politically moderate ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.63$) on a scale ranging from 1 (*very liberal*) to 7 (*very conservative*). Participants identified as women (51.6%) and men (48.4%). The majority of participants identified as heterosexual (79.9%) followed by bisexual (13.2%), gay (2.3%), lesbian (1.7%), queer (1.7%), asexual (0.3%), and another identity (1.4%). Most participants were White (55.0%), followed by African American or Black (16.6%), Asian American or Asian (10.6%), Latinx or Hispanic (6.0%), Middle Eastern or North African (0.9%), Native American or Indigenous (0.6%), and multiethnic (10.3%). The average BMI of the sample was 22.84 ($SD = 4.09$), which falls within the World Health Organization's defined category of "normal weight."

Procedure

Participants received the following information about the study purpose: "The general purpose of this study is to examine how people perceive engagement in certain forms of activism." Once participants provided informed consent to participate, they were given the following instructions: "You will be randomly assigned to view a profile of someone who identifies as an activist. Please read the profile carefully, as you will be asked to form impressions of this person." Participants were then randomly assigned to view one of four activist profiles: A fat woman, a fat man, a thin woman, or a thin man (see Materials).

After reviewing the profile, participants completed three attention checks, in which they were required to indicate via a series of multiple-choice selection questions the gender and body size of the activist they read about, as well as the type of activism the activist they read about engaged in. Participants who answered the questions incorrectly were redirected to review the profile and answer the questions again.

Next, participants completed measures of the goals and motivations, perceptions of fat activists, qualities of activists, and typicality/similarity measures in random order. Finally, participants provided demographic information (e.g., race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender), were carefully debriefed, and received monetary compensation for their time.

Materials

Participants were presented with a profile of an activist. Each profile described the activist as "a dedicated fat activist and member of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance." The profiles provided descriptive information about how the activist arrived at the cause, reporting either that the activist has experienced discrimination themselves as a person with a larger body (fat conditions), or became aware of fat prejudice via social media and observed discrimination as a thin person (thin conditions). Gender was manipulated through the use of stereotypically gendered names (Anna Smith or Brendan Smith) which were matched on perceived age, warmth, and competence (see Newman et al., 2018). Full vignettes are provided in Online [Supplemental Materials](#). Correlations between all primary measures are provided in Table S2a, b.

TABLE 7 Goals of fat activism items and factor loadings.

Item	Fat supportive goals	Fat hostile goals
Ending the stigma against fat bodies	.808	-.052
Normalizing body diversity	.779	-.011
Empowering fat people to feel better about their bodies	.769	.039
Increasing awareness about discrimination toward fat people	.768	-.131
Combatting stereotypes about fat people	.752	-.053
Increasing acceptance of fat people	.750	.014
Encouraging compassion for fat people	.698	-.040
Increasing how accessible spaces are for fat people	.584	.155
Gaining rights for fat people	.529	.027
Glorifying fatness	-.014	.864
Forcing people to pretend that fatness is attractive	-.035	.840
Normalizing unhealthy lifestyles	-.090	.815
Making people feel better about being lazy	-.071	.782
Forcing others to accommodate fat people	.233	.735
Promoting the idea that being fat is healthy	.094	.727
Getting attention	.008	.565
Shaming thin people	-.095	.506

Note: Bolding indicates factor on which each item loaded.

Measures

Goals of fat activism. Based on the themes identified in Study 1, we developed 18 items to capture perceived goals of fat activism. We excluded the themes representing participants who were unsure of goals and participants who expressed explicit prejudice and developed one item to represent each of the remaining 18 themes. Participants were prompted with the question, “To what extent do you think this activist engages in fat activism with the goal of…”

We remained as close to the data as possible in generating response items, using direct quotes from participant responses where possible. For example, the reported goal of *combatting fat stereotypes* was assessed by the item “Combatting stereotypes about fat people,” while the reported goal of *normalizing body diversity* was assessed by the item “Normalizing body diversity.” Participants responded to each item on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

We conducted a factor analysis on the stereotype items to examine factor structure. We used a maximum likelihood extraction method, as data were relatively normally distributed (Costello & Osborne, 2005), and employed promax rotation as factors were expected to correlate. The overall Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.923 and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was statistically significant, $c^2(153) = 3391.83$, $p < .001$, indicating that the data were appropriate for factoring.

