Semiotic Analysis

Social semiotics is the second method we have used, to assist the netnography. This method allows us to decipher the plethora of social codes gathered in the netnography, condensing the raw data into some broader themes. The digital ecosystem of 'skinny core' (as we have termed it) is very semiotically rich to analyse as the entire premise is based off visual presentations of bodies. When we read the images through a connotative lens and not simply a denotative one, we unlock the truth of the issue: this has never been about how bodies actually look but what the size of a body supposedly tells us about the inhabitants personality, morals and traits. Clothing and styling choices, and how these accentuate and showcase different body types, conveys a very strong set of social codes relating to desirability, attractiveness, popularity, worth, and more. This becomes problematised in our society as fashion choices and body types are not allowed to exist purely in the realm of the aesthetic and are placed into the realm of the moral.

For example, one of the most frequently employed spatial codes is the accentuation of the stomach and waistline. In lots of the images in the netnography, a flat, skinny, taut stomach is on show, or the person is dressed to deliberately draw attention to this part of the body. This stands in contrast to a bigger body with curves, rolls, and more skin, which suggests an expansiveness and excess. The obsession with thinness stems from a fetishisation of women taking up as little space as possible, shrinking themselves in comparison to men who are regularly seen taking up excess space through body language like 'manspreading'. Patriarchy has always thrived on the obedience of women, as Wolf points out. This code is not only spatial, but also religious. The Judeo-Christian bedrock of Western societies sees gluttony, as embodied in the rolls of skin, as a key sin. Bigger bodies are stigmatised not purely on an aesthetic level but also due to the presumption of over-indulgence, lack of control and self-respect. In comparison, the skinny stomachs of ‘heroin chic’ suggest the internal discipline and self-regulation abilities of a moral high ground.

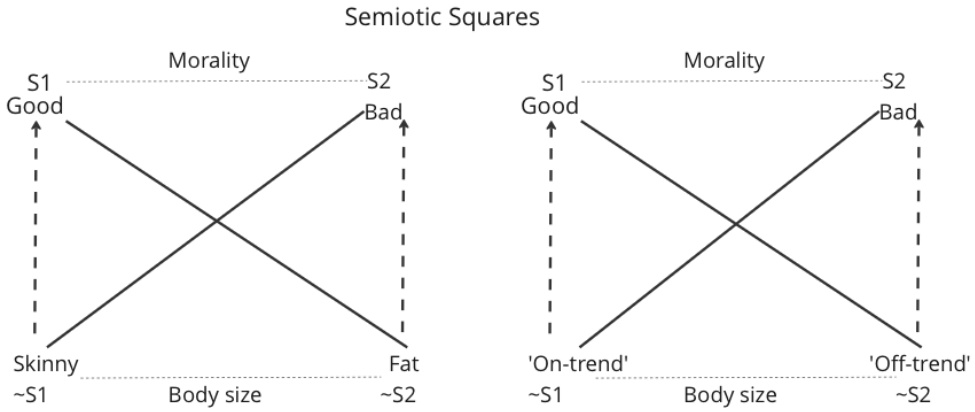
The netnography is also very rich in sartorial codes when we consider the role of fashion and styling choices in bolstering ‘skinny core’. Not only are body types subject to trend cycles, so are the clothes they are dressed in, which can further the agenda of ‘heroin chic’ by explicitly emphasising the body or concealing it. The burden becomes two-fold: not only does your body have to be in fashion, so do the clothes you put it in. When we consider the trends we have highlighted, like micro shorts, the emphasis is always on a minimal amount of material and a maximum amount of skin exposure. Having more flesh exposed is a trend more likely to be participated in by people with bodies who fit the current beauty standard, as they are more likely to receive verbal praise and compliments from others, instead of derogatory or body-shaming comments. Thus, when the trending fashions tend this way, as opposed to baggier silhouettes for example, most of the diversity of body types are likely to feel more excluded from participating in them (this is obviously a generalisation; people with all body types should and do feel comfortable wearing whatever they choose, but there may be more considerations to wearing them for people inhabiting bodies that society condemns and ridicules). When the trending fashion centres around maximising ‘nakedness’ it is valid to question if the clothes themselves are the focus, or if they are just a mask to conceal what bodies we want to see on display and promoted, and which we want to subliminally tell to stay hidden, off-trend or to change to emulate skinnier silhouettes. So, we see how fashion becomes a key player implicated in this complex problem and its web of morality and judgement. This then helps construct other social ideals such as attractiveness, desirability,

popularity, and many other sought-after attributes that can be accessed by being deemed in the morally correct camp.

One prominent example of this is the presentation of Disney heroes and villains. There are countless princess stories where she is thin, beautiful, and partially dressed/ dressed in overtly feminine or sexy styles, for example Cinderella, Belle, Jasmine etc. And vice versa stories of villains depicted as fat, overexaggerated in being stereotypically “ugly” and badly dressed e.g. Ursula, Madam Min. The princesses exemplify good moral traits like being selfless, caring and loving whereas the villains are greedy, selfish, and evil. As one of the largest producers of cultural content in the West, Disney establishes this relationship between body type/ fashion choices + morality/ character in children’s consciousness from a young age. One study asked girls under the age of 6 to select the ‘real princess’ from a choice of ballerinas of different sizes and the majority of them chose the thinnest one (Hayes and Tantleff-Dunn, 2010).