Visual analysis of the scree plot (Costello & Osborne, 2005) indicated a two-factor best fit solution. The two-factor solution indicated goodness of fit, $c^2(118) = 216.84$, $p < .001$, and explained 52.18% of total variance; The factors explained 32.35 and 19.83 percent of variance, respectively. One cross-loading item was removed; all other items loaded appropriately onto a single factor. We labelled the factors *Fat Supportive Goals* ($\alpha = .900$, $w = .900$) and *Fat Hostile Goals* ($\alpha = .900$, $w = .908$). Items and factor loadings are displayed in Table 7.

TABLE 8 Motivations for fat activism items and factor loadings.

Item	Experiential motivations	Negative motivations
They have experienced fat stigma	.868	-.167
They want to be more accepted	.829	-.068
They want to feel better about their own body size	.812	.104
They are fat	.800	.112
They want to feel like part of a fat community	.615	.145
They have fat friends or loved ones	.457	-.160
They are delusional	-.048	.815
They are attention-seeking	.048	.791
They want to blame others for their body size	.162	.728
They want to force society to subsidize their existence	.234	.640
They don't want to be seen as responsible for their own body size	.309	.634
^a They are highly compassionate	.176	-.594

Note: Bolding indicates factor on which each item loaded.

^aIndicates item that is reverse scored.

Motivations for fat activism. The procedure for generating Motivations items was identical to that of the Goals items. We generated 17 items, with one item reflecting each theme after the exclusion of the *unsure* and *explicit prejudice* themes. Participants were prompted with the question, “To what extent do you think this activist is motivated to engage in fat activism because...” Example responses included “They have experienced fat stigma” and “They are delusional.” Participants responded to each item on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). We conducted a factor analysis to examine factor structure. The overall Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.878 and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was statistically significant, $c^2(136) = 3213.30$, $p < .001$, indicating that the data were appropriate for factoring.

Visual analysis of the scree plot indicated a four-factor best fit solution, however, only one item was loading on the fourth factor. We ran a forced three-factor solution, in which the same item crossloaded across factors. We thus opted to remove the item (“They want people to make healthier choices”), which, notably, was based on participants’ misunderstanding of fat activism in Study 1. After removing the item, we ran another factor analysis which suggested a two-factor best fit model, though three factors had eigenvalues over one. We forced a two-factor solution which indicated goodness of fit, $c^2(89) = 638.82$, $p < .001$, and explained 49.21% of total variance; The factors explained 30.14 and 19.06 percent of variance, respectively.

Four cross-loading items were removed; all other items loaded appropriately onto a single factor. We labelled the factors *Experiential Motivations* ($\alpha = .876$, $w = .892$) and *Negative Motivations* ($\alpha = .870$, $w = .877$). Each factor demonstrated appropriate reliability. Items and factor loadings are displayed in Table 8.

Attitudes toward fat activists. Participants responded to the same 13 items as in Study 1, with the question stem modified to “the extent to which you think that the activist you read about...” ($\alpha = .922$, $w = .924$).

Qualities of activists. Based on prior work examining perceptions of advantaged and disadvantaged activists and allies, we included a 10-item measure of perceived activist qualities (Park

et al., 2022). The 10 items represent two factors: perceived trustworthiness (including the items *warm, moral, passionate, selfless, loyal, helpful, knowledgeable*) and perceived influence (including the items *central, impactful, powerful*). Participants indicated the extent to which the activist they read about embodied each trait on a scale ranging from 0 (*minimally*) to 100 (*maximally*). Sub-scale scores were averaged to create composites; Trustworthiness ($a = .936, w = .937$), Influence ($a = .884, w = .894$).²

Results

Goals

Separate two-way ANOVAs examined the effect of size and gender conditions on the two goals factors: Supportive Goals and Hostile Goals. For Supportive Goals, there were no main effects of size condition, $F(1, 345) = .021, p = .885, h_p^2 = .000$, or gender condition, $F(1, 345) = .943, p = .332, h_p^2 = .003$, and no significant interaction, $F(1, 345) = 1.92, p = .166, h_p^2 = .006$; Table 9 displays condition means for all comparisons.

For Hostile Goals, there were no statistically significant effects of gender condition, $F(1, 345) = .629, p = .428, h_p^2 = .002$, and no significant interaction, $F(1, 345) = 1.13, p = .289, h_p^2 = .003$. There was a main effect of size condition on Hostile Goals, $F(1, 345) = 4.39, p = .037, h_p^2 = .013$. Endorsement of hostile goals was higher in the fat condition ($M = 2.49, SD = 1.00$) than in the thin condition ($M = 2.27, SD = 1.00$), $p = .037, 95\% CI [.014, .437]$, though endorsement in the fat condition remained just below the scale midpoint.

Motivations

Separate two-way ANOVAs examined the effect of size and gender conditions on the two goals factors: Experiential Motivations and Negative Motivations. For Experiential Motivations, there were no statistically significant effects of gender condition, $F(1, 345) = .610, p = .435, h_p^2 = .002$, and no significant interaction, $F(1, 345) = .081, p = .776, h_p^2 = .000$. There was a main effect of size condition on Experiential Motivations, $F(1, 345) = 507.55, p < .001, h_p^2 = .595$. Endorsement of experiential motives was higher in the fat condition ($M = 3.91, SD = 0.66$) than in the thin condition ($M = 2.13, SD = 0.82$), $p < .001, 95\% CI [1.624, 1.935]$. This finding makes sense in light of the fact that these experiential motives center on experiences of fatness or size-based discrimination and would thus be less likely to apply for a thin person, and given that our experimental manipulation highlighted these experiences of discrimination in the fat condition.

For Negative Motives, there was again no statistically significant effects of gender condition, $F(1, 345) = .079, p = .778, h_p^2 = .000$, and no significant interaction, $F(1, 345) = 2.251, p = .134, h_p^2 = .006$. There was a main effect of size condition on Negative Motives, $F(1, 345) = 21.60, p < .001, h_p^2 = .059$.

² **Similarity.** We included an exploratory measure assessing the extent to which the activist participants read about was perceived as similar to a number of relevant groups: other fat activists, fat people in general, people of the same gender as them, activists in general, yourself, racial justice activists, feminist activists, Black people in general, and White people in general. Participants responded to each item on a scale ranging from 1 (*not similar at all*) to 5 (*extremely similar*). Items were analyzed independently. See supplemental Table 3.

TABLE 9 Conditions means (SDs) for Study 2 ANOVAs.

Condition	Fat	Thin	Woman	Man	Fat woman	Thin woman	Fat man	Thin man
Supportive goals	3.84 (0.85)	3.83 (0.83)	3.80 (0.87)	3.88 (0.81)	3.86 (0.82)	3.72 (0.92)	3.82 (0.88)	3.94 (0.72)
Hostile goals	2.49 (1.00)	2.27 (1.00)	2.34 (0.99)	2.44 (1.03)	2.39 (0.93)	2.28 (1.05)	2.59 (1.06)	2.25 (0.96)
Experiential motivations	3.91 (0.66)	2.13 (0.82)	3.11 (1.12)	3.06 (1.19)	3.93 (0.62)	2.17 (0.78)	3.89 (0.70)	2.09 (0.85)
Negative motivations	2.36 (1.05)	1.88 (0.86)	2.12 (0.95)	2.16 (1.04)	2.27 (1.00)	1.95 (0.87)	2.46 (1.10)	1.82 (0.85)
Attitudes toward fat activists	3.22 (0.96)	3.68 (0.78)	3.46 (0.91)	3.40 (0.92)	3.26 (0.96)	3.69 (0.80)	3.18 (0.97)	3.67 (0.77)
Activist trustworthiness	57.69 (23.45)	59.34 (24.08)	57.70 (24.22)	59.22 (23.25)	57.19 (23.62)	58.28 (25.03)	58.19 (23.40)	60.43 (23.15)
Activist influence	45.32 (24.73)	45.58 (25.51)	44.40 (25.67)	46.51 (24.44)	44.87 (25.36)	43.86 (26.18)	45.77 (24.20)	47.37 (24.84)

Note: Goals and motivations measured on a 1–5 scale, Attitudes on a 1–7 scale, and Activist Trustworthiness and Influence on a 1–100 scale.