The 2 semiotic squares below summarise this relationship between morality and fashion/ body image which is indicative of the way the ecosystem of bodies becomes highly moralised and politicised. Contemporary Western society has a certain set of beauty ideals - the Eurocentric beauty standard - that may not be found in other parts of the world or times in history. For example, in Dabiri's work 'Disobedient Bodies' she explores how many African and Asian traditions have notions of beauty more tied to harmony, interconnectedness or imperfection, than the cult of thinness that has come to characterise Western beauty discourse (Dabiri, 2023).

Figure 1: Semiotic Squares



To be noted about the semiotic squares, by 'thin' and 'fat' we are not specifying an actual size range or body type, but the projection and perception of thinness and fatness as dictated by fluctuating oppressive body trends. For example, someone could be perceived as 'fat' as a size 10 because Abercrombie in the 2010's mainly stocked sizes 0-6, and this is what we are referring to in the squares, how people's bodies are 'read' by wider society.

When we drill down into the relationships displayed in the semiotic squares, we understand that morality is about more than just being considered a 'good' or 'bad' person. As discussed above, it encompasses ideas including self-control, self-respect, obedience, behaviour, trustworthiness, leadership, laziness, and motivation. Establishing skinniness as the

benchmark for moral 'goodness' and fatness as its mirror opposite in every respect fuels 'fatphobia' (also called weight bias or stigma) which 'describes the negative attitudes and stereotypes surrounding and attached to larger bodies' (Butterfly, 2021). This fuels the bias towards fat people in areas like employment, whereby they are less likely to be employed than a ‘regular’ size person. One survey found that '93% of employees would choose an applicant of ‘normal weight’ over an equally qualified applicant who was [of a higher weight]' (Blumgart, 2014). Hence, there are then resulting financial implications tied to your body size. Other studies show that obese people are perceived as having less 'leadership potential' than regular-sized applicants (Flint et al., 2016). The Economist printed an article in 2022 titled 'The economics of thinness: it is economically rational for ambitious women to try as hard as possible to be thin' (The Economist, 2022).

Examining this complex problem through the lens of semiotics highlights the roots of this issue in a culture that has made other people's bodies public business. We legitimise behaviours of judging, commenting on, shaming, policing, and lecturing other bodies in a way we don't tolerate in other personal matters like finances. The Reductress meme acknowledges this in an ironic way, and echoes what Wolf says about the gendered undertones of this issue. This explorative process has highlighted the societal outrage and offence caused by perceived 'fatness' in women. Patriarchal society has its own corrupt equilibrium that directly rests on women being controlled, submissive, small, and subservient to the whims of the male gaze and to what type of body it dictates is 'trendy' this season. Being perceived as fat is a direct affront on the existing social order as women choose to live outside of this dynamic, take up space and release themselves from an external standard dictated to them by others. And hence semiotics is such a useful method here because we understand that what is fuelling 'skinny core' and 'heroin chic' is not actually anything to do with people's waist measurements and everything to do with what we read into these numbers. When we understand that society programmes us to view fatness as someone 'letting themselves go' and thinness as discipline and self-respect, we see that we will always have fertile ground for fluctuating body standards and trends whilst bodies are read through the lens of morality and not aesthetics. Aesthetics would be a liberatory paradigm to position bodies and fashion within, releasing them from representing more than personal style and representation. Whilst morality is an objective set of standards and rules set by society, aesthetics is inherently subjective and personal and thus we would arrive at an understanding that somebody's body and fashion choices are only meant to please them.

References

Blumgart, J. (2014). *Fat Rights and Why You Can't Be Obese at Work*. [online] Pacific Standard. Available at: https://psmag.com/news/dont-right-obese-work-78497 [Accessed 8 Jan. 2024].

Butterfly (2021). *What Is Weight Bias and fatphobia, and How Can We Challenge it?* [online] Butterfly Foundation. Available at: https://butterfly.org.au/weight-bias-fatphobia-diet-culture/#:~:text=Weight%20bias%2C%20sometimes%20also%20called [Accessed 8 Jan. 2024].

Dabiri, E. (2023). *Disobedient Bodies*. Profile Books.

Flint, S.W., Čadek, M., Codreanu, S.C., Ivić, V., Zomer, C. and Gomoiu, A. (2016). Obesity Discrimination in the Recruitment Process: 'You're Not Hired!' *Frontiers in Psychology*, [online] 7(647). doi:https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00647.

Hayes, S. and Tantleff-Dunn, S. (2010). Am I Too Fat to Be a princess? Examining the Effects of Popular children's Media on Young girls' Body Image. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, [online] 28(2), pp.413–426. doi:https://doi.org/10.1348/026151009x424240.

The Economist (2022). *The Economics of Thinness*. [online] The Economist. Available at: https://www.economist.com/christmas-specials/2022/12/20/the-economics-of-thinness [Accessed 8 Jan. 2024].