001, $h_p^2 = .059$. Endorsement of negative motives was higher in the fat condition ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.05$) than in the thin condition ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 0.86$), $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.278, 0.687].

Attitudes toward fat activists

For attitudes toward fat activists, there were no statistically significant effects of gender condition, $F(1, 345) = .286$, $p = .593$, $h_p^2 = .001$, and no significant interaction, $F(1, 345) = .145$, $p = .704$, $h_p^2 = .000$. However, there was a main effect of size condition on perceptions, $F(1, 345) = 23.76$, $p < .001$, $h_p^2 = .064$. Perceptions of fat activists were more positive in the thin condition ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.78$) than in the fat condition ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.96$), $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.650, -0.276].

Qualities of activists

Separate two-way ANOVAs examined the effect of size and gender conditions on the two factors: Perceived Trustworthiness and Perceived Influence. For Perceived Trustworthiness, there were no main effects of size condition, $F(1, 345) = .426$, $p = .515$, $h_p^2 = .001$, or gender condition, $F(1, 345) = .380$, $p = .538$, $h_p^2 = .001$, and no significant interaction, $F(1, 345) = 0.05$, $p = .823$, $h_p^2 = .000$. For Perceived Influence, there were again no main effects of size condition, $F(1, 345) = .012$, $p = .913$, $h_p^2 = .000$, or gender condition, $F(1, 345) = .667$, $p = .415$, $h_p^2 = .002$, and no significant interaction, $F(1, 345) = .234$, $p = .629$, $h_p^2 = .001$.

Discussion

We manipulated the gender (woman, man) and body size (fat, thin) of hypothetical fat activists to examine how these characteristics influenced perceptions of, and backlash to, their activism. The manipulation of these particular characteristics was based on findings of Study 1 indicating that fat people and women are perceived as prototypical fat activists. Overall, in Study 2, gender had little influence on perceptions of fat activism, and men and women fat activists were perceived as equally similar to fat activists in general. To our knowledge, this study was among the first efforts to examine the effect of activist identity on activism that does not match the target activist identity. Our results suggest that the identity of activist may be less relevant when the identity does not match activism type, though notably we always concurrently provided information about the matching identity (i.e., body size), limiting these conclusions. Specific to our study context, we speculate that this null effect was also because participants did not perceive women and fat people as similarly stereotyped, in line with prior research showing that White women perceived similarly stereotyped outgroup experts (e.g., Black vs. White man experts) as less sexist (Chaney et al., 2018).

Body size, however, exerted consistent effects on perceptions of fat activists. Relative to thin people engaging in fat activism, fat people engaging in fat activism were perceived to have more hostile goals and more experiential and negative motives, and participants reported more negative attitudes overall toward the activism of fat versus thin activists. Interestingly, however, there were no significant differences by body size in terms of perceived supportive goals or activist qualities (trustworthiness or influence). Taken together, these findings suggest that fat people engaging in activism on their own behalf are likely to face more backlash than thin people engaging in similar

activism as fat allies, mirroring prior work suggesting that advantaged allies' activism elicits more positive attitudes than that of marginalized group members (e.g., Li, 2022).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

In two studies, we identified lay theories of the goals and motivations for fat activism as well as lay theories about who participates in fat activism, and tested how these theories about fat activism are applied when activists hold differing (stereotypical or non-stereotypical) identities. While prior work has examined lay theories about other forms of activism (e.g., anti-racism activism; Pham, Chaney, Ramírez-Esparza, 2024), the present work is the first to examine lay theories about the fat activism movement.

Lay theories about the goals of fat activism

Lay theories about the goals of fat activism reflected two primary dimensions. The first captured experiential and fat-positive or fat-neutral goals (e.g., reducing fat stigma, normalizing body diversity), which resonate with the stated goals of fat activist movements (e.g., Acar & Ulug, 2022; Edison & Notkin, 2023). These goals were endorsed by the majority of our sample. Similar to lay perceptions of anti-racism activism goals (Pham, Chaney, Ramírez-Esparza, 2024), these goals of fat activism also have both promotion (i.e., focused on achieving gains such as normalizing body diversity) and prevention (i.e., focused on reducing loss such as reducing fat stigma) foci (see also Higgins, 1998).

The second dimension captured more hostile lay theories, which broadly suggested that people engage in fat activism for reasons such as excusing unhealthy lifestyles and glorifying fatness. Many of these lay theories equate fatness with health, drawing upon stereotypical assumptions about fatness as unhealthy and fat people as blameworthy (e.g., Nath, 2019). Despite being endorsed by only a small proportion of our sample, it is these hostile lay theories that are predominant in backlash against fat activism as seen commonly in online spaces (see Bograd et al., 2022; Davidson & Gruver, 2022; Nimmo, 2023). These falsely endorsed lay theories (when compared with actual goals of fat activist movements) underscore how unaware people are about fat activism, further highlighting the consequences of fat activism being understudied (e.g., Acar & Ulug, 2022; Oswald et al., 2022; Simic, 2015). This lack of awareness of fat activism may in part underlie backlash to fat activism, which appears to arise when lay theories about fat activism fail to align with actual goals of the movement.

In Study 2, we found that hostile lay theories about goals of fat activism were endorsed to a greater extent when participants considered a fat (vs. thin) person engaging in fat activism. These findings build on literature on the role of identity in activism (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2008, 2018), demonstrating that the social identities of activists influence perceptions of activists and responses to their activism. The nonsignificant difference in Supportive Goals lay theories between thin and fat activists suggests that it is hostility toward fat activists who are fat (rather than positivity toward thin activists) that mainly drove the pattern of findings. These patterns can result from multiple mechanisms: generalized fatphobia (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019; Strings, 2019), backlash against fat activism overall (e.g., Warner, 2002), or negative perceptions of marginalized activists in general (e.g., Thai et al., 2021). That is, the present findings are consistent with work demonstrating negative perceptions of and backlash toward marginalized (vs. privileged) people when advocating for their own groups (e.g., Alt et al., 2019; Thai et al., 2021).

Notably, hostile lay theories about activist goals did not emerge in prior work on lay theories about anti-racism activism (Pham, Chaney, Ramirez-Esparza, 2024). It is possible that negative lay theories about the goals of fat activism—and particularly about the goals of fat people engaging in fat activism—reflect the normalization of fatphobia relative to other forms of oppression (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019, 2021). To distinguish these processes, future research should investigate varying forms of activism at the same time (e.g., a study examining thin vs. fat activists for fat activism and White vs. POC activists for racial activism), and perceptions of fat people engaging in activism in support of other marginalized groups.

Lay theories about motivations for fat activism

Similar to lay theories about goals of fat activism, there was dimensionality in lay theories about motivations for why people engage in fat activism, with some participants endorsing more positive motivations (e.g., reducing fat stigma, creating positive change) while others endorsed more negative motivations (e.g., enabling unhealthiness or externalizing blame). Underlying the majority of reported motivations, and central also to our findings about lay theories of who participates in fat activism, was an assumption of experiential investment in fat activism. That is, most reported motivations assumed that it was fat people who were motivated to engage in fat activism. This assumption is evident particularly in the most commonly reported motivations (because they are fat and experiences of discrimination), but also reflected across the bulk of motivations which implicitly assume fat people are the ones engaging in fat activism. We note that these findings about goals and motivations of fat activism were documented in a sample of everyday people who on average did not engage in fat activism ($M = 1.26$, $SD = 0.64$) and encourage future work to explore differences in such lay theories held by activists (who, for example, are more informed about the goals of fat liberation movements on the ground) versus non-activists.

These findings align with work showing that fat people are in fact the primary demographic who engages in fat activism (e.g., Lupton, 2013; Simic, 2015) and highlight the lack of visibility of allies to fat activism (or the actual lack of allies to fat activism). Notably, some participants indicated that people close to or who love fat people may be motivated to participate in fat activism, hinting at the notion that those in close circles with fat people may be more likely to understand and challenge experiences of fat stigma—perhaps due to experiences with associative stigma that result from their closeness to fat people (see Oswald et al., 2023).

In Study 2, we found that fat people engaging in fat activism, relative to thin people engaging in fat activism, were assigned particularly negative motivations for doing so. These findings suggest the lack of legitimacy everyday people afford to fat activism. In this way, our research aligns with recent findings demonstrating the lack of perceived legitimacy of fat activism and of the oppression of fat people broadly, including that fat people's experiences and fat activism movements are nearly universally excluded from diversity and inclusion efforts broadly (Dufur & Fox Okeke, 2024). Together, these studies reveal how fatphobia and processes of delegitimizing fat identity and fat oppression operate at not only individual but also cultural and structural levels. As people are less anti-fat when they perceive fat identity as legitimate (Campbell et al., 2022), fatphobia at all levels needs to be addressed to support the fat liberation movement (see Edison & Notkin, 2023).

Lay theories about fat activist identities

In Study 1, our qualitative findings show that most people (around three-quarters) in our sample believed that *fat people* are the most likely to engage in fat activism. Other identities endorsed by participants included *people with fat loved ones*, *social justice advocates*, *people who have experienced fat stigma*, *compassionate people*, and *liberal/progressives*. Backlash in the form of hostility was again prominent in participant responses characterizing fat activist identities, particularly from participants who believed activists were involved in social justice or politically progressive. Hostility and backlash were directly endorsed in themes of labeling fat activists as *lazy people/people who don't want to lose weight*, *attention seekers*, and *people with pathology*. Further, these themes signify an expectation of responsibility or onus of fat people being accountable for their body size and negative stereotypes that they encounter. Participants also noted *women* and *other marginalized identities* as characteristics of fat activists, suggesting intersectional components in lay theories of activist identities. It is possible that these gendered effects are specific to fat activism, as fat women are often perceived more negatively (e.g., as more desperate and unhappy) than fat men (e.g., Oswald et al., 2022) and may thus be perceived as more likely to engage in fat activism. However, it is also possible that these gendered effects may persist across forms of activism, with activism being seen as a form of gendered care labor.

Key findings of body size and gender differences for activist identities were further examined in Study 2's manipulation. The differential effects of activist identity on lay theories were limited to body size; there were no effects of activist gender on perceived motivations. Men and women fat activists in Study 2 were perceived relatively similarly in terms of goals and motivations, suggesting that activist identity may matter less when comparing activists on a different, not context specific identity-dimension (e.g., gender in the context of fat activism). Future research, however, should examine other ally identities such as race/ethnicity and LGBTQ+ identity, given their interconnectedness with fatness may be stronger in lay perceptions (e.g., fatness can be framed as a symptom of gendered anti-Black racism; e.g., Edwards et al., 2023; Stewart & Breeden, 2021). In such cases, advocates for fat liberation who are Black (vs. White) and queer (vs. straight) may also be perceived more negatively regarding goals and motivation.

Policy implications: Theorizing backlash against fat activism via lay theories

Across lay theories of goals and motivations for fat activism, a dimension of negativity—which we understand throughout as a symptom of backlash—was salient among relatively small proportions of our sample. Previous work on lay theories of activism in other contexts, such as anti-racism activism (see Pham, Chaney, Ramírez-Esparza, 2024), has not identified similar backlash. Yet, this backlash is salient both in our findings and in online discourse about fat activism (Bograd et al., 2022; Nimmo, 2023). Such backlash is likely particularly prominent in the case of fat activism due to the ongoing cultural investment in the oppression of fat people as well as the cultural saliency of fatphobia (see Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019, 2021; Rubino et al., 2020).

The present findings demonstrate that some people hold hostile lay theories about fat activism, which mismatch with or mischaracterize the intentions of fat activists. Alongside prior research demonstrating that lay theories underlie backlash to diversity efforts (see Ballinger et al., 2023), we propose that hostile lay theories about fat activism underly backlash toward this form of

radical activism. These everyday conceptualizations of fat activism as negative and illegitimate undermine the liberatory goals of fat activism. Further, this backlash may result in fat people and their allies fearing engaging in fat activism (see Rudman & Fairchild, 2004) and may thus be restricting the liberatory possibilities of fat activism. Thus, it is important to critically consider whether lay theories about fat activism can be altered to promote more positive perceptions and reduce backlash—for example, by incorporating fat activism into medical and health education and encouraging healthcare providers to provide accurate information about the harms of fat oppression and the goals of fat activism. Previous work suggests that lay theories are malleable (e.g., Neel & Shapiro, 2012); thus, this may be an important avenue for future intervention and policy work.

Limitations and future directions

While the present research highlights the role of activist identity in lay theories of activism, it would be important to also consider additional axes of activist and perceiver identity (e.g., race, age). Indeed, racial identity of perceivers matters, such that Black versus White Americans perceive anti-racism activism goals differently ([redacted for review]). Further, prior research also demonstrates that people with marginalized identities perceive marginalized activists more positively than privileged activists and engage more actively with efforts led by marginalized activists (Iyer & Achia, 2021; Park et al., 2022). Thus, it is possible that fat (vs. thin) perceivers may perceive fat fat activists more positively than thin fat activists. Taking a step further, future research should explore downstream consequences of different lay theories about fat activism; for example, lay theories of hostile goals attributed to fat fat activists might lead to outcomes such as less donations to fat activist-led organizations and less interest in engaging with similar activist organizations (e.g., Pham, Chaney, Ramírez-Esparza, 2024). In examining such questions, it is imperative we take an explicitly intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1991). Such an intersectional focus will inform practical efforts on the ground, especially because many fat social movements include mostly cis-gender White women and require intersectional approaches to reach all populations and uplift the most oppressed (Striley & Hutchens, 2020).

As the present study laid out the different manifestations of hostility toward fat people and fat activists, future research can develop interventions to reduce such hostility. For instance, given that many lay theories about fat activism goals and motivations conceptualize fatphobia as an individual rather than structural issue (see also Dufur & Fox Okeke, 2024; Scott-Dixon, 2008), future research could test informational interventions to educate people about the structural and institutional level of discrimination against fat people (see Kraus et al., 2022; Onyeador et al., 2021). Further, framing fat liberation as intersectional site of struggle (i.e., intersecting with other axes of power such as racism and homophobia) may also encourage people to be more open to learning about fat liberation movement and personally engaging in the movement (e.g., Curtin et al., 2015; Shaheed et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

Fat activism is an understudied yet critical liberatory movement to abolish the ongoing and salient oppression of fat people. In the current studies, addressing the dearth of literature on fat activism, we provide insight into lay theories of the goals and motivations of fat activism, and about who

engages in fat activism. Our qualitative findings provide a contemporary snapshot of cultural perceptions of fat activism. Lay theories about goals and motivations were differentially endorsed depending on whether people engaging in fat activism were fat or thin, with fat people's activist engagement generally being perceived more negatively. An undercurrent of hostility, which we characterize as a symptom of backlash, cut through lay theories about fat activism. Our findings provide unique insight into this backlash via everyday people's beliefs about fat activism, and suggest intervening upon lay theories as a potential mechanism for increasing the liberatory potential of fat activism.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are openly available: https://osf.io/6vfdm/?view_only=20305d5b32384b8c95c4d12d-15dcad9b.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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R. J. Harr is a queer, Appalachian researcher and PhD candidate in their fourth year of the Developmental Psychology program at the University of Denver. Their research uses multilevel modeling to study adolescent development within the social context of institutions and systems, particularly highlighting resilience, protective factors, and intersectionality within communities and social spheres. They continue to weave their abolition ideology into their work and advocate for marginalized individuals through their research, teaching, and mentorship.

Alexandra Garr-Schultz is an assistant professor at the University of Connecticut. Her research program uses a mixed-methods approach to highlight unique experiences common among members of marginalized groups and to challenge cultural defaults, including exclusionary practices and social narratives around stigmatized identities. Her work examines the interplay between social structures and policies and individual-level behaviors and outcomes, with the goal of identifying effective strategies for social change in pursuit of a more just, equitable, and inclusive society.

Kimberly E. Chaney is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. Chaney's research areas include lay theories of prejudice, prejudice confrontations, and perceptions of allyship, examined via an array of methodologies (e.g., behavioral, physiological, and implicit cognition), to elucidate the interpersonal and cognitive (e.g., attentional bias) mechanisms of stigma and prejudice. By examining both basic and applied questions about how people perceive, experience, and combat prejudice in their day-to-day lives, Chaney's research broadens our understanding of prejudice and stigma, especially as it relates to cognitive, health, and behavioral outcomes.